

# Crisis experiences and welfare attitudes during the Great Recession: A comparative study on the UK, Germany and Sweden

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**Patrick Sachweh**

Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany

## Abstract

What motivates welfare attitudes during economic crises? While existing research highlights self-interest, this conclusion rests on a predominant conceptualization of citizens' crisis experiences as personal job loss. However, during economic downturns, people are likely to also witness colleagues or distant others being laid off, which might affect welfare attitudes for reasons beyond self-interest. This article analyses how personal job loss as well as that of colleagues and acquaintances during the Great Recession is related to welfare attitudes in the UK, Germany and Sweden, where welfare regimes and crisis policies differ systematically. Based on Eurobarometer data from 2010, the findings reveal that the importance of personal job loss as well as that of colleagues and acquaintances varies cross-nationally. In the liberal UK – with its modest crisis response – demand for greater public welfare provision is associated with personal job loss. In social-democratic Sweden – with its active crisis management – demand for greater welfare provision is associated with acquaintances' job loss. In conservative Germany – with its labour market insider-focused crisis response – no clear picture emerges. These findings support a sociological perspective emphasizing the importance of other-regarding concerns for welfare attitudes and the role of institutions in structuring people's self-interest and normative orientations.

## Keywords

Economic crisis, great recession, self-interest, welfare regimes, welfare state attitudes

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### Corresponding Author:

Patrick Sachweh, Goethe University Frankfurt, Cluster of Excellence "Normative Orders", Max-Horkheimer-Str. 2, D-60323 Frankfurt am Main, Germany.

Email: [patrick.sachweh@normativeorders.net](mailto:patrick.sachweh@normativeorders.net)

## Introduction

In affluent Western democracies, welfare state institutions stabilise citizens' living conditions during economic crises since they – at least partly – compensate for the losses incurred by economic downturns (Pontusson and Raess, 2012; Starke et al., 2013). Accordingly, research shows that citizens react rationally to changing economic conditions and therefore support greater governmental provision and redistribution when experiencing unemployment or income losses (Jaeger, 2013; Margalit, 2013; Naumann et al., 2016; Owens and Pedulla, 2014). While previous studies have mostly focused on personal unemployment as citizens' dominant crisis experience, they have paid little attention to the question of how perceptions of other people's crisis experiences – such as those of colleagues or friends who have been laid off – are related to citizens' attitudes to welfare. As a result, theoretical perspectives on welfare attitudes during economic crises predominantly emphasise the importance of self-interest, or egocentric concerns, triggered by individuals' own experiences of economic hardship (e.g. Blekesaune, 2007; Page and Shapiro, 1992). Only recently have scholars begun to consider the potential role of other-regarding motives, which are triggered by 'sociotropic' perceptions of other people's crisis experiences (Blekesaune, 2013: 61; Margalit, 2013: 83; Owens and Pedulla, 2014: 1105). This neglect contrasts markedly with the sociological literature on welfare attitudes, which emphasises that other-regarding motives matter in addition to self-interest (Svallfors, 2010).

Moreover, previous research has paid little attention to potential cross-national heterogeneity in the relationship between crisis experiences and welfare attitudes (but see Blekesaune, 2013; Jaeger, 2013). Nevertheless, depending on the institutional or socio-political context, crisis-induced job loss – whether an individual's own or that of others – may matter differently with regard to welfare attitudes. For instance, losing one's job in a country with generous unemployment provision might have different implications for one's welfare attitudes compared with a country with meagre social protection (Blekesaune, 2013; Naumann et al., 2016: 82).

Against this backdrop, I aim to contribute to the literature on welfare attitudes during economic crises in two ways. First, by considering a broader range of crisis experiences than previous research, I establish empirically how these experiences are related to welfare attitudes. More specifically, I analyse how personal job loss as well as that of colleagues and acquaintances is associated with demand for greater public welfare provision during the Great Recession. Second, I ask how the importance of these three crisis experiences regarding citizens' welfare attitudes varies cross-nationally. By comparing the UK, Sweden and Germany, I focus on three nations that entered the crisis in favourable macro-economic conditions but which differ systematically in their welfare regime's protection against risk (Esping-Andersen, 1999). Regime characteristics are clearly reflected in different policy responses to the crisis (Chung and Thewissen, 2011; Van Hooren et al., 2014). As in-depth information on crisis policies is available for these nations, I chose a deliberate selection of cases over a large-*N* sample in order to provide a nuanced account of each country's crisis response and policy officials' framing thereof in view of each nation's overarching welfare arrangement (Chung and Thewissen, 2011; Kiess et al., 2017; Pontusson and Raess, 2012; Van Hooren et al., 2014; ). Building upon the insights from these country-specific accounts enables a better understanding of cross-national differences in the relationship between crisis experiences and welfare attitudes (Ebbinghaus, 2005: 149).

For the empirical analysis, I use data from a Eurobarometer survey collected in 2010 that contains various attitudes towards the Global Financial Crisis and the Great Recession. While these cross-sectional data cannot depict change in welfare attitudes over time, or permit robust inferences about the causal effects of crisis experiences, their unique advantage is that they provide direct measurements of *different kinds* of crisis experiences, which can be related to citizens' welfare attitudes in a European comparative perspective. My results reveal that the importance of personal job loss as well as that of colleagues and acquaintances differs clearly and meaningfully across countries. Self-interest and other-regarding concerns do not exist in a vacuum; rather, they unfold in specific institutional contexts, which operate as 'filters' through which crisis experiences translate into demand for greater welfare provision.

The findings support a sociological perspective that emphasises both the importance of other-regarding sentiments during the crisis and the role of institutions in structuring people's self-interest and normative orientations (Mau, 2003; Rothstein, 1998).

This article proceeds in five steps. The next section discusses the theoretical reasoning that underlies research on welfare attitudes during economic crises. The third section describes the major institutional variations between the UK, Germany and Sweden and discusses how crisis experiences might be associated with welfare attitudes. The fourth section explains the data and methods, and the fifth section presents the results. Finally, the conclusion discusses the findings and considers their implications for welfare state solidarity in hard times.

## **Economic crisis and welfare attitudes: from personal to other people's crisis experiences**

Most studies on welfare attitudes during economic downturns are based theoretically on the 'governmental protection hypothesis' (Blekesaune, 2007: 393). During good economic times, citizens are said to accept greater individual responsibility and less social protection, whereas they demand greater governmental provision during bad economic times (Blekesaune, 2013; Jaeger, 2013). The key mechanism behind this is citizens' *self-interest*. People become more supportive of the welfare state when social benefits help them to cushion the effect of crisis-induced reductions in their material standard of living (Blekesaune, 2007; Kluegel, 1987). Consequently, studies based on longitudinal data find that losing one's job (Margalit, 2013; Naumann et al., 2016) or parts of one's household income (Owens and Pedulla, 2014) lead to an increase in welfare state support. Overall, researchers have concluded that self-interest triggered by individuals' personal experiences of economic hardship underlies welfare attitudes during economic crises (Naumann et al., 2016: 90).

Though common in the political economy tradition (Meltzer and Richard, 1981), this focus on self-interest contrasts starkly with a sociological perspective, which argues that non-selfish motives, such as value orientations (e.g. egalitarianism), are equally important (Kulin and Svallfors, 2013; Mau, 2003; Svallfors, 2010). This contrast might be due to the predominant focus on the influence of personal crisis experiences – and thus of *direct* crisis impacts – on people's welfare attitudes in previous research (e.g. Jaeger, 2006b; Margalit, 2013; Naumann et al., 2016; Owens and Pedulla, 2014). While Owens and Pedulla (2014: 1105) have suggested that personal experiences of hardship might trigger feelings of empathy that can positively affect welfare attitudes, it is difficult to distinguish empirically between self-interest and other-regarding motives when only examining personally affected individuals.

To overcome such limitations and gain insights into non-selfish motives, it is also necessary to study citizens who are currently not affected (and for whom self-interest is thus not an immediate concern) but who are confronted with others' crisis experiences. This focus allows for considering not only the direct impact of economic crises on citizens' material well-being but also the *indirect influence* of the crisis on people's beliefs and values. Because economic downturns increase overall levels of unemployment and material hardship in society, they draw attention to the crisis experiences of (proximate or distant) others, such as the job loss of colleagues or friends, which might then influence welfare attitudes among unaffected individuals (cf. Blekesaune, 2013: 61; Kluegel, 1987: 85). To gain empirical insights into a broader range of motives underlying welfare attitudes during hard times, I follow the suggestion by Owens and Pedulla (2014: 1105) of 'shed[ding] light on the extent to which observing the unemployment experiences of others increases one's own preferences for redistribution'.

Somewhat analogous to the economic voting literature (Kinder and Kiewiet, 1981), I label perceptions of others' crisis experiences as 'sociotropic' perceptions, because they refer to collective experiences of economic hardship (cf. Kam and Nam, 2008: 233–234; Kulin, 2004: 10). While sociotropic assessments are often contrasted with strict 'pocketbook' forms of short-term self-interest (e.g. Mau, 2003: 22), they are not necessarily altruistic; that is, they can involve other-regarding motives as well as definitions of long-term self-interest (Kam and Nam, 2008: 234). Empirical evidence on how sociotropic

perceptions of others' crisis experiences shape welfare attitudes remains scarce. In one rare study, Blekesaune (2013) found that people in higher socio-economic positions – who are less likely to depend on the welfare state – are more supportive of redistribution in countries where many people experience economic hardship. The fact that individuals who are unlikely to experience economic problems consider collective experiences of hardship indicates that sociotropic perceptions matter; but we do not know why this is the case. Blekesaune (2013: 69) discusses three alternative explanations: more widespread economic hardship might imply greater risks of experiencing hardship oneself; a greater awareness of economic problems; or a greater tendency among the public to attribute economic strain to factors beyond individual control. While the first explanation refers to respondents' long-term self-interest in the 'insurance value' of social policies (Kluegel, 1987: 85; Moene and Wallerstein, 2001), the latter points to potential other-regarding motives. Overall, however, empirical evidence on *how* other-regarding concerns affect welfare attitudes in hard times is lacking.

I therefore propose taking a more differentiated look at perceptions of other people's crisis experiences. Following Granovetter ([1974] 1995: 44–46), we can distinguish between 'work-related' and 'family-social' relationships: while the former involve colleagues and co-workers, who often provide work-related information (e.g. about job opportunities), the latter include family members, friends and acquaintances, who serve as sources of social and emotional support (Mewes, 2010). I suggest that the degree to which sociotropic perceptions appeal to other-regarding concerns versus an individual's long-term self-interest might depend on whose crisis experience is being witnessed. Because work-related contacts often have similar job-related characteristics and skills, seeing colleagues and co-workers lose their jobs may trigger feelings of insecurity about the stability of one's own employment and thus lead to a demand for welfare provision out of long-term self-interest. By contrast, because familial or social relationships are more emotionally charged, observing friends or acquaintances lose their jobs might also involve feelings of sympathy or empathy for their fate.<sup>1</sup>

In sum, I investigate how personal job loss, and that of colleagues and acquaintances, is related to citizens' demand for greater public welfare provision during the Great Recession. Personal job loss indicates a direct impact of the crisis on citizens' material well-being and likely reflects self-interest. By contrast, sociotropic perceptions of colleagues' and acquaintances' job loss represent indirect influences among people not directly affected and therefore might reflect long-term self-interest due to insecurity (colleagues) as well as non-selfish beliefs due to empathy (acquaintances).<sup>2</sup>

Importantly, the extent to which specific crisis experiences translate into demand for greater welfare provision may differ cross-nationally in accordance with varying socio-political and institutional contexts (Chung and Thewissen, 2011; Esping-Andersen, 1999). The following section outlines the contexts in which self-interested and other-regarding concerns are likely to unfold.

## **Welfare regimes and policy responses to the Great Recession**

The comparative literature on welfare attitudes assumes some degree of correspondence – or elective affinity – between the institutional architecture of welfare regimes and public opinion (Larsen, 2008; Svallfors, 2010). Theoretically, the relationship between institutions and attitudes can be conceptualised in different ways. First, the 'policy feedback' perspective (Kumlin and Stadelmann-Steffen, 2014; Pierson, 1994) posits that institutions shape attitudes. Thus, welfare state institutions structure citizens' self-interest via the benefits and services the institutions provide (Korpi and Palme, 1998); at the same time, they also embody specific ideals of a legitimate social order that orient citizens' perceptions and normative beliefs (Mau, 2003; Rothstein, 1998). Second, the 'policy responsiveness' perspective argues that attitudes shape institutions. Here, citizens' social policy preferences are assumed to be a driver of welfare state generosity and welfare state resilience in the face of economic and demographic challenges (Brooks and Manza, 2006; Steensland, 2008). A third perspective supposes that other – unobserved – factors (e.g. historic cleavages, religious traditions) underlie any observed correspondence between attitudes and institutions and that the association might be spurious (Stegmueller et al., 2012). Finally,

scholars have recently begun to consider ‘reciprocal causation’ between institutions and attitudes (Breznau, 2017).

There is an ongoing theoretical and empirical debate on these different perspectives (e.g. Brady and Bostic, 2015; Jaeger, 2006a; Korpi and Palme, 1998; Kumlin and Stadelmann-Steffen, 2014; Svallfors, 2010). For this article, a policy feedback perspective seems warranted even though cross-sectional data do not permit empirically disentangling the relationship between institutions and attitudes. While processes of liberalization, retrenchment and institutional hybridization have made the UK, Germany and Sweden less archetypical of liberal, conservative and social-democratic welfare regimes, respectively (Scruggs and Allan, 2008; Seeleib-Kaiser, 2016), policy reactions to the crisis mirror regime-specific approaches to the management of social risks to a significant degree (Chung and Thewissen, 2011; Esping-Andersen, 1990; Starke et al., 2013; Van Hooren et al., 2014). This regime specificity is also reflected in policy-makers’ accounts of crisis responses (Kiess et al., 2017). The Great Recession thus provides a particularly strategic opportunity to study the correspondence between institutions and welfare attitudes.<sup>3</sup>

How do institutional differences affect the relationship between crisis experiences and welfare attitudes? I argue that institutional arrangements and crisis policies operate as ‘filters’ through which crisis experiences translate into a demand for greater welfare provision in two ways. First, institutions and crisis policies differ in how they shape individuals’ self-interest by the benefits they provide. Specifically, liberal regimes catering selectively to the poor give rise to zero-sum conflicts of interest between beneficiaries and net-payers, thereby undermining popular support – an effect absent in more generous welfare regimes that cover large segments of the population (Brady and Bostic, 2015; Korpi and Palme, 1998). Second, welfare arrangements differ in their normative underpinnings, thereby providing distinct normative blueprints based on which citizens form opinions (Mau, 2003; Rothstein, 1998). As Kiess et al. (2017) have recently shown, the institutional and normative legacies of the British, German and Swedish welfare state have shaped government officials’ perceptions of the crisis and their framing of appropriate policy responses. Crisis responses thus highlight the distinct ‘models of solidarity’ (Esping-Andersen, 1999: 40) underlying different welfare regimes vis-a-vis the public. The following sections outline how the UK, Germany and Sweden differ in these regards.

## UK

Ideal-typically, liberal welfare regimes embody notions of self-help and individual responsibility and assign a residual role to public welfare provision (Esping-Andersen, 1999: 40). While the categorization of the UK’s Beveridge-initiated welfare model as liberal has never been contested (Castles, 2010: 633; Scruggs and Allan, 2008), unemployment provision is comparatively lean (Clasen, 2010). Flat-rate benefits of the Contributory Jobseeker’s Allowance (unemployment insurance) are provided for a maximum duration of six months, after which the Income-based Jobseeker’s Allowance (unemployment assistance) kicks in. Both schemes provide similar income replacement amounting to a relatively low 11% of average adult earnings (Clasen, 2010: 20). Furthermore, benefit generosity has been declining since the 1970s (Sjöborg et al., 2010: 428), and recent reforms have involved stronger conditionality of benefits and more means-testing (Clasen and Clegg, 2011: 335, 339).

When the global financial crisis hit the UK in 2008, the rate of unemployment was low and the economy was vibrant (Hörisch and Weishaupt, 2012: 242). Thereafter, unemployment rose sharply and economic recovery proceeded slowly (Pontusson and Raess, 2012: 16). Through the government’s active crisis management in the financial sector via the provision of bailouts, policy officials viewed the crisis as a problem of public spending (Kiess et al., 2017: 8). As a result, social and labour market policy responses followed existing paths of ‘Third Way’ liberalization. Initial measures aimed at activation by stimulating economic activity, e.g. through tax cuts, job subsidies, and extra support for the long-term unemployed (Chung and Thewissen, 2011: 362; Vis et al., 2011: 347). Later, direct job-creation schemes with a particular focus on unemployed youth were also introduced (Hörisch and Weishaupt, 2012: 243).

However, in contrast to other Western European countries, no measures were taken to keep people in their jobs, for example through short-term work schemes (Vis et al., 2011: 348). Furthermore, unemployment benefit generosity continued to decline during the Great Recession (Pontusson and Raess, 2012: 23).

Thus, the UK has done comparatively little to mitigate the socio-economic impact of the crisis on its citizens. Empirical assessments find that British unemployment insurance is among the least generous in Europe, with earnings of other household members being a more significant source of protection than unemployment benefits (Fernández Salgado et al., 2014: S194). Because low-educated and low-skilled workers have been particularly affected by job losses (Fernández Salgado et al., 2014), the crisis increased poverty and hardship, particularly among vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. In this context, job loss poses a severe income risk. By highlighting zero-sum conflicts of interest via clearly separating beneficiaries from contributors, targeted benefits undermine welfare state support (Brady and Bostic, 2015; Korpi and Palme, 1998; Larsen, 2008). Against this backdrop, personal job loss should be associated with demand for greater public welfare provision, whereas other people's job loss potentially fuels distributive conflicts between beneficiaries and contributors. Sociotropic perceptions should thus not be related to welfare attitudes.

## Germany

Conservative–corporatist welfare regimes rest on a particularistic notion of solidarity, which confines the pooling of risk by group membership (Esping-Andersen, 1999). Although Germany has often been regarded as *the* archetypical conservative regime, recent reforms have weakened its conservative character (Scruggs and Allan, 2008: 651; Seeleib-Kaiser, 2016). Unemployment protection was transformed into a two-tier system, providing earnings-related benefits through unemployment insurance, and flat-rate benefits for those ineligible and for the long-term unemployed whose claims have expired (Ebbinghaus and Eichhorst, 2009). Although unemployment insurance still provides relatively generous benefits (the receipt of which is tied to prior contributions), reforms have shortened benefit receipt, tightened eligibility criteria and enforced work requirements by broadening the definition of 'suitable employment' (Clasen and Clegg, 2011: 335; Seeleib-Kaiser, 2016: 224). Income risks associated with unemployment have thereby increased (Kohler et al., 2012) while institutional divisions between labour market insiders and outsiders – including those in fixed-term, part-time or other forms of atypical employment – have been reinforced, causing a 'dualization' of welfare provision (Palier, 2010: 614–615).

The macro-economic impact of the Great Recession in Germany has not been as severe as in other nations. Entering the crisis in favourable conditions, Germany's unemployment continued to fall between 2008 and 2009 and only increased slowly thereafter. It is likely that this was due to a crisis response that protected labour market insiders (Chung and Thewissen, 2011: 360). As interviews with policy officials on the German crisis response demonstrate, 'stable jobs' were 'perceived as an important part of the German political economy' (Kiess et al., 2017: 11). An extensive short-time work scheme enabled employers to retain skilled workers while safeguarding them from unemployment (Chung and Thewissen, 2011: 361; Hörisch and Weishaupt, 2012: 244). Furthermore, the early retirement scheme for older employees was extended, facilitating a gradual retirement transition of workers over the age of 55 (Van Hooren et al., 2014: 617). In addition, contributions to unemployment insurance were lowered to reduce labour costs, while investments in training for the unemployed aimed at activation (Chung and Thewissen, 2011: 361; Vis et al., 2011: 347).

Thus, consistent with its traditional emphasis on protecting core workers, the German crisis response focused on keeping labour market insiders in their jobs. Consequently, the increase in unemployment was less steep than in other European nations, including the UK and Sweden (Chung and Thewissen, 2011: 360). In this context, I expect experiences of personal job loss to be less strongly related to welfare attitudes in Germany than in the UK. Against the backdrop of the focus of German policy-makers on job

stability, however, sociotropic perceptions of others' job loss – signalling insecurity to the employed – should be associated with welfare attitudes.

## Sweden

Often cited as a social-democratic role model, the Swedish welfare state rests on a notion of universal solidarity. It grants benefits based on citizenship rights and provides encompassing social services (Esping-Andersen, 1999). Despite recent tendencies towards retrenchment and privatization (Kautto, 2010), universalism remains comparatively high (Scruggs and Allan, 2008: 657). Unemployment protection is organised as a voluntary state-subsidised insurance – or 'Ghent system' – combining a flat-rate basic allowance with a voluntary earnings-related benefit (Sjöberg, 2011). While benefit levels have been generous in the past, recent reforms have lowered replacement rates, tightened conditionality and enforced work requirements (Clasen and Clegg, 2011: 335), thereby weakening their decommodifying effect. Nevertheless, coverage is greater than in Germany or the UK (Sjöberg et al., 2010: 242), and benefits are granted relatively independently of other household members' resources.

Despite entering the Great Recession in good economic shape, unemployment rose rapidly in Sweden in 2009, affecting young people in particular (Hörisch and Weishaupt, 2012: 246). Perceiving the crisis as an external shock, the centre-right government abstained from planned shifts towards greater targeting (Kiess et al., 2017: 6) and instead pursued an active crisis management that combined striving for full employment with the provision of income security and the buffering of temporary unemployment (Chung and Thewissen, 2011: 363). Consistent with social-democratic policy traditions, activation measures sought to increase employment and included a reduction of non-wage labour costs, the provision of training programmes, job-search assistance and the creation of (temporary) jobs in the public sector (Starke et al., 2013: 163; Vis et al., 2011: 347). Furthermore, income security was enhanced by relaxing the conditions of receiving unemployment benefits and through reductions in income taxation, particularly for vulnerable groups (Chung and Thewissen, 2011: 364; Pontusson and Raess, 2012: 23).

As a result, the Swedish government made comparatively comprehensive efforts to mitigate the consequences of the Great Recession, particularly for at-risk groups. Empirical studies show that tax-credits and social benefits mitigated the impact of the crisis on household incomes (Björklund and Jäntti, 2013: 171). In addition, universal welfare states incorporate broad segments of the population, thereby fostering an understanding of inclusion and solidarity. Correspondingly, Kulin and Svallfors (2013) have shown that values affect welfare attitudes more strongly in egalitarian countries. Therefore, in the Swedish context, less attention should be given to self-interested concerns than in the UK, and sociotropic perceptions should play a greater role.

Table 1 summarises the expectations formulated above.

## Data, variables and methods

I analyse data from the Eurobarometer 2010 (study number EB 74.1) for the UK, Sweden and Germany. Samples are drawn in a stratified multi-stage random sampling design. After deleting cases with missing information, the samples include 755 respondents in the UK, 938 in Germany and 607 in Sweden. The pooled sample used in the multivariate analysis thus includes 2300 respondents. In all analyses, the post-stratification weights provided in the dataset are applied.

Demand for greater welfare state provision as a *dependent variable* is measured with the following question:

Which of these statements comes closest to your view: (1) The [...] government should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for; (2) People should take more responsibility to provide for themselves; (3) It depends.

**Table 1.** Welfare regimes, crisis responses and demand for greater welfare state provision.

	UK	Germany	Sweden	
Welfare regime	Protective capacity flat-rate unemployment protection	Liberal: Residual (conflicts of interest)	Conservative: dualized unemployment protection Particularistic (corporatist solidarity)	Social-democratic: voluntary state-subsidised unemployment protection Universal
Crisis response		Modest	Labour market-insider-oriented	Active crisis management
Crisis experience behind demand for greater welfare state provision		Personal job loss (egocentric concerns)	Job loss of colleagues and acquaintances (sociotropic concerns)	

I recode this item into a dummy variable in which 1 indicates support for greater state responsibility and 0 indicates support for greater individual responsibility or indecision.<sup>4</sup> As this item refers explicitly to demand for *greater* state responsibility, it does not necessarily indicate the acceptance of *existing* institutional arrangements. However, it is similar to established items (e.g. in the ISSP) that measure support for government responsibility to provide for specific groups (e.g. the old, the unemployed, etc.). The item refers to the goal dimension of welfare attitudes (Roller, 1995: 167) and indicates support for welfare state principles.<sup>5</sup>

The central *independent variable* is a measure of different experiences of job loss as a direct consequence of the crisis. Respondents were asked to indicate (a) whether they themselves or their partner had lost their or his/her job, respectively, (b) whether one of their colleagues had lost his/her job and (c) whether an acquaintance who is neither related nor a colleague had lost his/her job as a direct consequence of the crisis.<sup>6</sup> As argued in the theoretical section, it is important to differentiate between respondents experiencing a *direct* crisis impact (personal job loss) and those experiencing only *indirect* impacts (colleagues' and acquaintances' job loss) to empirically disentangle egocentric and sociotropic perceptions and to establish their relationship with welfare attitudes. Therefore, I recode these different crisis experiences into four distinct categories of a single variable:

- *Job loss: own* indicates a respondents' own job loss or that of his/her partner, respectively;
- *Job loss: colleague* indicates a colleague's job loss while excluding those who simultaneously report a job loss of their own or their partner;
- *Job loss: acquaintance* indicates an acquaintance's job loss while excluding those who simultaneously report a job loss of their own (or their partner) and of a colleague.
- The reference category consists of respondents who had none of the above job-loss experiences.

Furthermore, I control for several relevant individual characteristics: social class, employment status, education, respondents' assessment of their income, gender, household composition and age. Social class is measured using the European Socio-Economic Classification (ESEC; Rose and Harrison, 2007) and recoded into a condensed version of three classes: the salariat (higher and lower service class), an intermediate class (higher white- and blue-collar workers, small employers and the self-employed) and a working class (lower white-collar-, lower technical- and routine blue-collar workers).<sup>7</sup> An employment status outside the labour market is indicated by two dummy variables: one for having been unemployed before the crisis (measured by excluding respondents who indicated a job loss of their own due to the crisis from all unemployed respondents) and one for being outside the labour force for other reasons (housewives, students).<sup>8</sup> Pensioners are excluded from the analysis. Education is measured via the respondent's age when formal education was finished and is recoded in three categories: primary,



secondary and tertiary education. Because no objective information on household income is available in the data, I use an item that asks whether respondents are able to make ends meet on their current monthly household income. Response categories range from 1 ('very easily') to 7 ('with great difficulty'), and the coding was reversed such that higher values indicate a positive assessment. Gender is included as a dummy variable (1 = female), and household composition has three categories: single, couples without children and (single or couple) households with children. Single households serve as reference group. Age is measured in years and divided by 10 to indicate 10-year increases. Descriptive statistics for all variables are provided in Table S.1 in the supplementary material.

First, I descriptively analyse the relationship between welfare attitudes and crisis experiences. Second, I estimate a binary logit regression model with robust standard errors for the pooled country sample. Because cross-national differences in the effects of crisis experiences are of key interest, I interact all variables for the crisis experiences (and all control variables) with country dummies to estimate the pooled model (for a similar approach see Passaretta and Triventi, 2015). This strategy provides identical results to country-specific binary logit models but facilitates the calculation of Wald tests (presented in the empirical section) to assess whether cross-national differences are statistically significant. Moreover, it avoids comparisons of coefficients from different models, which would be problematic in non-linear models (Long, 1997). The estimates are presented as average marginal effects (AME; Mood, 2010) and were calculated using the 'margins' post-estimation command in Stata 12 (Williams, 2012). While odds ratios are most common in interpreting binary logit models, they lead to potentially misleading conclusions about the magnitude of effects because they say nothing about the base probability of the outcome (Mood, 2010). By contrast, AMEs do not face this problem. While also ignoring the non-linearity of the relationship between dependent and independent variables, AMEs provide a single summary measure of how a one-unit change in an independent variable changes the probability of the outcome (here, the likelihood of demanding greater welfare provision), averaged across the whole sample.

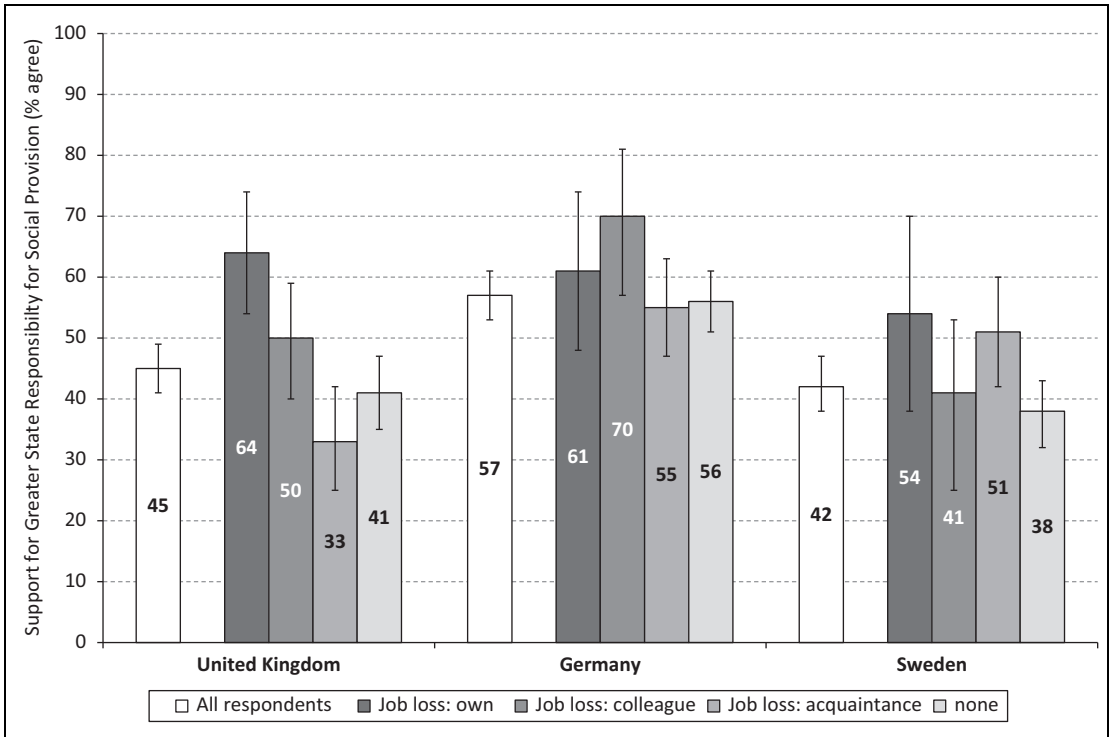
## Results

### *Descriptive results*

Figure 1 shows the share of respondents demanding greater state responsibility for social provision by crisis experience as well as – for purposes of comparison – the respective shares of all respondents in each country. First, it can be seen that demand for greater state responsibility is highest in Germany (57%) and lower in the UK (45%) and in Sweden (42%). While the findings for Sweden may appear counter-intuitive, they might reflect high actual levels of provision – because the item explicitly asks for *greater* state responsibility – as well as shifting popular support towards a mixed model of welfare provision (Edlund and Johansson Sevä, 2014).

Furthermore, welfare attitudes clearly differ between respondents with different crisis experiences, and the pattern of these differences also varies across countries. In the UK, demand for greater state responsibility is significantly higher among respondents who themselves, or whose partner, lost their jobs (64%) as compared with those with no crisis experience (41%). Moreover, demand is higher among those whose colleagues lost their jobs (50%) and lower among those whose acquaintances lost their jobs (33%) when compared with those with no crisis experiences; however, these differences are not statistically significant.

In Germany, demand for greater welfare provision is significantly higher among respondents whose colleagues lost their jobs (70%) compared with those with no crisis experience (56%). While demand is also higher among those who themselves, or whose partner, lost their job (61%), respectively, the difference to respondents with no crisis experience is not statistically significant. Furthermore, welfare attitudes among respondents whose acquaintances lost their jobs are almost identical (55%) to those with no crisis experiences (56%).<sup>9</sup>



**Figure 1.** Welfare state support and crisis experiences in the UK, Germany and Sweden. Source: Eurobarometer 2010,  $N = 709$  (UK),  $938$  (Germany),  $607$  (Sweden); 95% confidence intervals.

In Sweden, demand for greater welfare provision is highest among respondents who themselves (54%), or whose acquaintances, lost their jobs (51%). However, while the latter group differs significantly from those with no crisis experience (38%), the former does not. In addition, welfare attitudes among respondents whose colleagues lost their jobs (41%) do not differ significantly from those with no crisis experiences.

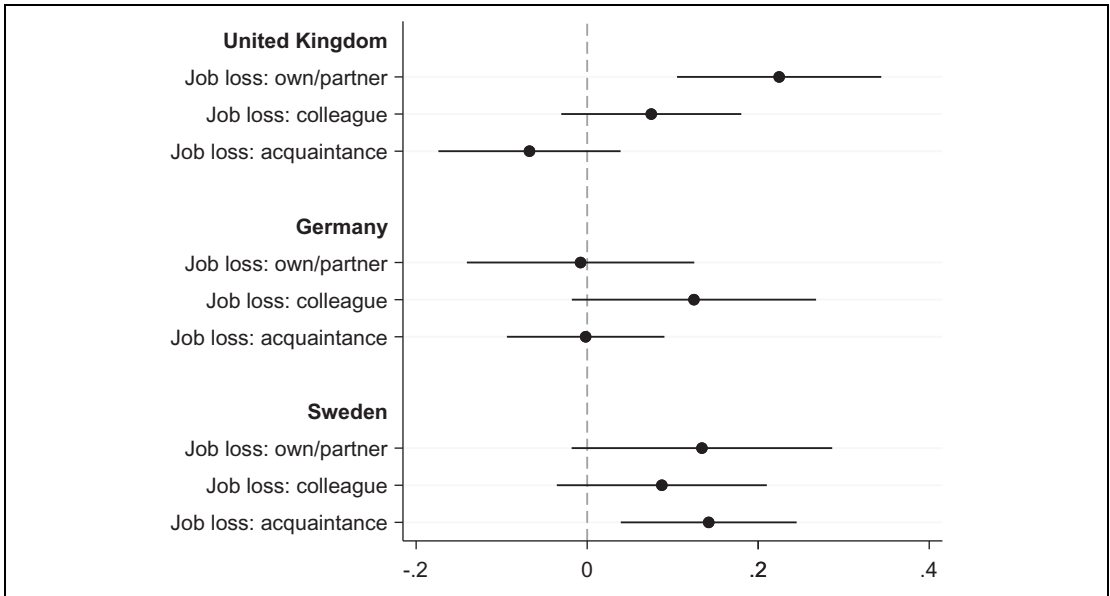
Thus, different kinds of crisis experiences are related to welfare attitudes across countries: these differences indicate that self-interest appears to underpin demand for greater state responsibility in the UK, whereas sociotropic perceptions of other people's crisis experiences are important in Germany and Sweden.

I now analyse whether this pattern persists when respondents' characteristics are controlled for.

### Multivariate results

Figure 2 presents the key findings of the pooled binary logit regressions by plotting the average marginal effects of the three crisis experiences on welfare attitudes across the three countries. Full regression results can be found in Table S.2 in the supplementary material.<sup>10</sup>

In the UK, the probability of demanding greater public welfare provision is 22 percentage points higher among respondents who lost their own job (or whose partner lost their job) compared with respondents with no crisis experiences. In contrast, job loss of colleagues or acquaintances is not significantly associated with higher demand for welfare provision. Examining the control variables (Table S.2, supplementary material), demand for greater state responsibility is 27 percentage points higher among respondents who were unemployed prior to the crisis and 18 percentage points higher among members of the working class (compared with the service class). Conversely, it is 4 percentage points lower among respondents who assess their household income favourably.



**Figure 2.** Crisis experiences and welfare attitudes.

Source: Eurobarometer 2010; average marginal effects with 95% confidence intervals from interaction terms of all variables with country dummies in pooled binary logit model; control variables: social class, employment status, education, R's assessment of household income, household composition, age, gender, East Germany (in Germany).

In Germany, in contrast to the descriptive findings, demand for greater state responsibility among respondents who experienced a colleague's job loss does not differ significantly from those with no crisis experience at the conventional 5% level, but is 12 percentage points higher at the 10% level. Personal job loss and that of acquaintances are not significantly associated with welfare attitudes. Among the control variables (Table S.2, supplementary material), intermediate levels of education and living in East Germany are associated with higher demand for welfare provision (11 percentage points each), whereas having children and judging one's income favourably lowers demand by 11 and 5 percentage points respectively.

Finally, the probability of demanding greater public welfare provision in Sweden is 14 percentage points higher among those experiencing an acquaintance's job loss compared with those with no crisis experience. Furthermore, personal job loss significantly increases support for greater state responsibility by 13 percentage points at the 10% level, but colleagues' job loss does not have a significant effect. The control variables (Table S.2, supplementary material) indicate that being outside the labour force and being female also increase demand for state responsibility by 24 and 11 percentage points, respectively, while having children in the household decreases demand by 12 percentage points.

Are the cross-national differences statistically significant? Table 2 shows the results of Wald tests that assess whether the association between crisis experiences and welfare attitudes differs between countries. The effect of personal job loss differs significantly between the UK and Germany, which suggests that self-interest – triggered by personal job loss – appears to be more important for demanding greater welfare provision in the UK compared with Germany. By contrast, the effect of the job loss of acquaintances differs significantly between Sweden and the UK as well as between Sweden and Germany. Sociotropic perceptions of acquaintances' job loss thus are significantly more important in Sweden than in the UK and Germany.

In line with the theoretical considerations, this finding indicates that other-regarding concerns based on sociotropic perceptions appear to unfold in universal institutional contexts that blur the boundaries between

**Table 2.** Wald test of cross-national differences in the effect of crisis experiences on welfare attitudes.

	UK vs. Germany			UK vs. Sweden			Germany vs. Sweden		
	$\chi^2$	df	p	$\chi^2$	df	p	$\chi^2$	df	p
Crisis experience									
Job loss: own	6.49	1	0.01	0.82	1	0.36	1.89	1	0.17
Job loss: colleague	0.30	1	0.58	0.02	1	0.88	0.15	1	0.70
Job loss: acquaintance	0.83	1	0.36	7.73	1	0.01	4.15	1	0.04

net payers and beneficiaries of the welfare state. Self-interest based on egocentric concerns, in contrast, is significantly more likely to matter in a liberal context that highlights zero-sum conflicts of interest, which is further reflected in the greater incidence of class- and income-based attitudinal cleavages in the UK.<sup>11</sup>

## Discussion and conclusion

What lies behind demand for greater welfare state provision during economic crises? While a political economy perspective emphasises self-interest, recent studies have begun to consider the role of other-regarding motives (Blekesaune, 2013; Margalit, 2013; Owens and Pedulla, 2014). However, selfish and other-regarding concerns have not yet been empirically separated because research has focused on personal job loss as the dominant crisis experience, thereby narrowing our understanding of welfare attitudes during hard times.

Nevertheless, beyond losing their own jobs, people also witness their colleagues or distant others being laid off during economic crises. Citizens may therefore not only attend to their egocentric self-interest but also consider sociotropic perceptions of the crisis experiences of others. By examining not only those directly affected by the crisis but also those unaffected, who are nevertheless aware of others' crisis experiences, my analyses provide empirical insights into the association between sociotropic perceptions and welfare attitudes during economic crises. Importantly, the extent to which selfish versus other-regarding concerns matter is shaped by institutional and socio-political conditions that vary cross-nationally. I have thus analysed how personal job loss, as well as that of colleagues and acquaintances, is associated with welfare attitudes during the Great Recession in the UK, Germany and Sweden – three countries that vary systematically in the protection against risk provided by their welfare regimes and in their specific crisis policies.

The findings demonstrate that the importance of egocentric and sociotropic perceptions differs cross-nationally. In the liberal UK – with its modest crisis response – welfare attitudes are associated with (egocentric) experiences of personal job loss and thus appear to be based on considerations of immediate self-interest. In social-democratic Sweden – with its active crisis management – welfare attitudes are positively associated with sociotropic perceptions of acquaintances' job loss and thus appear to be underpinned by other-regarding concerns rather than self-interest. Importantly, this effect is distinctive because it differs significantly from the situation in the other two countries. Finally, in conservative Germany – where crisis management has focused on job stability for labour-market insiders – sociotropic perceptions seem to matter more with regard to the job losses of colleagues. This finding could be interpreted as a 'spill-over' effect of job-related insecurity among employed individuals upon observing colleagues losing their jobs (cf. Lengfeld and Hirschle, 2009). However, this effect is only marginally significant at the 10% level in the multivariate analyses and does not differ significantly from the other two countries. Therefore, it should be interpreted with caution.

Overall, these findings indicate that welfare attitudes during hard times may not be driven by self-interest alone, as current research suggests; rather, a broader motivational basis appears to exist, and whether other-regarding concerns matter depends on the extent to which welfare state institutions and crisis policies mitigate social divisions and crisis-induced hardship. As the results indicate, other-regarding concerns are more likely to matter in Sweden, where crisis policies have mitigated economic

hardship and the boundary between beneficiaries and ‘net payers’ of the welfare state is blurred (Larsen, 2008: 152–153; Rothstein, 1998). Testing for the statistical significance of cross-national differences corroborates these findings. However, since generalization from small-*N* comparisons is difficult, future research should explore whether this pattern can be extended to a larger sample of nations.

One limitation of the cross-sectional survey data used here is that they refer to only one time point. As a result, it is not possible to analyse change in welfare attitudes, or to provide robust inferences about the causal effects of crisis experiences. However, the unique advantage of the Eurobarometer survey used here is that it relates direct measurements of different crisis experiences to the welfare attitudes of citizens in a European comparative perspective, an opportunity offered by no other survey data as far as I am aware. Consequently, while the analyses cannot support strong causal claims, the findings suggest that perceptions of *other people’s* crisis experiences are indeed related to welfare attitudes. Future research should investigate the interrelations between different crisis experiences in more detail, preferably from a longitudinal perspective that covers a larger sample of countries.

Finally, my results are in line with sociological–institutionalist scholarship. Since Titmuss (1970), scholars have argued that institutions affect the motives underlying welfare attitudes (Mau, 2003; Rothstein, 1998). I have demonstrated that other-regarding concerns unfold within an institutional architecture that does not divide citizens into ‘them’ and ‘us’ but instead fosters trust and mutual concern (Larsen, 2008; Rothstein, 1998). It remains to be seen what the institutional restructuring associated with austerity politics in Europe will do to welfare attitudes in the time to come.

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## Supplementary material

Supplementary material for this article is available online.

## Notes

1. It could also be argued that layoffs of relatives or close friends affect self-interest, because individuals might feel obliged to offer financial support. Therefore, I only consider perceptions of crisis experiences by more distant acquaintances for whom no such obligation might be triggered.
2. Because people can make multiple crises experiences simultaneously (e.g. losing their own job and witnessing colleagues’ job losses), selfish and non-selfish motives may overlap. Furthermore, personal crisis experiences and those of others might be associated with both kinds of motives. For instance, losing one’s job may affect self-interest but also evoke empathy. Similarly, colleagues’ job losses may increase insecurity while also eliciting empathy. Conceptually, however, these different crisis experiences are not necessarily equivalent in their meaning to citizens; rather, it is plausible to assume that individuals having direct crisis experiences, such as losing their job, will prioritize self-interest (though other-regarding considerations may not be precluded). By contrast, self-interest is less likely to matter to those personally unaffected; however, to the extent that they witness others’ crisis experiences, other-regarding concerns may unfold.

3. Importantly, welfare arrangements, institutionalized norms and crisis policies are interrelated and emerge in processes of historical co-evolution (Starke et al., 2013). Cross-national differences in the salience of specific crisis experiences are therefore not attributable to a single factor; rather, they are associated with a country's overarching approach to welfare provision.
4. Alternatively, I conducted the multivariate analyses with the categorical dependent variable using multinomial logit models. These analyses provide similar results (available on request), and I present the findings from the binary models, which are easier to portray.
5. Furthermore, this item refers to welfare provision in general, whereas the sample is restricted to working-age people because the theoretical argument focuses on job loss. However, welfare support might vary depending on the policy field people associate with welfare provision (e.g. healthcare, pensions, etc.). Unfortunately, no policy-specific measure of welfare support is available in the Eurobarometer data.
6. The question wording is: 'Here are some situations that could have arisen recently in your work life or in the work lives of those around you. For each of them, please tell me if this has happened as a direct consequence of the crisis, if it has happened but was not a direct consequence of the crisis, or if it has not happened at all. (a) You have lost your job/your partner (husband or wife, partner, etc.) has lost his/her job [ . . . ]; (b) One of your colleagues has lost his/her job; (c) Someone you know who is neither related to you nor a colleague has lost his/her job'. Only job losses occurring as a direct consequence of the crisis were coded into the respective category; job losses that were not a direct consequence of the crisis were coded into the base category (= none).
7. The ESEC classification builds on the EGP (Erikson–Goldthorpe–Portocarero) class scheme (Goldthorpe, 2000). Like EGP, ESEC differentiates classes based on their employment relation (service relation versus labour contract). Its most differentiated version distinguishes ten classes (for details, see Rose and Harrison, 2007).
8. Although they cannot experience job loss of their own, the unemployed, housewives and students are retained in the sample because they may have partners who lost their jobs, an experience interrogated by the independent variable.
9. While welfare state support is significantly higher in East Germany than in West Germany, the association between crisis experiences and welfare attitudes does not differ significantly between the two parts of the country.
10. Importantly, no interaction effects between social class and crisis experiences were found in any of the countries.
11. When using an alternative coding that allows for different crisis experiences to overlap, the effect of acquaintances' job loss in Sweden becomes insignificant. This finding highlights the importance of distinguishing empirically between direct (own job loss) and indirect (colleagues' and acquaintances' job loss) crisis experiences.

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### Author biography

**Patrick Sachweh** obtained a PhD from the University of Bremen, Germany, in 2009. During the academic year 2009–2010, he was a postdoctoral fellow at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies in Cologne, Germany. Since 2011 he has been working as a lecturer and research fellow at Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany. His current research focuses on popular attitudes towards inequality, social justice and the welfare state, from both a quantitative and a qualitative perspective.