Welfare State Attitudes in Context

Local Contexts and Attitude Formation in Sweden

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To Ester

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Welfare State Attitudes and the Local Community: Contextual Effects on Attitudes toward Financing and Service Delivery

Local Contexts, Social Risks, and Social Spending Preferences: A Multilevel Approach

Local Context and Attitudes toward Privatization: Do Public Service Contexts Matter for Attitude Formation?

Suspicious Minds: Local Context and Attitude Variation across Swedish Municipalities

Abstract

Background Welfare state attitudes are often studied from the perspective of the individual's characteristics and/or national or regime-type contexts. This thesis instead seeks explanations for individuals' varying attitudes towards the welfare state at the level of local contexts (municipalities). Sweden is used as a case for testing whether there are contextual effects. The general aim is to find out whether social, political, and institutional aspects of local context influence the attitudes of individuals.

Methods Since the general aim of this thesis is to examine how background characteristics of individuals and characteristics of local contexts simultaneously act in shaping individuals' attitudes, I use multilevel modelling in order to handle individual-level and contextual-level data simultaneously. Latent-class analysis (LCA) is also employed in the analyses to explore the patterning of variables. This is mainly done in order to create dependent variables and to distinguish between categories of municipalities sharing similar characteristics. The data consist of Swedish survey data, which have been complemented by municipal-level data.

Results The findings indicate that the social and political context of municipalities can matter for individuals' attitude formation. Variation across municipalities in terms of the prevalence of social problems and risks seems to influence how individuals view the welfare state. Local municipal contexts characterized by many social problems and risks tend to be associated with more welfare state friendly attitudes among the local inhabitants, after taking individual-level determinants into account. Support for high social spending is greater in such milieus as is the tendency to view welfare beneficiaries with less suspicion regarding the potential abuse of welfare policies. Regarding the influence of local public service provision on attitudes, no evidence was found for feedback effects on individuals' attitudes toward public service privatization.

Conclusion In their attitudes towards the welfare state, individuals are to some extent influenced by their local environment. There seems to be a 'built in' thermostat in the Swedish welfare state. Local circumstances characterized by social problems and risks tend to be associated with a local citizenry having more welfare state-friendly attitudes.

Keywords Welfare state, attitudes, local context, multilevel analysis, municipalities, Sweden.

Preface

I once heard an opponent at a PhD defence asking the respondent whether the process of writing the dissertation felt like chopping through a dense jungle and finally reaching a clearing, or whether it could best be described as arduously climbing a high mountain and finally reaching the top and there being rewarded with a spectacular view of the terrain. At times, my work with this dissertation has felt like struggling through a jungle, finally reaching a clearing, only to find myself standing at the foot of a towering mountain.

Luckily, a number of generous people have provided me with the tools and gear necessary for jungle expeditions and mountaineering. First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisors Stefan Svallfors and Jonas Edlund. I cannot imagine there being a better team guiding a doctoral student through the rugged terrain of writing a dissertation. Mikael Hjerm has also been a great support throughout, latterly as a formal supervisor, and earlier as an informal adviser.

The work resulting in this thesis was conducted within the research programme 'the Political Sociology of the Welfare State', a collaboration between sociologists from Umeå University and political scientists from Göteborg University. The advice and comments given at our project meetings have been invaluable. Between serious discussions on papers and articles, the meetings have also been fun, not least when debating whether there are significant differences in the spoken words per minute-ratio between the northern- and western factions of the project group. In addition to Stefan Svallfors, Jonas Edlund and Mikael Hjerm I would therefore like to thank Linda Berg, Staffan Kumlin, Maria Oskarson, Maria Pettersson and Ida Öun.

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List of original papers

Welfare State Attitudes and the Local Community: Contextual Effects on Attitudes toward Financing and Service Delivery
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Suspicious Minds: Local Context and Attitude Variation across Swedish Municipalities
Forthcoming in International Journal of Social Welfare

Introduction

This thesis explores the significance of the local environment for individual-level attitude formation. It has been suggested that everyday life and the public sphere represent two arenas influencing peoples' attitudes (Svallfors 1989, 1996). Everyday life encompasses the multitude of experiences people have depending on, for example, their structural position in society. In the public arena, various organized interests provide their own interpretations of ongoing events, often filtered through the mass media. This broad conception of individual-level attitude formation as taking place under the influence of both these arenas encapsulates diverse strands of research. Some approaches examine the cleavages between different social groups while others highlight the differences between countries in terms of institutions and political articulation. However, given the significance of everyday life and of political articulation in shaping the political attitudes of individuals, there is reason to consider how these spheres are connected to the local community. Do people experience different things in their daily life, not only because of their class or gender (for example), but also because of what they encounter in their particular local community? Similarly, can more or less overt political messages vary locally as a result of the relative strength of various organized interests and political parties at the local level? The general aim of this thesis is to determine whether individuals' attitudes are affected by these aspects of the everyday life and political milieu of their local community.

Two influential strands of research argue that political attitudes are affected by non-individual factors. First, cross-national attitude research as well as studies of institutional design have identified the significance of political institutions for individual attitude formation. Institutions therefore constitute exogenous factors often discussed in relation to individual behaviour and attitudes at the country and regime levels as well as at the individual level in terms of personal encounters with various institutions. For example, apart from the well-established cross-national comparative research, there is a growing body of research into the impact of institutional design on individual experiences and political preferences (see, for example, Kumlin 2002, 2004; Pettersson, 2007). Although the relationship between institutions and attitudes has been studied extensively from these two vantage points, little attention has been directed toward institutional variation at the sub-national level. If institutional variation matters to individual attitude formation, there is reason to assume that this influence could also be exerted at the sub-national level if there is sufficient institutional variation across local units in a country.

Another body of comparative research emphasizes not country-level processes, but rather the other end of the scale, highlighting the influence of the neighbourhood or residential area on individual attitudes and behaviour. This literature on neighbourhood effects (sometimes also referred to as contextual effects) suggests that the social and political composition of a neighbourhood or residential area influences individual attitudes and behaviour. Personal interaction and perceptions of the attitudes of others in the neighbourhood are here suggested to shape individual attitudes and behaviour. However, this literature lacks studies of the social and political contexts of other sub-national units larger than the neighbourhood but still small enough to constitute social and political contexts meaningful at the individual level. Many of the processes identified at the neighbourhood level may well be significant at higher local community levels. In addition, *different* processes might be operating at the level of larger local communities than at the neighbourhood level. Extending this approach also to include local contexts, such as municipalities, might prove useful when attempting to explain why welfare state attitudes vary.

This thesis thus explores whether variation across local communities, in terms of institutional, social, and political environments, affects individual attitudes toward the welfare state. In doing so, the thesis contributes to research into contextual effects on political attitudes by focusing on larger sub-national units than the neighbourhood, and to research into institutions and attitude formation by attempting to fill the gap between institutional configurations at the country level and personal welfare state experiences as sources of attitude variation. Sweden will here be used as a case for testing whether institutional theories can be applied at the sub-national level and whether there are contextual effects related to social and political contexts that operate at the municipal level. The welfare state attitudes that will be investigated concern a number of different aspects of social policies and the welfare state.

This introduction is organized as follows. The concepts 'institution' and 'social context' will be discussed first, followed by a description of the theoretical and methodological framework of the contextual analysis. Thereafter follows a discussion of the pros and cons of using Sweden as a case for investigating sub-national variation as a source of influence on individuals' welfare state attitudes. Previous research into welfare state attitudes will be presented next, mainly to introduce the individual-level determinants (of welfare state attitudes) to be taken into account to eliminate relationships between the municipal- and individual-level attitudes due solely to municipal demographics. The method and data will then be presented, followed by the operationalizations of the main variables. Wrapping up the thesis is a brief summary of the constituent papers and a discussion of the main findings and conclusions.

The institutional context

Institutions can be defined as 'the formal rules, compliance procedures and standard operating practices that structure the relationship between individuals in various units of the polity and economy' (Hall 1992). Advocates of the 'new institutionalism' often claim that institutions are not just endogenous entities created in accordance with the political preferences of the population (see, for example, Hall and Taylor 1996; Rothstein 1996). Rather, institutions should be seen as independent forces in themselves, capable of influencing or even creating preferences. Rothstein describes a causal relationship working in both directions: 'Opinions, interests, values, ideology, preferences, etc., all influence institutions and policies. But policies and institutions also influence opinions, etc.' (Rothstein 1998).

Other scholars have particularly emphasized the norm-shaping function of institutions by suggesting that they are influential entities in forging a 'moral economy', referring to the prevailing norms and orientations of a society that stem from the interaction between institutions, social cleavages, and orientations (see Mau 2003; Svallfors 1996, 2006). The 'new institutionalism' approach therefore often treats institutions as significant, independent macro variables affecting diverse political outcomes; consequently, they are fitting subjects for cross-national comparisons. Different configurations of institutions in welfare states and in production systems are often conceptualized as particular regime types in which there is are linkages between the different types of institutions in a particular regime. 'Public policies' are often considered synonymous with institutions, and Svallfors suggests that they may be seen as 'concrete manifestations of political institutions' (Svallfors 2007, pp. 11–12).

Mettler and Soss, addressing political scientists as well as social policy scholars, also claim that political attitudes and behaviour cannot be fully understood unless the influence of public policies on such behaviour is considered: 'Scholars can significantly advance each field by studying the ways that citizens' political thoughts and actions are molded by broad policy environments and influenced by direct encounters with specific public programmes' (Mettler and Soss 2004, p. 56). This quotation highlights yet another perspective when studying political institutions and social policies, namely, the influence of institutional design on the relationship between personal welfare state encounters and political attitudes (see, for example, Kumlin 2004). Such an approach highlights the fact that significant institutional variation can be found *within* countries across different types of institutions and policies. Institutions and policies can thus have feedback effects on individual attitudes and preferences through the direct contacts individuals have with institutions; institutions and public policies, however, can also

provide a broad institutional environment affecting individual preferences, not necessarily through direct and personal welfare state encounters.

This discussion of institutions suggests that, if institutional variation is found across other units than nation states and public policy programmes, feedback effects could well exist. However, the existence of such effects is ultimately an empirical question, since the number of dimensions of institutional variation is as vast as the number of potential outcomes that could be affected. This is underlined by Mettler and Soss: 'To understand why policies produce different types of feedback, we need to identify the underlying dimensions of policy variation that have political significance for mass publics: visible versus hidden, targeted versus universal, obligations-oriented versus rights-oriented, participatory versus non-participatory, supervisory versus distant, generous versus stingy, privately provided versus publicly provided, and so on' (Mettler and Soss 2004, p. 64).

It is evident from several comparative studies on the country and regime-type levels that individuals often differ in their political attitudes depending on country-level or regime-level characteristics (see, for example, Andress and Heien 2001; Blekesaune and Quadagno 2003; Jaeger 2006a; Svallfors 1997). The explanations referred to in these studies often incorporate an institutional approach: a country's institutional setting is understood as something influencing individual behaviour and how citizens think about political issues. It has also been highlighted that there are dominant institutionalized interests capable of affecting popular attitudes. Not only institutions themselves, but the political ideas articulated by political parties and interest groups also need to be considered when discussing the influence of institutions. If institutions do affect preferences, as stated above, and moreover are time- and space-bound entities, there is strong reason to investigate whether significant institutional/attitudinal variation can be found elsewhere than at the national level. Little attention has, however, been devoted to institutional variation across other macro units than countries. It seems reasonable to assume that, if such institutional variation exists at the local level, it might well affect how people perceive the welfare state.

The social context

The other main building block of this thesis besides institutions concerns the social environment in which individuals form their attitudes and preferences. As mentioned earlier, the conceptualization of 'social environment' has often been limited to smaller units, such as neighbourhoods, when attitudes and behaviour have been studied, or often been excluded altogether from the analysis. It has traditionally been common to treat an individual's attitudes and behaviour as mainly a consequence of individual-level attributes (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1993; Oliver 2001; Timpo ne 1998). Oliver,

for example, claims that political scientists have largely neglected environmental effects when explaining political participation: 'Citizens are characterized as atomistic creatures making political choices and decisions largely in a social and institutional vacuum' (Oliver 2001, p. 23).

Incorporating the social environment as an independent macro variable, when explaining individual attitudes and behaviour, is often done using the theoretical and methodological framework of contextual analysis.

How, then, has contextual influence on attitude formation been explained by proponents of contextual analysis? As discussed above, the predominant mechanism in past research into contextual effects is interpersonal social interaction (see, for example, Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1966; Butler and Stokes 1969; Huckfeldt 1986; MacKuen and Brown 1987; Pattie and Johnston 2000). Social contacts are assumed to provide political information as well as having a persuasive impact on attitudes; as expressed by Huckfeldt, 'People exposed to neighbourhood environments where particular characteristics predominate frequently adopt social and political sympathies that are congruent with these environments' (Huckfeldt 1986, p. 17). This line of reasoning originates in the 'contagion model' of the development of political homogeneity in small groups developed by Berelson et al. (1966) in their study of voting decisions. This explanation rests on the assumption that the social composition of the local context conditions the extent and nature of an individual's social contacts.

Other scholars have instead argued that social interaction is not a prerequisite for contextual effects (see Books and Prysby 1991; Burbank 1995, 1997; Mondak, Mutz, and Huckfeldt 1996; Mutz 1998). They claim that individuals instead use their local context as a source of default information. Two different versions of this mechanism exist, one stipulating that uninformed individuals are those most likely to use the local context as a source of information, while the other suggests that only the well-informed are capable of using local information when forming attitudes. Burbank describes a process of perceptual influence in which voters use information acquired from the local environment as a shortcut when forming their own opinions. He argues that perceptions rather than social contacts influence vote choice, since people use their fellow local citizens' views as an information shortcut (Burbank 1997). This perspective downplays the importance of personal experiences on behalf of socio-tropic perceptions and, furthermore, argues that people will rely on the social context most relevant to the judgment they are making. In the absence of reliable and abstract nation-level information, people tend to trust information and perceptions acquired from their local environment before using their own personal experiences as guidelines when making political judgments (Mondak, Mutz, and Huckfeldt 1996; Mutz 1992). Despite the slightly different versions of the 'information effect', there seems to be evidence indicating that individuals might sample politically

relevant information from their local environment when forming opinions: 'In short, contextual effects do not come about as the result of social composition alone, but result from individuals learning and acting in an environment with an informational bias' (Burbank 1995, p. 169).

Finally, some scholars suggest yet another way in which contextual influence might work, namely, through the mechanism of 'local interests' (see Cutler 2007; Johnston, Jones, Sarker, Burgess, and Bolster 2004). This mechanism is related to the information approach described earlier in that it does not presuppose social contacts or political discussion for local context to influence individual attitudes. Cutler (2007, p. 579) summarizes how local interests exert an influence in the following way. First, people are attached to the places they inhabit and accordingly care more about their fellow locals than about people living farther away. This includes identification with politically relevant groups and the development of a subjective understanding of the places where they live based on objective local characteristics, such as social composition. Finally, individuals attribute interests to the people who live around them. In a study of Canadian data, Cutler claims that different contextual factors are relevant only in relation to specific political issues: 'Specific local characteristics are relevant as a definition of what is good for the locale only in relation to specific political issues. For example, in judgments about unemployment, the local unemployment situation or aggregate economic vulnerability in the locale is relevant, while the percentage catholic or the number of doctors per capita, or even the county partisan context, is not' (Cutler 2007, p. 580). He concludes that the influential contextual variables in his study all can be said to define a local interest across a range of issues while other unrelated contextual variables had no impact on these attitudes.

Regardless of whether the operative contextual mechanisms relate to individual use of the local environment as a source of default information or to the fact that individuals are concerned about the well-being of their local community, the information-effect perspective and the local-interest mechanism both suggest that local contexts can exert influence on attitudes without this influence necessarily being transmitted through social contacts and political discussions. This is not to say that interpersonal influence does not exist or that some of Cutler's results could not have been interpreted in such a light. However, it seems to suggest that contextual influence is not restricted to smaller contextual units (for example, neighbourhoods and residential areas) that represent spheres of social interaction. Individuals instead seem to react to their social surroundings in various ways that sometimes have implications for their attitudes and behaviour.

Contextual analysis

Contextual analysis provides a framework for studying the impact of institutions and social contexts on individual attitudes at the sub-national level. The broadest definition of a contextual effect is simply a systematic variation in the behaviour of individuals associated with variation across geographic settings (Burbank 1995). Huckfeldt and Sprague similarly conclude that 'various labels have been applied to individually exogenous factors that serve to influence individual behaviour, and the broadest definition of a contextual effect is tied to any such factor extrinsic to the individual' (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1993). Books and Prysby define contextual effects as 'effects on individual behaviour from characteristics of geographical units in which the individuals reside' (Books and Prysby 1991). Another way of putting it is that a contextual effect exists when factors intrinsic to the individual cannot explain systematic variations in behaviour across environments (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1993). It is thus a matter of the systematic variation in the attitudes and behaviour of individuals across local settings remaining after relevant individual-level determinants (of the specific attitude or behaviour) have been taken into account. This is an essential aspect of contextual analysis: for the local environment to have an independent impact on individual attitudes, there must be a contextual influence that operates over and above pure individual characteristics.

To begin with, it is necessary to define what a context is. Books and Prysby define context as a geographically bounded social unit. According to them, states, counties, cities, communities, precincts, and neighbourhoods can be used as contextual units, while non-geographical units, such as families, associations, interest groups, and other organizations, cannot (Books and Prysby 1991).

A broader definition of context is also supported by some scholars who emphasize social networks rather than geographic settings as the most important contextual units (see Eulau 1986; Eulau and Rothenberg 1986; Huckfeldt 1986). In their opinion, geographic context poorly captures the direct social interaction occurring within social networks. According to Eulau and Rothenberg, a person's residential location tells us very little about his or her patterns of social and political communication (Eulau and Rothenberg 1986). Baybeck and Huckfeldt also cite this fact when discussing technological advances such as the Internet and the cell phone as well as forms of rapid transit: 'Urban residents are just as likely to associate with someone who lives across the region as they are to associate with someone who lives across the street' (Baybeck and Huckfeldt 2002). These observations are certainly true and make a strong case for studying social networks, but they do not exclude geographic units from being relevant contexts when studying political attitudes. First, as mentioned earlier, the type of contextual effects dis-

cussed above mainly rests on the assumption that personal interaction and social contacts are prerequisites for any contextual influence on attitudes. If, on the other hand, the mechanisms involved do not rely exclusively on social contacts and political discussions, there may be a number of other contextual units of potential interest. Second, even if social interaction is assumed to be the main mechanism through which the local context influences individual attitudes, there is still an element of constraint depending on the nature of the local environment. As Huckfeldt and Sprague note, 'In contrast, networks represent the product of myriad choices made by people who compose the net, but choices that are circumscribed by the opportunities and constraints imposed by contexts' (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1987).

A second question relates to *what* a contextual variable is. The terminology regarding this is often confusing and distinctions between different types of contextual variables are often somewhat unclear. Books and Prysby distinguish three types of contextual variables: compositional variables, structural variables, and global variables (Books and Prysby 1991). The first type, compositional variables, is by far the most common type of variable used in contextual analysis. Here, the composition of individual characteristics in the local environment affects individual attitudes or behaviour. Social interaction is the mechanism most often employed when studying the effect of compositional variables on attitudes and behaviour. Several scholars have in fact restricted the term 'contextual effect' to applying only to effects on individual attitudes and behaviour arising from social interaction within a local environment (Eulau 1986; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1993; Przeworski and Teune 1970). It is here assumed that the composition of individual characteristics in a neighbourhood or residential area affects the likelihood of someone interacting with some individuals rather than others in everyday community life. The nature of the social contacts a person experiences is thus conditioned by the composition of people residing in the neighbourhood or local community. These contacts with other people are assumed to have a political content and sometimes exert a persuasive impact on political judgment. It is assumed that such social interaction has a converting effect: an individual's attitudes are pulled toward those of people with whom he or she interacts.

In the literature on contextual effects, social composition is often construed in terms of social class, partisan preferences, and education, for example, the presence of a high proportion of a certain social class in a given locale tends to affect the attitudes and behaviour of other individuals not sharing that class attribute. A classic example of such an effect is provided by a study of British political behaviour by Butler and Stokes. They found that individuals belonging to the minority working class in an area tended to conform to local class norms and vote with the middle-class majority (Butler and Stokes 1969). Another example in the same vein is found in Tingsten's

pioneering study of voting precincts in Stockholm, where he found that the working-class vote was disproportionately large in precincts dominated by the working class (Tingsten 1937).

The second type of variable identified by Brooks and Prysby, structural variables, describes the local context in terms of structure and interaction patterns that go beyond the mere aggregation of individual characteristics. Level of party activity is typically considered such a structural factor. The last type, global variables, represents exogenous factors not directly tied to the behaviour of individuals. Characteristics of the local mass media and the dominant economic interests in the community are two examples of such global factors. It will, however, become clear that any straightforward distinction between the various types of contextual variables is difficult to uphold. For example, a structural variable such as the local labour market can be construed in terms of its industrial structure (for example, manufacturing versus service industries); at the same time, however, this structure affects the socio–economic composition of the local community, thereby transforming the structural variable into a compositional variable.

Another factor of importance as an independent force and as a channel for transmitting information about the municipal-level factors described above is the local mass media. Reporting in local media about political scandals and crime rates, for example, can be seen as a potential contextual effect not necessarily related to the actual occurrence of such phenomena in the local context. It has, for example, been demonstrated that media coverage of crime rates have more influence on media-attentive citizens' fear of crime than actual crime rates (Books and Prysby 1991). However, local mass media are also bound to be principal sources of information concerning other kinds of contextual factors. Consider a compositional factor such as the rate of unemployment in the local community. This contextual variable is likely to influence individual attitudes through personal observations of the local community as well as various kinds of informal interaction, but a significant source of information for most people concerning this compositional factor is likely to be the local mass media. Labour market statistics and news about factory closures are frequent subjects of news coverage by local mass media. Similar compositional factors transmitted through local mass media include other social problems, such as rates of ill-health and long-term sickness or disability.

The aspects of social composition most relevant to welfare state attitudes should describe the municipal context in terms of political composition and the prevalence of social problems. Several examples in the contextual effects literature suggest that the composition of partisan preferences influences individual attitudes and behaviour. Burbank, for example, claims that the 'flow of information' in a given context mainly operates through two processes: personal influence and perceptual influence. Individuals learn

from others and from their own observations; both processes are functions of the distribution of political preferences among individuals in a given context (Burbank, 1995). Political composition is expected to be a relevant municipal-level variable, since there is such a strong relationship between party preference and welfare state attitudes at the individual level (Svallfors 1996).

Other findings indicate that the composition of social problems and risks might affect individuals. Cutler (2007) has, for example, demonstrated that local unemployment conditions affect individual support for government measures to reduce unemployment. Similarly, some findings from research into welfare state attitudes indicate that the unemployment experiences of relatives and close friends tend to make people more supportive of the welfare state (Svallfors 1999). There are most likely a number of other municipal-level factors capable of affecting individual attitudes; these might include other compositional factors, such as the municipal level of affluence.

Welfare state attitudes: individual-level explanations

To eliminate spurious effects of local context arising from the demographic characteristics of municipalities, the relevant individual-level determinants of welfare state attitudes must be included in the analyses. If not, 'contextual' effects may arise simply because one or several key individual-level determinants are distributed unevenly across municipalities. Viewed from the individual-level perspective, people tend to make political judgments because of the self-interest, identities, and norms inherent to belonging to a certain social group. There is certainly no lack of evidence supporting this viewpoint, claiming that individual-level characteristics are important determinants of a number of welfare state attitudes (see, for example, Edlund 2006; Jaeger 2006b; Sihvo and Uusitalo 1995; Svallfors 1996; Svallfors 1999; van Oorschot 2002). A particularly important determinant of welfare state attitudes is structural position. Some scholars have emphasized that social classes differ in their resources and in their exposure to market-related risks. Support for the welfare state is stronger among those exposed to greater risks and having fewer resources.

Although the emphasis is often on the economic rationality of individuals, it has been suggested that class differences also relate to class-specific identities and norms. Employment sector is another factor that has been emphasized: public-sector employees display more welfare state-friendly attitudes because of self-interest. Age differences are also assumed to affect welfare attitudes, since exposure to market-related risks and economic resources varies through different stages of the life cycle. Gender differences in welfare state attitudes have also been found. This approach emphasizes the resources individuals possess and the risks to which they are exposed as the

main sources of attitude variation. It is essential that these explanations be taken into account in the analyses before any claims about contextual effects are made.

The Swedish case

This thesis builds exclusively on data from Sweden. It is therefore important to describe Sweden as a case and discuss whether its characteristics render it a complicated or simple case when trying to detect contextual effects on welfare state attitudes. The state structure of Sweden is often depicted as an hourglass: public power is concentrated at the top in a strong central government and at the bottom in self-governing municipalities (the principle of local self-government is written into the constitution), leaving the county level with considerably less administrative power (see, for example, Petersson 2007). Municipalities are often considered the cornerstones of the Swedish welfare state, since much of the implementation of social policies and the delivery of public services is carried out at the municipal level. A series of municipal mergers was carried out in the 1970s to create efficient municipal units capable of handling delivery of a broad range of public services. This reduced the number of municipalities from approximately 2500 in the 1950s to today's 290 (the number of municipalities has been 290 since 2003).

Furthermore, several reforms and changes in the 1980s and 1990s have profoundly affected the Swedish welfare state and the municipalities. These reforms and changes, including decentralization, New Public Management reforms, 'marketization', and output orientation (as opposed to procedural control), have in many ways entailed more freedom for municipalities and contributed to increasing variation across municipalities (Bergmark and Palme 2003; Gustafsson 1987; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004). Decentralization had already been a prominent theme in the 1970s (mostly for reasons of enhancing democracy), but the 1980s saw a particularly strong trend toward decentralization with the aim of making municipal administration more effective and businesslike.

Gustafsson claims, in describing the Social Democratic programme of renewal presented to parliament in 1985, that 'one consistent aim is to establish a more decentralized public administration' (Gustafsson 1987, p. 180). A shift toward a more output-oriented public sector, emphasizing service quality goals (for example, by implementing total quality management), was put into practice at all levels of government. Increasing decentralization and 'marketization' continued in the 1990s; for example, the responsibility for all compulsory schooling was decentralized to the municipalities. Trydegård cites an example of the rapid increase (especially between 1999 and 2000) in public service production carried out by for-profit enterprises: the share of

for-profit firms delivering welfare services increased by nearly 150 percent between 1993 and 2000 (Trydegård 2001). She also emphasizes the fact that different forms of service delivery by non-public actors display large variations across different service areas as well as across municipalities.

The reforms and trends cited above illustrate the significance of municipalities in the Swedish political system and the changes and reforms that have occurred in recent decades. Although no *specific* effort will be made in this thesis to assess whether differences between Swedish municipalities have increased or whether this has affected the relationship between local context and attitudes, the past development of the public sector and of Swedish municipalities is described mainly to indicate the potential of the municipal level to represent substantial local differences within Sweden. However, no data are available with which to perform any analyses of the relationship between municipal conditions and individual attitudes over time.

It is often suggested that different parts of Sweden have particular local characteristics in terms of structural attributes and the norms, orientations, and behaviour of the people living there. One such distinction often made is between northern and southern Sweden. Another duality often highlighted in the mass media and in social science research is that between rural and more densely populated areas. It is, however, often hard to distinguish whether any substantial differences really exist, at least in terms of the attitudes, orientations, and behaviour of people living in different parts of the country. This is particularly salient if these differences are assumed to originate from some independent influence of the local environment. The fact that there are plenty of significant differences between municipalities in terms of, for example, their size, population density, affluence, labour market, local economy, and public services, is undeniable, so it is tempting to infer that such tangible differences must affect people. Some empirical findings also seem to lend credence to the picture of a geographically divided Sweden where there is a link between people's place of residence and their opinions on diverse issues.

The prime example of this is probably the established voting pattern historically found across Swedish municipalities and regions. For example, a number of political scientists conclude that a trademark of Swedish politics through most of the 1900s is the remarkable difference in party support across geographical space (see, for example, Lewin, Jansson, and Sörbom 1972; Wörlund 1990). This political geography of Sweden has largely persisted despite a number of major changes in society, such as industrialization and urbanization. Another related example is the cleavage found between the northern and southern parts of Sweden as well as between rural areas and cities in the referendums on EU membership (1994) and on adopting the Euro (2003) (see Gilljam 1996; Martinsson 2004). Regional and local differences within Sweden are also identified by studies of popular opinion across

a variety of public services (see, for example, Birgersson 1975; Ferraz Nunes 2002; Nilsson 1996; Sannerstedt 1981).

However, as stated earlier, there is often considerable uncertainty whether these differences exist merely because these regions and local communities consist of different compositions of individuals (in terms of their background characteristics). If that is the case, any variation in attitudes or behaviour found across regions or municipalities would simply be because different individuals tend to live in different places. Such concentration effects might well be relevant, but for a more interesting hypothesis, claiming that characteristics of the local environment actually influence individuals' opinions, to be valid, attitude differences must remain between local contextual units even after the demographic characteristics of local contexts are taken into account. If such attitude differences persist, something is clearly going on in the local context causing otherwise 'similar' individuals to hold somewhat different opinions depending on the characteristics of their respective local environments. Some scholars have argued that the potential for heterogeneity to be hidden within a single country can be considerable, since local communities might be characterized by cultural, institutional, and structural variation, possibly affecting the attitudes and behaviour of individuals (see, for example, Allardt 1966; Jones and Duncan 1998; Linz 1969; Snyder 2001).

Previous research into municipalities

There is a long tradition of municipal studies in Sweden, since municipalities constitute important administrative units, levying local income taxes and delivering most welfare services (for some examples, see Birgersson 1975; Johansson, Nilsson, and Strömberg 2001; Montin 1990, 1992; Nilsson 2002; Premfors 1991; Sannerstedt 1981). Despite the vital function of municipalities in the Swedish political system and their roles as cornerstones of the organization and provision of welfare services, few attempts have been made to assess whether there is a relationship between municipal context and individual political preferences. However, some research explicitly examines Swedish municipalities and political attitudes. The potential for municipal conditions to affect individual attitudes is revealed in studies of municipal service production and citizen evaluations of these services (see Birgersson 1975; Olander 1984; Sannerstedt 1981). Common to all these studies is that variation in the standard of service production between Swedish municipalities is assumed to affect peoples' degree of satisfaction with these services. This question was investigated by Birgersson (1975). He studied the relationship between a number of individual-level determinants and citizen satisfaction and discovered that it proved to be younger, well-informed individuals with high levels of education who expressed the least satisfaction with municipal services. Birgersson claims that those less-informed individuals who,

conversely, expressed satisfaction with municipal services do so not so much because they are particularly satisfied with these services, but because they are generally uninterested and unaware of the extent and quality of municipal services. A main interest in his study was also whether municipalities having the most comprehensive range of services also tend to have the most satisfied citizens. He summarizes the main finding, contradicting the anticipated relationship between standard of municipal services and citizen satisfaction, in terms of a 'service paradox'. This 'service paradox' refers to the negative correlation between standard of services and citizen evaluations of these services: the proportion of unsatisfied citizens proved to be larger in municipalities having the most extensive services (Birgersson 1975).

Another attempt to investigate whether and how attitudes toward municipal services vary between different social groups and types of municipalities was made by Sannerstedt (1981). He finds no evidence of the 'service paradox' – stating that more extensive municipal services tend to lead to more dissatisfied citizens – discovered by Birgersson (1975). When respondents were asked to state whether they generally were satisfied or dissatisfied with their municipal services, Sannerstedt found that the proportion expressing satisfaction differs substantially across municipalities. These municipal variations, however, are not linked to the service level of the municipalities, according to Sannerstedt. He instead claims that a number of socio–economic factors influence whether or not people tend to be satisfied. Sannerstedt also notices a regional difference, like that identified in several studies of voting patterns, indicating that municipalities in northern Sweden tend to have larger proportions of dissatisfied and demanding respondents than do municipalities elsewhere (Sannerstedt 1981).

Some studies of regional differences and individual voting preferences also touch on municipal differences. Gilljam (1996) studied social cleavages and regional voting differences in the 1994 referendum on Swedish European Union membership. He finds evidence of two separate processes relating to geographical voting patterns: one is separating voters along the lines of regions and another relating to places of residence and population density. These cleavages seem to operate independently of each other and indicate that voters living in cities and in southern Sweden as opposed to voters living in rural areas and northern Sweden are more supportive of EU membership. These regional differences are persistent when comparisons are made within groups of individuals sharing the same profession or political party preference (Gilljam 1996). The spatial variation found cannot be explained by claiming that the socio–economic make-up of the geographical regions differs, thereby giving birth to the variation across regions.

A similar result was found by Martinsson in a study of another referendum, the Swedish referendum in 2003 on adopting the Euro. He also finds considerable differences, not only across regions, but also across municipali-

ties and electoral districts. Martinsson sets out to answer the question as to whether the differences across regions are due to the concentration of socio–economic characteristics. His main conclusion is that such characteristics can only account for some of the variation across the eight regions he identifies, and that much of the variation across regions still remains after controlling for socio–economic variables (Martinsson 2004, p. 298).

Other studies of Swedish municipalities deal with different outcomes, for example, different forms of political participation. Eriksson (2007) finds no significant relationship between the socio–economic composition of municipalities and political participation. Other similar studies exist, but the contextual units investigated are often smaller units, such as residential areas or city districts (see, for example, Brännström 2006; Eriksson 2007; Strömblad 2003).

The potential for municipalities to constitute relevant explanatory units is instead best highlighted in a Finnish study by Blomberg and Kroll (1999). They stress the 'local character' of the welfare service systems of the Nordic countries: 'Despite their universal character, these services are provided by local authorities with wide decision-making powers in administrative units that differ from each other in many respects, including levels of taxation and spending on the social and health service sector, and also regarding the economic situations and strengths of political blocs' (Blomberg and Kroll 1999, p. 320). This study found that macro-sociological factors such as economic condition, level of social and health expenditures, and political dominance do affect individual attitudes. Individuals living in municipalities characterized by economic hardship, low social and health expenditures, and a dominant bourgeois bloc tend to be less supportive of welfare services.

Some findings clearly indicate that municipal conditions might affect individual attitudes. However, most studies of Swedish data deal exclusively with attitudes toward public service delivery and there are no examples of studies investigating the potential influence of municipal context on a broader set of welfare state attitudes. Furthermore, most previous studies lack the ability to simultaneously control for a sufficient number of individual-level determinants, leaving unanswered the question as to whether the contextual effects found are merely due to concentration effects. Using the appropriate statistical technique, it is be possible to incorporate all relevant individual-level predictors (identified by previous research into welfare state attitudes) in each specific case.

The methodological approach

Studying contextual effects rests on a multilevel approach to theory and data, as described by Steenbergen and Jones: 'The goal of multilevel analysis is to account for variance in the dependent variable that is measured at the lowest

level of analysis by considering information from all levels of analysis' (Steenbergen and Jones 2002). Similarly, Jones and Duncan conclude that: 'Multilevel models are a useful tool for quantitative analysis when the problem under investigation has a multilevel structure, when a process is thought to operate at more than one level or scale, or when the researcher is particularly interested in variability and heterogeneity and not just overall average values' (Jones and Duncan 1998).

Since the basic assumption of this thesis is that individuals are influenced by their local contexts, the research problem here clearly involves multiple levels of analysis, addressing both individuals and contexts. In other words, measurements at the individual and municipal levels must be simultaneously included in the statistical model to explain individual attitude variation. The lowest level of analysis is often referred to as level 1, so more level 1 units (individuals) are nested within fewer level 2 units (municipalities). The difference between single-level OLS regression and multilevel models is that a random part is added to the single-level model, allowing relationships to vary at level 2. The level 2 residuals estimate the between-context variation while the level 1 residuals estimate the between-individual (within contexts) variation. An advantage of multilevel modelling is thus that variation in the dependent variable can be assigned to the appropriate level using information from the individual and contextual levels. Furthermore, the ability to specify higher-level variation (between contexts) in the model provides a means for testing whether any variation across level 2 units is merely due to compositional effects: if the level 2 variation disappears when relevant individual-level determinants are included in the model, there is clearly a case of demographic effects causing variation at level 2. If, on the other hand, variation between contexts remains significant after including relevant individual-level determinants and if higher-level variables also prove to have a significant impact on the dependent variable (after taking into account relevant individual-level predictors), contextual effects are most likely present. Another advantage is the ability to specify cross-level interactions determining whether the impact of individual-level predictors is conditioned by factors at the contextual level.

Data

The datasets used in this thesis are taken from various sources and times for several reasons. First, when using survey data to detect attitudinal differences across a large number of level 2 units (municipalities), it is necessary to have a large enough sample so that the number of individual cases and of level 2 units is sufficient to allow reliable parameter estimates. Few national samples contain more than 1000–1500 respondents, which, in light of the approximately 290 Swedish municipalities, renders them inappropriate for

multilevel modelling. Fortunately, Statistics Sweden's Living Conditions Survey (ULF), carried out in 1998, contains both a large enough sample (n = 5732) as well as the survey questions necessary for studying welfare state attitudes. This dataset is used in two of the constituent papers of this thesis, the second and fourth.

However, some of the municipal characteristics and individual preferences of interest here demand more recent data, which makes the 1998 Living Conditions Survey impossible to use. This is the case when the focus is on municipal variation in the degree of 'marketization' of public services and the accompanying individual attitudes toward such privatization, since these processes were not sufficiently established in 1998. Three regional SOM surveys from 2003 and 2004 have for that reason been merged and used in the third paper. Finally, a number of national surveys carried out between 1992 and 2002 have been merged into a third dataset, which is used in the first paper. This dataset consists of five separate surveys from the Swedish Welfare State Surveys (1992, 1997, and 2002) and two waves of the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) (1996 and 2002).

In addition to the survey data described above, the municipal characteristics of interest have been collected externally and used in order to create a municipal database. These municipal variables have then been added to each survey dataset. A number of sources have been used in gathering these data, including Statistics Sweden, the Swedish Social Insurance Agency, and the Swedish Public Employment Service.

Variables

The main variables used in the four studies are briefly described here; a detailed description of the variables is then provided in each paper. The independent variables of primary interest are operationalizations of the institutional and compositional characteristics (social and political) of municipalities described earlier.

The institutional variation at the municipal level regarding the degree of privatization of public services is measured by the share of the total costs of welfare services (for example, schools, child care, and elderly care) carried out by private-sector operators.

The second aspect of Swedish municipalities as local contexts is the social and political contexts they constitute. The municipal composition of such characteristics includes the prevalence of social problems and risks in municipalities as well as the ideological and political climate characterizing the local milieu. Social problems are measured by municipal rates of unemployment, social assistance, and ill-health. These rates are also used individually as a basis for grouping municipalities into categories sharing similar characteristics. A municipality's ideological climate is measured in terms of the

dominant party preference along the left–right spectrum. Election data from local and national elections are used to calculate the share of votes cast for different political parties, thereby describing the prevailing political climate of the local citizenry.

The dependent variables used in the papers aim at measuring how people view the welfare state along a number of dimensions. Attitudes toward the welfare state are not one-dimensional: there is no single coherent set of attitudes that covers every aspect of the modern welfare state. It is an oversimplification to assume that people are either for or against the welfare state. Popular attitudes toward various aspects of the welfare state instead often display little coherence, and it is sometimes difficult to find a strong relationship between different dimensions of attitudes toward the welfare state (Svallfors 1989, 1996). Modern welfare states and social policies can be conceptualized as having different aspects – for example, financing, spending, service delivery, and suspicion of abuse – each capturing a fundamental dimension of the welfare state. These different dimensions are captured roughly by the following questions: How should social policies be financed? How much money should we spend on these policies? Which actors are best suited to produce/deliver welfare services? How widespread is the abuse of social policies? These attitude dimensions have been used as guidelines when constructing the dependent variables used in the papers.

Summary of the papers

What insights have been gained by focusing on the relationship between popular attitudes toward the welfare state and municipal contexts? A brief summary of the papers and a concluding discussion will answer that question.

The first paper investigates whether there is a relationship between local ideological climate and individuals' attitudes toward financing and service delivery. The main contextual variable therefore measures municipalities in terms of their political climate: a scale is constructed measuring the relative strength of the social democrats and the conservatives. These two parties have been chosen because they are the two major parties representing the traditional ideological divide in Sweden. Political climate should here be understood as the general ideological climate among municipal inhabitants as well as the political rhetoric characterizing local political debate. The empirical findings indicate that individuals living in municipalities where the conservative party is dominant are less supportive of the collective financing of social policies and the public organization of service delivery. This finding remains significant when a number of individual-level and municipal-level controls are included in the model, indicating that individuals having similar background characteristics tend to favour public welfare solutions to a vary-

ing degree depending on the political climate of their municipal environment.

Paper two assesses whether social risks and the social spending preferences of individuals are related. The municipality is here viewed as a context exposing individuals to different types of social risks. It is suggested that exposure to such social risks in the local community might influence support for high social spending among municipal inhabitants. It is further claimed that the interdependent nature of certain social risks is the key factor when explaining contextual influence on social spending preferences. Examples of such interdependent risks include local unemployment rate, depopulation, and the structure of the local labour market in terms of manufacturing vs. service production. The results indicate that risk factors such as unemployment conditions and the population trend of municipalities constitute local contexts influencing social spending preferences. Similar individuals (i.e., individuals having comparable background characteristics) living in different municipalities tend to think differently about social spending. Support for high social spending is greater among individuals living in high-risk municipalities regardless of their individual-level characteristics.

The degree of preference of Swedes for privatized public service delivery is studied in the third paper. The main aspects of the municipal environment capable of affecting attitudes are here considered to be the institutional setting and political climate. It is suggested that policy feedback effects and political articulation by right-wing parties can create a local information bias that affects individual preferences. A public service environment characterized by a high degree of non-public service providers and a strong conservative party could make people more inclined to favour privatization of service delivery. The empirical findings, however, indicate no relationship between municipal context and degree of preference of Swedes for privatized public service delivery. Attitudes do not vary across different municipalities so no contextual effects are present. This lack of variation across municipalities in terms of attitudes toward privatization is rather unexpected, considering the strong relationship between such attitudes and individual party preferences given the salient political geography of Sweden. The lack of variation might be explained by the fact that the survey data for this study are limited to two regions of Sweden, possibly excluding some of the municipal variation in party strength characterizing Sweden.

The last paper investigates whether degree of suspicion of welfare abuse relates to municipal context in Sweden. Local context is here conceptualized in terms of social problems and political climate. Social problems are captured by local unemployment, social assistance, and ill-health rates, while political climate is captured by electoral support for the conservatives. The results indicate that suspicion of abuse of welfare policies does vary across municipalities and, furthermore, that this attitude variation is linked to the

municipal-level factors suggested. Less suspicion is generally found among people living in municipalities having high levels of social problems, while more suspicion of abuse is associated with an increase in conservative vote. There is also an interaction between level of social problems and political climate: the impact of the conservative vote varies between municipalities having different levels of social problems. Among those municipalities having high levels of social problems, an increase in conservative vote affects suspicion more than in municipalities having fewer social problems.

Conclusion

The papers presented here present mixed evidence of the existence of contextual effects on individuals' welfare state attitudes. Two main findings stand out. First, there seems to be a relationship between unfavourable municipal conditions in terms of social problems and risks (for example, unemployment conditions and depopulation) and pro-welfare state attitudes among the municipal inhabitants. The findings of paper two indicate that the existence of interdependent risks, such as high local unemployment and depopulation, tend to be associated with stronger support for the welfare state. Willingness to support high social spending is greater among individuals living in municipalities characterized by many social risks, such as high unemployment and declining population. Similarly, paper four demonstrates that an analogous pattern exists when social problems at the municipal level are related to individual views of social policy beneficiaries. When three categories of municipalities are distinguished based on their rates of unemployment, social assistance, and numbers of sick days, it becomes clear that social policy recipients are generally viewed more favourably in municipalities having many social problems. Suspicion of abuse of welfare policies is less widespread among the inhabitants of such municipalities.

One interpretation of these results is that there seems to be a 'built in' thermostat in the Swedish welfare state. Local circumstances characterized by social problems and risks tend to be associated with a local citizenry having more welfare state-friendly attitudes. These findings can be seen in relation to the impact of social networks on individual attitudes found by Svallfors (1999). His conclusion that social problems among an individual's relatives and close friends tend to lessen suspicion about welfare abuse and increase willingness to support high social spending seem to extend to include the local community as well.

Another way of interpreting the relationship between the incidence of social problems in the local milieu and individual attitudes is to focus on the dimensions of welfare state attitudes investigated here. Arguably, suspicion that welfare abuse is frequently taking place has an inherent element of perceptive evaluation in contrast to more normative viewpoints regarding, for

example, the financing of the welfare state. The same can be said – albeit to a lesser extent – about attitudes regarding whether the amount of money spent on social policies should be increased or decreased; such opinions related to welfare abuse are likely shaped more by the conditions people face in their everyday community lives.

Another principal finding concerns the apparent lack of institutional feedback effects on welfare state attitudes at the municipal level. The third paper investigates whether the local level of public service privatization affects individuals' preferences regarding the privatization of public service delivery. No evidence can be found of any feedback effects on attitudes arising from the municipal public service context. Since this aspect of institutional variation is considerable across municipalities, it is somewhat striking that there is no feedback from a privatized service environment generating more privatization-friendly attitudes in the local population, as might have been expected. There is thus little suggesting that alternate provision of public services, such as independent schools or privatized child care, is fueling an increasing demand for such privatized service production. The impact of institutions and policy feedback effects on attitudes often found at the national level clearly does not exist when the scale is shifted to municipalities. At least not on the outcome studied here. Several explanations can be cited. First, it might not be the institutional variation per se, but rather the political articulation surrounding these institutions that affects preferences. Much of this is likely articulated at the national level by national politicians and interest groups rather than at the local level by local politicians and other local actors. If this is the case, it might not matter so much that there is substantial institutional variation across municipalities, since the influence of institutions on attitudes is transmitted through political articulation taking place mainly at the national level.

It is also rather unexpected to find contextual effects on attitudes concerning financing and spending. In contrast, attitudes toward public service privatization, which arguably could be viewed as less ideological in character compared to the fundamental issues of financing and spending, and thus possibly more easily influenced by contextual factors, display no relationship whatsoever with local context. These findings are even more interesting in view of the substantial variation in terms of actual public service privatization (in a broad sense) across Swedish municipalities. An alternative explanation of this general result might be found in the fact that, despite the seemingly non-ideological character of attitudes toward service delivery, a strong ideological polarization guides individuals in these matters.

Regarding possible explanations of contextual effects on welfare state attitudes, the findings of this thesis support the explanations emphasizing the local context as an 'information setting' and the related perspective emphasizing some kind of 'local interests'. These explanations seem equally valid as

the social interaction approach, which highlights interpersonal interaction and political discussion. Individuals are likely made aware of social problems and risks through a number of sources and mechanisms not limited to personal contacts only. This is not to say that the effects found here could not have been brought about through interpersonal interaction, but it seems more fruitful to broaden the understanding of contextual effects beyond mere interpersonal interaction. It seems more plausible to assume that people are exposed to some kind of biased information settings in their community life through various sources, such as personal interaction, personal observations, political rhetoric and the local mass media.

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