Attitudes towards the Market and the Welfare State

Incorporating attitudes towards the market into welfare state research

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Abstract
Social policy and its associated institutions are central political arenas for societal compromise and conflict. The capacity to attract strong support from a wide constituency of citizens is, therefore, a defining feature of welfare policy legitimacy. While there is much research measuring attitudes towards state-organized welfare, the overall aim of this thesis is to incorporate attitudes towards the market into this research field. This aim is carried out through four empirical studies that add a market component to the analysis of different topics covered in current welfare state research. The articles in this thesis either compare attitudes across countries or deploy Swedish public opinion as a test case. Newly designed or previously underutilized survey measures are used that explicitly cover attitudes towards the market. Latent class analysis, structural equation modeling, and multilevel analysis are used to study how attitudes vary both within and across countries.

Citizens' perceptions and evaluations of the market are found to be shaped by their everyday life experiences within the market structure. Moreover, citizens' trust in the performance of market institutions is found to be important in structuring their welfare policy preferences. In addition, attitudes towards the market appear to be influenced by the institutional context: citizens living in countries with more ambitious welfare states are less inclined to support market distribution of social services, and class differences in political welfare attitudes tend to be larger in countries with more encompassing welfare states. Collected findings thus suggest that citizens living in countries with more generous welfare states are more inclined to think that the legitimate scope of the market nexus should be negotiated and calibrated via social policy.

By incorporating attitudes towards the market in relation to welfare state support, this thesis contributes to increasing our understanding of the political and moral mindset of citizens in advanced political economies. Public attitudes towards the welfare state are to a significant degree formed by perceptions and evaluations of the market and its actors. In order to further our knowledge about preferences regarding the role of the state in modern society, and to stay in tune with ongoing policy developments, future socio-political research is well advised to bring the main alternative to the state – the market and its actors – into the analytical framework.

Keywords
Market, welfare state, social policy, political attitudes, public opinion, trust, class, marketization.

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