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NOTES ON AN ATTRIBUTION MODEL OF WELFARE PREFERENCES¹

1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between ethnic heterogeneity and welfare provision has become subject to intensive research in the past fifteen years. Scholarly interest may have stemmed from accumulating evidence on American voters' overwhelming hostility towards certain welfare transfers. Studies on racialization of those attitudes linked the issue to the large body of literature on race and politics in the US (e.g. Gilens 1995). Meanwhile, analyses of local public policies established the relationship between racial heterogeneity and certain policy outcomes in American communities (e.g. Poterba 1997, Ribar and Wilhelm 1999). In their influential study, Alesina and Glaeser (2004) widened the scope of policy analysis by extending it to aggregate welfare spending and also to many countries around the world. Their provocative hypothesis about the coming era of welfare state retrenchment following mass immigration in Europe prompted a new line of research on the other side of the Atlantic (e.g. Burkhardt and Mau 2011, Finseraas 2008, Lepiatka et al 2010, Petersen et al 2011, Taylor-Gooby 2005, van der Waal et al 2010).

In addition to massive empirical research, much has been done to uncover mechanisms which might foster ethnicization of welfare attitudes, but diverging experiences in the US, Europe and Canada pose puzzles for all theoretical perspectives. Early theoretical works were motivated by the American experience, supposing strong links among the salience of the minority poor, poverty attributions, welfare attitudes, political behavior and welfare state design (e.g. Gilens 1995, 1999). Indeed, the racialization of welfare attitudes of the otherwise increasingly color-blind American public hasn't been fading in recent years (Dyck and Hussey 2008). The solid support for redistribution in Western Europe, however, hasn't

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been shaken by increasing ethnic heterogeneity yet (Finseraas 2009, Lepiatka et al 2010, Mau and Burkhardt 2009). In Central-Eastern Europe, on the other hand, „European-style” egalitarianism is often coupled with the „American-type” tendency to stigmatize the poor (Kluegel et al 1995, Lepiatka et al 2010).

In this short paper, we put forward an argument which connects inequality and ethnicity to welfare attitudes, and is grounded on four major propositions. First, instead of referring to racism, we follow Gilens (1999), van Oorschot (2000) and others by assuming that most voters support public assistance for the „deserving” poor of any color, and the stereotypes on crosscultural variance of deservingness lay the ground for ethnicization of welfare attitudes. Second, the role of stereotypes stem from the middle class voters’ lack of perfect information on the behavioral patterns and intentions of the poor. Third, some indicators of the economic status may serve as information shortcuts on the efforts of welfare beneficiaries: middle-class voters interpret lower status as a noisy signal of lower efforts. Fourth, the degree of uncertainty about a poor person’s proper behavior is, itself, dependent on his economic status: lower status – to some degree –, implies higher level of uncertainty. We argue that the poor are deprived of many opportunities to prove their deservingness. This might contribute to stigmatizing poverty, but also leaves room for prior stereotypes – positive and negative ones alike – to shape judgements on welfare recipients. Thus, we conclude that poverty-related attitudes are prone to become stigmatizing and racialized, but do so only in sufficiently unequal societies.

2. POVERTY ATTRIBUTIONS, ETHNICITY AND THE WELFARE STATE

The Diversity-Solidarity Relationship

Fighting poverty is an enduring task even in affluent postindustrial societies. In many of them, the image of the poor is ethnicized, leading to further complications. The stigma on poverty is stronger where very low status is identified with some native or immigrant minority groups. This, in turn, might result in low public support for poverty alleviation measures. Some scholars warned early in the eighties that the popularity of the whole welfare system also may deteriorate in societies where poverty is ethnicized (Freeman 1986, Weede 1986).

Alesina and Glaeser’s (2004) provocative hypothesis about the coming era of welfare state retrenchment following mass immigration in Europe was subject

to strong critique (Taylor-Gooby 2005), and gave rise to a new line of research in Europe. Those cross-country investigations of attitudes and welfare spending provide only scant evidence for a detrimental effect of heterogeneity on solidarity (e.g. Finseraas 2008, Lepiatka et al 2010, Mau and Burkhardt 2009, Soroka et al 2004, see Stichnoth and Straeten 2009 for a review). Actually, an already long history of immigration, and a significant overlapping of minority groups with the poorest strata have not shaken the solid popularity of the comprehensive welfare states of Western Europe yet. Nonetheless, recent findings on moderate average influence of heterogeneity on attitudes *may* indicate upcoming changes of the political climate in some European countries (van der Waal 2010). In the meantime, US trends of intensifying anti-welfare sentiments have been reversed in the post-welfare reform era, but the racialization of welfare attitudes hasn't been fading yet (Dyck and Hussey 2008). Those findings in America pose puzzles themselves in the light of long lasting trends of weakening racial prejudices in attitudes towards other policy areas, as well as patterns of some important real-life decisions about, for instance, marriage (e.g. Qian –Lichter 2007) or political candidates. To add further noise to the empirical results, the outlines of a third pattern of attitude structures emerged in surveys in Central-Eastern Europe. Here, strong egalitarianism is often coupled with the solid tendency to stigmatize the poor (Kluegel et al 1995, Lepiatka et al 2010).

Early theoretical works were motivated by the American experience, supposing strong links among the salience of the minority poor, poverty attributions, welfare attitudes, political behavior and welfare state design (Gilens 1995, 1999). They have difficulties with taking account of such ambiguous findings across advanced welfare states. Nevertheless, American exceptionalism is multidimensional, leaving room for reasoning about the roles of culture and institutions in shaping the impact of ethnic heterogeneity (Taylor-Gooby 2005).

Theoretical Perspectives on Welfare Attitudes

Two lines of argument tries to take account of the evidence on ethnicization of welfare attitudes: the one based on pure racism or „ethnic preferences” and the other one based on stereotypes and attributions.

A widespread hypothesis claims that any kind of ethnic discrimination could be traced back to old fashioned racism or so called „ethnic preferences.”² Ethnic

² Rational choice models of political economy tend to use the latter term.

preferences imply a desire to discriminate between ethnic groups. In other words, individuals with ethnic preferences give larger weights to the wealth of the members of their own ethnic group than to the one of people belonging to other groups. Political economy models of welfare preferences use the ethnic preferences assumption (e.g. Luttmer 2001). Habyarimana et al (2006) test directly the mechanisms which may undermine public good provision in ethnically heterogeneous communities. They refuse the ethnic preference hypothesis, and find some support for network based explanations instead. Nonetheless, some scholars continue to adopt such a preference based approach to the study of the diversity-solidarity relationship (Freeman 2009). Decades after the civil rights movements era in America, psychologists rarely refer to „old-fashioned” racism when interpreting policy preferences. Instead, they suppose that symbolic racism fuels racialization of attitudes (Sears and Kinder 1971, Tarman and Sears 2005). However, symbolic racism is not a direct preference to discriminate, but a system of beliefs instead, so it is closer to the other perspective on opinion formation.

The predominant view of opinion formation traces ethnicization of attitudes back to stereotypic beliefs about the personality traits of the poor. Gilens (1999) assumes that middle-class Americans are willing to support the deserving poor. However, media presentation of poverty distorts the image of this group, showing it as a predominantly black community. Blacks are targets of old stereotypes, according to which they are lazy. Thus, middle-class Americans think, the majority of the poor (since they are predominantly black) are undeserving. Gilens refuses to leap forward a more general theory of intersection of ethnic stereotypes and welfare preferences. Instead, he narrows his focus on the case of US. One should note that the issue of variance in deservingness is not necessarily related to ethnicity, other factors also play a role (van Oorschot 2000).

3. TOWARDS A THEORY OF INCOME DEPENDENT POVERTY ATTRIBUTIONS

In this session, we put forward a simple theory of poverty-related policy attitudes. Our theory models middle-class voters’ judgements about various groups of the poor, and the preferred levels of assistance resulting from those judgements. Attribution theory provides a general framework for the argument. Moreover, some of our major propositions are similar to those adopted by Gilens (1999) and van Oorschot (2000), among others. Nonetheless, two factors, namely, the degree

of uncertainty and variance of the level of poverty, which are at the forefront of our theory, weren't addressed explicitly in earlier research.

We assume that voters are driven not only by self-interest when expressing their policy preferences on the assistance for the poor. Their opinions are also based on a sense of fairness and justice: they are ready to support those in real need. Principles of fairness and justice do not imply a "blind" egalitarianism. Taxpayers' money should help only the „deserving” poor. In other words, they support assistance only for those, whose poverty is a result of bad luck but not lack of efforts.

Behind this, lies an attribution model for evaluating fellow-citizens' economic performance. This kind of model supposes that financial situation is a function of environmental factors and personal characteristics.³ We simplify it further, and assume that middle class citizens model personal economic performance as a function of luck and effort. In our interpretation, luck comprises almost all the factors linked to structuralist attributions. Thus, in our view, voters who think about poverty, focus their attention on poor people's intentions on the one hand, and factors such as labor market opportunities and health status on the other. Taxpayers are ready to reward effort and compensate for bad luck. That is if poor financial situation is accompanied by high level of effort, voters are supportive for welfare assistance. They are reluctant, however, to pay the bills of bad characters.

Do not forget at this point that we talk about the voters' naïve model of economic performance, instead of a social science theory on the issue. That is, our theory is about this naïve model and not about the real roots of poverty.

The kernel of the logic of welfare attitudes in our theory could be better understood in a model of a simplified world, where voters can observe perfectly every single individual in their society, and public assistance is also individual-specific. In this toy world, compassionate citizens judge the potential beneficiaries of public assistance they meet in two steps. First, voters are to distinguish those who try to do their best to improve their own situation from the ones who do not exert significant effort to escape poverty. The latter group is considered as undeserving, and is ignored – at best. In the second step, benevolent citizens look at the deserving types, and detect the lag – if there is any – between their socially acceptable needs and their disposable financial resources. Then, voters could decide how much of taxpayers' money they prefer to sacrifice for alleviating poverty of those who are „deserving”. Note that this decision process is purely

³ Those assumptions are also called structuralist and individualist attributions, respectively. In the terminology of attribution theory, one can also distinguish controlled factors and uncontrolled ones, individuals bearing responsibility only for the former ones (e.g. Oorschot 2000).

„color-blind”, and, in this way, is strikingly different from the one assumed by the ethnic preference hypothesis or any other theory of racism.

Our argument on welfare preferences in modern large-scale societies is grounded on three major propositions. First, we emphasize that it is difficult to observe the deservingness of any individual directly in modern large scale societies, and stereotypes on work ethics of various groups are to bridge the gap of uncertainty. The larger the uncertainty about deservingness is, the stronger role of stereotypes will be.

Second, the easily detected economic status might send cheap albeit noisy signals about an individual’s (hard to be observed) personality. Low status can be a signal of laziness, while relatively higher level of income may inform about the subject’s deservingness.

Third, we assume that the degree of uncertainty about an observed person’s proper behavior is, itself, dependent on his economic status. We argue that the poor, especially those without a stable job, are deprived of opportunities to prove their deservingness, leaving room for prior stereotypes – positive and negative ones alike – to shape judgements on them. This might explain, in turn, why poverty-related attitudes are particularly prone to become racialized, and are more so in more unequal societies.

Thus, a middle class individual who belongs to a negatively stereotyped group, may have a good chance to *prove* that stereotypes are not to apply to his case. A poor, jobless person from the same group, on the other hand, is deprived of most of the opportunities for sending signals of diligence and efforts for distant observers. Negative stereotypes aren’t refused in his case.

To sum up our argument about the formation of welfare attitudes, we may conclude that deservingness of potential beneficiaries is crucial for benevolent voters, but in large-scale societies, they are forced to hypothesize on it by using noisy signals and prior assumptions. Those signals, however, are becoming weaker and noisier as would-be welfare recipients slip down the income ladder further away from stable middle-class status. Thus, poverty, by fuelling uncertainty about personality, is a fertile ground for the survival of old-age stereotypes in policy preferences.

The next session formalizes our argument. We intend to show that the simple distinction between poverty and middle-class status leaves important attribution mechanisms unexplored. The formal model help us to introduce and analyse a continuous income variable which, in turn, sheds new light on poverty attributions, and their interactions with income inequalities.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The relationship between ethnic heterogeneity and welfare provision has become subject to intensive research in the past fifteen years. Theories addressing the issue tend to rely on the American experience so diverging evidence on the heterogeneity-solidarity relationship in the US, (East- and West-) Europe and Canada, pose puzzles for social science theory. Nevertheless, it is plausible to refer to various cultural and institutional differences when accounting for cross-country variance in welfare preferences and welfare design (Taylor-Gooby 2005).

This paper, instead of addressing cross-cultural differences directly, aimed at developing an abstract and general rational choice model of public preferences on the assistance for the poor. We drew on attribution theory and pointed to „deservingness” as a key concept in voters’ minds (c.f. Gilens 1999, Oorschot 2000). The model suggests that income is an important information shortcut on deservingness, and highlights the role of income inequalities in the ethnicization of welfare attitudes. We showed, first, that negative stereotypes and individualistic poverty attributions may give rise to a kind of „poverty-assistance paradox”: the poorer the recipient is, the fewer transfer he will deserve according to middle-class voters. Second, the analysis revealed that the impact of ethnic stereotypes on welfare preferences diminishes as the income of the target population approaches the middle class standards.

References to cultural and institutional traditions as explanations for cross-country differences in the heterogeneity-solidarity relationship still leave some important questions open: Does the increasingly tolerant American public continue to look at welfare through racial lenses, and will some European societies, sooner or later, follow American suit as a reaction to mass immigration? Furthermore, is the future American for the welfare regimes of ethnically diverse societies in Central-Eastern Europe and other regions comprising emerging economies?

We could not answer these questions. But we pointed to a basic dimension of social structure as one of the major driving forces behind diverging pathways. Namely, income inequality was singled out as a variable which may have a significant effect on ethnicization of welfare attitudes. We argued that the salience of minorities among the poor, ethnic stereotypes and individualistic poverty attributions foster ethnicization of welfare attitudes by interacting with income differences. That is, their ethnicizing effects on attitudes may strengthen as inequality increases. Thus, one might argue that the role of income inequalities should be taken into account in inquiries into the heterogeneity-solidarity relationship in advanced welfare states.

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