

## 2 Theoretical background and literature review

This chapter provides the theoretical backdrop of the study, giving an overview of existing approaches and describing empirical results in the literature. The first section briefly discusses the concept of institutions and describes insights from institutional theory. This section addresses the theoretical relationship between institutions and individuals and the question of how institutions impact on human behavior, preferences, and attitudes.

The second section elaborates on empirical results from the comparative welfare-state literature and discusses the theoretical mechanisms that link welfare-state institutions and attitudes. This part of the chapter describes the hypotheses that have been formulated with regard to attitudinal differences among welfare regimes as well as among social groups and explicates which of these hypotheses have been confirmed empirically. At the end of this section, an analytical framework is provided that depicts the theoretical link between welfare-state institutions and public attitudes.

The last section eventually discusses the distinctiveness of the family-policy field in comparison to other fields of welfare-state intervention. One major feature of this field is the salience of normative beliefs and cultural traditions (e.g., in terms of gender-role attitudes or attitudes toward the best type of childcare) for both the development and the evaluation of family-policy measures. Moreover this section addresses the question of how family-policy institutions structure families' lives and gives an overview of empirical classifications of family-policy systems.

The second part then describes results from earlier studies, which analyzed public attitudes toward family policies and gender-roles, and discusses the question which social cleavages can be expected to matter with respect to attitudes toward family-policy measures. The section ends with a description of the hypotheses guiding the empirical analyses in the following chapters, which analyze the link between existing family-policy institutions, contextual features, and public attitudes toward family policies in a comparative perspective.

## 2.1 Institutional theory

Institutional theory has been used extensively to illuminate the impact of institutions on political and corporate actors (for an overview, see, Oliver and Mossialos 2005), whereas studies looking at institutions' effects on individuals are rare (Wendt et al. 2011; Mettler and Soss 2004). The basic idea of the institutionalist approach is that actors are embedded in institutional environments that, according to Ebbinghaus (2006: 16), "shape actors' orientations and interests as well as the opportunity structures for the actor constellations." This idea can be applied to both political or corporate actors as well as individuals (see also Ebbinghaus 2011).

A key concept in institutional theory is path dependence, which is used to explain institutional stability as well as institutional change. According to Ebbinghaus (2005: 5), the basic idea of this concept is "that in a sequence of events, the latter decisions are not (entirely) independent from those that occurred in the past." This concept encompasses two distinct approaches: The "trodden trail" approach refers to "micro-level diffusion processes in social networks" (Ebbinghaus 2005: 25) and "stresses the spontaneous evolution of an institution and its subsequent long-term entrenchment" (Ebbinghaus 2005: 5). This model can explain persistence but not institutional change. The second approach - the "road juncture" model - refers to "macro-level institutional arrangements that shape subsequent (political) decision-making" (Ebbinghaus 2005: 25). This model is more flexible and can be used to explain both institutional persistence and change because it "looks at the interdependent sequence of events that structure the alternatives for future institutional changes" (Ebbinghaus 2005: 5). In his study of institutional change in the field of family policy, Bahle (2003) discussed the concept of path dependency and concludes that recent changes in Western European social-service systems indicate a mixture of institutional continuity (in terms of path dependency) as well as institutional innovation.

Institutional theory is divided into three schools of thought: Rational choice institutionalism, sociological institutionalism, and historical institutionalism (for an overview, see, P. A. Hall and Taylor 1996; Oliver and Mossialos 2005). The following paragraph reviews the three approaches briefly, since they constitute useful concepts for the study of welfare-state institutions and their impact on individuals' attitudes. The focus is thereby on two questions: 1) How are institutions defined? And 2) how do institutions impact on individuals? All three traditions focus on the impact institutions have on actors' decisions or behavior and consequently on social and political outcomes.

**Rational choice institutionalism** arose from the study of American congressional behavior and views politics as a series of collective-action dilemmas (P. A. Hall and Taylor 1996). Rational choice institutionalists apply a typical “calculus approach” in which actors have a fixed and pre-defined set of preferences and behave completely instrumentally and strategically in order to maximize the attainment of these preferences. Political outcomes are seen as the result of strategic interaction through which actors’ strategic behavior is affected by expectations about how others are likely to behave. Institutions are then able to solve collective-action dilemmas by structuring alternative options as well as providing information and enforcement mechanisms, thus reducing uncertainty about the behavior of others. The origination of institutions is hence assigned to the involved actors themselves, who create institutions in order to realize gains from cooperation.

**Sociological institutionalism** has developed in the subfield of organizational theory and explains institutional forms and procedures in cultural terms (P. A. Hall and Taylor 1996). Sociological institutionalists follow a variant of the “cultural approach” and apply a broad definition of institutions, which tends to include culture itself as a form of institution. As Hall and Taylor (1996: 947) pointed out, institutions are not only the formal rules, procedures, or norms, “but the symbol system, cognitive scripts, and moral templates that provide the ‘frames of meaning’ guiding human action” (see also Rothstein 1996).

The relationship between institutions and individual action is seen as highly interactive and mutually constitutive. Following this approach, institutions influence behavior by providing the cognitive scripts and models that are necessary to interpret the world as well as the behavior of others. According to Hall and Taylor (1996: 948), institutions “influence behavior not simply by specifying what one should do but also by specifying what one can imagine oneself doing in a given context.” Hence, they affect individuals’ most basic preferences, self-images, and identities. This approach does not deny rationality or purposeful action but claims that what an individual views as rational is itself socially constituted. The emergence of new institutional forms or practices, finally, is explained by a “logic of appropriateness” in contrast to a “logic of instrumentality” (Campbell, cf. P. A. Hall and Taylor 1996: 949), i.e., organizations (or individuals) aim primarily at enhancing social legitimacy within their broader cultural environment.

Finally, according to Hall and Taylor (1996: 938), **historical institutionalism** defines institutions “as the formal or informal procedures, routines, norms and conventions embedded in the organizational structure of the polity or political economy. They can range from the rules of a constitutional

order or the standard operating procedures of a bureaucracy to the conventions governing trade unions behavior or bank-firm relations.” Research following this tradition is especially interested in power and asymmetrical power relations and assumes that institutions distribute power unevenly across social groups, e.g., with regard to access to the decision-making process. Applying the path-dependency concept, institutions are seen as relatively persistent over time. When explaining institutions’ impact on human action, historical institutionalists apply both approaches - the calculus and the cultural approach.

According to the calculus approach, human behavior is based on strategic calculation and seeks utility maximization given a set of individual goals and preferences. This argumentation is in keeping with rational choice institutionalism. Institutions structure individual action through the provision of more-or-less certainty regarding the behavior of other actors at the present and in the future (e.g., through the provision of information, enforcement mechanisms, or penalties for defection). As Hall and Taylor (1996: 940) stated it, “institutions persist over time because they embody something like a Nash equilibrium,” which means that individuals are better off when following the institutionally suggested pattern of behavior.

The cultural approach, in contrast, is more in line with sociological institutionalism and stresses the impact of established routines and the individual’s interpretation of the situation on human action resulting in bounded rationality. Following this approach, institutions structure individuals’ interpretations and actions by providing moral or cognitive templates. Hence, institutions not only provide strategically useful information but also “affect the very identities, self-images and preferences of the actors” (P. A. Hall and Taylor 1996: 939). Institutions and the conventions associated with them are persistent over time because they are taken-for-granted and simply not called into question.

Each of these three schools of thought has its own strengths and weaknesses and could benefit from a greater exchange with the others (P. A. Hall and Taylor 1996). Rational choice institutionalism has developed a precise model of the relationship between institutions and behavior. However, this model rests on rather simplistic assumptions about human action, focusing on rationality, instrumentality, and strategic calculation. It therefore misses important dimensions of human behavior, such as social norms and values. Sociological institutionalism is better equipped to account for these dimensions, for it specifies ways in which institutions can affect the underlying preferences or very identities of actors. However, one of the major weaknesses of this approach is the broad definition of institutions, which makes the empirical application of the concept difficult (see also Rothstein 1996). Historical institutionalism, finally, is

best suited for integrating the advantages of the other two types of institutionalism. Since it applies both calculus and cultural approaches, it provides the most all-encompassing theory when analyzing the relationship between institutions and individuals (see also Wendt et al. 2011). The main weakness of this approach is that it has not clearly specified the causal mechanisms through which institutions affect social actors.

In order to define the concept of institutions for this study, Hall and Taylor's definition of institutions as "the formal or informal procedures, routines, norms and conventions embedded in the organizational structure of the polity or political economy" (P. A. Hall and Taylor 1996: 938), serves as a useful starting point. Focusing on welfare-state institutions, however, a narrower definition of institutions is needed that includes only formal political institutions. This study therefore applies the definition provided by Svallfors (2006). His definition restricts the concept of an institution to "politically decided objects and their implementation. By this definition, institutions are thus systems of formal rules and procedures, manifested in phenomena such as social security systems, election systems, and family law" (Svallfors 2006: 23). When broken down to the subfield of family-policy institutions, which are the focus of this study, this definition includes institutions such as parental leave, childcare services, and family allowances. Regarding this specific field of welfare-state intervention, the calculus approach suggests that those groups that are most likely to benefit from family-policy benefits and services should be most in favor of these policies. This argument applies, e.g., to parents with small children and especially to low-income families. The cultural argument, in contrast, emphasizes normative beliefs, which play a crucial role in the family-policy field (see Section 2.6). Normative beliefs about the social roles of men and women (and particularly of mothers) and about the provision of social care are key aspects in the understanding of public opinion toward family policy.

## **2.2 The link between institutions and welfare attitudes**

### *Variation among welfare regimes*

A key hypothesis in the comparative welfare-state literature is that the different welfare regimes create systematic variation in the extent to which the public supports welfare-state principles, policies, and programs (e.g., Korpi 1980; Linos and West 2003; Svallfors 1997; Jæger 2006a; Arts and Gelissen 2001; Bean and

Papadakis 1998). The most influential classification of welfare states is Esping-Andersen's "The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism" (1990). Based on the concepts of social stratification and "de-commodification," Esping-Andersen distinguishes three distinct welfare regimes, namely the liberal (e.g., the US), the conservative (e.g., Germany), and the social-democratic welfare state (e.g., Sweden). According to Esping-Andersen (1990: 21/22), "De-commodification occurs when a service is rendered as a matter of right, and when a person can maintain a livelihood without reliance on the market." The level of de-commodification describes the degree to which "citizens can freely, and without potential loss of job, income, or general welfare, opt out of work when they themselves consider it necessary" (Esping-Andersen 1990: 23). Briefly summarized, the social-democratic regime is characterized by a high level of de-commodification and universal welfare policies, whereas the liberal regime coincides with low de-commodification and strong individualistic self-reliance. The conservative regime is characterized by corporatism and a modest level of de-commodification. Although Esping-Andersen's classification has not remained uncontested (e.g., Scruggs and Allen 2006), the bulk of empirical studies interested in the relationship between welfare states and public opinion use this classification as the point of departure.<sup>1</sup>

The distinct welfare regimes don't only comprise a specific set of social policy arrangements and assign a different level of responsibility to the state, the market, and the family for the provision of welfare; they also create collective patterns of institutionalized solidarity and social justice beliefs. As Esping-Andersen (1990: 58) stated it, "each case will produce its own unique fabric of social solidarity." These moral and normative beliefs have developed over time, are embedded in the culture, and have been institutionalized in welfare-state institutions, which in turn impact on public discourse and individual orientations (e.g., P. Hall 1986; Rothstein 1998; Mau 2004). According to Mau (2003, 2004), different norms of reciprocity and fairness result in different "moral economies" of the welfare state, which are understood as sets of institutionalized normative assumptions about who should get what, for what reasons, and under what conditions. These normative assumptions function as generalized frames of reference for the public's judgment of what the appropriate scope of public welfare is and which social groups deserve public aid (see also Jæger 2006a; Edlund 1999; Svallfors 2003). Following these arguments, redistributive policies

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<sup>1</sup> For critics and extensions made by other scholars, please refer to Leibfried (1992), Castles and Mitchell (1993), Ferrera (1996), Bonoli (1997), Arts and Gelissen (2002), and Scruggs and Allen (2006).

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should gain public support as long as they are consistent with socially valid reciprocity norms (Mau 2003). This means that people support a certain welfare arrangement not only out of self-interest but also because the arrangement in question is morally plausible and perceived as fair. Reciprocity thereby does not imply the “equality of burdens or obligations” or a “balancing out of material costs and benefits” (Mau 2003: 188). According to Mau’s conceptualization, “reciprocity means that people expect some kind of recompensation for their efforts, but these recompensations can be either in the form of having a stake in a collective endeavour, a protection promise, welfare entitlement returns or in the form of norm-conforming behaviour on the part of the beneficiaries. [...] From the recipient’s perspective, reciprocity is a pattern of exchange that entails certain obligations or actions as repayments for benefits received” (Mau 2003: 188). What exactly the public considers fair and equitable, both in terms of burdens and benefit level, varies across different fields of welfare-state intervention and among distinct welfare regimes and is partly contingent upon public discourses, the press, and political actors (Mau 2003).

In addition to providing social services and income maintenance, welfare states function as an agent of social stratification (Esping-Andersen 1990; see also Gelissen 2000). The different policy arrangements can increase or lessen societal cleavage structures and conflict lines and generate very different patterns of coalition in the electorate. Authors such as Esping-Andersen (1990), Svallfors (2006, 2007), and Korpi and Palme (1998) emphasize the role of the middle classes in the development and persistence of welfare-state arrangements. The middle class is either believed to form a “welfare-coalition” with the working class or an “anti-welfare-coalition” with the upper class (Albrekt Larsen 2008: 147). Scholars argue that encompassing or universal welfare states foster a broad coalition among the electorate in favor of government intervention, whereas welfare states relying primarily on targeted and means-tested policies enhance hostile attitudes toward the welfare state (Korpi 1980; Korpi and Palme 1998; Edlund 1999; Rothstein 2001).

Most research in this field assumes that attitudes toward the welfare state are dependent on an individual’s position in societal hierarchies (e.g., income or status hierarchies) and on the design of existing social policy arrangements since these arrangements constitute the context in which citizens’ attitudes are shaped (see also Svallfors 1997; Gelissen 2000). Most empirical studies focus consequently on differences in the level of support among the different welfare regime types and among social groups within welfare regimes.

Scholars have hypothesized that support for redistribution should be highest in the universal and highly redistributive social democratic regime type, lowest

in the liberal regime type, and in-between in the conservative welfare regime type (see Svallfors 1997; Gelissen 2000; Arts and Gelissen 2001; Andreß and Heien 2001). Empirically, the findings are not completely clear cut. All studies find substantial differences among countries with regard to attitudes toward redistribution (e.g., Edlund 1999; Svallfors 1997; Arts and Gelissen 2001; Linos and West 2003), solidarity beliefs (e.g., Arts and Gelissen 2001), and government responsibility for other aspects of welfare provision (e.g., Gelissen 2000; Svallfors 2003, 2004; Blekesaune and Quadagno 2003; Lipsmeyer and Nordstrom 2003; Bean and Papadakis 1998). However, these patterns correspond only roughly to the welfare regime typology (see also Jæger 2006a; Svallfors 2010).

Studies focusing on support for specific welfare programs have confirmed the expected pattern. Universal and encompassing programs, such as healthcare and old-age pensions, receive higher public support compared with targeted and means-tested programs, such as housing and social assistance (e.g., Bean and Papadakis 1998; Rothstein 2001; Coughlin 1980, 1979). The latter type of program is also more likely to produce suspicion regarding abuse or cheating. Blekesaune and Quadagno (2003) showed that support for programs helping the unemployed varies with different levels of unemployment. If unemployment is high, support for programs helping the unemployed is comparatively high as well (see also Wendt et al. 2011).

Regarding the strength of conflict lines among social groups within the different welfare regime types, it has been hypothesized that class cleavages should dominate in the liberal regime, whereas the conservative regime type is expected to create conflicts between labor-market insiders and outsiders (i.e., between those who have a good labor-market position and those who are unemployed or have a weak labor-market position). The social democratic regime, in turn, is hypothesized to create strong gender and sectoral conflicts between the public sector, which is mainly populated by women, and the private sector, which is predominantly occupied by men (Esping-Andersen 1990). Empirical results, however, are inconsistent with some studies confirming the expected cleavage patterns among different welfare regimes (e.g., Andreß and Heien 2001; Linos and West 2003), whereas others find that most conflict lines are present in all welfare regimes (e.g., Svallfors 1997, 2010; Edlund 1999; Bean and Papadakis 1998; Svallfors 2003).

An important methodological extension of this field is the work done by Jæger (2006a, 2009), who argues that individual countries should not be treated as perfect empirical representations of their respective theoretical welfare regimes. Therefore, instead of using welfare regimes, Jæger includes regime-type

indicators measured at the country-level to assess a country's empirical resemblance to the welfare regimes. These indicators mirror what states actually do in terms of welfare provision and cover the three dimensions of welfare provision, namely the state, the market, and the family. Jæger (2006a) used indicators such as the total scope of public social spending and the composition of cash benefits versus social services (state dimension), unemployment benefit generosity (market dimension), and the scope of benefits and services to families (family dimension). This approach allows for the approximation of a country's degree of membership in the different regime types and introduces more cross-national variation (Jæger 2006a). Jæger concluded that empirical support for the regime hypothesis is mixed. In a later study, he (2009) analyzed not only the level of public support for redistribution but also the variance of support in 15 countries. With respect to the level of support, he found the strongest support in the conservative regime, followed by the social democratic regime, whereas the level of support is lowest in the liberal regime. The rank order with respect to the variance in public support differs slightly: The variance is strongest in the social democratic regime, followed by the conservative regime, and is lowest in the liberal regime. Jæger argues that the results are coherent with the idea that the actual level of redistribution and ideological and political controversy regarding redistribution affects attitudinal polarization at the individual level (Albrekt Larsen 2006; Svallfors 2004; Pfeifer 2009).

The findings described above show that there is variation both in the level of public opinion among welfare regimes as well as in the patterns of social polarization among individuals within these regimes. The current study amends existing research by investigating both the level and variability of public opinion toward family policy in distinct family-policy regimes as well as in individual countries. This stepwise approach sheds light on the interrelatedness of the family-policy setup and public attitudes. Moreover, it is argued that other contextual features are important for the understanding of the link between the policy setup and public opinion. The approach of welfare arrangements (Pfau-Effinger 2005a) theoretically captures the interrelatedness of different aspects of a society that potentially impact on public opinion. This approach is described in the following section.

### *The approach of welfare arrangements*

Complementing the comparative welfare-state literature, Pfau-Effinger (2005a) reflected on the relationship between culture and welfare-state policies in a

comparative perspective and introduced the approach of welfare arrangements. According to this approach, welfare-state policies of a given society are embedded in the broader societal context that includes the following interrelated elements: The cultural system, the welfare system, social structures, and political and individual actors (see Figure 2.1).

At the macro-level, the cultural system includes the welfare culture, which forms the basis of the welfare arrangement and captures the relevant ideas surrounding the welfare state in a given society. The welfare culture comprises “the stock of knowledge, values and ideals to which the relevant social actors, the institutions of the welfare state and concrete policy measures refer” (Pfau-Effinger 2005a: 4). The welfare system comprehends the institutional system of a given society, including the institutions of the welfare state as well as other central institutions, such as the family and the labor market. The social structures cover existing social inequalities, power relations, and the division of labor (Pfau-Effinger 2005a: 4).

At the meso- and micro-level, political- and individual actors are taken into account. Political actors (in terms of both collective and individual actors) are assumed to be involved in conflicts, negotiation processes, and discourses on values and ideals, whereas individual actors play an important role in terms of their social practices and behavior. A key feature of the welfare-arrangement approach is the interrelatedness of all elements. The relationship of culture and welfare-state policies is thus conceptualized as “a complex, multi-level relationship which is embedded into the specific context of a particular society and which can develop in contradictory ways” (Pfau-Effinger 2005a: 16).



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