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Self-Serving Welfare Support?

An empirical assessment of the statist individualism hypothesis

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Abstract

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Abstract: This thesis contributes to the ongoing scholarly debate about the relation of individual freedom and the Swedish welfare state. The point of departure is the theory of statist individualism, as propounded by Berggren & Trägårdh, which this paper intends to quantitatively assess through individual level proxies. The research utilizes European Social Survey data from 2016 in order to create three separate measures of welfare support which are analyzed through multiple regression models. These are coupled with Schwartz's theory of basic values, employed in order to approximate the core arguments of statist individualism. Subsequently, the models are refined through the inclusion of interaction terms and a robustness check incorporating Esping-Andersen's welfare regime typology. Thereafter, the results of the models are referred back to statist individualism, and their implications on the theory are assessed. The findings provide no support for the central expectations of statist individualism at the individual level. No evidence is found suggesting that autonomy structures welfare attitudes in a uniquely positive way in Sweden, nor that welfare support can be sustained independently of solidaristic value orientations. Instead, the significant interaction effects that are identified run counter to the theoretical expectations of statist individualism, thereby casting some doubt on the explanatory power of the concept.

Keywords: *statist individualism, welfare attitudes, welfare support, value orientations, welfare regimes, individualization*

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1. Introduction

The distinguishing characteristic of Swedish political tradition is its roots in the seemingly paradoxical coexistence of strong individualist values alongside an expansive interventionist welfare state (Berggren & Trägårdh, 2015, p. 43). This idea is the impetus substantiating a still ongoing scholarly debate about the relationship of individual freedom and the Swedish welfare state. How can Sweden, in empirical measurements of culture, rank among the most individualistic countries in the world (Berggren & Trägårdh, 2015, p.84, World Values Survey, 2023, Inglehart–Welzel Cultural Map) yet simultaneously be regarded as one of the most expansive welfare state models and associated with labels such as the *people's home*? Processes of individualization, both cultural and structural, are frequently regarded as posing a challenge to the welfare state (Raven, Achterberg & van der Veen, 2013, p. 950). The rising importance of individual freedom is theoretically assumed to undermine the support of collectively organized institutions, whereas disembeddedness from social structures is associated with the erosion of traditional interest groups forwarding the legitimacy of the welfare state (Raven, Achterberg & van der Veen, 2013). The coexistence of strong individualism alongside extensive welfare state institutions has therefore often been considered theoretically puzzling.

Scholarly interpretations of this relationship have broadly been characterized by two competing perspectives, considering the welfare state as either fundamentally opposed to, or compatible with, individual freedom (Reinikainen, 2024). One influential attempt to reconcile this tension is Berggren & Trägårdh's (2015) theory of statist individualism. Through this lens, the Swedish welfare state is not understood as primarily rooted in collective obligation or solidarity, its central legitimating principle is instead argued to be the facilitation of individual autonomy. Thus, the paradoxical framing of the coexistence of individualism and the welfare state dissipates, as welfare support and legitimacy is not understood as dependent on collectivist notions. Nonetheless, there is still discord among scholars about the relation of individual freedom and the welfare state, with authors such as Reinikainen (2024) arguing that Berggren & Trägårdh's interpretation is too liberal, disregarding the ideology of the Swedish social democratic party. Thus, while important contributions have been made concerning the relationship between individualism and the welfare state in Sweden, there remains disagreement regarding the mechanisms through which welfare legitimacy is sustained.

2. Purpose and research question

The main purpose of this paper is, then, to further the debate about the interplay between individual freedom and the welfare state in Sweden. As there still seems to be disagreement among scholars coming at the topic from historical or ideological perspectives, this paper instead seeks to empirically test the proposed logic of statist individualism, as conceptualized by Berggren & Trägårdh (2015). This aims to be conducted through quantitative measurements through the creation of individual level theoretical proxies, capturing the underlying logic proposed by statist individualism, and assessing their saliency as predictors of welfare attitudes in Sweden compared to other European countries. Simultaneously, we thus explore the relevance of individual level value orientations as predictors of different aspects of welfare policy. Thus, this paper not only seeks to elucidate the debate regarding the relation of individual and state in Sweden, it also aims to examine possible antecedents of welfare attitudes, contributing to the wider field of welfare studies.

At the outset it should be clarified that this paper does not claim to capture the statist individualism concept in its entirety, as a macro-level cultural construct. That which is being examined is rather individual-level patterns consistent with its fundamental principles. The results of this paper thus cannot claim to confirm, or deconfirm, the statist individualism hypothesis, but it does seek to assess whether the principle proposed by Berggren & Trägårdh is observable at the individual level. The chief statement that drives the analysis is Berggren & Trägårdh's (2015) claim that the Swedish welfare state is not primarily founded upon, or necessitated by, feelings of solidarity or collective obligation, but rather that its main principle is that of enabling individual autonomy by reducing interdependence. It is precisely this, the individualist and autonomy-based explanation legitimating the Swedish welfare state, and its underlying logic, that is to be examined further and tested empirically. The aim of this paper is to empirically assess whether observable implications of statist individualism, the theoretical conception of Sweden's culturally specific relation between individual and state, are empirically discernible, culminating in the following research question:

To what extent are value-based Self-Interest and Autonomy associated with welfare attitudes, and does this relationship differ between Sweden and other European countries?

3. Prior research

This section reviews research on welfare attitudes, value orientations, and their interrelationship, in order to situate the empirical assessment of statist individualism.

Initially, measuring attitudes towards welfare is a widely researched topic. Previous studies suggest that much importance should be placed in the type of welfare state that is being researched. This also encompasses the assumption that attitudes towards welfare may vary across regime types, depending on the institutional framework of the welfare services in the country (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Svallfors, 1997; Lee & Kim, 2025). However, a more recent meta analysis proposes that there is a process of hybridization taking place, and that national differences based on regime type are becoming harder to detect (Bertin, Carrino & Pantalone, 2021). Nonetheless, previous findings implore us to take the concept of welfare regime types into consideration, a further discussion of which can be found in the theory chapter.

Along with this, prior research has identified individual antecedents to welfare attitudes. These encompass concepts such as class, political ideology or material self-interest (Svallfors, 2004; Meier Jæger, 2024; Qi & Haselswerdt, 2024). The concepts of political ideology and material self-interest tend to be seen as two contending causal explanations for individual level welfare support, though there have been mixed empirical results concerning both of the approaches, underpinning the development of a conditional self-interest paradigm (Lee & Kim, 2025; Meier Jæger, 2024). The prevalence of these concepts in the literature motivates the inclusion of both political-ideological and economic factors in our analysis. Though material self-interest is more widely researched, this study instead focuses on a value-based conception of self-interest, capturing the extent to which individuals prioritize personal goals over collective welfare, which is considered more appropriate for assessing statist individualism.

Concerning the measurement of individual values, a plethora of research exists. This comprises value scales such as Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions or Inglehart's (1977) post-materialism measures. A somewhat more recently conceptualized measurement, the Schwartz (1992) human values scale, is, however, what is to be utilized in this paper. This scale is not only widely empirically validated, but presents a clear structure of values and a distinction between individual and cultural values (Patrício et al., 2022). In addition to this, much literature concerning the interplay of values and welfare attitudes utilizes Schwartz basic values, thus this decision places us in line with established praxis.

At the intersection of these concepts lie the growing research area linking values to welfare attitudes. The results of this research have broadly found significant correlations between values and welfare attitudes (Arikan & Bloom, 2015; Gryaznova, 2013; Kulin & Meuleman, 2015; Kulin, 2011; Choi, 2021). Some studies also incorporate a conditional perspective on the way in which values correlate with attitudes, finding that the predictive strength of basic values differ depending on, for instance, class belonging or political ideology (Kulin & Svallfors, 2013; Arikan & Bloom, 2015). Most of these studies focus on the value orientations of Self-Enhancement and Self-Transcendence, included in this paper as well. What differentiates this analysis is that it uses the explored connection of values and welfare attitudes in order to create individual level proxies for the concept of statist individualism, which is sparsely researched, and its mechanisms remain largely untested.

While analyzed in historical and theoretical terms, statist individualism has rarely been examined empirically, which this study seeks to address, aiming to assess it quantitatively, at the individual level. Building on these strands of research, the following section develops the theoretical core of this study, integrating welfare regime theory and Schwartz's value theory with Berggren & Trägårdh's (2015) concept of statist individualism.

4. Theoretical concepts

This section aims to present the theoretical starting point for this paper, primarily focusing on the concept of statist individualism, as conveyed by Berggren & Trägårdh (2015), while also contextualizing it through relevant supplementary literature. Additionally, this chapter touches on concepts such as Esping-Andersen's (1990) welfare regime typology and Schwartz's (2012) value orientations, which are utilized in this analysis, and thus are required to be understood. Ultimately, this chapter concludes by presenting the hypotheses that this analysis rests upon.

4.1 Statist Individualism

The concept of statist individualism is situated in an ongoing scholarly debate regarding the Swedish welfare state and its relation to individual freedom. An outline of this discussion is presented by Jouni Reinikainen (2024) in the article "The view of freedom that shaped the Swedish welfare state". According to Reinikainen (2024) there have been two overarching interpretations dominating this

debate. The first of these, as propounded by Hirdman, interprets the Swedish welfare state as in opposition to individual freedom, driven by an urge to micromanage society and its citizens (Reinikainen, 2024, p. 498). Diametrically opposed to this proposed incongruence is the camp consisting of Rothstein as well as Berggren & Trägårdh, who instead claim that the Swedish welfare state facilitates autonomy and individual freedom (Reinikainen, 2024, p. 494). Whereas their theoretical points of departure are dissimilar, Rothstein's (1998) analysis resting upon Dworkin's view of state neutrality, while Berggren & Trägårdh's (2015) discussion centers around the Kantian idea of asocial sociability, both parties come to conclusions regarding the Swedish welfare state that, according to Reinikainen (2024, p. 495), are surprisingly individualistic and autonomy friendly.

What sets Berggren & Trägårdh's interpretation apart from the other mentioned scholars is that their focal concern is not that of the ideology shaping the Swedish social democratic party's reforms, instead their argument rests upon the wider notion of Swedish history and culture. With that in mind, their claims are more overarching in nature, aiming to encompass the views and opinions of normative Swedish culture, rather than focusing on the goals of specific politicians or parties. But then what exactly is statist individualism?

The starting point of Berggren & Trägårdh's (2015, p. 43) discussion of statist individualism is the seemingly paradoxical notion that Sweden, and Swedes, place a high value on individual freedom while simultaneously supporting vast government authority and intervention. This claim is further supported by the measurements of the World Values Surveys, where it becomes apparent that Sweden occupies an outlier position, strongly prioritizing self-expression and secular values (Berggren & Trägårdh, 2015, p. 84; World Values Survey, 2023, Inglehart–Welzel Cultural Map). This is indicative of Sweden having gone far in the process of individualization, which is theoretically assumed to undermine welfare support (Berggren & Trägårdh, 2015, p. 84; Raven, Achterberg & van der Veen, 2013, p. 950). Though it should be mentioned that the empirical material does show some mixed results regarding the salience of individualization as a predictor of welfare dissatisfaction (Raven, Achterberg & van der Veen, 2013). Nonetheless, it is this enigmatic notion, Swedish culture emphasizing individualism and personal freedom while supporting an expansive welfare state, that Berggren & Trägårdh seek to explain through statist individualism.

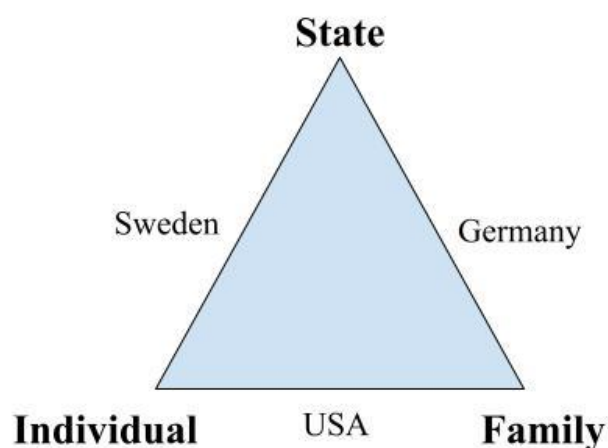
This discussion is rooted in the idea of *the swedish theory of love*, inspired by Rousseau, comprising the idea that in Sweden interpersonal relationships are founded upon the basis of autonomy and independence, rather than interdependence (Berggren & Trägårdh, 2015, pp. 22-23). Statist

individualism is then a specifically Swedish design of the social contract, anchored upon this cultural importance of independence from other people (Berggren & Trägårdh, 2015, p. 22). It functions as an alliance between individual and state, constructed with the purpose of emancipating the individual from the interpersonal, and guaranteeing personal autonomy. The claim is then, that the Swedish welfare state is an institutionalization of these underlying values (Berggren & Trägårdh, 2015, p. 23).

In more digestible terms, Berggren & Trägårdh (2015, p. 64) claim that the driving force behind the legitimacy of the Swedish welfare state is that it guarantees individual autonomy, rather than it being founded upon feelings of collective responsibility. This does not mean that solidarity or worrying about the good of the collective is incompatible with welfare support in Sweden, but that welfare support is not contingent on it. According to Reinikainen (2024, pp. 500-501), statist individualism is a conceptualization of the moral core of the Swedish welfare state through which welfare is supported as a means of releasing the individual from relationships of dependency.

In order to further exemplify statist individualism Berggren & Trägårdh (2015, p. 80) provide a triangular figure meant to illustrate the relationship of individual, family and state in relation to different types of welfare solutions. Statist individualism, in this case represented by Sweden, is thus a social contract in which individual and state are interlinked at the expense of the family (Berggren & Trägårdh, 2015, p. 80). In Germany the relationship is characterized by an alliance of state and family, and a lower importance given to the individual, whereas the United States prioritizes the individual and family, lending less authority to the state (Berggren & Trägårdh, 2015, p. 80). For the keen-eyed, this figure overlaps quite nicely with Esping-Andersen's (1990) welfare regime classification, which the next section will discuss further.

In summary, Berggren & Trägårdh attempt to elucidate the seemingly paradoxical notion of Sweden's high individualism and prioritization of personal freedom coexisting with expansive government authority. Their hypothesis claims that the legitimacy, and support, of the Swedish welfare state is not primarily explained by solidarity or collective obligation, but rather, in individual striving for personal autonomy. This theoretical lens renders individualistic motivations, and autonomy,



The power relations of welfare - Adapted from Berggren & Trägårdh (2015, p.80)

as congruent with welfare support, and solidarity as beneficiary but superfluous, resolving the apparent paradox of autonomy/individualism coinciding with an expansive state.

It is precisely this part of statist individualism that is the main interest of this paper, the core argument of which is captured by the following postulate: *In Sweden, welfare support can be sustained independently of strong solidaristic value orientations, and may instead be rooted in the pursuit of individual autonomy.*

4.2 Welfare Regimes

As with most scholarly work concerned with the topic of welfare states, this paper cannot disregard the studies of Esping-Andersen (1990), in this case the work regarding welfare regimes. What is posited here is that the welfare state should not be conceived of as one homogeneous concept, but that there exists distinct clusters of welfare state types, differentiated by their degree of decommodification, stratification and the relationship between state, family and markets (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 111). In this original work three separate regime types are proposed: Liberal, Conservative and Social democratic, though more recent work has suggested several additions (Arts & Gelissen, 2002). These ideal-types are representations of institutional differences between welfare solutions in different countries, and, more importantly for this paper, they hint at distinct cultural understandings of the concept of welfare, thus influencing attitudes towards it.

As previously mentioned, these original regime types map onto the triangular figure that Berggren & Trägårdh (2015, p. 80) utilize in order to differentiate the power relations of different welfare states, Sweden as a representative of the social democratic welfare state, The United States as the prototypical liberal welfare system and Germany as the conservative regime. This, in conjunction with Berggren & Trägårdh (2015, p. 42) suggesting that statist individualism may not be uniquely Swedish, raises the question of whether the patterns of statist individualism are specific to Sweden, or artefacts of the broader social democratic welfare regime type. This motivates further comparative analysis within this regime cluster. While Esping-Andersen's original typology has been both criticized and expanded upon, it has remained a central tenet to welfare studies, and for this analysis the social democratic regime ideal-type remains a pertinent point of inquiry.

In this regard it should be noted that, since Esping-Andersen identified Sweden as a prototypical social democratic welfare regime, the country has gone through notable changes, both institutionally and in terms of political discourse, documented in contemporary studies (Palme, 2024; Lapidus, 2019; Burström, 2015; Davidsson, 2016). In accordance with this, a recent meta-analysis by Bertin, Carrino & Pantalone (2021) highlights a trend of hybridization of welfare systems, making it harder to denote broad national differences in regime types, instead suggesting narrowing the focus to specific aspects of welfare policy. Despite this, we nonetheless consider a comparison of social democratic welfare regimes a fruitful addition to this analysis as it allows insight into whether traces of statist individualism, or lack thereof, is linked to attitudinal differences between welfare regimes, rather than to Sweden specifically. In accordance with recent studies, we will consider the nordic countries to be the core of the social democratic welfare cluster, with Iceland as a more recent addition which was not present in Esping-Andersen's original work (Gugushvili et al., 2023; Widding-Havneraas & Pedersen 2020).

4.3 Value Orientations

In order to empirically assess the claims made by statist individualism this study employs Shalom Schwartz's (1992) theory of basic values. This is a social-psychological measure aiming to capture universally applicable human values, with a shared structure irrespective of culture. According to Schwartz's (2012, p. 3) theory, there are 10 motivationally distinct types of values, which are able to be aggregated into four higher order value orientations. What is most important to understanding Schwartz's theory may not be the values themselves, but the structure of the values in relation to each other. This is represented by figure 2, showing the circular structure which Schwartz (2012, p. 9) proposes for the relationship of the ten basic values. In this diagram, values that are adjacent are

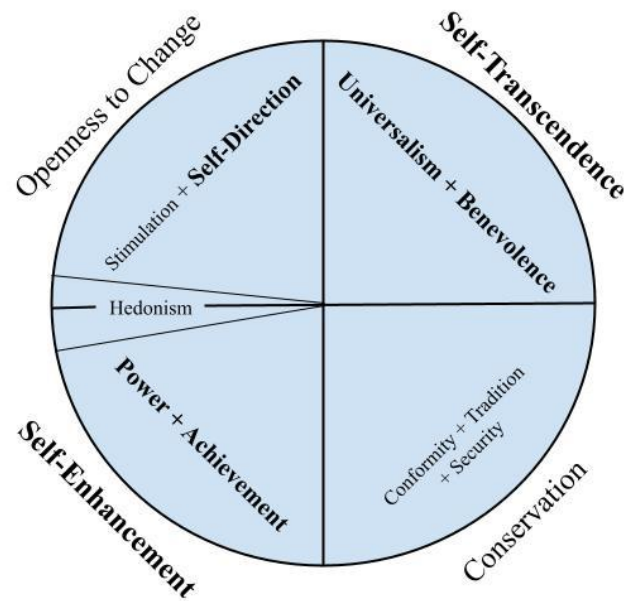


Figure 2. Simplified representation of the circular structure of basic values. Adapted from Schwartz (2012, p. 9)

understood as congruent with one another, whereas values on opposite sides of the circle are contradictory (Schwartz, 2012, p. 10). Thus, favouring *Conformity* or *Tradition* is conceptualized as incongruent with scoring highly on *Stimulation* or *Self-Direction*. As such, the circular structure construes values as tradeoffs, or priorities, rather than absolutes. This is also how cross national patterns become recognizable, as the values themselves are understood as universal, while their prioritization varies systematically across individuals and cultures (Schwartz, 2012, p. 3). The figure also gives insight into the previously mentioned aggregations, where, for instance, *Universalism* and *Benevolence* values make up the higher value orientation of *Self-Transcendence*.

Given that this study is concerned with values regarding individual autonomy and collective solidarity we are mainly focusing on a subset of five of the ten basic values (highlighted in figure 2), and the higher value orientations that these make up. The autonomy dimension is captured through Schwartz's (2012, p. 5) basic value orientation of *Self-Direction*, which encompasses the need for independence in both thought and action. While solidarity is not directly measured, it is approximated through the opposition between the higher-order value orientations of *Self-Enhancement* and *Self-Transcendence*. This dimension is described as:

“[...] the conflict between values that emphasize concern for the welfare and interests of others (universalism, benevolence) and values that emphasize pursuit of one's own interests and relative success and dominance over others (power, achievement).” (Schwartz, 2012, p. 8)

In addition to this, Schwartz (2012, p. 13) also stresses some further principles regarding the four higher value orientations, namely the contrast between goals with a social focus (*Self-Transcendence & Conservation*), and ones with a personal focus (*Self-Enhancement & Openness to Change*). Accordingly, our proxy for collective solidarity, or lack thereof, is realized through the prioritization of personal goals, specifically the pursuit of *Self-Enhancement* values, as opposed to the social focus of *Self-Transcendence*.

In summary, Schwartz's value orientations provide a cross national tool for measuring values, and distinct prioritizations of values in respects to cultural differences. For the purpose of this analysis, particular emphasis is placed on *Self-Direction*, *Self-Enhancement*, and *Self-Transcendence*. Given this framework, *Self-Direction* is interpreted as capturing individual autonomy, while *Self-Enhancement* and *Self-Transcendence* reflect a continuum between the prioritization of individual interests or collective welfare. This continuum is henceforth referred to as *Self-Interest*. For further discussion about these variables, both regarding construction and implications, see section 5.3.

4.4 Hypotheses

With the context of these theoretical constructs in mind, we are able to create some initial hypotheses which will act as the touchstone for the coming analysis. The first two postulates are concerned with the baseline interaction of *Self-Interest*, *Autonomy* and welfare attitudes, whereas the latter two attempt to capture the underlying logic of statist individualism. Thus our baseline hypotheses run on the logic that value orientations that emphasize a personal focus, as opposed to a social one (Schwartz, 2012, p. 13), will undermine support for welfare, resulting in the following assumptions:

H₁: Higher levels of Self-Interest are expected to be associated with lower levels of welfare support.

H₂: Higher levels of Autonomy are expected to be associated with lower levels of welfare support

The two latter hypotheses then build further upon these, anchoring them to the claims of statist individualism. Specifically, the statist individualism hypotheses aim to capture the previously mentioned postulate that: *In Sweden, welfare support can be sustained independently of strong solidaristic value orientations, and may instead be rooted in the pursuit of individual autonomy.* This results in the following hypotheses:

H₃: The association between Self-Interest and welfare attitudes is expected to be less negative in Sweden compared to other European countries.

H₄: The association between Autonomy and welfare attitudes is expected to be less negative in Sweden compared to other European countries.

These are the claims that make up the theoretical point of departure for this paper's analysis.

5. Materials and Methods

5.1 Data source

As this paper seeks to assess cultural differences and national comparisons we require a large set of respondents and answers to analyze, which leaves a few possible options such as the WVS or ISSP. However, for this thesis the European Social Survey is the project that is deemed the most appropriate,

and is to be employed. This choice is supported by the fact that the ESS database not only contains an established personal values questionnaire, rooted in Schwartz's (2012) theory of basic values, but also has a rotating module concerning welfare attitudes. As such, it seems an ample fit in order to assess our research question. The one possible downside is that the questions regarding attitudes towards welfare are part of a rotating module that does not appear every round of the ESS. Thus we are limited to either the 2008 or 2016 databases. This would pose a larger issue if we were trying to assess longitudinal change, or patterns in welfare attitudes, however, for our current research question this factor does not seem a grave limitation.

With that in mind, the data of this analysis is drawn from European Social Surveys (2016) eighth round. Included in this dataset are 22 European countries, in addition to Israel, containing a total sum of 44 387 respondents from ages 15 and above. Respondents with a missing value on any of the variables included in the analysis were excluded from the models. As a result, the number of observations varies across models, ranging from 27,500 to 28,700 respondents. Given the large sample size, this reduction is not expected to substantially alter the robustness of the results.

5.2 Dependent variables

The dependent variables that are to be measured encompass different aspects of welfare attitudes. In accordance with the recommendations of Svallfors (2011), stating the importance of taking multiple measures into account as opinions may vary depending on the aspects measured, we employ a three-dimensional measure of welfare attitudes. The three overarching measures that are to be analyzed are attitudes towards government responsibility, social benefits/services, and government led income redistribution. While not as broad as the battery of multidimensional measures utilized by Svallfors (2011) these measures do allow us insight into various important aspects of welfare attitudes, though by no means can we claim to capture welfare support in its entirety.

The first measure is capturing to what extent the respondents find the government responsible for dealing with societal issues such as the standard of living of pensioners or the unemployed. Along the lines of Svallfors (2011) this can be motivated as an important aspect of welfare support as it gives insight into the respondents perceptions of public authorities as providers of care and services. It also dives into the preference of collective versus private financing of social services, where support for collective financial commitment is understood as a necessity for welfare state support. In Svallfors's

(2011) work this tends to be formulated as how services such as care for elderly or education should be funded, or who is best suited to deliver the services. In the European Social Survey questionnaire (2016) it is instead worded as *how much responsibility do you think the government should have* regarding different welfare services. These questions then range from a scale of 0-10 where zero implies it should not be the government's responsibility, and ten indicates that it is entirely the responsibility of the government. A more apparent parallel to our current study is then the work of Arikan & Bloom (2015) who also make use of the ESS databases to measure welfare support, and create an index of *support for government responsibility in providing social welfare services* as one of their core measures. In their use of the 2008 database they have access to a total of six items on the previously mentioned scale, whereas we, as a result of using the 2016 database, are limited to three.

Then our analogue to Svallfors's (2011) questions of preferred funding or aptness for delivering social services, inspired by Arikan & Bloom's (2015) measure, is that of a 3 item index, consisting of respondents' attitudes towards government responsibility in care for the elderly, unemployed and children. Performing a reliability analysis of the items yields a Cronbach's α of 0.679, placing it slightly below the commonly accepted 0.7 threshold, presumably since only 3 items exist in this database. This slightly lower value should be kept in mind, but as this index follows the praxis of Arikan & Bloom (2015), and as its only marginally lower than the 0.7 cutoff, it is not regarded as that detrimental to the analysis. Then, our first dependent variable is a *government responsibility* index, running from the values of 0-10, where a higher score indicates a preference for the government to be the provider of social services.

The second aspect of welfare that is to be measured is the attitude towards social benefits and social services and their effect. This is also akin to a measurement used by Arikan & Bloom (2015) in order to assess the belief that welfare services are beneficial for their country. The dataset contains six items concerned with social benefits, all running on a Likert scale from 1 (Agree strongly) to 5 (Disagree strongly), encompassing respondents' attitudes on benefits programs and their impact on the economy, their moral justification and their adverse effects. Through reliability analysis it does however seem that these variables are measuring two separate underlying constructs, as an index containing all of the above results in a Cronbach's α of 0.624. Running a reliability analysis without the questions concerning (1) whether social benefits prevent widespread poverty, and (2) whether social benefits lead to a more equal society improves the internal consistency of the index noticeably, instead measuring up to a Cronbach's α of 0.739. Thus we are left with an index consisting of attitudes concerning whether social benefits are:

(1) Placing too great of a strain on the economy, (2) Costing businesses too much in taxes, (3) Making people lazy and (4) Making people less willing to care for one another.

What is captured then is the respondents' attitudes regarding the effects of the current implementation of social benefits programs. In addition to this, the omitted items are concerned with the positive effects of social benefits, whereas the other four are measuring adverse effects. This also helps us explain why the larger index gave a weaker measurement of internal consistency, as respondents can simultaneously be aligned with the statements that social benefits programs are important in reducing poverty and promoting equality and that they are placing too much strain on the economy and businesses. Similarly, respondents may believe that the economy or businesses are not currently strained by welfare expenditure, while still being less convinced of its role in reducing poverty or promoting equality. It should also be noted that the included variables are ideological in nature, portraying discourses of welfare commonly associated with neoliberal and conservative political narratives. For instance, questions 3 & 4 are closely related to discourses of welfare dependency (Davidsson, 2016; Petersson, 2024; Shildrick, 2018).

Thus, the measurement not only includes attitudes about the current implementation of social benefits and services, and their supposed negative impact on the economy, businesses, and people, but also relates to whether respondents align with discourses that are critical of welfare provision. This results in a five point scale, where a lower score indicates the belief that social benefits programs are having tangible adverse effects on the country's economy, businesses and inhabitants. A higher score indicates a lack of agreement with the notion that social benefits are impacting the country adversely, however it should be noted that it does not necessarily equate to support for benefits programs. What is being measured is specifically perceptions of the negative consequences of social benefits rather than direct support for welfare policies. This is, however, in line with the precedent set by Arikan & Bloom (2015, p. 437) in their measurement of whether *welfare services are beneficial for the society*.

Lastly, we also employ a measurement of government induced income redistribution. This is assessed, simply, through the single ESS variable labeled *gincdif*. This, too, runs on a Likert scale from 1 (Agree strongly) to 5 (Disagree strongly), assessing whether respondents believe that “The government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels” (European Social Survey, 2016, p. 13). This item has been reverse coded, so that a higher score indicates a higher approval of income redistribution. It should also be stated that this is not a measure exclusively capturing attitudes towards redistribution, but it is also conceptually related to our first index, in that it encompasses respondents'

viewpoints regarding the role and responsibilities of the government, and opinions regarding government intervention.

In sum, we employ a tripartite measure of welfare attitudes, encompassing respondents' perceptions of *government responsibility*, *opinions on welfare services*, and *income redistribution*.

5.3 Measuring value orientations

This section consists of two main parts, firstly the operational definitions of Self-Interest and Autonomy are presented, and the rationale behind the decisions made is expounded upon and coupled to theory. Secondly, the course of action and treatment of the variables in the dataset is described in further detail.

For measuring individual value orientations Schwartz's (2012) theory of basic human values will be utilized, outlined in the theory chapter. In the ESS data this means using the PVQ-21 questionnaire, which is part of every wave of the survey program (ESS, 2021). This is a 21 item questionnaire, aiming to assess respondent's underlying basic values. All of the questions in the PVQ-21 are brief verbal portraits describing a fictional person's goals or aspirations, which the respondent then gauges their own likeness to (Schwartz, 2007 , p. 170). As such, all the questions are answered on a scale ranging from 1 (Very much like me) to 6 (Not at all like me).

For our analysis we employ these value questions in order to create proxies for two main claims, which make up the underlying logic of statist individualism. This analysis thus rests on scrutinizing two postulates: first, that welfare support in Sweden is not necessitated by collective solidarity; second, that the core of the Swedish welfare state is granting individual autonomy. Thus we are concerned with measurements that display the relative importance of (or lack thereof) solidarity and group goals or obligations, as well as autonomy and personal freedom. Individual low solidarity has been operationally defined through the tension between goals that are personal in their focus versus goals with a social focus (Schwartz, 2012, p. 13). More specifically we focus on the higher value orientations coined *Self-Enhancement* and *Self-Transcendence*, and their supposed opposition. As such, we operationalize low solidarity at the individual level through high relative prioritization of *Self-Enhancement* values and low relative prioritization of *Self-Transcendence* values.

The importance that respondents give to personal autonomy and freedom lends itself well to the value orientation named *Self-Direction*, which is founded upon the need for independence in both thought and action (Schwartz, 2012, p. 5). However, this value orientation only consists of two items

from the PVQ-21 questionnaire, which upon being run in a correlation matrix only yields a Pearson's r of 0.304, signifying a weak internal correlation. While running this value orientation would be preferable in order to stay aligned with the theoretical framework provided by Schwartz, we risk muddling our results by employing an index displaying such weak covariance. Therefore, we instead choose to employ a single item measure, which, despite being less reliable statistically than an index, is deemed to capture the theoretical core of Berggren & Trägårdh's (2015) argument regarding autonomy and the Swedish welfare state. This lends itself well to question 11 of the PVQ-21, the formulation of which is as follows:

“It is important to him/her to make his/her own decisions about what he/she does. He/she likes to be free and not depend on others.” (Schwartz, Breyer & Danner, 2015)

Thus, the operationalization of our measurements is the following. Lack of solidarity is measured as a computed variable, subtracting *Self-Transcendence* from *Self-Enhancement*, creating a variable where a higher score indicates prioritizing one's own goals and achievements above the welfare and interests of others. This variable is subsequently referred to as *Self-Interest*. The importance of individual autonomy is measured through the eleventh question of the PVQ-21, assessing respondents' attitudes towards freedom and independence.

In order to achieve these measurements, the variables in the dataset were subjected to a series of treatments. The first of these is reverse coding, where every one of the 21 variables of the questionnaire were transformed so that a higher score indicates higher agreement with the statement. After this, the variables were ipsatized, meaning that each item's score was centered by subtracting the respondent's mean score across all 21 value questions. Thus, the scoring that we are left with is not absolute, instead it measures the relative prioritization of each value for that respondent. The zero point represents the mean score of the respondent on all items in the PVQ-21. Therefore a positive score implies that the value measured is of higher relative importance than average, and a negative score that the value is of lower significance for the respondent. This also allows us to circumvent issues regarding respondents' interpretation of rating scales, where some may rate most items very highly, and some rate most items rather low. What then is actually measured by these ipsatized variables is, in line with Schwartz's (2012, p. 12) recommendation, each respondent's relative value importance. This is how it is ensured that the circular structure of values proposed by Schwartz, where certain orientations are regarded as in opposition to each other, becomes tangible through the data (see figure 2).

Our variable for personal *Autonomy* is constructed as described above, as a reverse scaled ipsatized version of question 11 in the PVQ-21, where a higher score indicates a higher relative prioritization of personal freedom and independence. Our measure of *Self-Interest*, however, is in need of further elaboration. Firstly, prior to ipsatization, reliability analysis was conducted upon the items corresponding to Schwartz's higher order value orientations of *Self-Enhancement* and *Self-Transcendence* (Cronbach's α : 0.738 and 0.746, respectively), which implied both were suitable for index creation. Ipsatization alters the covariance structure of the items, so computing reliability beforehand ensures the indices are internally consistent based on absolute responses. After ipsatization, the indices for *Self-Enhancement* (Questions 2, 4, 13 and 17) and *Self-Transcendence* (Questions 3, 8, 12, 18, and 19) were created. Then, by subtracting the scores of *Self-Transcendence* from *Self-Enhancement*, we create our final measure of *Self-Interest*. Thus, $Self-Interest = Self-Enhancement - Self-Transcendence$, resulting in a variable where a positive value indicates higher prioritization of self-oriented values relative to collective or social ones. It should however be mentioned that this is an indirect measure of lower solidarity, via value trade-offs, rather than through direct attitudinal measures.

These constructed measures of *Self-Interest* and *Autonomy* will subsequently be examined in relation to welfare attitudes at the individual level.

5.4 Control variables

In addition to the variables of the focal connection mentioned above, this study will employ a variety of control variables, which are to be briefly described here.

As with most quantitative sociological research we will utilize measures of gender, income, education and age. In the dataset this will be done through the items *gndr* measuring gender as a dummy variable with male as the reference level, *hinctnta* measuring household income deciles, *eduyrs* measuring years of education and *agea* measuring age of respondents. Additionally, respondents' domicile will be included. The selected item for this is the categorical variable *domicil* where respondents self describe their place of living as one of the following: *Big city*, *Suburbs or outskirts of big city*, *Town or small city*, *Country village*.

Furthermore, political affiliation needs to be taken into account, as our dependent variables are certain to be affected by the political orientation of the respondent. This will be assessed through the variable *lrscale* which allows respondents to self identify their placement on a ten point left to right

political scale, 0 equaling left wing and 10 indicating identification with right wing politics. It should be noted that the saliency of this item is disputed, and that issues of different cultural interpretations of the scale have been raised (Otto & Gugushvili, 2020, p. 8; Tavits & Letki, 2009). While this might not render the scale unusable, it remains the most suitable measure of political ideology available for this study, these issues should be taken into account when analyzing the results. As such, interpretations concerning the *lrscale* variable will be done cautiously, with these limitations in mind.

Another relevant consideration is that of societal and institutional trust, here measured through an index (Cronbach's α : 0.896) comprising the items *trstlgl* (trust in the legal system), *trstplt* (trust in politicians), *trstprt* (trust in political parties), and *trstprl* (trust in parliament). All of these run on a 10 point scale, 0 equaling no trust at all and 10 indicating complete trust, thus creating a compound variable where a higher score indicates higher trust in the political and legislative institutions of the country.

Moreover, a few categorical variables assessing views on income differentials, unemployment, and welfare cheating will be employed. All three of these run on likert scales where 1 = Agree strongly and 5 = Disagree strongly. The first of these variables is *dfincac*, which assesses respondents' views on whether “Large differences in people’s incomes are acceptable to properly reward differences in talents and effort” (ESS, 2016, p. 38). Secondly, *uentrjb* evaluates views on the unemployed population through the claim that “Most unemployed people do not really try to find a job” (ESS, 2016, p. 42). Lastly, *bennent* is an assessment of respondents' estimations on the extent to which services and benefits programs are being exploited by people who should not have access to them. The exact formulation is as follows: “Many people manage to obtain benefits and services to which they are not entitled” (ESS, 2016, p. 42).

Thus, our control variables encompass respondents gender, household income, education, age, domicile, political affiliation and societal trust. In addition further variables are included to assess views on large income differences, the unemployed populace, and the magnitude of exploitation of benefits and services.

5.5 Analytic strategy

With the choice of database and constructions of variables in mind, the focus is now shifted to the analysis itself. At the outset, it should be noted that this is not multilevel modeling. It's also necessary to draw attention to the fact that we cannot claim to be testing statist individualism as a macro level

cultural concept. Instead we are assessing micro level interactions consistent with its underlying logic, utilizing OLS multiple regression analysis with the focus being on interaction terms. This following section aims to sketch an outline of the approach to be used in the analysis of our models.

Initially, models regarding our three chosen aspects of welfare attitudes are to be run in the entire ESS dataset. At the heart of this first iteration is the focal connection of *Self-Interest*, *Autonomy* and welfare attitudes, and how these terms interact with one another. This will be assessed through a three step nested analysis. The first models will just consist of our focal correlations, giving an insight into the saliency of *Self-Interest* and *Autonomy* as predictors of welfare attitudes in a vacuum. Subsequently, the categorical variables encompassing income differentials, the unemployed populace and benefit abuse will be added and their implications analyzed. The third iteration of the models will then include all of the previously mentioned control variables. The last iteration of each mode. will give us a clearer estimate into whether *Self-Interest* and *Autonomy* carries any significance when predicting welfare attitudes in Europe.

This model will then be further refined, using a country variable with Sweden as a dummy, and interaction terms (Sweden x *Self-Interest*, Sweden x *Autonomy*). This allows us to assess whether the slopes of *Self-Interest* and *Autonomy* differ in Sweden compared to the wider European dataset. These interaction terms are the main way in which individual level traces of the statist individualism hypothesis is to be evaluated. Lastly, the complete model, with the interaction terms, will be run in a subsample of social democratic welfare regimes, in our case, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland & Iceland. This allows us insight into whether any significant divergence that Sweden displays in comparison to the wider dataset persists when compared only to other social democratic welfare states.

The model assumptions are assessed through diagnostic checks. Specifically, inspection of residuals and Q-Q plots was conducted. The models showed minor deviations from normality as well as slight signs of heteroscedasticity. However, given the large sample size these deviations are not expected to substantially impact the results. Additionally, VIF values were analyzed, exhibiting no serious signs of multicollinearity. All models were run with the analysis weights provided in the ESS database, in order to ensure proper cross-national comparability. This is done using the variable *anweight*.

6. Results

The following chapter contains two main sections. Initially, descriptive statistics are presented concerning the variables used in the models, and a brief discussion of the implications of the results in the table. Thereafter, the three multivariate models are presented and analyzed, as outlined in the previous section.

6.1 Descriptive statistics

The following table contains the descriptive statistics of the variables to be included in the models. Included in this section is also a short discussion of the values concerning our dependent variables , *Self-Interest* and *Autonomy* as well as other noteworthy results.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

	<i>n</i>	Min	Max	Frequency	Mean/%	SD
Government responsibility	43411	0.00	10.0		7.58	1.62
Opinions on welfare services	39624	1.00	5.00		3.01	0.80
Income redistribution	43715	1.00	5.00		3.87	0.99
Self-Interest	41293	-5.00	4.20		-1.25	1.17
Autonomy	41293	-4.10	3.86		0.59	1.17
Large income differences acceptable	43520					
Agree strongly				3060	7.00	
Agree				14806	34.0	
Neither agree nor disagree				9825	22.6	
Disagree				11497	26.4	
Disagree strongly				4332	10.0	
The unemployed don't try to find work	43313					
Agree strongly				3516	8.10	
Agree				12896	29.8	
Neither agree nor disagree				10449	24.1	
Disagree				13659	31.5	
Disagree strongly				2793	6.4	
Benefits/Services often exploited	41485					
Agree strongly				5797	14.0	
Agree				18441	44.5	
Neither agree nor disagree				9617	23.2	
Disagree				6720	16.2	
Disagree strongly				910	2.20	
Domicile	44337					
A big city				9937	22.4	
Suburbs/outskirts of big city				4433	10.0	
Town or small village				13958	31.5	
Country village				13274	29.9	
Farm/home in countryside				2735	6.20	
Gender	44378					
Male				21027	47.4	
Female				23351	52.6	
Political ideology	38583	0.00	10.0		5.16	2.24
Trust in political/legal institutions	42573	0.00	10.0		4.32	2.17
Household income	36445	1.00	10.0		5.19	2.73
Years of education	43963	0.00	54.0		13.0	3.85
Age	44232	15.0	100		49.1	18.6

Note. Maximum, Minimum, Mean and Standard deviation are presented for continuous variables, Frequency and Cumulative% are presented for categorical variables. The number of answers are displayed for all of the variables.

The upper three rows give insight into the distribution of answers regarding our dependent variables. Notably, Government responsibility exhibits a mean score of 7.58, indicating a preference for the government to be the provider of social services across the entire dataset. Opinions on welfare services

yield a mean of 3.01, a noticeably more centered result. The average view of government led income redistribution also seems to be positively skewed, as the calculated mean is 3.87.

Self-Interest showcasing a negative mean implies that respondents on average lend more importance to Self-Transcendence values than they do to Self-Enhancement values. Autonomy, on the other hand, presents a positive mean, with a value of 0.58, indicating that respondents tend to value personal freedom to a slightly higher extent than the other values in the questionnaire.

In addition, it seems pertinent to comment that the variable regarding welfare benefit misuse is notably negatively skewed, suggesting that respondents on average believe that benefits and services are being taken advantage of by those not entitled to them. This is, for instance, indicated by the fact that only 2.2% of respondents disagree strongly with the statement that benefits are often exploited. It should also be mentioned that the dataset has a slight overrepresentation of female respondents.

Lastly, as is to be expected, there is some variation in the amount of respondents across the variables. The most notable disparities are found in our second dependent variable, as well as the controls regarding political ideology and household income. Though none of the variables display missing values to an extent found to be alarming.

6.2 Multivariate analysis

The rest of the analysis is dedicated to the multivariate models, the first of which illustrates the baseline effects of *Self-Interest* and *Autonomy* on welfare attitudes. Subsequently, *table 3 & 4* lend further nuance to the models by incorporating a country variable and interaction effects, as well as checking the robustness of any results by running the model in a subset of social democratic welfare regimes.

Table 2: The effect of Self-Interest and Autonomy on welfare attitudes

	<i>Government Responsibility</i>			<i>Opinions on Welfare Services</i>			<i>Income Redistribution</i>		
	1A	1B	1C	2A	2B	2C	3A	3B	3C
Self-Interest	-0.147(0.008)***	-0.100(0.008)***	-0.089(0.008)***	-0.022(0.004)***	0.017(0.003)***	0.017(0.003)***	-0.127(0.005)***	-0.092(0.004)***	-0.076(0.004)***
Autonomy	-0.096(0.009)***	-0.101(0.009)***	-0.090(0.009)***	0.035(0.005)***	0.032(0.004)***	0.028(0.004)***	-0.033(0.005)***	-0.032(0.005)***	-0.027(0.005)***
Large income differentials acceptable									
Agree - Agree strongly		0.099(0.039)*	0.049(0.038)		0.123(0.017)***	0.097(0.017)***		0.427(0.023)***	0.391(0.023)***
Neither agree nor disagree - Agree strongly		0.213(0.041)***	0.112(0.041)**		0.293(0.018)***	0.254(0.018)***		0.634(0.024)***	0.562(0.024)***
Disagree - Agree strongly		0.551(0.040)***	0.430(0.041)***		0.364(0.018)***	0.316(0.018)***		0.965(0.024)***	0.874(0.024)***
Disagree strongly - Agree strongly		0.715(0.047)***	0.556(0.047)***		0.494(0.021)***	0.433(0.021)***		1.248(0.028)***	1.125(0.028)***
The unemployed don't try to find work									
Agree - Agree strongly		0.224(0.037)***	0.256(0.037)***		0.258(0.017)***	0.259(0.016)***		-0.074(0.022)**	-0.052(0.022)*
Neither agree nor disagree - Agree strongly		0.187(0.039)***	0.233(0.038)***		0.498(0.018)***	0.493(0.017)***		-0.112(0.023)***	-0.084(0.023)***
Disagree - Agree strongly		0.551(0.040)***	0.614(0.038)***		0.799(0.017)***	0.778(0.017)***		-0.022(0.023)	0.016(0.023)
Disagree strongly - Agree strongly		1.015(0.047)***	1.028(0.050)***		1.164(0.021)***	1.131(0.029)***		0.170(0.030)***	0.171(0.030)***
Benefits/services often exploited									
Agree - Agree strongly		-0.165(0.030)***	-0.140(0.029)***		0.167(0.013)***	0.155(0.013)***		-0.116(0.018)***	-0.093(0.017)***
Neither agree nor disagree - Agree strongly		-0.227(0.034)***	-0.184(0.034)***		0.378(0.015)***	0.351(0.015)***		-0.177(0.025)***	-0.139(0.024)***
Disagree - Agree strongly		-0.220(0.036)***	-0.161(0.037)***		0.487(0.016)***	0.445(0.016)***		-0.218(0.022)***	-0.170(0.022)***
Disagree strongly - Agree strongly		-0.314(0.063)***	-0.336(0.063)***		0.677(0.028)***	0.632(0.028)***		-0.201(0.037)***	-0.208(0.037)***
Domicile									
Suburbs/outskirts of big city - A big city			-0.007(0.035)			-0.145(0.015)***			-0.006(0.020)
Town or small village - A big city			-0.002(0.026)			-0.120(0.012)***			8.76e-5(0.015)
Country village - A big city			0.033(0.027)			-0.111(0.012)***			-0.011(0.016)
Farm/home in countryside - A big city			-0.163(0.050)**			-0.222(0.022)***			-0.074(0.030)*
Gender									
Female - Male			0.016(0.018)			-0.012(0.008)			0.025(0.011)*
Political ideology			-0.061(0.004)***			-0.048(0.002)***			-0.047(0.002)***
Trust in political/legal institutions			-0.024(0.004)***			0.009(0.002)***			-0.024(0.002)***
Household income			-0.033(0.003)***			0.004(0.001)*			-0.029(0.002)***
Years of education			-0.027(0.002)***			-0.001(0.001)			-0.010(0.001)***
Age			-9.25e-4(5.47e-4)			-9.82e-4(2.64e-4)***			8.81e-4(3.21e-4)**
R ²	0.013	0.063	0.080	0.003	0.289	0.310	0.022	0.136	0.160
Adjusted R ²	0.013	0.062	0.080	0.003	0.289	0.310	0.022	0.135	0.159
n	28396	28369	28369	27572	27572	27572	28712	28712	28712

Note. Entries are non-standardized beta coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Significance levels: * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

As the primary focus of this paper is the statist individualism hypothesis, and therefore the interaction terms to be presented in the next table, this discussion will be kept rather brief. This does not, however, mean that there aren't any noteworthy results to be commented upon. At the outset, hypotheses H_1 and H_2 are in line with the results regarding *government responsibility* and *income redistribution*, where both *Self-Interest* and *Autonomy* are significantly negatively correlated. In the full sample government intervention appears to be perceived as in opposition to personal autonomy and individual goal oriented striving. For the dependent variable *opinions on welfare services*, however, the results run contrary to expectations. *Autonomy* shows a positive relationship with the dependent variable throughout all the iterations of the models, whereas *Self-interest* initially portrays a weak, but significant, negative correlation. However, in the second iteration, this relationship reverses, with *Self-Interest* becoming positively associated with *opinions on welfare services*, similar to *Autonomy*. In addition to this it should be noted that H_1 and H_2 are contradicted in the strongest of the models, with 2C reaching an adjusted R^2 of 0.310. In comparison 1C and 3C only yield adjusted R^2 values of 0.080 and 0.159 respectively.

In brief, both *Self-Interest* and *Autonomy* appear to be significant predictors of attitudes towards the chosen aspects of welfare throughout all of the models. The strongest effects are that of *Self-Interest* and *Autonomy's* negative relationship with *government responsibility*. For *income redistribution*, *Self-Interest* and *Autonomy* remain significantly negatively correlated, however the effect of *Autonomy* is notably weaker. Regarding *opinions on welfare services* both variables display weaker positive correlations, contradicting expectations.

Furthermore, most controls behave as expected, such as respondents identifying with right wing politics or the legitimacy of large income differentials being less favourable towards all of our dependent variables. However, some results are in need of further context, such as the variable assessing to what extent benefits and services are taken advantage of by those not entitled. It appears that believing benefits and services are often taken advantage of is positively related to higher support for both *government responsibility* and *income redistribution*. As such, the *bennent* variable seems to capture attitudes towards the current implementation of welfare services, and concerns about misuse, rather than necessarily implying opposition to welfare in its entirety. Thus, respondents can believe that there is widespread misuse of benefits and services while supporting welfare provision, suggesting that the system itself is not being rejected, but rather, that it requires better regulation and maintenance, which seems congruent with higher support for *government responsibility*.

As previously stated, discussion regarding *Table 2* is purposefully concise. While there are additional results that could be commented upon, the analysis now turns to *Table 3* where the full models (1C, 2C & 3C) are refined through the inclusion of a country variable, with Sweden as a dummy, alongside interaction terms for *Self-Interest* and *Autonomy*.

Table 3: The conditional effects of Self-Interest and Autonomy

Government responsibility Opinions on Welfare Services Income Redistribution

Self-Interest	-0.087(0.008)***	0.018(0.003)***	-0.076(0.004)***
Autonomy	-0.092(0.009)***	0.028(0.004)***	-0.026(0.005)***
Large income differentials acceptable			
Agree - Agree strongly	0.049(0.038)	0.097(0.017)***	0.392(0.023)***
Neither agree nor disagree - Agree strongly	0.110(0.041)**	0.253(0.018)***	0.562(0.024)***
Disagree - Agree strongly	0.430(0.040)***	0.316(0.018)***	0.873(0.024)***
Disagree strongly - Agree strongly	0.558(0.047)***	0.432(0.021)***	1.124(0.028)***
The unemployed don't try to find work			
Agree - Agree strongly	0.256(0.037)***	0.259(0.016)***	-0.051(0.022)*
Neither agree nor disagree - Agree strongly	0.231(0.039)***	0.494(0.017)***	-0.082(0.023)***
Disagree - Agree strongly	0.608(0.038)***	0.779(0.017)***	0.019(0.023)
Disagree strongly - Agree strongly	1.021(0.050)***	1.132(0.023)***	0.174(0.030)***
Benefits/services often exploited			
Agree - Agree strongly	-0.140(0.029)***	0.154(0.013)***	-0.092(0.017)***
Neither agree nor disagree - Agree strongly	-0.186(0.034)***	0.351(0.015)***	-0.138(0.020)***
Disagree - Agree strongly	-0.163(0.037)***	0.445(0.016)***	-0.169(0.021)***
Disagree strongly - Agree strongly	-0.339(0.063)***	0.632(0.028)***	-0.207(0.037)***
Domicile			
Suburbs/outskirts of big city - A big city	-0.013(0.037)	-0.143(0.015)***	-0.002(0.028)
Town or small village - A big city	-0.023(0.028)	-0.120(0.011)***	0.001(0.015)
Country village - A big city	0.035(0.027)	-0.110(0.012)***	-0.011(0.016)
Farm/home in countryside - A big city	-0.171(0.050)***	-0.220(0.022)***	-0.069(0.030)*
Gender			
Female - Male	0.016(0.018)	-0.012(0.008)	0.025(0.011)*
Political Ideology	-0.061(0.004)***	-0.048(0.002)***	-0.047(0.002)***
Trust in political/legal institutions	-0.025(0.004)***	0.010(0.002)***	-0.023(0.002)***
Household income	-0.033(0.003)***	0.003(0.001)*	-0.028(0.002)***
Years of education	-0.027(0.002)***	-0.001(0.001)	-0.010(0.001)***
Age	-9.09e-4(5.46e-4)	-9.81e-4(2.46e-4)***	8.76e-4(3.24e-4)**
Country			
Sweden - Non-Swedish countries	0.123(0.133)	-0.143(0.059)*	-0.253(0.079)***
Self-Interest x Sweden	-0.067(0.062)	-0.066(0.027)*	-0.082(0.037)*
Autonomy x Sweden	0.056(0.064)	-0.016(0.028)	-0.043(0.038)
R ²	0.081	0.310	0.161
Adjusted R ²	0.080	0.310	0.160
n	28639	27572	28712

Note. Entries are non-standardized beta coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Significance levels: * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

As portrayed by *table 3*, the implications of statist individualism become a bit more complicated once the empirical data is taken into account. At the outset, regarding *government responsibility*, Sweden does not differ in any significant capacity from the other countries in the database. No significant divergence is found regarding the attitudes towards the role of the government, nor the way in which *Self-Interest* or *Autonomy* interact with it. As such, this welfare aspect lacks the results that H_3 and H_4 presupposes.

Regarding both *opinions on welfare services* and *income redistribution*, the results veer even further from our statist individualism hypotheses. The country variable shows that Swedes, on average, have a lower opinion of *income redistribution* and are more likely to believe that benefits and services are having adverse effects. This disparity is most noticeable regarding *income redistribution*, whereas the lower level of significance regarding opinions on welfare services needs to be taken into account. Nonetheless, these are noteworthy results, highlighting the fact that certain aspects of welfare are questioned to a greater extent in Sweden. The perception that welfare provision is having adverse effects and lower agreement with income redistribution can be interpreted as consistent with discourses of welfare dependency, which have become more prominent in Sweden's political discourse (Davidsson, 2016; Petersson, 2024). Thus, these results may reflect the dissemination of welfare-critical narratives in Sweden, aligning with broader welfare dependency narratives identified in previous research (Shildrick, 2018).

As with *government responsibility*, *Autonomy* yields no significant difference in slope for our two latter dependent variables. Therefore, it seems that Swedish individuals' conception of personal autonomy in relation to these welfare aspects does not differ significantly from other European countries. While an expansive welfare state may still be congruent with individual autonomy, it does not, according to this data, seem like it is something Swedish respondents consciously base their welfare support upon. As is previously stated, welfare support is multifaceted, thus it would be fruitful to take further aspects of welfare into account in order to assess whether there is any unique way in which personal autonomy is related to the welfare state in Sweden. With our current results, however, there is no support for the claim that autonomy plays a unique role in structuring welfare attitudes in Sweden, at least not at the micro-level. If anything, similar to the broader European sample, higher prioritization of individual autonomy is associated with lower levels of support for *government responsibility* and *income redistribution* among Swedish respondents. Thus, these models lack support for H_4 .

The results regarding *Self-Interest* are perhaps more surprising, as both our latter dependent variables find significant negative effects. As such, Swedish respondents who lend a higher prioritization to

Self-Interest values tend to exhibit lower opinions of income redistribution and to associate welfare services with adverse effects to a greater extent than their European counterparts. It should be noted that both of these coefficients only reach the lowest threshold of significance, however, these results are still compelling. Especially the conditional effect of *Self-Interest* on *opinions on welfare services* is in need of further consideration. As previously mentioned, in the complete dataset the effect of this coefficient was opposite to expectations with *Self-Interest* displaying a positive relationship with *opinions of welfare services*. This implies that respondents who prioritize their individual interests, as opposed to collective welfare, are less likely to believe that welfare services are having detrimental consequences. Analyzing the interaction term, it becomes clear that this relationship reverses compared to the full sample, becoming negative in the Swedish case. The postulate of statist individualism, claiming that the legitimating core of the Swedish welfare state is not collective solidarity, and that welfare support can be sustained independently of it, does seem at odds with these results. At the micro-level, Swedish individuals who de-emphasize collective solidarity are deviating from the dataset as a whole in that they tend to exhibit lower opinions of the effects of welfare services and income redistribution. As such, these results not only fail to support H_3 , but instead run counter to it. Accordingly, concerns for collective welfare and solidarity remain important for welfare support in Sweden, potentially to a greater extent than in the broader European sample, rather than being less crucial, as statist individualism implies.

While this study is unable to test statist individualism as a macro-cultural framework, these results nonetheless cast some doubt on the explanatory power of the concept. However, it is possible that the lack of empirical evidence supporting the theory may be due to differences in cultural understanding of welfare as a concept. As such, *Table 4* runs the same models as displayed above, restricted to a subsample of social democratic welfare states (Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland & Iceland). This functions as a robustness check, assessing whether the implications of statist individualism become tangible at the individual level when analyzing within welfare regime subtypes.

Table 4: The conditional effects of Self-Interest and Autonomy in the social democratic subsample

	<i>Government responsibility</i>	<i>Opinions on Welfare Services</i>	<i>Income Redistribution</i>
Self-Interest	-0.093(0.022)***	-0.028(0.010)**	-0.109(0.015)***
Autonomy	-0.073(0.022)***	-0.006(0.010)	-0.028(0.014)
Large income differentials acceptable			
Agree - Agree strongly	-0.010(0.088)	0.101(0.041)*	0.386(0.058)***
Neither agree nor disagree - Agree strongly	0.038(0.092)	0.223(0.043)***	0.620(0.061)***
Disagree - Agree strongly	0.228(0.092)*	0.307(0.043)***	0.856(0.060)***
Disagree strongly - Agree strongly	0.457(0.106)***	0.462(0.050)***	1.098(0.070)***
The unemployed don't try to find work			
Agree - Agree strongly	-0.055(0.117)	0.257(0.056)***	0.009(0.077)
Neither agree nor disagree - Agree strongly	0.003(0.117)	0.394(0.056)***	0.026(0.077)
Disagree - Agree strongly	0.155(0.115)	0.658(0.055)***	0.050(0.075)
Disagree strongly - Agree strongly	0.665(0.129)***	0.960(0.061)***	0.226(0.085)**
Benefits/services often exploited			
Agree - Agree strongly	0.015(0.086)	0.236(0.040)***	-0.078(0.057)
Neither agree nor disagree - Agree strongly	-0.024(0.090)	0.341(0.042)***	-0.132(0.059)*
Disagree - Agree strongly	0.018(0.092)	0.514(0.043)***	-0.104(0.061)
Disagree strongly - Agree strongly	0.141(0.152)	0.530(0.071)***	-0.110(0.100)
Domicile			
Suburbs/outskirts of big city - A big city	0.170(0.061)**	-0.018(0.028)	-0.079(0.040)*
Town or small village - A big city	0.083(0.054)	0.035(0.025)	0.055(0.035)
Country village - A big city	0.169(0.062)**	-0.006(0.029)	0.070(0.041)
Farm/home in countryside - A big city	-0.116(0.065)	-0.009(0.030)	0.072(0.043)
Gender			
Female - Male	0.082(0.036)*	0.037(0.017)*	0.064(0.024)**
Political Ideology	-0.064(0.008)***	-0.073(0.004)***	-0.093(0.005)***
Trust in political/legal institutions	0.026(0.010)*	0.020(0.004)***	-0.010(0.006)
Household income	0.007(0.006)	-0.003(0.003)	-0.024(0.004)***
Years of education	-0.008(0.005)	-0.010(0.002)***	-0.001(0.003)
Age	-0.001(0.001)	-0.001(4.81e-4)*	0.004(6.69e-4)***
Country			
Sweden - Other social democratic regimes	-0.382(0.074)***	0.057(0.035)	-0.036(0.049)
Self-Interest x Sweden	-0.083(0.033)*	-0.007(0.016)	-0.015(0.022)
Autonomy x Sweden	0.021(0.034)	0.018(0.016)	-0.034(0.023)
R ²	0.102	0.371	0.267
Adjusted R ²	0.097	0.367	0.263
n	4952	4869	4962

Note. Entries are non-standardized beta coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Significance levels: * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

Comparing Sweden to other social democratic welfare regimes, the results of the prior tables are further contextualized, and the implications become more nuanced. Akin to the wider dataset, *Self-Interest*

remains a significant predictor of welfare attitudes in this subsample. *Autonomy*, however, only exhibits a significant correlation with *government responsibility*. Notably, the Sweden specific effects regarding the latter two dependent variables, and *Self-Interests* relation to them, are not tangible when comparing within welfare regimes. As such, the lower scores on *opinions on welfare services* and *income redistribution* do not appear to be unique to Sweden, but observable in the other social democratic regimes as well. In the same vein, the conditional effect of *Self-Interest* on the two previously mentioned variables, observed in the wider dataset, is not recurrent in this subsample. As such, the stronger negative correlation of *Self-Interest* with *opinions on welfare services* and *income redistribution*, initially assumed to be specific to Sweden, seems to be an artefact consistent with the social democratic welfare regime subtype. This is exemplified by the fact that, akin to Sweden in *table 3*, *Self-Interest* sports a significant negative correlation with *opinions on welfare services*, unlike the positive correlation found in the wider dataset.

This does not, however, mean that Sweden displays no meaningful differences in comparison to its social democratic counterparts. Given the *government responsibility* index Sweden exhibits a significant and prominent divergence from the rest of the sample, scoring notably lower than the other social democratic regimes. In conjunction with this, *Self-Interest* seems a stronger negative predictor for this variable in Sweden. Thus, it appears that Swedes, on average, want less government responsibility and intervention than the other social democratic regimes. And, Swedes who prioritize their own goals over collective welfare tend to be even more critical of *government responsibility* compared to likeminded individuals in the other nations.

In regards to statist individualism, this robustness check does not indicate any interactions consistent with its underlying logic. While some of the previously assumed Sweden specific interactions seem to be consistent within the social democratic regime type as a whole, they still run counter to the expectations of statist individualism. As such, regarding these specific aspects of welfare, this analysis finds no evidence supporting statist individualism at the micro level. If anything, these results posit that *Self-Interest* functions as a stronger predictor of negative attitudes towards welfare in Sweden and across the social democratic regime type when compared to other European countries. This suggests that concern for collective welfare remains an important factor for welfare support. Along with this, *Autonomy* is not found to structure welfare attitudes in any unique way in Sweden, whether comparing to the wider dataset or within regime type. In summary, no significant differences supporting the claim

that in Sweden, welfare support can be sustained independently of strong solidaristic value orientations, and may instead be rooted in the pursuit of individual autonomy are found throughout these models.

7. Discussion

The main results of this paper, then, seem contradictory to our theoretical starting point. While H_1 and H_2 are largely corroborated, no support is found for H_3 or H_4 . As such, no empirical evidence supporting the statist individualism claim is found at the micro-level. The significant effects that are found, specifically concerning *Self-Interest*, run counter to our expectations. However, there are some caveats that need to be made, in order to not overstate the significance of these results. Firstly, statist individualism is a macro-cultural concept, whereas this paper tests micro-level implications consistent with its underlying logic. As such, there is an incongruence in the level of analysis, meaning that we cannot claim to be testing the concept in its entirety. This framework also requires the presupposition that the cultural context of statist individualism would influence individual values, a seemingly reasonable assumption, which is, however, not prevalent in the original work of Berggren & Trägårdh (2015). Secondly, there is the issue of translating the statist individualism hypothesis into testable empirical claims, here done through the ESS module of welfare attitudes and Schwartz value orientations. Operationalizing the concept, some nuances of the original work may be lost in the process.

With this in mind, these results should not be interpreted as disputing the existence of statist individualism, as we cannot claim to have tested the concept in its entirety, nor in its original formulation as a macro-cultural framework. However, the lack of micro-level effects consistent with its central claims does cast some doubt on the explanatory power of the concept. While the concept itself cannot be disproved by this paper, our results call into question specific components of statist individualism. The claim that seems most contradictory to our results is, perhaps, that the welfare state is an institutionalization of Swedish culture, rather than a project of social engineering (Berggren & Trägårdh, 2015, p. 23). If the welfare state were primarily rooted in bottom-up cultural values, we would expect to observe corresponding micro-level patterns structuring welfare attitudes. In light of the results regarding *Autonomy*, this claim becomes harder to espouse, as this does not seem to be a significant factor inducing welfare support for the Swedish respondents.

This does not, however, mean that there aren't any claims of statist individualism which are compatible with our results. What the results of this paper do question is a specific part of the causal chain that Berggren & Trägårdh proposes, as represented by figure 3.

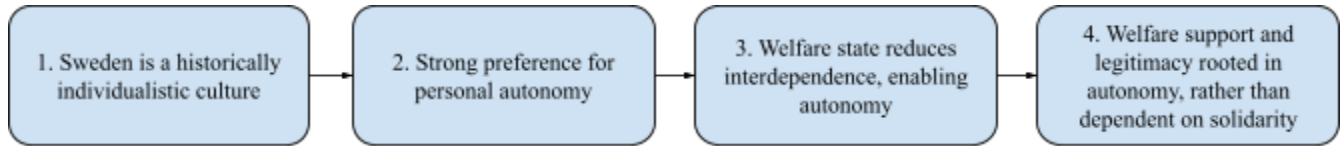


Figure 3: Simplified argument chain of statist individualism

The entirety of this argument comprises both the paradox of individualism and state authority, as well as an attempt to explain the origin of the Swedish welfare state. Our empirical assessments, however, are confined to the fourth claim of the figure. Thus, while our results question the legitimacy of the last claim of the figure, the rest of the argument chain is untouched by this analysis. This also implies that the proposed reconciliation of individualism and state authority, made by claim 3, remains intact. Our results should therefore not be interpreted as reinstating the claim that the coexistence of these is paradoxical. While the findings of this paper do not support the autonomy-based welfare legitimacy proposed by statist individualism, they may still be consistent with parts of its underlying logic. In particular, the mechanism through which welfare institutions reduce interpersonal dependence remains theoretically plausible. However, rather than viewing this as the origin of welfare support, it seems plausible to suggest that such a mechanism may instead operate as a consequence of expansive welfare institutions. This alternative interpretation, illustrated in Figure 4, shifts the focus from cultural origins to institutional effects. This proposed causal chain replaces the assumption of a preexisting cultural individualism promoting the creation of the welfare state. Instead, it proposes that expansive welfare arrangements may inhibit the latent function of facilitating the process of cultural individualization through the mechanism of reducing interpersonal dependence. This also decouples the mechanism from its reliance on Sweden's unique cultural conditions, thereby offering a potential explanation for why all of the included social democratic welfare states score highly on self expression values (World Values Survey, 2023, Inglehart–Welzel Cultural Map).

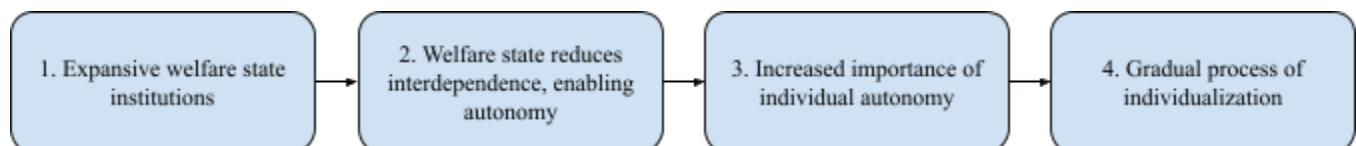


Figure 4: Alternative institutional framework explaining the coexistence of individualism and an expansive state

In conclusion, the findings of this paper cannot claim to disprove the concept of statist individualism, however, the results do cast doubt on the claim that personal autonomy is the central tenet of welfare support in Sweden. The empirical models of this paper find no support for the claim that autonomy structures welfare attitudes in a unique way in Sweden, thus, akin to the other European countries, autonomy displayed negative correlations with welfare attitudes throughout a majority of the models. Prioritizing personal goals over collective welfare, used here as a proxy for low solidarity, seemed a stronger predictor of welfare dissatisfaction in Sweden compared to the wider European dataset, thus contradicting the assumption that it would be of less importance for welfare support. Compared to the social democratic welfare model subtype, the previously mentioned interaction effects dissipated, suggesting that these are patterns congruent with the entire regime type, not just Sweden. Additionally, compared to this subtype, *Self-Interest* was found to be a stronger negative predictor concerning government responsibility in Sweden. Thus, no interaction-effects consistent with the theoretical starting point of statist individualism is found at the individual level, the significant interaction-effects that are found run counter to it. Ultimately, it would be preferable for more aspects of welfare to be taken into account in order to further assess the salience of the claims of statist individualism, and in order to better account for the multidimensional nature of welfare attitudes.

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9. Appendices

9.1 Cronbach's α table

Cronbach's α

	Complete Database	Social democratic subsample
Government Responsibility	0.679	0.675
Opinions on welfare services	0.739	0.751
Self-Enhancement	0.738	0.716
Self-Transcendence	0.746	0.653
Trust in political/legal institutions	0.896	0.889

9.2 VIF Values

VIF Values: Complete database

	Government responsibility	Opinions on welfare services	Income redistribution
Self-Interest	1.08	1.08	1.08
Autonomy	1.03	1.03	1.03
Income differentials acceptable	1.02	1.02	1.02
Unemployed don't try to find work	1.04	1.05	1.04
Benefits/Services often exploited	1.04	1.04	1.04
Domicile	1.01	1.01	1.01
Gender	1.02	1.02	1.02
Political ideology	1.04	1.04	1.04
Trust in political/legal institutions	1.06	1.06	1.06
Household income	1.09	1.08	1.09
Years of education	1.12	1.12	1.12
Age	1.07	1.06	1.07
Country - Sweden dummy	2.06	2.05	2.05
Self-Interest x Sweden	2.02	2.01	2.02
Autonomy x Sweden	1.18	1.18	1.19

VIF Values: Social democratic subsample

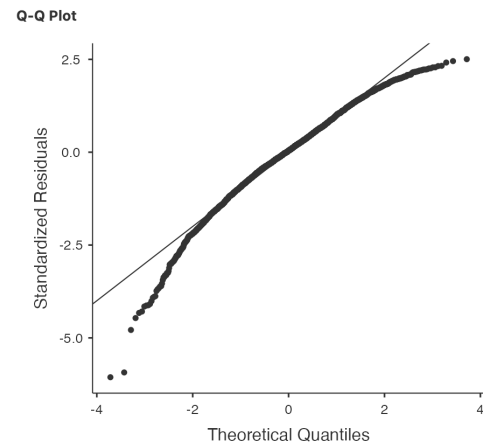
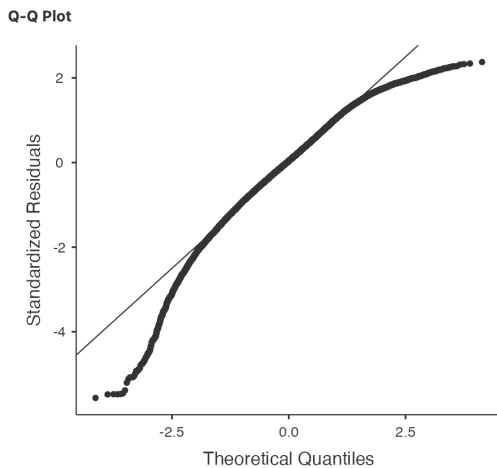
	Government responsibility	Opinions on welfare services	Income redistribution
Self-Interest	1.38	1.38	1.38
Autonomy	1.32	1.31	1.32
Income differentials acceptable	1.04	1.04	1.04
Unemployed don't try to find work	1.04	1.04	1.04
Benefits/Services often exploited	1.04	1.04	1.04
Domicile	1.02	1.02	1.02
Gender	1.04	1.04	1.04
Political ideology	1.11	1.11	1.11
Trust in political/legal institutions	1.07	1.08	1.07
Household income	1.08	1.08	1.08
Years of education	1.14	1.14	1.14
Age	1.07	1.07	1.07
Country - Sweden dummy	2.09	2.09	2.09
Self-Interest x Sweden	2.18	2.17	2.17
Autonomy x Sweden	1.45	1.44	1.45

9.3 Q-Q Plots

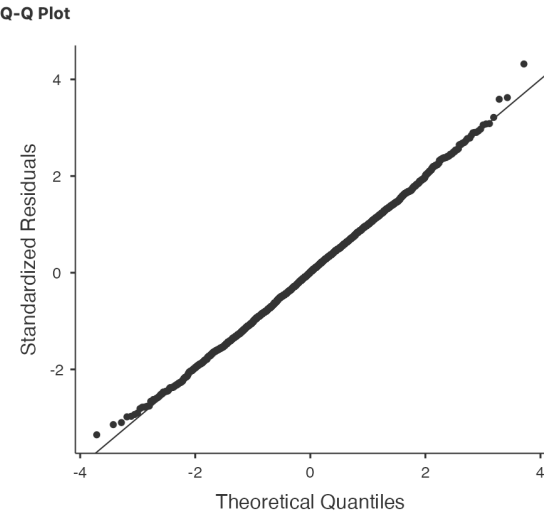
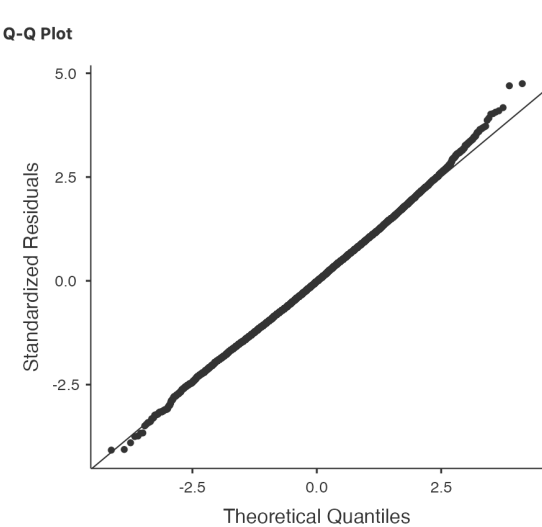
Complete database

Social democratic subsample

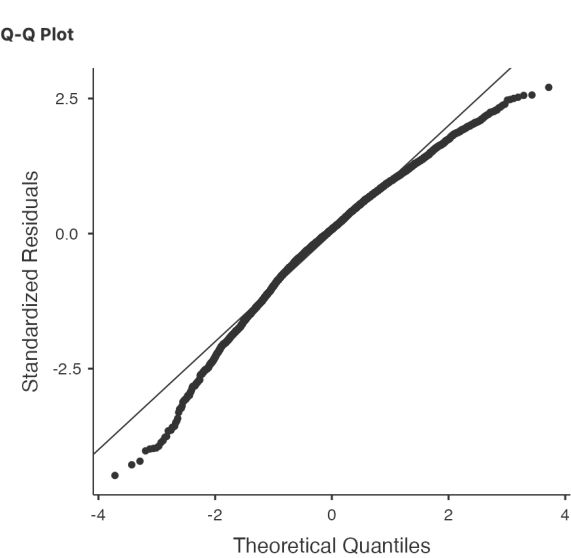
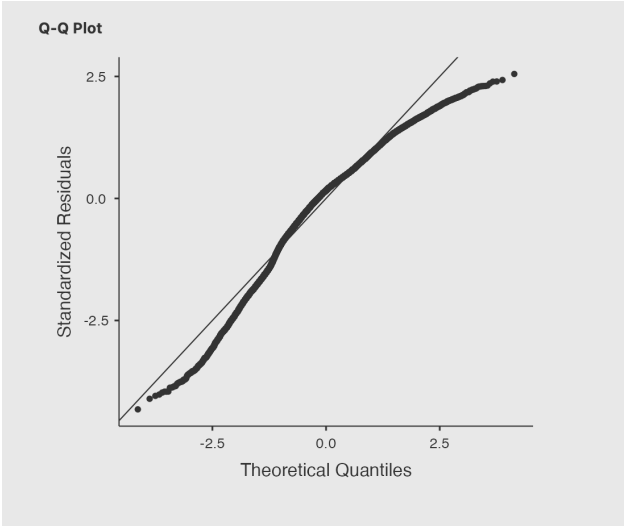
Government responsibility



Opinions on welfare services



Income redistribution



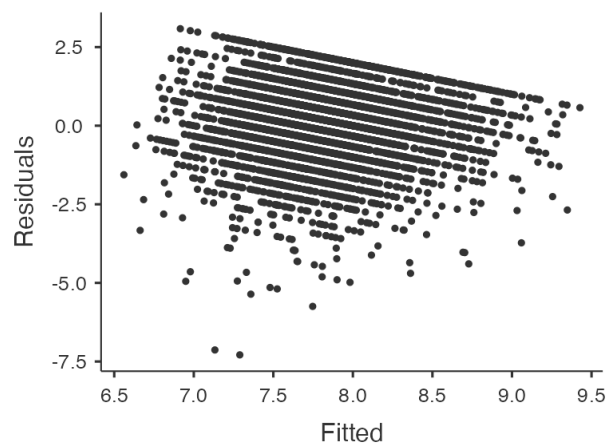
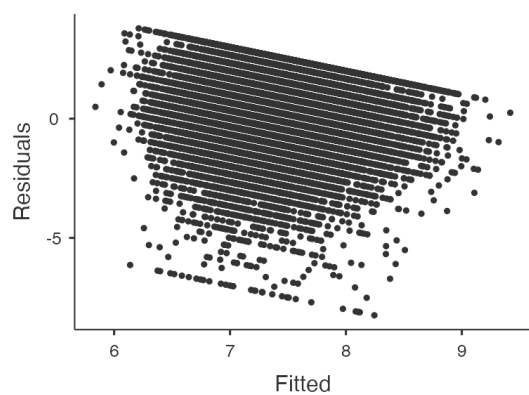
9.4 Residuals

Complete database

Social democratic subsample

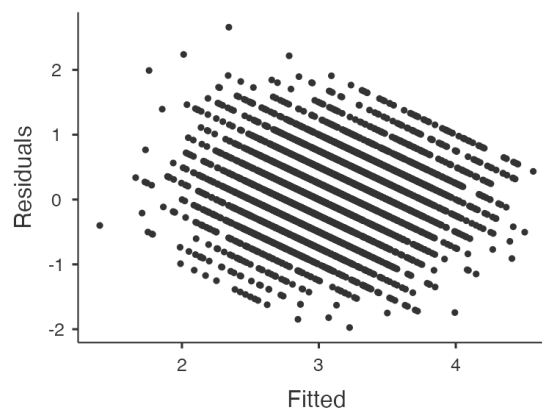
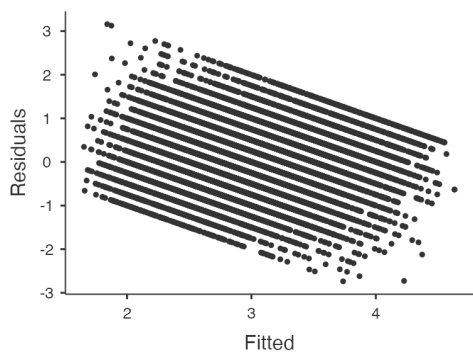
Government responsibility

Residuals Plots



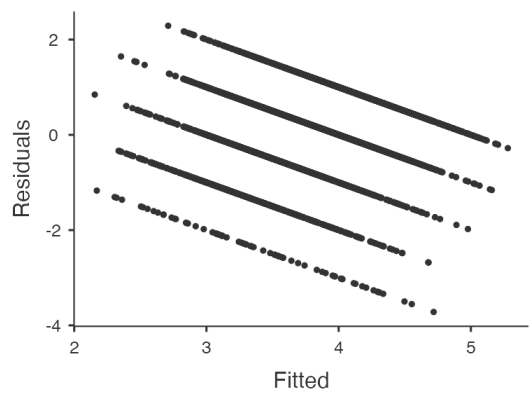
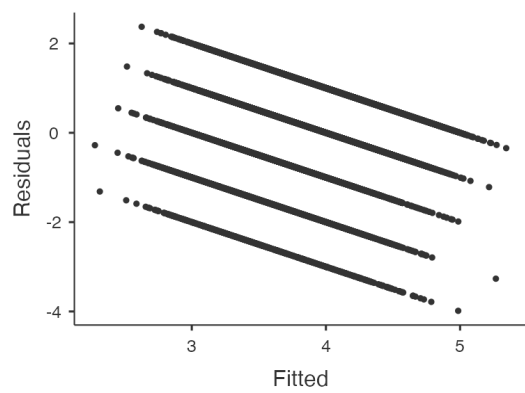
Opinions on welfare services

Residuals Plots



Income redistribution

Residuals Plots





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