

Welfare cuts – how framing influences support

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*Talking about economic reform, Jean-Claude Juncker once remarked: “We all know what to do, we just don’t know how to get re-elected after we’ve done it”. That politicians get punished for welfare cutbacks used to be a truism in politics and academia. A couple of years later, we are not so sure anymore. Here, **Paul Marx** and **Gijs Schumacher** outline how important framing policy is, and how undecided voters might be more easily swayed by particular messages to support welfare cuts.*



European governments from North to South have dramatically retrenched social policies. Many lost subsequent elections, but others got away with it. Why? The answer probably is that voters are usually not really sure what they want. Or, put differently, what voters think they want has a lot to do with what persuasive politicians suggest is good for them. So our answer to Juncker is: you can get re-elected after welfare cutback, you just need the right framing.



Although this claim is simple enough, it is not easy to demonstrate. The reason is that in reality we can never observe the effects of welfare reforms on voters independent of how politicians frame these reforms. To make things worse, welfare cutbacks often occur during hard economic times. And since voters often see a bad economy already as a sufficient reason to oust governments, it is hard to say what really caused the lost election.

More causes, more problems

To address the potential problem that there are multiple reasons why governments lose elections, we [conducted a survey experiment](#). In this experiment we compare different frames about a poor economy and the problems this entails. We subsequently asked respondents whether they support or do not support cuts to unemployment benefits. Our sample consists of a random draw from the British population totalling 2,258 individuals.

The table below lists our control group and 3 treatments. In the objective frame we simply present some poor economic prospects in the form of a massive increase in unemployment. The inequality frame presents a typical – although by now somewhat old-fashioned – left-wing response. The deficit frame presents a response typical for most governments during the Great Recession, especially from the right (this is probably the type of response Juncker alluded to).

“Which of the two following goals do you personally think the government should prioritise?

(1) Maintaining the standard of living for the unemployed even if this leads to a higher budget deficit or (2) reducing the budget deficit even if it means cuts in unemployment benefits”

Question

Control group	No message
Objective Frame	“Next year unemployment in UK will reach an all-time high. Many jobs in the public and private sector will be cut.”
Inequality Frame	“Next year unemployment in UK will reach an all-time high. Many jobs in the public and private sector will be cut. Experts say that unemployment benefits need to be kept at their current level to keep people from falling into poverty. Otherwise the UK will become a more unequal country.”

“Which of the two following goals do you personally think the government should prioritise?
(1) Maintaining the standard of living for the unemployed even if this leads to a higher budget deficit or (2) reducing the budget deficit even if it means cuts in unemployment benefits”

Question

Deficit Frame	“Next year unemployment in UK will reach an all-time high. Many jobs in the public and private sector will be cut. Experts say that unemployment benefits need to be cut, because the costs will skyrocket and push the budget further into deficit. Otherwise debts will be passed on to future generations.”
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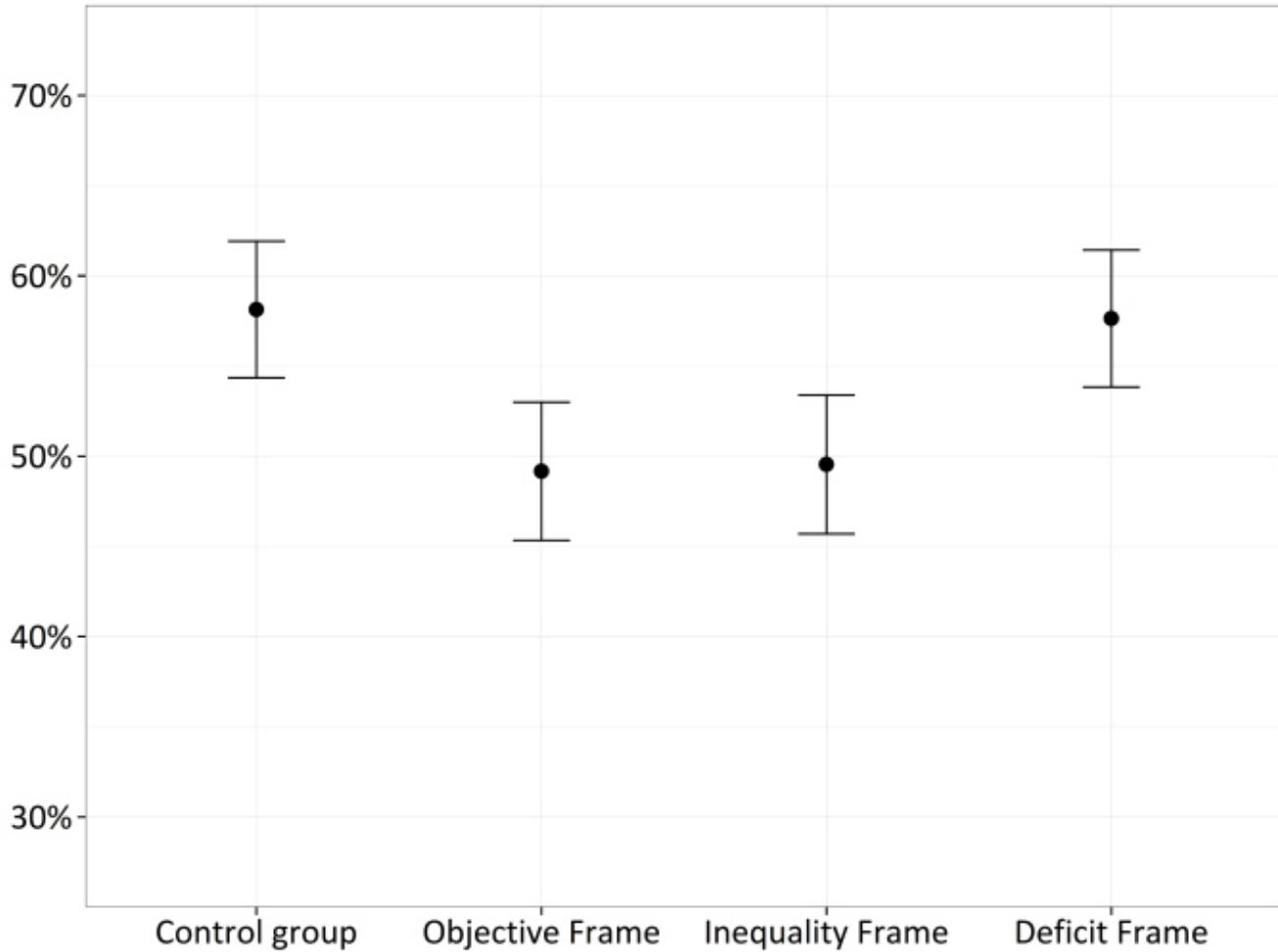
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Who supports retrenchment?

Next we compared groups that were exposed to these different messages (see graph). In the control group that did not receive any frame almost 60 per cent of the people supported cuts in benefits. This is somewhat surprising, particularly after benefits were lowered considerably over the past years in Britain. Juncker – at the very least – got public opinion in Britain wrong: a majority does support cuts. This reflects the Conservative majority result for the 2015 general election and the way in which it thinks about this issue.

If we tell respondents about a rise in unemployment in the objective frame, this does reduce support for retrenchment, by approximately 10 per cent. Higher unemployment as such seems to promote more, not less, solidarity. Stressing inequality does not change support. Either inequality arguments are unimportant, or people already realize the implications of the negative unemployment trend. Adding information about budget deficits increases support for retrenchment again by 10 per cent, so that it offsets the leftward shift because of growing unemployment. Hence, this frame is not as ineffective as Juncker claimed.

Proportion supporting cuts in unemployment benefits for different treatments



These main effects may of course differ depending on one's income or partisanship. For that purpose we analyzed the effects of income and partisanship on the preferences for retrenchment. For income surprisingly we find few effects. Of course people from lower-income strata are more in favour of keeping benefits than people from higher-income strata, but we do not find strongly different responses to our frames across income groups.

We do find that party identification matters for the success of the different frames. Non-partisans are easy to influence. In response to the objective frame support for retrenchment drops by 20 per cent among independents, but support increases again by 10 per cent if we add information on the potential budget deficit. Partisans seem unmoved: their preferences in the control group and in the objective information are similar. But if we add information on inequality left-wing partisans reduce their support for retrenchment. If we add information on the budget deficit right-wing partisans increase their support for retrenchment. Hence, partisans respond to the information associated with their political identification.

Influencing voters

Electoral punishment for welfare cutbacks is not inevitable. Through strategic framing, incumbents can convince voters that cutbacks are desirable or at least necessary. This strategy arguably is most effective in the absence of counter-framing by the opposition. The widespread consensus among European mainstream parties in how to respond to the economic crisis indeed suggests that such counter-framing is currently lacking. The fact that this role has been left in many countries to anti-establishment parties has consequences that go beyond welfare politics.

Our results also show that it is not just about finding the right frame. Some frames work better for some people than for others. The partisan orientation of voters is a crucial aspect in this respect. However, we know that stable attachments to parties are declining and that the segment of independents is growing. Soon it will probably form the

majority of the electorate. On the face of it, this means that more voters will make up their minds ‘independently’. Our findings suggest that it also implies a growing susceptibility to framing. In an electorate more easily led by framing, the diversity of arguments in public discourses will be critical for the quality of democracy.

About the Authors

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