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The welfare preferences of socially liberal and socially conservative voters

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ABSTRACT
Research on party politics in Western Europe suggests an increasingly salient second dimension of electoral competition that divides socially liberal and socially conservative policy demands, complementing and potentially predominating the economic dimension. To better understand its implications for welfare politics, this study investigates how citizens at the two poles of this second dimension differ in their social policy preferences. It contributes to existing literature by firstly showing how socially liberals and conservatives differ in their support for lower-income oriented, solidaristic and social investment policies. Second, it theorises age differences among socially liberals. Using novel German survey data, findings reveal that socially conservatives prefer contribution-based consumption policies, while socially liberals also favour social investment and lower-income oriented, solidaristic policies. However, aggregate analyses mask differences between young and old socially liberals. Young socially liberals show strong support for social investment, while older socially liberals attribute more importance to social assistance.

KEYWORDS Welfare preferences; second dimension; social investment; generational divide; socially liberals

While welfare politics was traditionally structured along an economic left-right programmatic dimension of political conflict, the second dimension of political conflict[1] between libertarian, universalist and cosmopolitan policy demands and authoritarian, particularistic and nationalist demands has become salient in all Western European countries, and, in many of them, is today even the dominant dimension of political competition (Hall 2022; Hutter and Kriesi 2019: Kriesi *et al.* 2012). Recent studies even see a fully-fledged social cleavage in this new divide, complete with a socio-structural basis, collective identity and political organisation

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by left-libertarian and green parties on one side and radical right parties on the other (Bornschier *et al.* 2021, 2024; Hooghe and Marks 2018; Marks *et al.* 2023).

Even though we know that this divide was initially politicised around policy issues distinctive from social policy (in particular immigration, supranational integration, gender roles and the rights of sexual minorities), its salience implies that the programmatic antagonistic 'bundles' of the cleavage have gained a strong structuring ideological impact on how citizens generally think about politics, make sense of policies, and orient themselves in the political space (Bornschier *et al.* 2024). For citizens at the extremes of the cleavage, the choice between libertarian-universalistic-cosmopolitan vs. authoritarian-particularistic-nationalist outcomes is at stake in all major political decisions, including the different areas of social policy (Busemeyer *et al.* 2022; Garritzmann *et al.* 2022, 2024; Häusermann and Kitschelt 2024; Häusermann and Kriesi 2015; Röth and Schwander 2021). It is indeed a property of political cleavages that allow voters to incorporate specific policy issues, both existing and newly raised ones, into a firmly anchored ideological coordinate system.

For this reason, conceptualising European welfare politics in the twenty first century requires that we understand what voters at the extremes of the second dimension think of and want from the welfare state (see also Häusermann *et al.* 2025 for a theory on how to conceptualise welfare politics in the current electoral space of Western Europe). A growing number of important studies theorises and shows how authoritarian/TAN values among voters of populist radical right parties relate to nativist, exclusionary and punitive understandings of welfare deservingness and welfare chauvinism (e.g. Chueri *et al.* 2024; De Koster *et al.* 2013; Ennser-Jedenastik 2018; Rathgeb 2024), and a smaller set of studies has started to link libertarian/GAL values to education and activation policy preferences. However, beyond these specific angles, we know relatively little about which social policies in general the voters at the poles of the second dimension support and which they prioritise over others. Yet, there is ample reason to think that socially liberal and socially conservative values relate to distributive preferences more generally: contribution-based social consumption policies reaffirm traditional boundaries of solidarity (e.g. among workers with standard employment biographies, among male breadwinners, traditional families) and thus resonate with socially conservative values, while socially liberal voters may want to transform and expand such boundaries to new minorities and new risk profiles (e.g. Achterberg *et al.* 2014; Rathgeb 2024). Moreover, the diffuse and widespread benefits of social investment policies resonate more with socially liberal, emancipative values (Beramendi *et al.* 2015; Garritzmann *et al.* 2022, 2024). Social liberalism also has a strong egalitarian value-dimension, which is likely to entail support for

solidaristic, low-income oriented transfers to vulnerable social groups (Häusermann 2010).

Hence, if indeed we find that social policy attitudes in general are structured by the second dimension, GALTAN divide, this would reveal a potentially transformative character of this new cleavage for welfare states, depending on coalitional politics: if – beyond their support for social investment – socially liberal voters are supportive of solidaristic policies more generally, this would strengthen a left pro-welfare coalition. If not, the increasing importance of socially liberal stances within the broader progressive field may rather divide the left. Similarly, if social conservatism resonates only with maintaining social consumption policies, but not with support for solidarity with low-income, vulnerable groups, it will rather strengthen the right (Chueri *et al.* 2024). The transformative potential of these coalitional (re)alignments then also depends on the relative size of the socially liberal and conservative poles of the second dimension, which differs across countries and regimes (Beramendi *et al.* 2015).

With this study, we want to make two contributions. While the link between GALTAN stances and investment vs. consumption policies is relatively well documented (e.g. Garritzmann *et al.* 2018; Häusermann and Kriesi 2015; Röth and Schwander 2021), the existing empirical literature neglects how the GALTAN divide relates to solidaristic social policies more generally, such as social assistance. Hence, we complement existing findings by investigating the association of second dimension stances and welfare attitudes more broadly, through different measures of position and priorities. We also go one step further by contributing a more historical argument: we contend that the sequential political emergence of this cleavage over the past 40 years may have led to differences between younger and older socially liberals in their attitude towards such solidaristic, lower-income oriented policies. Cohort differences among socially liberals are likely because citizens have been politicised through different waves of political mobilisation, each with their own programmatic interpretations of what substantially constitutes the policy priorities at the extremes of the GALTAN divide. Coupled with the massive educational expansion and occupational upgrading over the past decades, this programmatic development of the divide has led to an ever larger and heterogenous group of socially liberals in Western democracies. We thus expect that older socially liberals support generous solidaristic policies for lower-income groups more than younger socially liberals, as older socially liberals have become politicised in a more clearly anti-capitalist, and establishment-critical context, while the political socialisation of younger socially liberals happened in reaction to the rise of the New Right.

In order to empirically assess our hypotheses, we use original survey data fielded in Germany in early 2021. Our empirical contribution

consists of three aspects that go beyond the existing research: (i) we extend the analysis to *more social policy fields*, going beyond the social investment versus social consumption focus, (ii) we distinguish between policy *positions and priorities*, and (iii) we introduce more *constrained preference measures* through point distribution questions and a conjoint survey experiment. Our results indicate that while socially conservatives prefer contribution-based social consumption policies (e.g. pensions), socially liberals are more supportive of social investment policies (e.g. childcare or university education), as well as lower-income oriented, solidaristic policies (in particular social assistance). However, aggregate analyses mask differences between younger and older socially liberals. In fact, younger socially liberals show particularly high support for social investment, while older socially liberals also attribute importance to lower-income oriented, solidaristic policies.

Theory

What do socially liberals and conservatives want from the welfare state? Are there differences in how younger and older socially liberals and conservatives approach the welfare state and welfare politics? We theorise these research questions sequentially.

The GALTAN dimension and social policy preferences

A growing literature theorises and empirically studies social policy preferences of voters with decidedly GAL vs. TAN attitudes. Much of this literature focuses specifically on voters of populist radical right parties, and on preferences regarding welfare chauvinism, as immigration and multiculturalism are, of course, key component issues of the GALTAN dimension. The preferences for welfare chauvinism are motivated in large part by these voters' preferences for nativist policies (e.g. Chueri *et al.* 2024; Eick 2024; Ennser-Jedenastik 2018). Empirically, attitudes towards welfare chauvinism have indeed been shown to relate closely to attitudes concerning immigration or social conservatism (Häusermann and Kriesi 2015). Overall, welfare chauvinism is most likely the one area of welfare politics, in which divides between socially liberals and conservatives in terms of both position and priority are most obvious.

In this article, however, we are interested in more general social policy preference divides between socially liberals and conservatives. Given the massive importance this cleavage has gained in the way citizens understand and think about politics, it is plausible to think that attitudes along this second dimension also structure welfare politics in 'traditional' social policy fields such as pensions, education, unemployment insurance or

social assistance. In that case, the implications and transformative potential of the second-dimension divide for welfare politics are obviously even more extensive.

There is indeed much reason to expect the new cleavage to affect welfare state politics beyond the question of immigrants' social rights. Three strands of literature provide important theoretical ground for this contention. First, while the second-dimension divide has manifested itself early on in issues like immigration or cultural liberalism, an earlier sociological literature reminds us of the ideological divide between freedom, authority, autonomy and community that fundamentally underlies this dimension (Flanagan and Lee, 2003; Achterberg and Houtman 2009). Hence, traditionalist-authoritarian orientations relate more fundamentally to visions of social order that emphasise status maintenance, sanctioning and commodification (Achterberg *et al.* 2014; Knotz, 2021; Rossetti *et al.* 2021; van der Waal *et al.* 2010). Similarly, the literature on the political preferences of populist radical right voters and parties also points to the more generally conservative, sanctioning and authoritarian aspects of their programmatic profile, which entails conceptions of deservingness, norm-enforcement and sanctioning of deviation from established norms that go far beyond the issue of immigrants' welfare rights (Attewell 2021; Busemeyer *et al.* 2022; Chueri 2021, 2022; De Koster *et al.* 2013; Ennser-Jedenastik 2018; Rathgeb 2024). Specifically, radical right voters and parties want to reward those who are believed to be the hard-working 'producers' or 'makers' of a country's wealth (Abts *et al.* 2021; Ivaldi and Mazzoleni 2019; Rathgeb 2021). Third, a rapidly growing literature theorises an important divide concerning socially liberals' and socially conservatives' attitudes on social investment and consumption policies. The distinction between these types of social policy has been amply developed in the literature: while social consumption policies typically replace income via transfers, are clearly delineated in terms of the eligible beneficiaries, and 'repair' income loss ex-post, social investment policies 'create, mobilize, and preserve' human capital and capabilities to sustain individuals' earnings potential in the labour market (Garritzmann *et al.* 2022; Hemerijck 2013; Morel *et al.* 2012). Social investment policies imply social spending in the present to yield societal returns in the future. As a consequence, the exact distribution of the returns and benefits of social investment policies is not clearly identifiable and predictable ex-ante for individuals (Beramendi *et al.* 2015). We also know that while both social consumption and social investment policies enjoy broad support across the entire population (Garritzmann *et al.* 2018), there are differences in degree and – in particular – in the relative importance voters attribute to different social policies (Bremer and Bürgisser 2023; Häusermann *et al.* 2022). Hence, when studying the preferences of socially liberals and

socially conservatives in this article, we focus as much on position as on the importance voters assign to specific policies.

Why do we expect people situated at the two poles of the second dimension to differ in their preferences regarding different logics of social policy? At the centre of our argument is the fundamental libertarian-authoritarian (Kitschelt 1994) value divide between socially liberals, who emphasise equal rights and opportunities for individuals irrespective of their backgrounds and life choices, and socially conservatives, who emphasise support for a community of individuals with specific joint characteristics, who adhere to shared social norms, respect and preserve established social order, and who sanction deviant behaviour (Achterberg *et al.* 2014; Flanagan and Lee 2003). Given these very different sets of values and visions for society, voters see the role of the welfare state in society, and thus the primary goal of social policies, differently. Socially liberals consider social policy an instrument to provide the very pre-conditions for social inclusion and participation, i.e. policies that provide all members of society with the necessary security and resources to engage with education, family, the labour market, and to lead an autonomous life (Häusermann et al. 2025; Häusermann and Kitschelt 2024). For socially conservatives, this implies that the purpose of social policy is to stabilise existing communities, hierarchies and norms, and to enforce and reward norm conformity. The very idea of norm enforcement arguably explains the strong link between TAN values and deservingness perceptions, which is key to the literature on welfare demands of radical right voters (e.g. Abts *et al.* 2021; Attewell 2021). Chueri *et al.* (2024: 2) call it the 'authoritarian twist': citizens who violate norms of contribution, reciprocity or identity should be excluded or punished.

Focusing on these fundamental value divides implies a difference in the preference of voters for social consumption and investment social policies (Beramendi *et al.* 2015). The expected benefits of social investments are widely spread, hard to predict, and may enhance inclusion and social mobility (Hemerijck 2017). If designed inclusively, they enhance equality of opportunity and ideally allow individuals more agency over their life, properties that relate them directly to socially liberal values. Think of investments in education, which unfold their effects over a long period of time and generate diffuse benefits that citizens cannot for certain identify to accrue to them or others (or other people's children) (Jacobs and Matthews 2017). Social consumption policies, by contrast, accrue to clearly identifiable groups of beneficiaries, and they mainly reward individuals with long, stable and typical, norm-conforming, employment and contribution trajectories. They thereby resonate with reaffirming traditional boundaries of solidarity and social order, and hence with socially conservative values.

The existing empirical evidence confirms this association concerning policy positions (Garritzmann *et al.* 2018), especially concerning the relative importance socially liberal and conservative citizens attribute to typical social investment and consumption policies (Häusermann *et al.* 2022). In line with these observations, several recent studies also identify the parties at the extremes of this second dimension – the Greens and the Radical Right – to clearly articulate and drive the political conflict around investment and consumption (Enggist and Pinggera 2022; Häusermann *et al.* 2025).

From these explanations, we derive two hypotheses:

H1: People with socially conservative attitudes support contribution-based consumption policies more than those with socially liberal attitudes.

H2: People with socially liberal attitudes support social investment policies more than those with socially conservative attitudes.

Many social policy domains can be quite clearly attributed to the social investment vs. social consumption typology. Yet, the distributive profile of these policies – whether they are redistributive, stratifying or even regressive (Garritzmann *et al.* 2022) – represents another dimension that the investment-consumption distinction cannot fully grasp. In some social policy domains, which are oriented towards lower-income groups and thus very solidaristic, this distributive aspect is, however, the most relevant. Research to date has hardly addressed how the GALTAN dimension intersects with issues of lower-income solidarity for welfare recipients in most need of support, such as attitudes towards the generosity of social assistance benefits.[2] Traditionally relegated to the first, economic dimension, these attitudes have been assumed to generally align with the first dimension only, with economically left voters expected to show greater solidarity with those in need and express more support for social assistance benefits than their economically right counterparts. We also argue that there is no 'natural', straightforward link between GALTAN values and the generosity of lower-income oriented policies. Rather, we argue in the subsequent section that this link depends on the evolving relationship between the GALTAN dimension and the economic dimension over time. As a result, we expect that the time period during which voters underwent political socialisation is important in determining the link between GALTAN positioning and, specifically, support for solidaristic social assistance benefits.

Younger and older socially liberals, and why their social policy preferences differ

From previous studies such as Häusermann and Kriesi (2015), Kitschelt and Rehm (2014), Oesch and Rennwald (2018), we know that GALTAN

values are, of course, also driven by socio-structural determinants. Mid- to high-skilled individuals in socially interactive professions are on average consistently more socially liberal (Häusermann and Kriesi 2015; Kitschelt 1994). Education also plays a crucial role, with high-skilled citizens, especially those trained in interactive, creative or communicative fields, being most socially liberal (Bornschier *et al.* 2024; Hooghe *et al.* 2024). To control for composition effects, we thus control for education in our main analyses. Age, however, does not have such a straightforward link to social liberalism or social conservatism. While it is true that younger citizens are on average more liberal, this has held true for many decades and strong cohort effects preserve and stabilise early acquired values (Mitteregger 2024). Yet, the timing of socialisation matters for the definition and understanding of social liberalism, we argue. The emergence of the GALTAN cleavage over a period of the past 40 years may have led to differences between younger and older socially liberals in their attitude towards solidaristic, lower-income oriented policies. We do not expect the same heterogeneity for socially conservatives, for reasons we will explain in the subsequent paragraphs.

In order to understand how first-dimension attitudes relate to second-dimension attitudes, we need to understand the three different 'waves' with which subsequent cohorts of citizens have been accustomed to and socialised into the programmatic 'bundles' that today constitute the extremes of the GALTAN divide.

Socially liberal demands were first mobilised on a very large scale in electoral politics of Western Europe in the context of the New Social Movements, starting in the mid-1970s. The New Social Movements put issues associated with the GALTAN dimension on the political agenda of mainstream mass politics, in particular through claims for gender equality, international peace and solidarity with developing countries in the Global South, and against nuclear energy (Kitschelt 1986; Kriesi *et al.* 1995). Through massive mobilisation efforts via demonstrations, protests, action committees and – eventually – party formation, they entailed meaningful socialising experiences for an entire generation of young, left-wing voters who would later become the backbone and core electorate of New Left green and left-libertarian parties. These movements organised and emerged from within the traditional Left and in direct succession to the 68-revolt that claimed progressive, systemic, anti-capitalist societal change. They mobilised with the explicit objective of extending the scope and ambition of the social democratic 'emancipatory project' to new social groups who had previously been somewhat sidelined from the social democratic class compromise between the (male organised) working class and capital, such as women, non-nationals, precarious and atypical workers, or even future generations (Frega 2021). Importantly, the New Social

Movements had both a programmatic and an organisational emancipatory ambition: programmatically, they re-defined the notion of 'left-wing politics' by extending its ambition to a broader set of issues and groups as mentioned before; organisationally, they explicitly mobilised against traditional forms of institutionalised politics – e.g. by organising mass protests or collective action committees outside established organisations – with the aim of empowering and raising the voices of citizens against the established elites through grassroot movements (Kriesi 1999; Offe 1985). The voters who 'became socially liberals' through processes of political socialisation in this first wave of cleavage formation three to four decades ago are by now in their early 60s or older.

It is against this first wave of mobilisation at the GAL pole that the 'silent counter-revolution' by populist radical right parties occurred (Ignazi 1992; Kitschelt 1995). Through either new parties or a reorientation of existing socially conservative parties, the New Right mobilised voters who opposed the far-reaching progressive social change the New Left had put on the agenda. With their programmatic claims for traditional gender roles, family norms and social order, for national priority and protectionism over internationalism and against increased environmental protection, they promoted the mirror image of the socially liberal policy-bundle of the New Left (Betz 1993; Bornschier 2010; Kriesi 1999) from the late 1980s onwards. During the 1990s and 2000s, when the New Right movement gained in scope and importance, anti-immigration and anti-supranationalism positions became increasingly important in defining the socially conservative programmatic agenda of these parties, while their traditionalist-authoritarian opposition to the core demands of the New Social Movements remained part of their programmatic supply. However, while their mobilisation was in reality strongly driven in a top-down way by party elites, as opposed to the grassroots politics of the New Left (Hutter 2014), their political rhetoric early on emphasised a populist, anti-elite and anti-establishment claim. This emphasis on bottom-up politics against the elites consequently implied a much less clear demarcation from the New Left than the antagonistic demarcation we observe in programmatic terms. The populist anti-elite claims of the New Right manifested in more recent times in the form of critical or even adversarial positions against experts, technocrats and established educational elites (Caramani 2017).

With the nationalist right-wing electoral potential becoming large and visible in basically all Western European countries from 2000 onwards, the divide between socially liberals and conservatives developed into a full-blown cleavage (Bornschier *et al.* 2021, 2024). Therefore, younger voters born after the mid-1980s were politically socialised into an ideologically competitive space in which the TAN extreme had been very strong from the moment these younger voters became aware of politics. Hence,

those who developed socially liberal political attitudes in these more recent times did so in clear demarcation from the populist radical right's anti-immigrant, nationalist, traditionalist programmatic positions. However, their political socialisation has been less closely tied to a grassroots movement challenging the establishment than the political socialisation in the New Left of the 1980s (Hix 2023). Also, given the populist profile of the New Right, many younger socially liberals may have come to even defend established institutions or expert-led politics (Bertsou and Caramani 2022). In short, the attitudes of younger socially liberals refer more clearly to programmatic politics, rather than to new, anti-establishment ways of doing politics in a bottom-up way, in the pursuit of empowering the weak and marginalised.[3]

This dialectic development of programmatic understandings of what social liberalism is and implies is one factor why we would expect age differences within the group of voters with socially liberal attitudes. Additionally, massive educational expansion and occupational upgrading have led to a much larger but most likely more heterogeneous group of socially liberals compared to the 1980s and 1990s. Over the past 20 years, the share of young people with tertiary education in Western democracies has more than doubled on average. With GAL attitudes closely linked to the types of social and cultural capital that come with higher education, this development has broadened the socially liberal coalition way beyond the left-wing subcultures that were at the root of the New Social Movements, thereby weakening the link between left-wing attitudes on the first, economic dimension and socio-cultural issues (related to the GALTAN dimension) over these generations (Ares and van Ditmars 2024; Mitteregger 2024).

What do these three waves of political-programmatic socialisation and cleavage formation imply for the *social policy attitudes* we expect to prevail among the members of these cohorts? For 'early socially liberals' (i.e. older cohorts), we would expect their social policy attitudes to extend beyond support for social investment to solidaristic and lower-income oriented policies because of the left-wing, anti-capitalist, and anti-elite mobilisation context in which they became socialised into the new cleavage. For our case of Germany, we expect this to be particularly the case in West German, whereas in East Germany the issues of the Western New Left were not the main mobilising issues (Brown 2008). For younger socially liberals, this link is less obvious, both because of the more heterogeneous background they come from, as well as because their programmatic socialisation happened most clearly in reaction to the New Right and their claims, which are decidedly socially conservative but much more diverse or even blurred when it comes to capitalism and redistribution (Eger and Valdez 2019; Rovny and Polk 2020). Consequently,

we expect younger socially liberals to side with social investment claims but to be less concerned with solidaristic and lower-income oriented policies. Finally, for socially conservative voters, we do not expect such a cohort difference. First, their view on social policy is likely to be shaped by a clear authoritarian- and identity-based understanding of deservingness (resonating with priority given to social consumption policies), but is likely to be less concerned with marginalised groups per se. Second, Schäfer (2022) highlights the absence of an age divide in voting for populist TAN parties. This suggests that neither younger nor elderly voters at the TAN pole are necessarily a more heterogeneous group than the other.

From these explanations, we derive two additional hypotheses:

H3a: The divide between people with socially liberal and conservative attitudes regarding social investment and social consumption is consistent across age groups.

H3b: The divide between people with socially liberal and conservative attitudes regarding lower-income oriented, solidaristic policies (such as social assistance) is stronger among older people than among the young.

Data and methods

We test our hypotheses empirically by focusing on the German case. Germany is an ideal case for our study for several reasons: first, the New Social Movements were particularly strong in West Germany in the 1980s and left a lasting imprint on the political socialisation of an entire generation. Second, while the socially liberal claims of the New Left were integrated into the pre-existing social democratic parties in several countries, the difference between the German SPD and the German Greens in terms of first- vs. second-dimension programmatic priority has remained clear and strong (Häusermann and Kitschelt 2024; Kitschelt 1994). This organisational distinction is likely to result in more distinctive preference profiles of socially liberal voters over time. Third, Germany did experience a strong counter-revolution against the New Left way before the – relatively late – mobilisation of the radical right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in 2012. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Germany dealt with repeated waves of radical right mobilisation, not least in the wake of reunification, and these waves left strong imprints on the political socialisation of young people at the time. German conservative parties struggled over decades with the question of how to appeal to a right-wing national electoral potential without compromising themselves in the light of the German historical trauma (Art 2011; Bornschier 2012). The AfD gave this electoral potential a voice comparable to what had happened in neighbouring countries 10 to 20 years earlier.

To empirically assess our hypotheses, we use original survey data gathered as part of the ERC project WELFAREPRIORITIES at the University of Zurich.[4] The survey was fielded between January and March 2021 in cooperation with the survey company Bilendi. It includes completed answers from 3019 respondents in Germany. To increase the representativeness of the survey to Germany's adult population, we included quotas for sex and age (crossed) as well as educational attainment.

One of the main strengths of the survey is that it includes multiple ways of operationalising social policy preferences, ranging from standard positional items, over items that capture the importance that respondents attribute to these positions, to items which introduce constraints that force respondents to make hard decisions and explicitly state their priorities (here, we use conjoint experiments to gauge priorities). In this article, we use all these types of measures. Using different kinds of operationalisations to assess our hypotheses relies on both theoretical and empirical grounds. Theoretically, previous research has suggested that preferences on the GALTAN dimension are related to welfare preferences. Importantly, however, this research empirically shows that these effects may be stronger for measures of importance or priorities than for measures of positional attitudes (e.g. Garritzmann *et al.* 2018). Moreover, the use of different operationalisations of the dependent variable is also used to probe robustness.

The first operationalisation of our dependent variable (social policy support) focuses on *unconstrained positional items*. Therefore, we use standard items which capture respondents' support for expanding or reducing spending for six social policies. Respondents were asked: 'Do you think the government should expand or reduce the following benefits and services?'. This question was answered on a 7-point answer scale for the following policies: 'Old age pension benefits', 'Childcare services', 'University education', 'Unemployment benefits', 'Services that help reintegrate unemployed into the labour market' (active labour market policies), and 'Social assistance benefits'. The second operationalisation of our dependent variable focuses on *unconstrained importance items*. Therefore, we use the following item: 'How urgent do you consider the following improvements of social policy benefits in Germany?'. Again, respondents answered this question for the same six social policy fields. Answers were captured on a 4-point answer scale from 'not at all' to 'very' urgent. The third operationalisation of our dependent variable focuses on *constrained priorities* (conjoint analysis) and is described in more detail below.

As indicated in the hypotheses, we differentiate between support for *contribution-based consumption policies*, measured by support for old age pensions, *social investment policies*, measured by support for active labour

market policy (ALMP), childcare, and university education, and *lower-income oriented*, *solidaristic policies*, measured by support for social assistance and unemployment benefits. Unemployment benefits could also be considered a contribution-based consumption policy, of course. Since unemployment as a labour market risk is strongly related to the income distribution, we classify unemployment benefits as a lower- income oriented policy (Jensen 2012). Yet, it is true that our survey asked German respondents about 'Arbeitslosengeld' (unemployment benefits) and 'Sozialhilfe (Arbeitslosengeld II)' (social assistance). This distinction may indeed lead respondents to think of unemployment benefits more as a social insurance/consumption than as solidaristic, lower-income oriented policy. As both conceptualizations (as solidaristic vs. consumption policy) imply contradictory expectations regarding the link with the GALTAN values, we have to keep the ambiguity of this policy domain in mind when interpreting the findings.

Our main independent variable are attitudes on the GALTAN dimension. We use five items (similar to the one used to measure GALTAN or 2nd dimension attitudes in the literature, see for example, Boräng et al. 2024; Häusermann and Kriesi 2015; van der Brug and van Spanje 2009) to construct an unweighted, additive index. Respondents were asked to 'Disagree Strongly', 'Disagree', 'Agree', or 'Agree Strongly' with the following statements: 'Gay and lesbian couples should have the same rights to adopt children as straight couples', 'All in all, family life suffers when the woman has a full-time job', 'Immigration is a threat to our national culture', 'Immigration is a threat to the national labour market', and 'European integration has gone too far'.[5] An exploratory factor analysis indicates that these five items load onto a single factor, with an eigenvalue of 2.33. We normalise the additive index to range from 0 (TAN, socially conservative) to 1 (GAL, socially liberal). The mean is at 0.58.

Our second independent variable is age, which we interact with GALTAN attitudes in the analyses for hypotheses 3a/b. The weak negative correlation between the two variables ($r=-0.15$) indicates that high values of social liberalism are more prevalent among younger cohorts. Nonetheless, as Table 1 shows, we have a sufficient number of both young (<30 years) socially conservatives (lower third of the distribution) and of older (>=70) socially liberals (upper third of the distribution).

To analyse the relationship between social policy preferences (positional support and unconstrained importance), GALTAN attitudes and age, we run a series of OLS regression models. All models presented control for sex, educational attainment, and attitudes on the first, economic dimension. The latter is operationalised by combining the answers on two items to an unweighted, additive index: 'For a society to be fair, income differences should be small', and 'Social benefits and services in Germany

Table 1. Number of socially conservatives and liberals across age groups.

Age	Conservatives	(%)	Middle group	(%)	Liberals	(%)	Full sample	(%)
<30	98	*21*	125	*27*	237	*52*	460	*100*
30–49	384	*40*	306	*32*	264	*28*	954	*100*
50–69	482	*40*	375	*31*	337	*28*	1194	*100*
>=70	161	*39*	144	*35*	106	*26*	411	*100*
Full sample	1125	*37*	950	*31*	944	*31*	3019	*100*

place too great a strain on the economy'.[6] Furthermore, all models include poststratification weights (sex and age crossed, educational attainment) to increase the representativeness of the sample. Excluding the weights does not change the results substantively.

In further robustness checks, we take into account the regional variation in Germany. First, we rerun the analyses separately for the former West and East German states (Figure A2). We expect age differences in the GALTAN divide (H3b) to be larger in West Germany than in East Germany. Second, we add economic controls at the regional (NUTS3) level to account for the possibility that the regional economic context affects both GALTAN attitudes and welfare preferences (Online Appendix A6). Controlling for regional context does not substantially affect our main findings.

Conjoint experiment

While questions about social policy positions and the importance of different social policies are unconstrained, i.e. they allow respondents to demand welfare expansion for all social policies and to attribute high importance to all social policies, differences between socially liberals and conservatives might show more strongly when measuring *relative* support for different social policies. Therefore, we are particularly interested in which social policies respondents prioritise.

In order to measure such welfare priorities, we use a novel conjoint experiment that we have fielded as part of the same survey. Conjoint designs are well-suited to capture individuals' welfare priorities since welfare politics are multi-dimensional and since real-world welfare reforms often involve trade-offs across multiple policy fields (Bremer and Bürgisser 2023). In our conjoint experiment each respondent had to compare four pairs of two different welfare state reform proposals and for each pair choose the reform proposal the respondent likes more. These reform proposals contained information on whether welfare benefits and services in six areas of social policy (namely old age pensions, childcare services, university education, unemployment benefits, active labour market policies and social assistance benefits) would stay the same or would be expanded in a respective welfare reform proposal (see Table 2 for an

Table 2. Overview of the attributes and levels used in the conjoint experiment.

Attribute	Type of level	Content of level
Old age pension benefits	Status quo	Leave benefits unchanged
	Expansion	Increase minimum benefits, but preserve maximum benefits
Availability of good quality childcare services	Status quo	Leave availability unchanged
	Expansion	Increase availability for lower-income families.
Access to good quality university education	Status quo	Leave access unchanged
	Expansion	Expand access for students from lower-income families
Unemployment benefits	Status quo	Leave benefits unchanged
	Expansion	Increase minimum benefits, but preserve maximum benefits
Reintegration services for the unemployed	Status quo	Leave services unchanged
	Expansion	Expand services for long-term unemployed
Social assistance benefits	Status quo	Leave benefits unchanged
	Expansion	Increase minimum benefits, but preserve maximum benefits

overview of the exact wording). Since the welfare reform packages are generated randomly, the conjoint design allows us to observe how much the expansion of each of these six social policies contributes to the probability of a reform proposal being preferred. The more it does, the more the respective social policy is prioritised.

Since the goal of this conjoint experiment is to measure priorities for expansion in the six social policies, two more specifics of our design should be noted. First, the expansive reforms in all cases specified that the benefit expansion should be redistributive and target recipients most in need. Holding the progressivity of expansion constant across social policies, reduces the complexity of the conjoint, ensures comparability across social policies, and allows us to focus on progressive expansion of benefits, services, or availability towards lower income classes. This approach represents a conservative test for identifying subgroup differences. Nonetheless, our primary interest lies in isolating the effects of a progressive shift in policy design. In line with Hypothesis 3b, we expect subgroup differences between younger and older socially liberal individuals to emerge primarily for solidaristic policies. Second, we made sure by design that within each pair of welfare reforms to be compared, the number of social policies to be expanded was identical. This prevents respondents from simply choosing the more (or less) expansive reform proposal, but forces respondents to really ponder which social policy expansions they care more about than others.

Using R's *cjoint* package (Hainmueller *et al.* 2014) we calculate average marginal component effects (AMCEs), thus the degree to which a level of an attribute averaged over all combination of levels of other attributes increases or decreases respondents' support for a welfare reform package.[7] We interact each attribute in a first step with attitudes on the GALTAN

dimension to observe whether people situated at the two poles of this dimension prioritise the expansion of different social policies. In a second step, we calculate a three-way-interaction of attributes, GALTAN attitudes and age. This is necessary in order to test H3, which expects the divide between socially liberals and conservatives to play out differently among younger than among older age groups. In our main analysis, we use a continuous attitudinal and age variable to make the findings as comparable as possible to the analysis of the other dependent variables described above. Using the more common approach of conducting the conjoint analysis separately for subgroups of young and old socially liberals as well as young and old socially conservatives yield essentially identical findings (Figures A3 and A4 in the Online Appendix).

Results

What do socially liberals and conservatives want from the welfare state?

We start by asking what socially liberals and conservatives want from the welfare state. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship of attitudes on the GALTAN dimension and *unconstrained positional support* for different social policies. The full regression table can be found in the Table A1 in the Online Appendix. As expected in H1, we find a negative relationship between GAL attitudes and support for pensions, as illustrated in the bottom left panel. In contrast, the relationship of GAL attitudes and social investment policies is positive, as illustrated in the top panels. This confirms H2. We find that for ALMP, childcare, and university education, support is substantially higher among socially liberals than among socially conservatives.

Because we expect strong age differences (see H3b), we have unclear theoretical expectations how attitudes on the GALTAN dimension are related to traditional, lower-income oriented and solidaristic social policies such as unemployment benefits or social assistance on average. For the former, we do not find a significant relationship. Regarding social assistance, however, we find that socially liberals are significantly and substantively more supportive than socially conservatives – a finding that we will follow up on below.

Overall, the findings show that socially liberals (even when controlled for economic 'first dimension' preferences) are more supportive of social investment policies and social assistance, i.e. the policy for which support is arguably driven most strongly by solidarity considerations. In contrast, socially conservatives are characterised by strong support for old age pensions, a traditional insurance-based consumption policy. Also note that

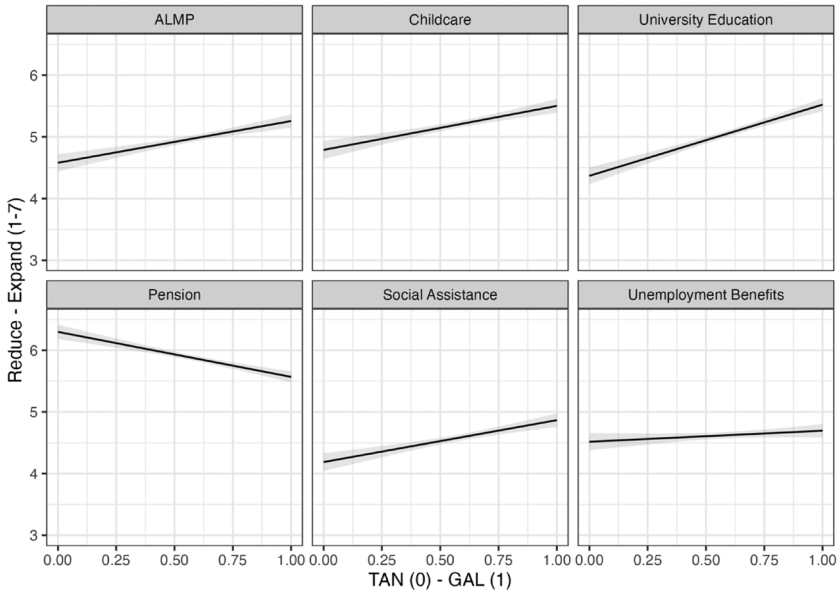

Figure 1. Relationship of GALTAN attitudes with unconstrained positional support for social policies.

overall support for most policies is relatively high. Hence, even though in general we may say that socially liberals are more supportive of social policies, socially conservatives are certainly not anti-welfare state, either. Even for social assistance benefits, we do not find even extreme socially conservatives to support actual retrenchment. Rather, they on average indicate that benefits should be left unchanged (as 4 is the middle category on the 7-point answer scale).

Figure 2 assesses the same hypotheses but illustrates the effect of GALTAN attitudes on *unconstrained importance* attributed to the very same social policies.[8] The findings look very similar. Socially conservatives are not only more supportive of old age pensions than socially liberals, they also attribute more importance to the expansion of these benefits. The importance attributed to an expansion of old age pension benefits is the most pronounced social policy conflict between socially conservatives and liberals. As with unconstrained positions, socially liberals also attach considerably more importance to expanding social investment policies. Again, conflict over unemployment benefits is not characterised by a divide on the GALTAN divide. However, the finding concerning social assistance does not conform to what we found concerning positional support. Although socially liberals reported to be in favour of expanding these benefits, as shown in Figure 1, importance attributed to such an expansion is not significantly higher among socially liberals

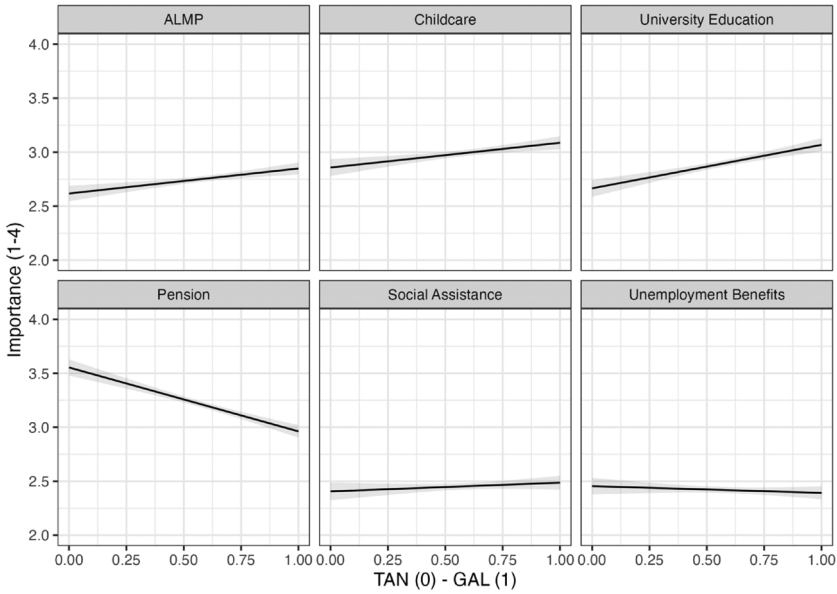

Figure 2. Relationship of GALTAN attitudes with unconstrained importance attributed to social policies.

than among conservatives. Hence, the solidarity expressed by socially liberals seems to be rather shaky. Our analyses by age further investigate this result.

Although our primary focus is on how welfare preferences vary along the GALTAN dimension, and we do find substantial differences in this regard, we do not argue that the economic dimension is irrelevant in shaping welfare preferences. Indeed, Tables A1 and A2 in the Online Appendix reveal that preferences concerning social assistance and unemployment are predominantly influenced by the economic dimension, while preferences regarding ALMP, childcare, and tertiary education are structured almost equally by both dimensions. Notably, socially liberals display a significant negative correlation with pension support, whereas economic leftism exhibits a significant positive association.

As a third way of measuring the welfare preferences of people situated along the GALTAN dimension, we use the conjoint experiment. While we do not per se have different theoretical expectations, this way of measuring differs from the two measures used above in that it introduces trade-offs between policy fields. While respondents could theoretically demand welfare expansion in all policy fields and attribute a high importance to all social policies, the conjoint design forces them to decide where they prioritise expansion.

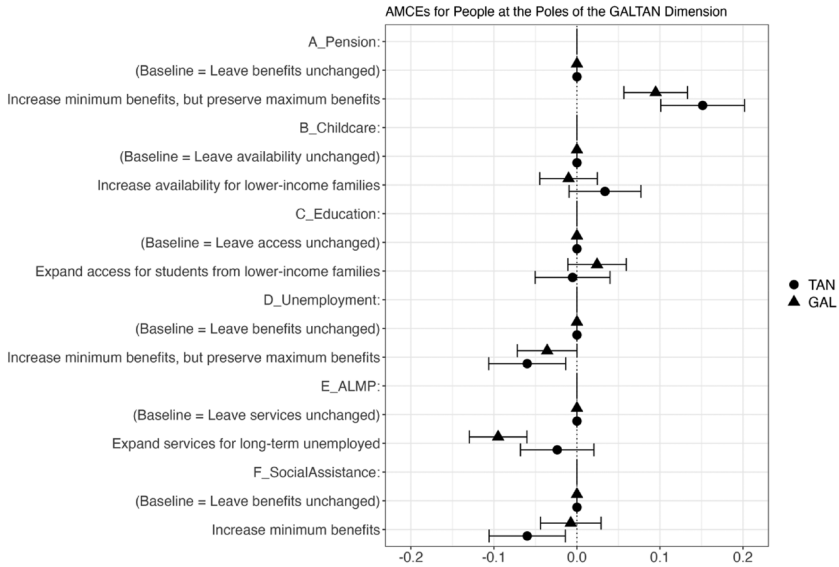

Figure 3. AMCEs From conjoint experiment for people at the poles of the GALTAN dimension.

Figure 3 presents the average marginal component effects (AMCEs) for the expansive reform propositions relative to the status quo, that is leaving benefits or services unchanged, for each of the six social policies and both for people with strongly GAL and strongly TAN attitudes. Positive AMCEs indicate that the expansion of the respective social policy being part of a welfare reform package contributes positively to the likelihood of a welfare reform package being preferred, hence the expansion of these policies is prioritised. Negative AMCEs indicate that the expansion of the respective social policy makes support for a welfare reform containing that expansion less likely. It is however important to note that negative AMCEs do not necessarily mean that an expansion in that social policy is generally disliked. Since we introduce trade-offs between policies by design, it could also just mean that welfare expansion in this area of the welfare state is liked less than expansion for other social policies.

If we first look at the findings from the conjoint in Figure 3 without paying attention to differences between socially liberals and conservatives, we observe that pension expansion is extremely popular and gets clearly prioritised over expansions in other welfare areas. This finding comes to no surprise to anyone familiar with social policy preference analysis, which has shown over and over that old age pensions are a key concern to all citizens (e.g. Busemeyer and Garritzmann 2017). Again, as one would expect, at the other end of the popularity scale are active and passive labour market measures, as well as social assistance, all of them

affecting smaller, concentrated risk groups, with childcare and education in between (Jensen 2012).

Our interest is not primarily in these baseline levels, but in the comparison of the attitudinal groups. The group differences are generally relatively small. This is likely the case, because all social policy expansion reform elements are formulated progressively, which makes this conjoint a conservative test for subgroup differences. Zooming in on specific policies, however, several differences appear. First, the prioritisation of old age pensions is even greater among socially conservatives than among socially liberals. Second, the expansion of social assistance benefits contributes negatively to the likelihood of welfare reform packages being chosen among socially conservatives while the AMCE among socially liberals is nearly zero. Beyond these consistent and expected patterns, we observe a somewhat surprising difference between socially liberals and conservatives concerning active labour market policies. Despite generally favouring all types of social investment policies, socially liberals appear more inclined than socially conservatives to prioritise the expansion of active labour market policies for the long-term unemployed. This finding contradicts our expectation regarding social investment policies and the earlier results from the position and importance measures. However, this discrepancy may arise from the conceptually different approach to measure social policy support in the conjoint experiment. Unlike other measures, the conjoint design prevents respondents from uniformly endorsing expansions across all social policy fields and specifically directs attention to the long-term unemployed—a group often perceived as relatively less deserving. These measurement differences may plausibly lead to socially liberals and conservatives behaving differently in the position/importance and conjoint measurements. Nevertheless, in accordance with the support and importance measures, we observe that expanding access for students from lower-income backgrounds to university is more important to socially liberals than conservatives – although the difference is not significant. Lastly, we find no significant difference between people situated at the GAL or TAN poles of the second dimension regarding the prioritisation of unemployment benefits. This finding is again in line with the results of the position and importance items above.

Summarising the findings from the study of positions, importance and priorities (conjoint), we detect that people at the two poles of the newly dominant, GALTAN attitudinal dimension clearly differ with regard to their welfare preferences. We find in accordance with H1 robust support for the fact that old age pensions – as the prototypical case of a contribution-based consumption policy – are supported and prioritised more strongly by socially conservatives rather than liberals. We find as expected in H2 socially liberals to support social investment policies more strongly. When

it comes to the prioritisation of these policies, however, this pattern does not uphold for childcare services and active labour market policies, which might be due to the specific conjoint design. We find evidence in both positions and priorities for socially liberals also being more supportive of social assistance benefits. Finally, support for unemployment benefits is largely unrelated to GALTAN attitudes. This may be because it is a contributory consumption policy, but at the same time it overproportionally benefits those with lower incomes and those who do not conform to the TAN ideal of being a 'maker' (Rathgeb 2021) or a 'producer' (Ivaldi and Mazzoleni 2019).

How does the relationship of GALTAN attitudes and welfare preferences differ by age?

After we have established what socially conservatives and liberals overall want from the welfare state, we investigate in the following analyses how these findings vary across age groups. Therefore, we regressed unconstrained importance attributed to social policies on the interaction of GALTAN attitudes and age. The full regression results can be found in the Table A3 in the Online Appendix. Figure 4 plots predicted importance dependent on GALTAN attitudes for respondents of age 30 (dark grey) and respondents of age 70 (light grey). Note that the findings are somewhat weaker (which is perfectly in line with theory) though not substantively different for respondents aged 40 and 60 (Figure A1 in the Online Appendix).

The divide between people with GAL and TAN attitudes regarding social investment and social consumption is consistent across age groups, supporting H3a. For both the young and the old we find significant relationships of GALTAN attitudes with importance attributed to ALMP, childcare, university education, and pensions. However, there are noteworthy nuances in these results between younger and older voters, particularly concerning university education, pensions and social assistance benefits.

With regard to university education and pensions, the GALTAN divide is stronger for those groups that are more directly affected by a social policy: regarding university education, the divide is somewhat more driven by the young. In contrast, the divide on pensions is much more driven by the old. Despite pensions being the social policy which most people find most important, older socially liberals – who might benefit from pensions themselves – attribute lower importance to pensions than for example to childcare or university education. Instead, older socially liberals attribute considerably more importance to solidaristic, lower-income oriented policies than older conservatives, in particular social assistance. In contrast, and importantly, young socially liberals do not attribute more

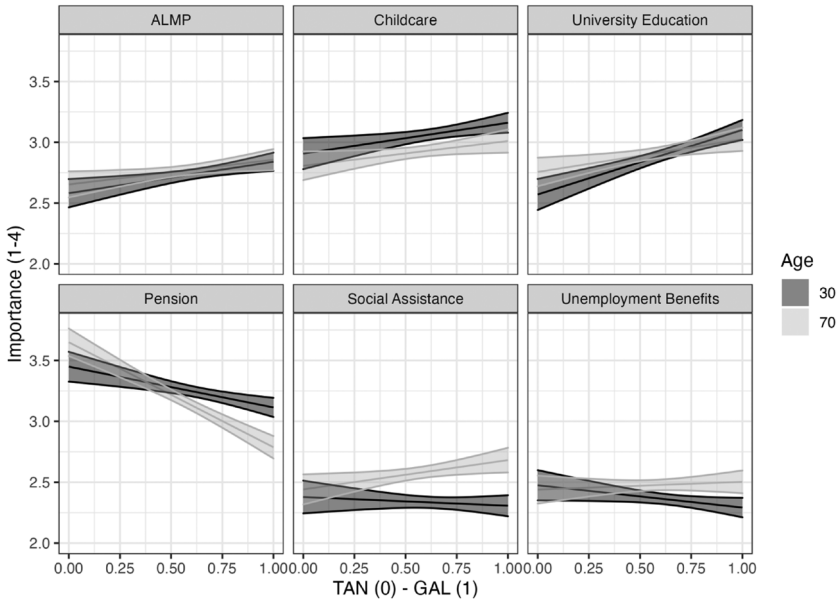

Figure 4. Relationship of GALTAN attitudes with unconstrained importance attributed to social policies by age.

importance to social assistance or unemployment benefits than young conservatives. When it comes to social assistance, it is elderly people at the GAL pole who place clearly more importance on supporting those most in need than young people at the GAL pole or people at the TAN pole (irrespective of their age).

This difference is not at all due to self-interest reasons of elderly GAL voters who might be vulnerable to requiring social assistance themselves, as we find that even support for social assistance among elderly GAL voters with an above-median income (who have no self-interest in social assistance at all) clearly and significantly exceeds support among young GAL voters. The difference in support for social assistance between elderly GAL and TAN voters is primarily driven by West German residents. When the analysis in Figure 4 is differentiated by region (Figure A2c in the Online Appendix), it becomes clear that elderly East Germans are generally more supportive of social assistance than West Germans. This corresponds to Svallfors' (2010) findings, who suggests that East Germans' higher support for policies that insure against labour market risks is likely rooted in their political socialisation under GDR institutions that guaranteed the right to work. This trend persists among older cohorts even decades after reunification. However, in East Germany we do not observe any relationship between social assistance support and GALTAN attitudes. This provides tentative evidence supporting our argument, as outlined in

the theory sections, that the GALTAN divide among the elderly may be attributed to socialisation effects related to the solidaristic and anti-capitalistic values central to the mobilisation of new social movements in West Germany, but much less in the GDR.

Hence, in line with H3b, we find that while for younger people, GAL attitudes are associated with placing a lot of importance on social investment policies, in particular university education and childcare, for older people, GAL attitudes go hand in hand with being more solidaristic with particularly vulnerable groups.

The conjoint experiment allows to draw similar conclusions. Figure 5 shows the AMCEs for respondents aged 70 (top panel) and aged 30 (bottom panel) at the GAL and the TAN pole. Economic attitudes are once again controlled for. It is important to note that confidence intervals are relatively wide since the estimates are shown for a specific age and specific GALTAN attitudes. Most importantly regarding our hypotheses, we find that the slight divide between socially liberals and conservatives concerning the prioritisation of social assistance benefits is exclusively due to the elderly. For elderly socially liberals, increasing social assistance benefits is the only expansive reform measure besides pensions that contributes positively to reform packages being chosen (although not significantly) and accordingly is their second most prioritised policy out of the six we study here. In contrast, young socially liberals prioritise social assistance benefits about as little as their young conservative counterparts. A sizeable and significant conflict over the prioritisation of social assistance benefits emerges only among the elderly, consistent with H3b.

Contrary to our theoretical expectations (see H3a), we detect age to also matter for the GALTAN divide in welfare preferences concerning the prioritisation of social investment. We see in the conjoint that young socially liberals strongly prioritise expanding access to university education for whom this reform measure is about as appealing as the ever-popular expansion of minimum pensions. Among the elderly though, people with GAL attitudes do not prioritise university education more than people with TAN attitudes. More generally, GALTAN attitudes structure the prioritisation of social investment policies among the elderly in no case, as we would expect it. Generally, these findings are substantively robust when predicting AMCEs for age 40 and 60 instead of 30 and 70 (Figure A3 in the Online Appendix) and to using the more common approach of calculating AMCEs by subgroups of old and young socially liberals and conservatives (Figure A4 in the Online Appendix).

Summarising differences by age, we thus find using both a measure of self-reported importance as well as conjoint experiments that the most important divides between socially liberals' and conservatives' welfare preferences are more strongly driven by either older or younger

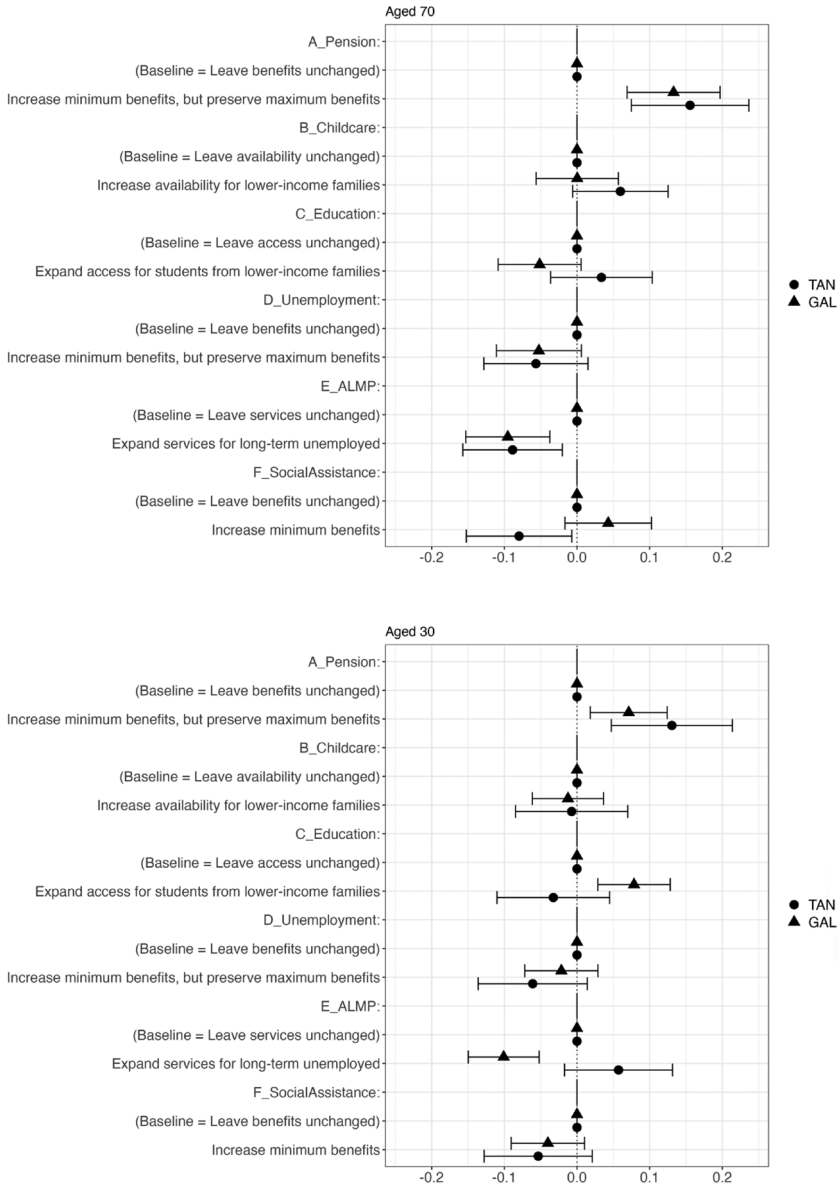

Figure 5. AMCEs from conjoint experiment for people aged 70 (top panel) and people aged 30 (bottom panel), shown for the people at the poles of the GALTAN dimension.

generations. While for younger voters the attitude on the GALTAN dimension matters primarily for their prioritisation of university education (prioritised by young socially liberals), these attitudes among older voters are related to the prioritisation of social assistance benefits (quite

strongly prioritised by elderly socially liberals). These findings suggest that the meaning of being situated at the GAL pole for welfare preferences is different for older than younger cohorts. Older socially liberals are strongly solidaristic with the neediest welfare recipients, namely the beneficiaries of social assistance benefits. Less evidence for such solidaristic preferences can be found among younger socially liberals. These differ from conservatives primarily in their higher prioritisation of social investment policies, especially university education.

Conclusion

Our results show that the GALTAN divide also structures welfare politics in traditional social policy fields such as pensions and social assistance. Socially liberals and conservatives have different conceptions of the welfare state and differ in their support for specific social policies. While conservatives favour contribution-based consumption policies such as pensions, socially liberals are generally more supportive of social investment policies and solidaristic policies directed at the most vulnerable groups. Moreover, our findings indicate that older and younger socially liberals have different social policy preferences, consistent with our argument that ongoing political struggles constantly redefine the meaning of the second dimension/GALTAN divide. Young socially liberals show above-average support for social investment policies, in particular for university education. In contrast, older socially liberals are the group most supportive of expanding solidaristic, lower-income oriented social policies.

These findings have important implications for the mass politics of the welfare state in the twenty first century. Suppose the second dimension of political conflict indeed becomes the dominant axis of political competition, pitting radical right against green parties. In that case, conflicts about welfare generosity, in general, will likely be replaced by conflicts about the generosity and size of specific welfare programs. If the age differences we find are due to the political socialisation of generations rather than life-cycle effects, our findings paint a somewhat gloomy picture for the future of solidaristic policies. A new generation of socially liberals seems to prioritise social investment exclusively, rather than solidaristic policies more generally. These findings might also help explain the difference in party choice between older and younger voters on the left and, potentially, parties' social policy positions. The voting behaviour literature has shown that green parties are exceptionally successful among younger socially liberals and often even the dominating vote choice among them (Mitteregger 2024). In contrast, older socially liberals split more evenly between the social democratic, radical left and green parties.

Regarding the limitations of this study, it is key to note that our design does not allow to disentangle age, period, and cohort effects. Thus, future research could embark on the potentially exciting avenue to disentangle how social policy preferences relate to different waves of political socialisation. Moreover, an open empirical question pertains to the extent to which our findings can be generalised beyond the German context. We anticipate that the overall way the GALTAN dimension structures welfare preferences would exhibit similarities across Western European countries. Specifically, we see no compelling reasons to believe that the value-based or compositional mechanism linking GAL attitudes to support for social investment would differ substantially between countries. Additionally, the drivers of generational variation among socially liberals, namely the politicisation of issues associated with the GALTAN divide initially by New Left and subsequently by New Right actors, are shared experiences in most Western European countries. However, what varies between countries are the intensity and timing of these mobilizations by the New Left and the New Right. Consequentially, country disparities may arise in terms of the extent to which differences between young and elderly socially liberals are pronounced, as well as which generations exhibit the strongest divergence.

Notes

1. This dimension is often called 'cultural dimension' (e.g. Oesch and Rennwald 2018) differentiating socially liberal/libertarian from socially conservative preferences (Achterberg and Houtman 2009; Kitschelt 1994), 'GALTAN-dimension' (Hooghe *et al.* 2002) differentiating Green/Alternative/Libertarian from Traditionalist/Authoritarian/Nationalist preferences or 'Universalism-Particularism dimension' (Beramendi et al. 2015). We use these labels interchangeably.
2. An exception is Chueri et al. (2024), who show that populist radical right voters on average show only modest support for generous unemployment benefits, contradicting the assumption that these voters want an overall generous, strong welfare state.
3. This may change again with the grassroots character of the climate strike movement that started in 2018, which also mobilises in a very elite-critical way, criticizing established parties in general, including left-wing and green parties.
4. ERC-project 'WELFAREPRIORITIES', PI Prof. Silja Häusermann, University of Zurich, Grant n° 716075. The data is openly available on SwissUBase at www.swissubase.ch Ref. 20076.
5. The answer scale to items 2–5 have been reversed. The findings are insensitive to only using one item about immigration.
6. The answer scale to this item has been reversed.
7. Since all of our attributes have merely two levels, the common criticism of AMCEs (Leeper *et al.* 2020) to be sensitive to the choice of reference category is negligible in our case. For ease of illustration, we therefore prefer AMCEs over marginal means.
8. See the full regression results in Table A2 in the Online Appendix.

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