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Chapter 16 The legitimacy of the welfare state in the age of migration

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16.1 Introduction

Modern welfare states institutionalised social solidarity with those affected by hardship in the context of disruptions produced by early capitalism and the formation of modern nation states (Flora and Alber 1981). At the time of nation state formation social boundaries were redrawn and the concept of social solidarity rested on the idea that national communities were ethnically and culturally homogeneous. Recent decades have seen the world experience growing international migration that has notably included the internationalisation of labour markets. These developments have subsequently increased both the political salience of migration and the scholarly interest in the immigration-welfare nexus.

A large body of literature suggests that there is a fundamental tension between migration and the institution of the welfare state (Alesina and Glaeser 2004; Freeman 1986). For example, the economist Milton Friedman once famously stated that "you cannot simultaneously have free *immigration* and a *welfare state*".[1] This raises the question of the existence of a 'progressive dilemma' (Goodhart 2004), whereby one cannot reconcile open borders with social solidarity.

To shed light on this debate, we propose that the challenge immigration poses to the welfare state should be understood as a two-fold relationship between welfare state institutions and international migration (cf. Jakubiak and Kaczmarczyk 2018). Applying the conceptualization of democratic legitimacy as based on input and output legitimacy (Scharpf 1999), we contend that the legitimacy of the welfare state rests on sufficient political consent and social solidarity (input) as well as on the fiscal capacity necessary to actually deliver social protection (output). In order to preserve the stability of existing welfare state institutions in a context of significant

[1] Milton Friedman in an interview at the Institute for Liberty and Policy Analysis (ISIL) 18th Annual World Libertarian Conference, 20 August 1999.

international migration, states face the challenge of allowing economically beneficial migration without undermining public support for welfare programs.

The remainder of this chapter discusses the empirical evidence on the tension between welfare state institutions and international migration and also provides an overview of potential mitigation strategies.

16.2 Taking stock of migration's effect on welfare state legitimacy

16.2.1 The "output" side: Immigrants and the fiscal sustainability of welfare states

Migration affects the economic foundation of welfare states by altering the size and composition of a country's population. Specifically, the effect of migration on the way welfare states function can be assessed from a contributing and a receiving side. On the one hand, migration can help strengthen the economic foundation of welfare states by providing additional labour force and complementary human capital as well as by counteracting demographic imbalances such as aging and population decline. As the societies of most established welfare states have grown older and experience low birth rates, immigration has become an important source of population growth (Malmberg 2006, 133; Parsons and Smeeding 2009, 2–3). Indeed, demographic aging is a good predictor of the extent to which OECD countries have liberalised labour immigration over the past several decades (Lutz 2020). This liberalisation process has taken place across all types of welfare states. Continuous immigration allowed receiving countries to ease the pressure on their pension systems (Han 2013), to address domestic labour needs, to fill skill shortages, to attract additional human capital, and to increase their economies' competitiveness and innovation capability (Hollifield 2006). As immigrants tend to be young adults well past the fiscally costly phase of their childhoods when they arrive in the destination countries, they indeed strengthen the contributory side of welfare states by expanding the absolute and relative size of the working-age population (Coleman 2008). This economic imperative has been the driving force behind the immigration liberalisations that took place over the past few decades. Openness to

immigration continues to be crucial for countries' economic competitiveness and the strengthening of the demographic foundation of their welfare states.

The extent to which immigrants are net-contributors strongly depends on their successful integration into the labour markets of receiving countries. In many contexts, immigrants are more likely to be unemployed, and this is especially the case for low-skilled immigrants from non-Western countries (e.g., Fleischmann and Dronkers 2010; Kogan 2006; van Tubergen, Maas, and Flap 2004). Nevertheless, these and other studies also show that this is not a general rule - in some countries immigrants are in fact *better* integrated into labour markets than natives. Moreover, deficits in immigrants' labour market integration have also been partially linked to host country institutions, such as labour market policies (Cohen and Kogan 2007; Kogan 2006), and, notably, to discrimination by employers (Auer et al. 2019; Zschirnt and Ruedin 2016; but see also Koopmans 2016). Immigrants' weak economic integration is thus far from inevitable and to a considerable degree not attributable to immigrants themselves.

A related concern focuses on the adverse selection of immigrants through generous welfare programs (Borjas 1999). According to this idea of a 'welfare magnet', the prospects of welfare benefits attract (low-skilled) immigrants and thereby increase the fiscal burden on receiving countries. Economists have assessed the causal effect of welfare state generosity on immigration levels and found mixed results (Agersnap, Jensen, and Kleven 2020; Giulietti et al. 2013). Overall, existing scholarship suggests that the main drivers of migration are economic opportunities and family networks and not the prospect of welfare benefits (De Giorgi and Pellizzari 2009; Geis, Uebelmesser, and Werding 2013). While migration tends to fluctuate with the business cycle, its fiscal impact also depends on the degree to which immigrants serve as a buffer whereby unemployment is exported in economically bad times (Afonso 2005). Recent evidence on the fiscal impact of immigration found that immigrants are to a large extent net contributors – and in several countries including Germany, Austria, Ireland, and the United Kingdom at higher rates than natives (Boeri 2010). Analysing immigrants' contributions to the welfare state in the United Kingdom, Dustmann and Frattini (2014) find that European immigrants produce a net positive and non-European immigrants produce a net negative. Overall, studies on immigrants' fiscal impact are inconclusive, suggesting that the latter tends to be small and highly depends on both the country context and immigrants' characteristics, such as their skill-level (Boeri, Hanson, and McCormick 2002; Hanson 2009; Huang, Kaushal, and Wang 2020; OECD 2013).

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In light of this, does immigration hence strengthen or undermine the economic foundation of welfare states? The existing empirical research suggests that immigrants often make important contributions to the welfare state but may under certain circumstances also have a higher welfare dependency. Migration sustains economic competitiveness and strengthens the demographic foundation of welfare states with overall limited fiscal risks for receiving countries.

16.2.2 The "input" side: Immigration and political support for the welfare state

Immigration may also affect the socio-political foundations of welfare states. Of primary concern here is the increased cultural and ethnic diversity that results from immigration, which may be a threat to social solidarity – a view that is strongly influenced by the observation that ethnic and especially racial diversity may explain why both welfare state development and public support for redistribution are lagging in the United States compared to the historically more ethnically homogeneous countries in Europe (Alesina and Glaeser 2004; Gilens 1999; Luttmer 2001). In contrast, the alternative 'compensation' hypothesis contends that immigration may in fact *increase* support for social protection. This hypothesis derives from the idea that economic globalisation generates increased competition and insecurities that in turn create a demand for more social protection (Rodrik 1998). As far as immigration is concerned, those who fear that they could be replaced by immigrants willing to work for lower wages are expected to become more supportive of social protection and redistribution (Burgoon, Koster, and van Egmond 2012).

The empirical evidence of the effect of immigration on public support for the welfare state is mixed. On the one hand, many studies focusing on industrialised democracies have found that immigrant inflows are indeed associated with subsequent reductions in popular support for fiscal redistribution and welfare spending (Dahlberg, Edmark, and Berg 2017; Eger 2010; Stichnoth 2012). Nevertheless, several others have demonstrated that perceptions of immigrants as an economic threat and of increased competition for jobs are actually associated with higher support for redistribution (Ervasti and Hjerm 2012; Finseraas 2008) and that immigration is in some cases linked to increased public support for the welfare state (Brady and Finnigan 2014; Burgoon, Koster, and van Egmond 2012; Gaston and Rajaguru 2013; Steele

2016). Overall, there is no strong evidence that immigration and ethnic diversity necessarily undermines welfare support, and empirical studies suggest that their effects vary across different contexts (e.g. Mau and Burkhardt 2009).

Despite the mixed evidence on the link between immigration and public support for the welfare state as a whole, the public has rather clear preferences on the narrower question of what social rights immigrants should have. Research on welfare deservingness perceptions (van Oorschot 2000) has repeatedly shown that there is a strong and persistent "welfare deservingness gap" between immigrants and members of the native population (Ford 2016; Reeskens and van der Meer 2019), whereby the former are seen as less deserving of social protection just by virtue of their immigration status, even if they contribute as much as their native counterparts. The literature refers to this phenomenon also as "welfare chauvinism" (Andersen and Bjørklund 1990, 212; Careja and Harris 2022).

This deservingness gap exists across a range of welfare benefits and services, from cash benefits like unemployment insurance (Buss 2019) all the way to critical medical care, including in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Larsen and Schaeffer 2020; see also Eick and Larsen 2021). Even though one could expect that there might be greater support for providing social protection to higher-skilled immigrants than to lower-skilled ones, this expectation does not seem to be borne out by the evidence (Kootstra 2016, 331). The reluctance to give immigrants access to social protection is also quite robust across countries and welfare regimes. Recent research has produced considerable experimental evidence of the "deservingness gap" from across the different welfare regimes (e.g., Ford 2016; M. H. Larsen and Schaeffer 2020; O'Dell et al. 2019; Reeskens and van der Meer 2019), although some earlier studies using systematic multi-level comparisons found that welfare chauvinism is less pronounced in social democratic welfare states than in liberal and conservative ones (van der Waal, De Koster, and van Oorschot 2013). It should of course also be pointed out that there is also variation at the individual level, specifically that the desire to restrict immigrants' access to social protection is more pronounced among those who perceive immigrants as a threat to their country's economy and culture (Kros and Coenders 2019; see also Scheepers, Gijsberts, and Coenders 2002). In addition, studies have identified authoritarian personality traits, i.e., a desire for order, conformity, and obedience to established social norms (Feldman 2003), as a salient predictor of the preference to limit migrants' social rights (Crepaz 2020).

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Overall, we find that immigration does not systematically undermine public support for the welfare state as a whole but rather affects the kind of welfare state that citizens want. What the public (or at least a sizable part of it) seems to want is not so much a smaller welfare state, but a smaller welfare state *for immigrants* (see also Banting 2016; Goldschmidt 2015). This preference is also reflected in concrete policy changes. While the effect of immigration on the welfare state as a whole remains ambiguous - with some studies finding negative effects (Kalm and Lindvall 2019; Soroka et al. 2016; Tabellini 2020) and others finding no or even positive effects on welfare state generosity and spending (Brady, Beckfield, and Seeleib-Kaiser 2005; Fenwick 2019; Taylor-Gooby 2005) - the patterns become clear once we examine what reforms are introduced. For instance, evidence from several European countries suggests that welfare state cutbacks are often driven by a desire to specifically exclude immigrants (Careja et al. 2016; Slaven, Casella Colombeau, and Badenhoop 2021). Denmark has introduced measures with the explicit and declared intent to limit immigrants' social rights. A prime example is a 2002 reform that lowered welfare benefits for non-EU/EFTA immigrants (Agersnap, Jensen, and Kleven 2020). In other cases, Danish reforms have targeted immigrants more indirectly, for example, by mandating stricter checks on benefit claimants living outside of the country in 2010 (Careja et al. 2016). Other countries have embarked on similar efforts: for instance, in 2016, Germany curtailed EU migrants' access to social assistance in order to deter "benefit tourism".[2] What these reforms indicate is, again, that although the welfare state generally remains resilient in the face of immigration - partly because immigrants themselves ensure its fiscal sustainability but also because the majority population remains supportive of social protection, at least for itself - immigrants' rights to social protection and the public's support for these rights are considerably more vulnerable. Still, in cases where immigrants are only indirectly the target of cutbacks, the social rights of other vulnerable groups are also at risk.

16.3 Strategies to reduce the tension between immigration and the welfare state

[2] See the 2016 reform (BGBl. I 2016, No. 65, p. 3155) and the German government's statement (https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/sozialleistungen-fuer-eu-auslaender-346428, last accessed on 13. August, 2021).

Contemporary welfare states seem to be stuck between a rock and a hard place: They often need immigration to remain fiscally sustainable, particularly as far as public pensions are concerned, but at the same time, the increased ethnic and cultural diversity ensuing from immigration can create political pressure for restrictions and cutbacks targeted directly or indirectly at immigrants. This poses a potential threat to the legitimacy of inclusive and universal welfare states, for immigrants and vulnerable natives alike.

This, in turn, raises the question whether effective ways of addressing these challenges that allow preserving the sustainability of welfare institutions in the age of migration do exist. How can welfare states allow for economically beneficial migration without undermining their public support? Existing research that has identified several potential moderators of immigration's effect on welfare state support and on welfare policies can provide relevant insights.

The first potential remedy for welfare chauvinism has to do with tightening eligibility requirements in order to signal that benefits are only given to those who have previously contributed to welfare systems. For example, Reeskens and van Oorschot (2012) show that the idea of giving immigrants access to welfare benefits enjoys relatively widespread popular acceptance when the potential recipients have contributed to their host societies by working and paying taxes for some time. The authors thus recommend that governments "reconsider universal and selective social policies and bring in more elements of social insurance, with its built-in logic of equivalence between contribution and benefit" (Reeskens and van Oorschot 2012, 132–33). Albeit seemingly sound, this solution would arguably face some problems in practice. Specifically, the universal nature of many social protection programs enjoys considerable public support - such as the universal health care programs available in many countries - and whether the public would accept or even demand the introduction of stronger contribution requirements *for all* in response to immigration remains unclear. For example, Neundorf and Cavaille (2016), in their analysis of how support for universal access to health care in the UK is affected by immigration, found that immigrant inflows reduce support only marginally, and that this effect is confined to those on the political right.

A second, more radical alternative would be to simply endorse "welfare chauvinism" and make sure that immigrants receive fewer welfare benefits than natives. The underlying idea consists in aligning the scope of the welfare state with the accepted boundaries of social

solidarity (Banting 2010, 798). Simply put, excluding immigrants is expected to dissolve natives' concerns that undeserving immigrants receive benefits and create a fiscal burden on receiving countries. There are, however, limits to the feasibility of this approach in many contexts, in particular due to legal prohibitions of discrimination against at least some groups of immigrants. Within the European Union, for instance, common market rules restrict member countries' ability to exclude EU migrants from social protection as long as the latter do not impose "unreasonable burdens" on their host countries (Eigmüller 2013). Similarly, the international human rights regime imposes constraints when it comes to the treatment of humanitarian migrants (Hollifield 2006). Added to this (and more important) are also some contradicting empirical findings, including the fact that attempts at 'de-racializing' US welfare politics by strengthening work requirements did not appear to enjoy much success (Soss and Schram 2007) and the aforementioned results from deservingness research, which show that even when immigrants do contribute, they continue not being seen as equally deserving. Finally, citizens' perceptions of immigrants' fiscal impact mostly do not correspond to objective realities (Blinder and Markaki 2019) and fiscal self-interests have not been found to be a reliable predictor of opposition to immigration (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014). Therefore, shielding welfare state institutions from immigrants' (potential or imagined) fiscal risks is unlikely to shift the public's opinion about their deservingness.

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A third approach consists in going in the opposite direction and in actually increasing the universality and generosity of welfare states. Here, the idea is that a generous and inclusive welfare state would allow for the expansion of the boundaries of social solidarity and would attenuate redistribution conflicts (Boräng 2015). This rationale is derived from the findings in several studies that welfare chauvinism is least pronounced in the universal regimes of Northern Europe - a pattern that stems from the fact that these regimes reduce the income differences between natives and immigrants and the extent to which these two groups have to compete for access to social protection (Crepaz and Damron 2009). However, the viability of this solution is also dubious. For one, we can question whether voters in other welfare regimes, such as the United States, would accept a social-democratic transformation of their welfare states (Brooks and Manza 2006). Second, even though welfare chauvinist attitudes might be less pronounced in the Nordic countries, they still clearly do exist and matter there (Eger 2010; Larsen 2011). After all, the very term "welfare chauvinism" originates from a study on party strategies in the Nordic countries (Andersen and Bjørklund 1990). Therefore, the

strategy of attenuating concerns about immigration by making welfare institutions more generous and universal also faces severe limitations in practice.

The final strategy does not seek to adapt welfare states to the presence of prejudice, but rather to address and reduce prejudice and bias in the first place. Experimental research from psychology and related fields shows that the relevance of even very powerful and persistent social categories like race and the biases that result from them can indeed be reduced if not eliminated.

This can in turn be achieved in two ways (Paluck and Green 2009, 345–47): The first approach comes down to encouraging contact between different groups**.** The central idea here is that contact between members of different social groups - natives and immigrants - reduces prejudice and discrimination by a) providing new knowledge about the respective outgroup; b) changing behaviour toward the other group; c) generating emotional ties, notably friendships; and d) promoting the re-evaluation of one's own group and its norms and values - otherwise known as a 'deprovincialization' of attitudes (Pettigrew 1998).

The second way to reduce prejudice involves breaking or recasting social categories, which can have a strong effect both on the saliency of previously important groups and on discriminatory behaviour (see e.g., Gaertner et al. 1989; see also Hewstone, Rubin, and Willis 2002, 589–93). For example, Kurzban et al. (2001) show that even the saliency of race as a feature distinguishing social groups can be eliminated with simple visual cues (coloured shirts) and behaviour indicating allegiance to shared goals. These studies strongly suggest that anti-immigrant attitudes and xenophobia are far from hard-wired into the human brain and that inclusive integration policies can indeed reduce the emphasis people place on group differences and increase communities' inclusiveness. Moreover, recent data indicates that despite the growing proportion of immigrants in their countries and the 2015 refugee crisis, the citizens of European democracies have adopted more positive views on immigration over time (Lutz and Karstens 2021).

Naturally, deploying these strategies outside of a laboratory setting is a daunting task, to say the least, and it is also not always clear that successful experimental manipulations do actually travel to the real world (Paluck and Green 2009). Still, there is evidence that multicultural integration policies can encourage meaningful and enduring contact between members of

different groups and, thus, reduce tensions (Green et al. 2020). For example, Canada has long implemented policies in place that explicitly recognise and encourage cultural diversity, prohibit discrimination, and support the integration of immigrants through comparatively liberal family reunification policies or education policies that encourage linguistic diversity, among others. At the same time, immigrants in Canada also enjoy relatively unrestricted access to social protection - all without sparking a 'welfare chauvinist' backlash. While the Canadian example shows the potential of large-scale immigration, multiculturalism and redistribution forming a stable equilibrium, the extent to which this model can be applied in other countries remains an open question (Banting 2010).

Overall, we suggest that there could be a way to overcome or at least attenuate welfare chauvinism and reconcile the apparent contradiction between the fiscal need for immigration and the political reality of prejudice and discrimination. This is best achieved through inclusive integration policies aimed at fostering mutual recognition and contact between natives and immigrant groups.

16.4. Conclusion

Immigration is often seen as a threat to the legitimacy of welfare states. This contribution has illustrated that the conflict between openness to migration and a generous welfare state is not a necessary one. Yes, immigration can *conceivably* undermine the legitimacy of welfare states if citizens view immigrants' access to social protection as unjustified. But immigrants can also (and in many cases do) contribute to the functioning and fiscal sustainability of welfare states and thus ensure that welfare states continue to deliver what citizens have come to expect of them. It is also not evident that opposition to immigrants' inclusion into welfare states cannot be overcome. Given the often mixed evidence and many open questions, more research is necessary to shed light on the relationship between migration and welfare states.

The empirical evidence suggests that welfare states are not doomed in the age of migration. What is clear is that welfare states face risks both when there are too few immigrants and when there are too many of them (cf. Lutz 2020). Policy-makers should be aware of the significant tensions that do exist and should carefully design policies that not only ensure the

fiscal sustainability of welfare institutions but also preserve public support for social solidarity in order to maintain the legitimacy of contemporary welfare states.

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