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Public perceptions of the economic, moral, social and migration consequences of the welfare state: an empirical analysis of welfare state legitimacy

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Summary This article contributes to the scant knowledge about what people believe to be the economic, moral, social and migration consequences of the welfare state. Data from a 2006 Dutch survey show, first, that in the eyes of most Dutch people the positive social consequences of the welfare state outweigh the negative economic and moral consequences. Second, the personal interests that people may have in the provisions made by the welfare state, for instance arising from the level of their income, play a minor role in understanding differences in perceptions. Instead, a set of ideational determinants proved to be more important. Consequence perceptions are consistently influenced by people's political stance, perceptions of the deservingness of welfare target groups and their attitudes towards the role of government.

Key words legitimacy, outcomes, perceptions, public opinion, welfare state

Introduction

What people believe to be the social and economic consequences of the welfare state is an subject almost neglected in studies on welfare state legitimacy. This is quite remarkable given that, as noted, for example, by Gough (2001), the welfare state is often criticized substantially for its (alleged) negative consequences. From an economic perspective the welfare state is accused of, among other things, being a fiscal burden, increasing labour costs, making labour markets too rigid and inflexible and sapping people's will to work (Lindbeck, 1995). In the 1990s, for instance, the concept of 'Eurosclerosis' was used to encompass all the (alleged) economic evils of the European Social Model (too costly, too rigid, creating dependency), explaining in one stroke the higher structural European unemployment rates of that period when compared to the USA (Henderson,

1993). From a moral and social perspective neo-liberals and conservatives expressed concerns about people losing their sense of self-responsibility when being pampered by the welfare state and about the development of a culture of dependency (Murray, 1984). At the same time, Christian-democrats and communitarians often argue that social expenditures and comprehensive social programmes 'crowd out' informal caring relations and social networks, as well as familial and communal systems of self-help and reciprocity, thereby fostering social isolation, anomie and self-centredness (Etzioni, 1995). More recently, the welfare magnetism effect of the welfare state has been added to the list of its alleged negative consequences. The argument being that European welfare states, and those with more generous provisions, could attract low-skilled migrants from poor countries aiming to improve their socio-economic situation, and thus create problems

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concerning the economic sustainability and cultural legitimacy of national welfare states (Bommes and Geddes, 2000).

Of course, whether and to what degree the negative consequences actually occur in reality is an important question for empirical research. However, the point of this article is not to consider whether the alleged consequences are real, but rather to consider whether a welfare state's social legitimacy could be in serious jeopardy if large segments of a population *perceived* them to be real. Currently there is hardly any published research on perceptions of welfare state consequences.

This article aims to contribute to such knowledge by exploring and discussing detailed empirical data from a 2006 Dutch survey in which participants were asked about their perceptions of the possible positive and negative consequences of the Dutch welfare state. The questions analysed are:

- (1) How do Dutch people perceive positive and negative consequences of the welfare state?
- (2) Do people perceive positive as well negative consequences at the same time? If so, is the overall balance positive or negative, and what is the degree of possible ambivalence?
- (3) How can individual differences in perceptions of consequences be explained?

In the following we will briefly review the empirical literature on welfare state legitimacy as measured by public opinion surveys and show that the perceived consequences are an almost neglected aspect in such literature. We then proceed to discuss the hypotheses about determining factors, followed by a discussion of methods and a presentation of findings. The article rounds off with a brief summary and discussion of the results.

Social legitimacy of the welfare state

All but a few public opinion studies that explicitly aim to measure and analyse welfare state legitimacy take as main indicators people's opinions on what Roller (1995) has labelled the 'range' and 'degree' of the role of government. Range regards the issue of whether government should or should not take up welfare responsibilities and in what range of policy areas.¹ Degree concerns the issue of how much

government should spend on welfare provisions.² Depending on the data availability existing studies vary in their exact focus of government responsibilities and spending issues. However, the majority of the 'range' studies use data from the International Social Survey Programme's modules on 'The Role of Government', which asks people's opinions on whether it should or should not be government's responsibility to provide jobs, health care, decent standards of living for various groups and so on. And the majority of the 'degree' studies use the modules' question on whether people would want to see more or less government spending on various policy areas, including health, education, unemployment benefits and pensions. Typically, the studies combine people's opinions regarding the separate areas for responsibilities and spending into one scale to arrive at an overall measure of legitimacy for the welfare state.

In our view, this existing practice with its focus on role-of-government indicators and sum scales for the measurement of overall legitimacy can be criticized on various grounds (see also Ullrich, 2000). One particular reason, which interests us here most, is that the role of government is an important aspect of the welfare state and one that people may have opinions about, but it focuses on only one among other aspects. Such as the ways in which benefits and services are financed, how and by whom policies are implemented, how effective the outcomes of welfare policies are and what their economic, social and moral consequences are. This multi-dimensionality, which is readily acknowledged in the literature (Sihvo and Uusitalo, 1995; Andress and Heien, 2003), implies that it is likely that the welfare state's social legitimacy cannot be captured by a single indicator that only reflects people's preferences for the role of government. However, only a few empirical studies actually measure other indications than those based on role-of-government. Some of them focus on a single alternative dimension of, for example, the practices of the welfare state with measures of people's opinions on the bureaucratic character of their welfare state, on the abuse of provisions and on tax levels (Ervasti, 1998). Other studies analyse a broader range of dimensions, some, for instance, add up scores on dimensions to one single 'welfarism' scale (Bryson, 1997; Gidengil et al., 2003), but most studies analyse dimensions separately.

The dimension of the consequences of the welfare state, on which we focus here, figures in three studies only, but in a rather minimal way. With no further analysis of determinants, Gidengil et al. (2003) show that, in 2000, 38% of Canadian women and 30% of Canadian men disagreed with the libertarian statement that 'the welfare state makes people less willing to look after themselves'. Bryson (1997) shows that, in 1996, 44% of respondents of the British Social Attitude Survey agree with this same statement, and also that 33% agree with the related statement that 'if welfare benefits weren't so generous people would learn to stand on their own feet'. Sihvo and Uusitalo (1995) offer a first explorative insight in the determinants of consequence perceptions by showing that, in 1992, older, richer, right-leaning and higher-class Finns more strongly felt that 'social security and welfare services have made people passive and reduced their initiative'.

All in all, these studies represent a meagre body of knowledge that I will try to extend here with an analysis of how Dutch people perceive a series of positive and negative consequences of the Dutch welfare state. Before explaining the data and methods I will first discuss the factors that might influence perceptions of welfare consequences.

Social variations in consequences perceptions

In my analyses of the factors that may influence people's consequence perceptions I apply an explorative strategy, since this is an almost unbroken ground. Sihvo and Uusitalo (1995) are the first, and as far as I know, the only authors who offered some insight into such factors. As mentioned earlier, in their study they found that older, richer, right-leaning and higher-class Finns more strongly felt that 'social security and welfare services have made people passive and reduced their initiative'. In this list of characteristics we recognize the two sets of factors that in many theoretical studies are discussed as being of prime importance to an understanding of the differences in pro-social behaviour, altruism and welfare support (Elster, 1990; Mansbridge, 1990). In many empirical studies on welfare opinions they have actually been shown to play a significant role (Hasenfeld and Rafferty, 1989; Groskind, 1994; Chong et al., 2001; Blekesaune and Quadagno, 2003;

Van Oorschot, 2006a). On the one hand, we have people's objective, or structural characteristics, such as age, income level and work status, which often indicate the degree of personal interest that people have in the benefits and services of the welfare state. A usual and often corroborated hypothesis is that people with a stronger interest in social protection have more positive attitudes towards and positive perceptions of the arrangements and outcomes of the welfare state. From this rational choice perspective one can expect less critical perceptions of the negative consequences of welfare among those who depend more on the welfare state, groups such as women, older people, people with lower incomes and/or more economic stress, people with lower educational levels, employees in the public sector, unemployed people and people from migrant families. From the same perspective one can expect that these groups would be more positive about positive consequences. The relationships between these interest factors and consequence perceptions can be indirect, for example, when people employed by the state would favour a larger role for the state in the provision of welfare, and therefore would perceive less possible negative consequences of that. The relationships can also be more direct, such as a person with higher income is more attentive and sensitive to information on benefit scrounging, or on budgetary and economic problems of welfare provision because of the possible tax consequences.

On the other hand, we have people's subjective characteristics, or ideational factors, such as their normative orientations, as well as their political and welfare relevant attitudes. In this exploration of influential factors I include a series of possibly relevant factors that are available in the data set. First and foremost, there is political stance, which has been shown in many welfare opinion studies to play a role in that left-leaning people tend to be more positive on all aspects of the welfare state. In accordance with this, and as Sihvo and Uusitalo (1995) found in their Finnish study, we expect that left-leaning people are less critical about negative consequences, and more positive about positive consequences. Second, religion, from the Christian-democratic and religiously inspired communitarian critique on the welfare state, we expect that religious people to be particularly more sceptical about

moral consequences, when compared to non-religious people. In addition to whether people say they adhere to a religion, we include religious denomination to see whether there is a difference in moral welfare scepticism between various religious groupings. One could expect a difference since it is argued that in Europe Catholic and Protestant traditions each have had their specific influence on the development of national welfare states generally (Manow, 2002) and on anti-poverty policy programmes in particular (Kahl, 2005). The arguments of both Manow and Kahl would suggest that scepticism about the consequences of the welfare state would be more manifest among (Calvinistic) Protestants because they would have more negative ideas about idleness and state intervention generally. Since people's ideas about the recipients of welfare often are crucial to understanding their welfare opinions (Gilens, 1996; Alesina and Glaeser, 2004; Van Oorschot, 2006a), we include in our exploration people's attitudes to the deservingness of welfare target groups (pensioners, single parents, sick and disabled people and so forth) in general, and to that of immigrants in particular. We expect more critical perceptions of welfare consequences among people who have less favourable attitudes.³

In addition to interest and ideational factors, it can be assumed that people's personal experiences of the welfare state, in terms of using or having used its benefits and services, may influence their consequence perceptions. They may be more or less critical, depending on whether their experiences have been positive or negative and thus have led to a more or less critical attitude to the welfare state generally. This experience may be different for different people. As Rothstein (1998) has shown, people's experiences with universal benefits and services are often much more positive than their experiences with selective programmes. Given the fact that during their lives people may use universal, as well as selective welfare provisions, it is difficult to formulate any expectation in advance about the direction of the relationship. The findings will show what the average effect of any personal experience with benefit use is.

Finally, for explicit exploratory purposes, I include in the analyses measures for people's attitudes towards the range and degree of the role of government in welfare provision. As we have seen these are the measures of welfare legitimacy that are used

most in uni-dimensional studies. Their inclusion allows us to provisionally test our claim for a multi-dimensionality of welfare legitimacy. That is, if welfare legitimacy is uni-dimensional and would depend on people's opinions towards the role of government, as many of the existing uni-dimensional studies imply, then our measures of consequence perceptions would be strongly influenced by our measures of role-of-government attitudes. If this is not the case, there is empirical reason to assume that people's opinions about the consequences of welfare form a separate aspect or dimension to the wider concept of welfare legitimacy, along with people's attitudes towards the role of government.

Data and methods

Data

Our data are from a national representative welfare opinions survey among the Dutch population aged 16 or older, which was held in October–November 2006. The questionnaire was divided in three modules, which were put successively to all respondents in three waves over the course of a six-week period. The sample of individual respondents was taken randomly from a larger, national representative panel run by Center Data at Tilburg University. Respondents filled out the computer-based questionnaires online. Of the 2682 selected respondents 1972 filled in the sub-questionnaires of all three waves, and thus completed the total questionnaire, giving a response rate of 73%. In this group response group correction was necessary for some under-representation of younger people, people with lower educational level and people with lower income. In our analyses presented here we use the weighed data set, which contains 1941 cases. The Dutch *Stichting Instituut Gak* financed the survey.

Dependent variables: perceived consequences

In the survey people were asked whether they disagreed or agreed (on a five-point scale) with a series of statements on social, economic, moral and migration consequences of the welfare state. The negative aspects in particular of the latter three receive regular attention in the Dutch media (WRR, 2006). Since I was interested in whether people would also

consider the possible positive social consequences, which usually do not get much media attention, the related statements were added to the questionnaire (see Table 1 for the questions asked).

In a factor analysis the answers to the four items on negative *economic* consequences represented one factor. They were added to form a Likert-scale with alpha reliability of 0.80. Higher scores indicate a stronger perception of negative economic consequences. The answers to the four items on negative *moral* consequences also represented one factor and were added to form a Likert-scale with an alpha of 0.83. Higher scores on this scale indicate a stronger perception of negative moral consequences. A factor and subsequent reliability analysis on the six statements regarding positive *social* consequences revealed that three of them (... people in general live happier, ... wealth is distributed more justly, ... everybody gets a chance of making something of their life) form a scale with an alpha of 0.80. Higher scores on this scale indicate a stronger perception of positive social consequences. The other three items on social consequences are not included in the scale because of low inter-item correlations. These remaining three items do not represent a separate second factor, so no second scale for positive consequences is constructed. The statement about the *migration* consequences of the welfare state is included as a single variable, with higher scores indicating a stronger perception of a welfare magnetism effect. In all four scales 'don't know' answers were assigned missing.

Independent variables

The set of structural factors included in our analyses were: *sex* (1 = male, 2 = female); *age* (in years); *income* (net monthly income of household); *educational level* (a series of dummy variables for: primary school, lower vocational, middle vocational, secondary school, higher vocational, university); *work status* (a series of dummy variables for: employed private sector, employed [semi] public sector, self-employed, unemployed, other [including: students, homemakers, pensioners, other]); *ethnicity* (0 = non-Dutch [at least one parent not born in the Netherlands], 1 = Dutch).

Personal experience with welfare provision is measured as *use of benefits* (1 = respondent uses now and/or has used previously an unemployment

benefit and/or a disability benefit and/or sick pay and/or social assistance, 0 = no such use).

The set of ideational factors included: *political stance* (self-placement on a 10-point scale: 1 = most left to 10 = most right); *religious denomination* (four dummies: none, Catholic, Protestant, other); *deservingness general* (sum scale of answers to the question to what degree one would say that various groups would be entitled to social protection [10 point scale: 1 = not at all, 10 = very much] groups mentioned were pensioners, disabled persons, social assistance clients, widows, sick people, unemployed people, people who cannot work, single parents, poorly educated people, people with poor health: alpha reliability = 0.85); *deservingness of immigrants* (sum scale of answers to four statements: ... non-western immigrants/western immigrants/economic fugitives/political fugitives should have less rights to social assistance than Dutch people: 1 = totally agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neither agree, nor disagree, 4 = disagree, 5 = totally disagree; alpha reliability = 0.92).

The measures for role-of-government attitudes were twofold: *range of role of government* (sum scale of answers to the five questions considering whether it should be left to people themselves to take insurance against income loss due to the risks of unemployment/sickness/disability/old age/loss of partner, or whether government should take responsibility and organize obligatory national social insurances for the risks mentioned: five-point scale, 1 = leave it totally to citizens themselves to 5 = totally responsibility of government: alpha reliability = 0.79); *degree of role of government* (sum scale of answer to the three questions whether the levels of the national schemes of unemployment benefit/social assistance/minimum benefits [including minimum pensions] should be reduced, with a decrease in [pay roll] taxes as a consequence, or should be increased, with a rise in [pay roll] taxes as a consequence: 1 = reduce strongly, 2 = reduce, 3 = stay at present level, 4 = increase, 5 = strongly increase: alpha reliability = .72).

Analyses

I analysed the influences of the independent variables on the four scales of welfare consequences separately. In each case I applied OLS regression in three steps. In step one I included the set of structural

variables, including use of benefits, to see what possible effects stem from the personal interest people may have in the welfare state. In step two I added the ideational factors to see whether they add to the understanding of variation in consequence perceptions, and to see whether and in what ways their inclusion detracts from the influences of interest related variables. In a third step I included the two role-of-government variables to see what their relative association is with consequences perceptions.

Results

Positive and negative perceptions

As Table 1 shows the Dutch public do not strongly perceive negative economic consequences of the welfare state. There are large proportions, 45% and 51%, respectively, who do not agree that because of the existence of the system of social benefits, unemployment would increase, or the economy would decline, while there is a more or less equal divide over its effect on labour costs and the international competitiveness of the Dutch economy. There is also a divide regarding the negative moral consequences, although in all cases those who do perceive such consequences form a small majority, ranging between 32% and 40%. Regarding the positive social consequences, however, there are large proportions agreeing (ranging from 46% to 65%). Finally, no less than 52% of the Dutch population perceives a welfare magnet effect, that is, they agree with the idea that many foreigners come and live in the Netherlands because of the system of social benefits.

Clearly, the moral criticisms of the welfare state appeal more to the Dutch public than do the economic criticisms. However, the most revealing finding from Table 1 is that, despite the fact that the positive consequences of the welfare state are rarely emphasized in the public debate, large segments of the Dutch public nevertheless have a clear understanding of them. As further calculations showed, it is even the case that for a substantial majority of 67% the positive social consequences outweigh the negative economic, moral and migration consequences.⁴

For the interpretation of these findings it is helpful to know that historically support for the welfare state is invariably high in the Netherlands, as has been measured annually by the Dutch Social and Cultural Planning Bureau since 1970

(Becker, 2005). Elsewhere we suggested that this Dutch welfare popularity may stem from the fact that no less than 70% of the Dutch population experience a direct interest in the system of social benefits covering the risks of unemployment, sickness, disability and poverty, because either they themselves or family members and close friends actually receive such benefits, or they have received them in the past (Van Oorschot, 2006b). Presumably, the overall positive perception of the system's consequences is related to the fact that so many profit from it. If so, the encompassing character of the Dutch welfare state seems to be a factor weighing up clearly against the negative character of the public welfare state debate.

Although a balance in favour of positive perceptions can be seen as a necessary condition for 'consequence based' legitimacy of the welfare state, such legitimacy will also depend on the degree of ambivalence among the population at large. That is, the overall balance may be positive, but the legitimacy would be more fragile to the degree that people more closely combine positive as well as negative perceptions at the same time.⁵ Additionally, I measured the degree of ambivalence in consequences perceptions as the percentages of people who, on average, score higher than 3 (on the 1–5 agreement scales) with respect to positive social consequences items, and who also score on average higher than 3 with respect to negative economic, moral and migration consequences items. We found that of those respondents who have high scores on the positive social consequences 10% combine this with high scores on the negative economic consequences, while 22% and 28%, respectively, combine this with high scores on the moral and migration consequences. Although I have no data from other sources with which to compare these results I am inclined to conclude that these percentages reflect modest levels of ambivalence.

Variation in perceptions

To analyse the factors that induce social variation in consequence perceptions I regressed the set of structural variables (Model 1), and a combination of these with ideational variables (Model 2) on the four consequences scales. To this I added two variables measuring role-of-government attitudes (Model 3). The results of the multivariate regressions are summarized in Table 2.

Table 1 'The system of welfare benefits can have positive and negative consequences. Do you agree or disagree with the statement that because of the system of social benefits: ...?'

	(Totally) disagree (%)	Neither agree, nor disagree (%)	(Totally) agree (%)	Don't know (5)
Economic consequences				
... labour costs are too high	23	34	33	10
... unemployment increases	45	28	18	9
... the competitiveness of the Dutch economy decreases	36	26	23	15
... the economy turns down	51	30	9	10
Average	39	29	21	11
Moral consequences				
... people get lazy	28	28	40	4
... people get egoistic and calculative	31	30	32	7
... people are not willing to care for each other anymore	29	28	36	7
... people lose their sense of personal responsibility	30	27	39	5
Average	30	28	37	6
Social consequences				
... large scale poverty and misery is prevented	10	20	65	6
... societal unrest is prevented	13	28	51	8
... wealth is distributed more justly	19	25	50	6
... the life of many is more pleasant and free	12	32	48	8
... everybody gets a chance of making something of their life	11	28	56	5
... people in general live happier	15	31	46	8
Average	30	27	53	7
Migration consequences				
... many foreigners come and live here	20	22	53	7

Looking at the *structural variables* (Model 1) first we see that their influences differ between types of consequence. In the case of economic consequences it is people with higher educational levels, those employed in the public sector and those who use benefits themselves who are less critical. However, when ideational variables are included (Model 2) all three effects disappear: public sector employees, benefit users and those with a higher education level differ from their counterparts (they may have a more left-leaning political stance, and more favourable perceptions of the deservingness of target groups). Generally, the disappearance or reduction of the effects of variables when other variables are introduced could mean that the influence of the former is wholly or partly indirect.

Conversely, when holding constant for ideational variables it shows that women are more critical about

the economic consequences than men. This is also the case with regard to women's perceptions of the moral (although relations are not significant) and migration consequences, while women are less positive about the social consequences. It is difficult to explain this female pessimism as Model 2 controls for ideational variables, as well as for a series of other objective variables, and usually it is found that women are stronger supporters of the welfare state than men (Deitch, 1988; Gidengil et al., 2003). Excluding the effects of gender then, respondents' perceptions of the economic consequences of the welfare state are not related to their socio-demographic and socio-economic situation, which from a rational-choice perspective is rather striking.

The same is true for respondents' perception of the welfare magnetism effect, that is, of the migration consequence. Here also, initial effects of educational

Table 2. Multivariate regression results: determinants of perceived consequences (standardized coefficients)

	Negative economic consequences			Negative moral consequences			Positive social consequences			Negative migration consequences		
	M1	M2	M3	M1	M2	M3	M1	M2	M3	M1	M2	M3
Gender (M-F)	0.033	0.055*	0.055*	0.014	0.038	0.038	-0.075*	-0.092*	-0.091*	0.027	0.057*	0.057*
Age	-0.009	0.015	0.032	0.018	0.042*	0.058*	-0.024	-0.053*	-0.065*	-0.012	0.024	0.033
Income	0.006	0.011	0.008	0.034	0.038	0.035	0.067*	0.065*	0.067*	0.039	0.044	0.043
Educational level												
Primary school (ref.cat.)												
Lower vocational	-0.013	-0.018	-0.030	-0.040	-0.046	-0.056	0.007	0.009	0.017	0.050	0.024	0.017
Secondary school	-0.051	-0.039	-0.053	-0.055	-0.041	-0.055	0.021	0.008	0.015	-0.019	0.003	-0.004
Middle vocational	-0.015	-0.007	-0.029	-0.081	-0.070*	-0.091*	0.031	0.021	0.033	0.020	0.024	0.012
Higher vocational	-0.075*	-0.025	-0.045	-0.127*	-0.071*	-0.089*	0.057	0.009	0.019	-0.074*	0.000	-0.010
University	-0.088*	-0.029	-0.055	-0.115*	-0.051*	-0.075*	0.082*	0.027	0.042	-0.108*	-0.025	-0.039
Work status												
Employed												
private (ref.cat.)												
Employed public sector	-0.083*	-0.027	-0.029	-0.097*	-0.037	-0.040	0.060*	0.013	0.015	-0.092*	-0.022	-0.023
Self-employed	0.008	0.006	-0.004	0.017	0.016	0.006	0.043	0.044*	0.051*	-0.019	-0.024	-0.030
Unemployed	-0.042	-0.010	0.006	-0.112*	-0.075*	-0.060*	0.028	-0.006	-0.014	-0.047	-0.020	-0.011
Other	-0.056	-0.024	-0.013	-0.080*	-0.043	-0.033	0.133*	0.103*	0.096*	0.000	0.026	0.031
Use of benefits	-0.099*	-0.031	-0.032	-0.147*	-0.072*	-0.074*	0.042	-0.020	-0.018	-0.066*	-0.014	-0.015
Ethnicity (nonNL-NL)	0.020	0.004	0.004	-0.051*	-0.073*	-0.073*	-0.028	-0.010	-0.011	0.022	0.003	0.003
Religious denomination												
None (ref.cat.)												
Catholic	0.025	0.013	0.013	0.036	0.025	0.025	0.001	0.001	0.008	0.026	0.026	0.019
Protestant	-0.008	-0.011	-0.011	-0.010	-0.012	-0.012	0.015	0.015	0.017	-0.036	-0.037	-0.037
Other	-0.003	-0.003	0.000	-0.030	-0.027	-0.027	0.024	0.023	0.023	-0.022	-0.022	-0.021
Political stance (L-R)	0.171*	0.127*	0.127*	0.165*	0.125*	0.125*	-0.090*	-0.063*	-0.063*	0.161*	0.139*	0.139*
Deservingness general	-0.206*	-0.113*	-0.113*	-0.235*	-0.149*	-0.149*	0.239*	0.179*	0.179*	0.001	0.001	0.051
Deservingness immigrant	-0.216*	-0.192*	-0.192*	-0.239*	-0.217*	-0.217*	0.203*	0.190*	0.190*	-0.472*	-0.460*	-0.460*
Role of gov.-range												
Role of gov.-degree												
Adjusted R ²	0.022	0.207	0.240	0.050	0.273	0.300	0.020	0.179	0.193	0.028	0.322	0.331

Note: * significant $p < 0.05$.

level, political stance and benefits use disappear when the set of ideational variables are introduced, while the effect of gender appears.

The influences of objective variables are more pronounced in the case of the perceived moral and social consequences of the welfare state. In the case of moral consequences we see that those with a higher education level, unemployed people, public-sector employees and benefits users are less sceptical about the moral consequences, while people from ethnic minorities are more sceptical. The effect of working in the public sector disappears when ideational variables are introduced to the analysis, which means that its effect is indirect and comes about because people working in the public sector are more left-leaning and/or are have more generous attitudes towards the deservingness of needy groups generally. In Model 2 the effects of education, unemployment and benefits use remain, but are reduced, which means that part of their total influence is indirect, and is exerted through ideational factors. The direct effects of being unemployed and using benefits may be interpreted as a rational 'defence strategy' of welfare dependents on accusations of being morally wrong (as being irresponsible, lazy, calculative), as a rational choice perspective would suggest. But it may also be based on personal experiences, on which grounds they do not recognize themselves in prevailing public images, that is, they may not personally experience any loss of responsibility, of work ethic, and such like, as a result of welfare dependency.⁶ The direct negative effect of educational level is harder to interpret. It certainly is difficult to understand from a rational choice perspective, given also that in the models income level is accounted for, as well as political orientation, deservingness perceptions and attitudes towards the role of government. It might be that higher education levels make people more critical about public images generally, including images of lazy, egoistic and irresponsible welfare dependents. In the Model 2 age becomes significant in that older people are more critical about the moral consequences of welfare. This may reflect their more general moral concerns with regard to the welfare state and modern society (Arts et al., 2003).

In the case of social consequences the pattern is quite different. Here there are educational level has no influence (when holding constant for ideational variables), nor does benefits use and unemployment.

In contrast, we see that men, younger people, people with higher income, self-employed people, and people with work status 'other' (students, homemakers, pensioners) are more positive about the social consequences of the welfare state. It seems hard to interpret these findings from a rational choice perspective, since the groups concerned are not typically those that depend most on welfare, on the contrary. The interpretation then might be as follows: if groups who are actually more dependent on welfare have experiences that make them more sceptical about the positive social consequences of welfare (that is, about the degree to which the welfare state can prevent poverty, distribute wealth more justly, and make life more happy and free), this scepticism might typically not be shared by groups who generally have less personal experience of welfare programmes, such as those just mentioned: men, younger people, people with higher income, self-employed people and people with work status 'other'.

Looking at the influence of the *ideational variables*, we see a clear and consistent pattern over all four types of consequence perceptions. Unexpectedly, religious denomination has no relationship with any of the perceptions. This may mean that, while especially in the Dutch context Catholicism and various forms of Protestantism have played a significant role in the formation of the welfare state (Roebroek, 1993), secularization may have progressed so far as to have eroded the once typical differences in welfare related opinions between Dutch Catholics and Protestants (on Dutch secularization see SCP, 1994). As expected, right-leaning people, and those who regard needy groups in general, and immigrants in particular, as less deserving, perceive negative consequences more strongly, while they perceive positive consequences less strongly. The consistent and relatively large effects of political orientation and perceptions of deservingness, as well as their suppression of some of the effects in Model 1, may be seen as support for the proposition that consequence perceptions are more importantly grounded in ideational factors, than in socio-demographic and socio-structural factors. However, this finding may be typical for an encompassing welfare state as the Dutch one, where large majorities of people and their close relatives and friends are entitled to social benefits and services – in the past, now or in future.⁷ This could be the reason that perceptions of welfare interest do not vary that strongly among categories of the Dutch population.

Finally, I included respondents' attitudes towards the role of government as a check to see whether and to what degree they and consequence perceptions form distinct aspects of welfare legitimacy. If they do, one would, on the one hand, expect the relationships to be as we actually find them: people who are more negative opined towards government responsibility for and spending on social benefits are more critical of the negative consequences, and less in agreement with the positive consequences. On the other hand, one would expect the relationships not to be very strong so that role-of-government attitudes and consequence perceptions still can be seen as separate aspects. And this, with coefficients being in the range of $-.0059$ to -0.188 , is also what we find.

Conclusion

Data from a 2006 Dutch survey show that in the eyes of a large proportion (67%) of the population the positive social consequences of the welfare state outweigh the negative economic and moral consequences. This is a rather striking finding, since in the Dutch public debate the negative economic, moral and migration consequences are regularly stressed, while there is little attention given to positive social consequences. This suggests that there is an autonomous element in people's overall evaluation of the good and bad consequences of the Dutch welfare state. Consequence perceptions are not a mere reproduction of ideas and images constructed in and through the public media.

With regard to social variations in perceptions, I found that structural indicators that reflect people's personal interests in welfare are hardly related directly to perceptions of the economic and migration consequences when ideational factors are accounted for. Most of the influence of interest related factors is indirect. In the case of the perceptions of the moral and social consequences, the existing relationships with socio-structural factors seem to be better understood from the perspective of personal experiences of welfare dependency have, rather than from considerations of strict self-interest. I found, for example, that unemployed people and benefits users, that is those with personal experience of welfare dependency, perceive negative moral consequences less, while people who on average may be assumed to have no or less personal experience, such as those with higher incomes, the better educated and self-employed, are more positive about the positive social consequences of welfare.

An explorative set of ideational factors proved to be important, in that right-leaning respondents, those with a less generous attitude towards deservingness, and with a less favourable attitude to the welfare role-of-government perceive negative consequences more strongly, and are more critical on the positive consequences.

Clearly, a single country analysis like this, in an underdeveloped field of study, raises the question of the generalizability of results. I would not want to claim that these results could be generalized, temporally nor spatially, since there are no similar comparative studies from other countries. Even from a Dutch national perspective our results could be rather typical for the year 2006 in which the survey was conducted, compared to for instance the 1980s, when the Dutch welfare state was in a deep fiscal crisis and unemployment rates were about three times as high as in 2006. It could be that people's perceptions of the economic consequences were much more negative then, as we have seen to be the case for 2006. It could also be that perceptions of the migration consequences were less pessimistic in the 1980s, because the issue of welfare magnetism and problems of the multicultural society were not that high on the Dutch socio-political agenda as they are currently. The point is that macro-level social factors of various kinds may affect the ideas people have about the consequences of the welfare state, and that one would need comparative data over time to analyse their influence. The same kind of argument holds when one adopts a cross-national perspective, that is, our findings may be typically Dutch. I already alluded to the possible influence of the fact that the Dutch welfare state is relatively comprehensive. Comparative data from other countries, with smaller or higher degrees of 'welfare stateness', would be needed to show whether the size and type of the welfare state people live in affects their ideas about welfare state consequences.

Finally, I have claimed that welfare state legitimacy is multi-dimensional, since people may think differently about the various dimensions and aspects of the welfare state. I tend to doubt, therefore, that one single or composite indicator can capture welfare state legitimacy. What would be interesting for a future study is to see how legitimacy indicators regarding different welfare state aspects, for example, perceptions of the role of government, of

implementation practices, of the costs and the actual outcomes of the welfare state would relate to each other, and to perceptions of consequences. I would especially be interested to see whether there is empirical grounding for a concept such as 'welfarism', or 'anti-welfarism', terms that are sometimes used in the literature to refer to a general and rather basic positive or negative attitude people may have to any welfare related issue.

Notes

- 1 Examples of studies on welfare legitimacy with such a 'range' approach are include: Andress and Heien (2003), Blekesaune and Quadagno (2003), Bonoli (2000), Bowles and Gintis (2000), Brooks and Manza (2006), Deitch (2004), Feldman and Steenbergen (2001), Haller et al. (1990), Kluegel and Miyano (1995), Linos and West (2003), Papadakis and Bean (1993), Paugam (2003), Roller (1995), Svallfors (1999; 2003), Gelissen (2000), Matheson and Wearing (1999), Meier Jaeger (2005) and Edlund (2007).
- 2 Examples of studies on welfare legitimacy with such a 'degree' approach include: Blomberg (1999), Boeri et al. (2001), Edlund (2004; 2007), Feagin (1975), Feldman and Steenbergen (2001), Forma (1997), Haller et al. (1990), Hasenfeld and Rafferty (1989), Papadakis and Bean (1993), Pettersen (1995), Sihvo and Uusitalo (1995), Gelissen (2000), Rehm (2007), Veghte et al. (2007).
- 3 Of course, one can question the causal direction. Here I assume it to be that attitudes influence perceptions of welfare consequences. From a dynamic perspective, perceptions of consequences in turn could influence attitudes, such as people's political ideas, or their role-of-government attitudes. For instance, a person who is left-leaning, but for whatever reason starts to see strong negative economic and/or moral consequences (whether real or not), might become more right-leaning (in the sense of favouring neo-liberal market principles more). Regrettably, we do not have panel data to check for this empirically. My choice in analysing consequence perceptions as dependent and attitudes as independent variables stems from my aim to explore the social variations in such perceptions.
- 4 I subtracted the average of respondents' scores on the negatively formulated items regarding the economic, moral and migration consequences, from the average of scores on the positively formulated social consequences: the balance was positive in 67% of cases, zero in 4% of cases and negative in 30% of cases.
- 5 Attitudinal ambivalence is usually defined as a person's combination of positive and negative evaluations of a single attitude subject (Priester and Petty, 1996).
- 6 Note in this respect that Gallie and Alm (2000) in the European-wide Employment in Europe Survey found that the commitment to work of unemployed people surpassed that of employed people.
- 7 See for figures on this van Oorschot (2008).

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