

## **Stereotypes and welfare attitudes: a panel survey of how ‘poor Carina’ and ‘lazy Robert’ affected attitudes towards social assistance in Denmark**

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### **Abstract**

*What is the impact of a predominantly negative debate about social assistance on public and individual support for the social benefit? Over the course of a year the public debate about social assistance flared up twice in Denmark. The debates drew on classic stereotypes of the social assistance recipients lacking both the financial incentives and the will to work. According to theories of the impact of media on welfare attitudes, this had the potential to undermine public support. A two-wave panel survey, however, showed only a small drop in public support for spending on social assistance, in a comparison of attitudes before and after the debates. The small overall impact on public opinion, however, hid a polarization of attitudes on the individual level. This shows that there was not a uniform reaction to welfare debates, but that people tend to seek out a version of reality that is consistent with their values and self-interest. The article thus shows that people when faced with public debates on welfare policies will seek to confirm their personal biases and this limits the possibility for overall changes in public support.*

**Keywords:** welfare attitudes, stereotypes, attitude formation, panel study, social assistance, welfare

## **Breaking the 'welfare consensus'?**

Across Europe politicians and policy organizations argue that social assistance and other social benefits should be made less generous. The arguments for making the social benefits less generous range from the need to create better incentives, in order to 'make work pay', to the social and moral benefits of working. The proposals to cut the social benefit levels do not, however, go unopposed. Some oppose them out of self-interest, as they directly or indirectly gain from the benefit, or because they think they might need this benefit in the future owing to a feeling of exposure of unemployment (Iversen & Soskice, 2001; Pierson, 1996). Others are against the cuts since they believe that it is important to maintain and extend social protection for ideological reasons (Feldman, 2003; Lipset, 1963). Therefore political scholars have argued that politicians who seek to retrench social benefits without facing negative electoral consequences need to gather public support for the cuts (Pierson, 1996). One way to create public support is to draw on negative stereotypes about the recipients and thus undermine support for the benefit. Stereotypes can play on ethnic prejudices (Gilens, 1996; 2000), present the recipients as lacking incentive to work, or simply as lazy and unwilling to work (Baumberg et al., 2012; Golding & Middleton, 1982; Larsen & Dejgaard, 2012). Golding and Middleton (1982) argue that by drawing these stereotypes politicians can invoke '(...) a series of images and beliefs that have historical continuity and lie very shallowly below a veneer of apparent "welfare consensus"'. (59). Many studies of media depictions and stereotypes are built on the premise that media and elite discourses are able to affect attitudes which then make social reforms more or less politically viable. This article challenges that perception by tracking the impact of a dramatic example of a predominantly negative media debate on social assistance in Denmark. In spite of harsh rhetoric and much media attention, this debate did not seem to break the 'welfare consensus'. This article therefore creates and tests what I believe is a more realistic model of how and why attitudes change from a negative debate.

In the next section the cases around which the debate centred will be introduced in detail. Then theoretical perspectives on the impact of media on attitudes are presented, followed by a survey on attitudes before and after the debate. Following this, theses are outlined to explain the attitude pattern. In the section following that the data and variables are introduced, and finally the results of the analysis are presented and discussed.

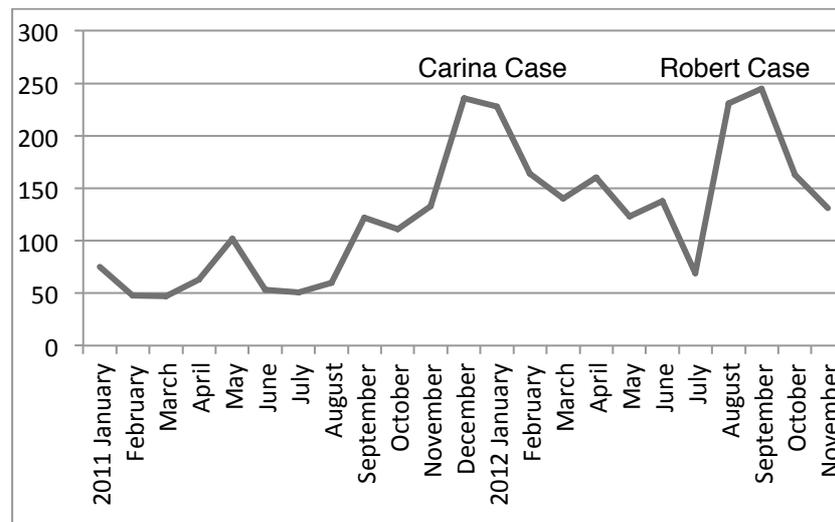
### **Introducing ‘poor Carina’ and ‘lazy Robert’**

In the spring of 2013 the *New York Times* reported that the Danes had begun debating: ‘(...) whether their beloved welfare state, perhaps Europe’s most generous, had become too rich, undermining the country’s work ethic’ (Daley, 2013). The newspaper reported that according to experts and politicians the Danes now wanted a tougher line on social assistance recipients. The source of these new attitudes was a debate about social assistance.

That debate had started in the fall of 2011, as a political debate about the existence of poverty in Denmark. This led to a discussion of whether the recipients of social assistance can be considered poor. The neo-liberal party Liberal Alliance supported an absolute definition of poverty, and therefore argued that social assistance is too generous, as it provides far more than the social minimum. The left-wing parties argued for a relative definition of poverty and thus concluded that many recipients are poor, as they cannot participate in society on an equal basis. As a part of this debate Özlem Cekic, a MP for the Socialist People’s Party, invited Joachim B. Olsen, MP for Liberal Alliance, to take part in a series of formal debates on this issue. One of these debates involved visiting Carina, a single mother and recipient of social assistance, whom Özlem Cekic had chosen as her case of a poor Dane on social assistance. There were no members of the media present during the visit and the first name Carina was a pseudonym given to her in order to protect her privacy, but afterwards Carina’s household budget was made public and the two politicians discussed the visit on a popular evening entertainment program. Carina’s budget showed that she could not be considered poor by the OECD-definition, or in comparison to low-wage job holders, because she received additional benefits supplementing her income as a single mother (Goul Andersen, 2012; Vangkilde, 2011). Though Carina’s situation is not representative of most social assistance recipients, her budget became a symbol of some social assistance recipients’ luxury expenses (e.g. cigarettes, a flat screen TV, and a dog), and provided a way of discussing the fairness of that. This resulted in the mocking nickname ‘poor Carina’ in the press and sparked a moral outcry in the public about the disincentives to work created by social assistance. This also prompted strong reactions in the newspapers, with readers comparing the income from low-wage work and social assistance, for example, ‘No! She is not poor. This is an insult to all working people’ (Eskesen, 2011), and ‘How sad it is that an idiot like me has not realized there is more money to be made

on social assistance!’ (Jespersen, 2011). The media attention surrounding social assistance slowly faded throughout the spring of 2012, but the debate revived when the state television programme *On the Other Side* aired a documentary on prime time featuring another recipient of social benefits, Robert Nielsen, who stated that he was a ‘lazy bastard’ and would rather receive social assistance than take a ‘crappy job’ like janitorial work at McDonalds. The press quickly nicknamed him ‘lazy Robert’ and the debate about social assistance peeked through again, though this time the debate focused more on the work ethics of recipients. This again prompted strong reactions in the media and even the social democratic Prime Minister Helle Thorning Smith commented that: ‘(...) if there are people like ‘lazy Robert’ out there, then there will be stricter requirements for such “lazy Roberts”’ (Søndberg, 2012, 7). Overall, the cases focused much media attention on the social assistance scheme, as shown on Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1.** Articles mentioning social assistance in five major newspapers



Source: The newspaper database Infomedia. Newspapers: BT, Ekstra Bladet, Berlingske, Politiken, Jyllands-Posten.

Figure 1 shows the number of articles in five major newspapers using the word 'social assistance' in a period before, during, and a short while after the media events took place. The figure shows how salient the debate was in the period covered. There are normally some mentions of social assistance as a part of general public debate, which is reflected in the period from January 2011 to October 2011, when between 47 and 122 articles made references to social assistance. The figure also has two peaks where the number of references to social assistance more than tripled, compared to the average for the period leading up to the debate. The peaks were around December 2011 and August 2012, coinciding with the publicity surrounding the two cases described above.

### **The impact of media on attitudes**

Scholars have argued that we view the world as a series of mental images called stereotypes (Lippmann, 1922; Zaller, 1992). The stereotypes help us make sense of a complicated world, and are especially impactful in dealing with areas where we have little or no personal experience. Therefore the media can have a large impact on attitudes, helping form the mental images of the unknown. Though the cases of 'poor Carina' and 'lazy Robert' do not portray typical recipients of social assistance (Larsen & Dejgaard, 2012), they quickly came to identify recipients in the public debate. They thereby transformed themselves from single cases into stereotypes of how social assistance undermines economic incentives and makes the recipients lazy and unwilling to work. Somers and Block (2005) argue that debates about helping the poor, going back to Malthus' essays on poverty (1798), have always rested on these two categories of critique.

It is, however, important to notice that opposing arguments also were put forward in the debate, which could act as positive 'counter-stereotypes'. The positive stereotypes focused on examples of more deserving recipients of social assistance who had lower disposable incomes and a history of previous work (Flensburg, 2012; Nørgaard, 2011). The positive counter-stereotypes were, however, less dominant than the negative. A study of 60 articles on social assistance, sampling from three major newspapers in the period from November

2011 to November 2012, showed that about half had a negative slant, about one-fourth had positive representations of social assistance, and one-fourth did not lean one way or the other. The study also showed a sharp rise in the use of negative terms in articles about social assistance in 2011–12 compared to the period from 1998 to 2010 (Jensen & Mose, 2012). This marked a break from the previous coverage of social assistance recipients which had been predominantly positive (Jensen & Mose, 2012; Larsen & Dejgaard, 2012). The debate thus seemed to have the potential to challenge the welfare consensus, as a result of the increased salience of the issue and the changed makeup of the debate (Soss & Schram, 2007; Zaller, 1992).

### **Explanations of attitude change**

A number of theoretical arguments have been put forward as to why negative debates might affect public opinion. From an institutionalist perspective Rothstein (1998) argues that selective policies such as social assistance tend to create a public discussion about '(...) where the line between the needy and the non-needy should be drawn and (...) whether the needy themselves are not to blame for their predicament (...)' (Rothstein, 1998, 158-159). Thus in this situation of increased media attention surrounding social assistance, the general population is more likely to question whether the benefit is too generous. Other scholars argue that attitudes on whether recipients deserve benefits are informed by deservingness heuristics (M. B. Petersen, 2009; van Oorschot, 2000; 2006). Heuristics are '(...) decision rules that produce quick judgements based on limited information and, hence, allow for opinion formation even when substantive information is absent'. (M. B. Petersen, Slothuus, Stubager, & Togeby, 2011, 26). Quick judgements seem likely to create attitude change in this situation of increased salience but limited information about social assistance. Studies applying these deservingness heuristics show that recipients of benefits who are of working age and perceived as unwilling to contribute to society foster the most negative reactions (M. B. Petersen, 2012; van Oorschot, 2000; 2006). The cases of 'poor Carina' and 'lazy Robert' clash with these criteria, as both of these persons had been out of work for a number of years despite being of working age. Soss and Schram (2007) argue that social assistance constitutes a '(...) potent but distant symbol for the mass public (...)' (122), since attitudes towards

social assistance, for most people, are not grounded in everyday experience, but in media representations and stereotypes (Baumberg et al., 2012; Golding & Middleton, 1982). A change towards less support for social assistance based on the description of the debate and theory outlined above should be expected. In Table 1 a cross-sectional view of attitudes towards spending on social assistance before and after the publicized cases is presented. The surveys are part of a two-wave panel study in which the first wave was collected about two months before the Carina case and the second, about two months after the Robert case. This provides a baseline of attitudes before the debate and a measurement a short while thereafter.

**Table 1.** Attitudes towards spending on social assistance before and after the Robert and Carina cases in percentages

	Too much	Suitably	Too little	Don't know	N
Before the Robert and Carina cases	23	46	20	11	1997
After the Robert and Carina cases	29	37	19	15	1707

*Question: 'Do you think that the government spends too much, suitably, or too little on social assistance?'*

From Table 1 we can observe a rise in the number of respondents who think that too much is being spent on social assistance and a small drop in the percentage who think that the amount is suitable. This is a movement towards less willingness to spend compared to the time before and after. However, the movement in attitudes is relatively small. Overall, this shows a relative stability throughout the period, which fits poorly with the expectations outlined above. This leads to the question of why attitudes towards social assistance do not seem to be more affected by the criticism and the media spotlight.

## **Explaining Stability in Attitudes**

One possible explanation may be that overall stability hides opposing attitude changes. A panel study by Togeby (2004) finds few variations in the overall public attitudes on a number of issues, but large variations on a few issues. On the individual level Togeby (2004) finds that the issues that display the smallest overall variation have the biggest individual variation. This pattern is created by uniform media messages on some issues which change the attitudes of few respondents but in the same direction. On other issues there is a small overall variation but a large individual variation in both directions created by a mixed media influence. The mixed media message fits with the description above and might help explain the small change in attitudes. Studies from political psychology have also found this polarization effect in survey experiments where both pro-and-con arguments are presented. The studies explain the polarization of attitudes as confirmatory or biased reading of information (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979; Taber & Lodge, 2006). Other studies have also found this to be true for stereotypes: People are more likely to believe information that supports their preconceived stereotypes and they ignore or discredit information that does not (Allport, 1954; Munro & Ditto, 1997). To investigate the possible explanation of a polarization in attitudes, I outline four individual-level theses below. The theses cover both why some respondents could become more positive towards spending and why other respondents more negative.

### **Theses**

The literature on individual attitude change takes its starting point in Converse's (1964) seminal essay 'The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics'. In a panel study Converse (1964) found that most citizens answered inconsistently both across the waves of the panel and between related issues. This result led Converse (1964) to question whether most citizens have something resembling real political attitudes, and therefore whether attitudes recorded through surveys are the expression of something more than random answers. The conclusions drawn by Converse (1964) have since been criticized (Achen, 1975; Page & Shapiro, 1992) and the subsequent literature on attitude formation has since modified that position. In much of the research following Converse (1964) the prevailing position has been that attitude instability is not due to people's lack of political attitudes, but to an ambivalence stemming from their having several and often

opposing attitudes regarding most issues (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Saris & Sniderman, 2004; Togeby, 2004; Zaller, 1992). In this interpretation of attitudes the media play a big role since they transmit elite messages which are crucial to attitude formation and attitude change. When people are exposed to new or changing media messages on an issue, it can lead to changes in attitudes (Togeby, 2004; Zaller, 1992). The theses outlined in this study are based in the understanding of attitudes and the role of the media, as presented in Zaller's book *The nature and origin of mass opinion* (1992). In addition, theories of welfare-state attitudes are used to form my theses. I hope this provides a more realistic model of how attitudes are affected by the stereotypes put forward in the debate. Instead of expecting a uniform effect, this model seeks to incorporate personal experiences and political values to explain polarization in the public's attitudes.

Zaller (1992) argues that attitudes, recorded through surveys, are formed 'on the fly', on the basis of available information and predispositions. It is this process of attitude formation that is described in Zaller's (1992) Receive-Accept-Sample (RAS) model. This model describes whether the message is received or not, whether the message is accepted or rejected, and finally how the sum of available information is translated into an opinion. An important precondition for Zaller's (1992) model is the fact that people do not have personal first-hand information about most issues they are surveyed about. Therefore they have to rely on information obtained through the media. On this basis I can outline my first thesis: For the cases to have an impact on attitudes, the respondents need to have received them, that is, they need to still remember the cases.

**Thesis 1:** Respondents who remember the cases will develop more negative attitudes, while the attitudes of respondents who do not remember the cases will be unchanged.

The debate over social assistance constitutes what Zaller calls a two-sided discourse, since both positive and negative stereotypes were available and could have affected attitudes positively or negatively depending on what stereotypes individuals were most exposed to. In the situation of the two-sided discourse, Zaller (1992) argues that individuals tend to follow arguments that are in agreement with their predispositions or values. One way to schematize the values or predispositions involved is in the opposition of egalitarian versus anti-egalitarian values (Feldman, 2003; Lipset, 1963). Other researchers

have argued that individuals take the position of their political parties (Slothuus, Petersen, & Rathlev, 2012). However, since left-wing arguments fall in line with egalitarian values, and right-wing arguments fall in line with anti-egalitarian values, this leads to a similar prediction. This opposition of values fits the competing stereotypes seen above: One side of the debate stresses inequality and the other side disincentives and laziness. On this basis I formulate my second thesis about accepting or rejecting the message:

**Thesis 2:** Respondents with anti-egalitarian values will develop more negative attitudes, while respondents with egalitarian values will develop more positive attitudes.

Together Thesis 1 and 2 outline a simplistic understanding of Zaller's (1992) RAS-model. To achieve greater nuance I further connect Zaller's (1992) general model of attitude formation to the research tradition on welfare attitudes. Here a number of studies have emphasized how attitudes are formed by a combination of political values (Thesis 2) and self-interest, in what is called the dual utility function (Rothstein, 1998). Self-interest can be measured in a number of ways, the most straightforward of which is personal gain. However, the indirect gains such as benefits to close family or the protection offered by the benefits also need to be taken into account (Iversen & Soskice, 2001; Kumlin, 2007). This forms the basis of my third thesis:

**Thesis 3:** Respondents who have no direct or indirect self-interest in the social assistance scheme will develop more negative attitudes, while respondents who have a direct or indirect self-interest in the scheme will develop more positive attitudes.

The final thesis is based on the policy-feedback literature, which argues that in addition to self-interest and political values, attitudes are also shaped by feedback from the welfare institutions (Campbell, 2012; Pierson, 1993). This policy feedback can be in the form of personal experiences or proximity to welfare institutions, which has been shown to affect attitudes towards a number of issues and areas (Hedegaard, 2014). Zaller (1992) also acknowledges that some information is created or transmitted through experiences and personal contacts, leading him to describe this as a shortcoming in this theory: 'It would obviously be desirable to be able to measure exposure to interpersonal influence independently of exposure to elite discourse in the mass media.' (44). The impact of interpersonal influences fits with the policy feedback literature with both emphasizing how proximity to

social assistance creates more positive attitudes by creating personal experiences to compete with the negative stereotypes.

**Thesis 4:** Respondents with no proximity to social assistance will develop more negative attitudes, while respondents who are proximate to the social assistance scheme will develop more positive attitudes.

I believe that this outlines a more realistic model of attitude change resulting from the debate. Instead of expecting that attitudes will be uniformly changed, we instead test whether there is a confirmation bias, because people seek out information and stereotypes that fit their predispositions and experiences and therefore attitudes diverge (Lord et al., 1979; Taber & Lodge, 2006).

## Data and Variables

The data used in this paper were collected as a two-wave web-panel study in which 2000 respondents were surveyed in both waves. The 2000 respondents were chosen from a larger pool in the first wave, which insured minimal dropout between the two waves of the panel. The first wave was collected prior to the Carina and Robert cases in September and October 2011 (T1), and the second wave was collected after the cases in November 2012 (T2). The target group of respondents was age 18–65 years and weights were applied to match national averages on age, gender, regions of the country, and education level.

The dependent variable throughout was based on the question which also was used in Table 1 above: 'Do you think that the government spends too much, suitably, or too little on social assistance?' Since the prediction was that the small change in attitudes hid larger variations, a variable was calculated to show developments in attitudes between T1 and T2. The changes in attitudes were measured as attitudes in T2 after subtracting attitudes in T1 (Menard, 2002). This is presented in Table 2.

Table 2 shows that attitudes can develop in a very negative direction (- -), a negative direction (-), remain unchanged (0), a positive direction (+), or in a very positive direction (+ +). For example, a

respondent who in T1 answered that a suitable amount is being spent and that too much is being spent in T2 constitutes an attitude change in a negative direction (-). In reality, very few respondents moved from one extreme to another (less than two per cent in all), which is why the positive and negative categories were combined in the study.

**Table 2.** The method for calculating development in attitudes between T1 and T2

		Attitude towards spending on social assistance in November 2012 (T2)		
		Too little	Suitable	Too much
Attitude towards spending on social assistance in September/October 2011 (T1)	Too little	0	-	--
	Suitable	+	0	-
	Too much	++	+	0

### Independent Variables

To test the outlined theses a number of independent variables were also outlined. In longitudinal studies the relationship between the dependent and independent variables can be measured in four different ways (Menard, 2002). This study investigated how independent variables explained changes in attitudes in both negative ( $X \rightarrow \Delta Y \downarrow$ ) and positive directions ( $X \rightarrow \Delta Y \uparrow$ ).

To investigate Thesis 1 about receiving the message, this question was used: 'Do you remember the so-called 'Carina case' which was discussed in the media about a year ago?' A similar one was asked about the Robert case and the response categories were simply 'yes', 'no', or 'uncertain'. No further help was provided for the respondents and the nicknames provided by the press were not used, as they could have biased the responses.

Thesis 2, concerning accepting or rejecting stereotypes on the basis of egalitarian values, was investigated by the proposition: 'In politics one should strive after securing for everyone the same economic conditions regardless of education and occupation'. The response categories are on a five-point scale: fully agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, and fully disagree. This was only collected in T1, but as values are believed to be relatively stable, they should not have changed significantly during the one year between the surveys (Halman, 2007).

Thesis 4 was studied by means of self-reported proximity to recipients of social assistance. These questions were collected in the second wave of the panel (T2). The proximity to recipients of social assistance is called the 'order of proximity' throughout the analysis, as it measures how proximate or distant the respondent is to recipients of the benefit. The 1<sup>st</sup> order of proximity is the group that, at the time or up to 12 months previously, were recipients of the social assistance benefit. The 2<sup>nd</sup> order of proximity contains respondents who were related to recipients of social assistance, that is, spouses, cohabitants, parents, children, or siblings. The 3<sup>rd</sup> order of proximity contains respondents who had recipients of social assistance within their closest circle of friends. The variables also contained a reference category of respondents who had no close relation to recipients of social assistance. This is listed as the 4<sup>th</sup> order. The proximity variables were structured such that respondents who answered that they had 1<sup>st</sup>-order proximity did not count in the other categories, and similarly for the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> order.

Thesis 3, about direct and indirect self-interest, was based partly on the measure above, as 1<sup>st</sup>-order and 2<sup>nd</sup>-order proximity outlined above fits the measures of, respectively, direct and indirect self-interest. Furthermore, a question regarding the self-reported risk of becoming unemployed was also used to capture another form of indirect self-interest: 'To what degree do you feel that you and/or your partner are at risk of becoming unemployed within the next year?' Here respondents could answer: to a high degree, to some degree, to a lesser degree, or not at all. This form of indirect self-interest differed from having family members who received benefits (2<sup>nd</sup> order proximity), as it measured the protection provided by social assistance.

## Results

Using the dependent variable outlined above I could track the individual development in attitudes. I found that 24 per cent of the respondents became more negative towards spending on social assistance, 15 per cent positive or more positive, and 61 per cent did not change their opinion between the surveys (N=1585). This suggests the explanation of overall relative stability hiding larger variations fitting the case, as 39 per cent changed their attitudes over the period. However, in order to further explore the divergence of attitudes and the theses of why the divergence happened, the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable was tested in two binary logistic regressions.

To test the theses outlined above I constructed two separate binary logistic regressions. The models tested how well the theses explained why respondents became more negative (model 1) or positive (model 2) towards spending on social assistance, compared to respondents who did not change their attitudes. The models were created as separate binary logistic regressions instead of a multinomial logistic regression, as this allowed me to set the reference point for categorical variables, but otherwise the combination of the two models had the same effect as a multinomial logistic regression. The models tested for the outlined independent variables as well as for age and education (not shown). In addition to that, I controlled for the attitudes in T1. Since the dependent variable measured changes in attitudes from a starting point, it might have prevented some groups from becoming significantly more positive or negative compared to their starting attitude. For example, if respondents had a very positive position as a group in T1, it is very unlikely they would become significantly more positive towards greater spending in T2. The models therefore expressed the relative changes in attitudes. The regressions from this control are not shown, as they do not add to the interpretation the models.

**Table 3.** Logistic regression models of changes in attitudes towards spending on social assistance, odds ratios and significance levels

<b>Model 1 - Negative direction</b>	Odds ratio	<i>p</i>	<b>Model 2 - Positive direction</b>	Odds ratio	<i>p</i>
<b>Remembers the case – Carina</b>			<b>Remembers the case – Carina</b>		
Yes	1.1	0.569	Yes	1.0	0.877
No	Reference		No	Reference	
<b>Remembers the case – Robert</b>			<b>Remembers the case – Robert</b>		
Yes	1.5	0.128	Yes	0.8	0.282
No	Reference		No	Reference	
<b>In politics one should strive to ensure equality (scale 1–5)</b>	1.2	0.030	<b>In politics one should strive to ensure equality (scale 1–5)</b>	0.8	0.000
<b>Proximity to social assistance</b>			<b>Proximity to social assistance</b>		
Self (1 <sup>st</sup> order)	0.2	0.022	Self (1 <sup>st</sup> order)	2.3	0.136
Close family (2 <sup>nd</sup> order)	0.9	0.636	Close family (2 <sup>nd</sup> order)	0.8	0.491
Close friends (3 <sup>rd</sup> order)	1.1	0.639	Close friends (3 <sup>rd</sup> order)	1.1	0.795
No proximity (4 <sup>th</sup> order)	Reference		No proximity (4 <sup>th</sup> order)	Reference	
<b>Perceived risk of unemployment (scale 1–4)</b>	1.2	0.055	<b>Perceived risk of unemployment (scale 1–4)</b>	0.7	0.002

*Note: No change N=739. Positive direction N=164. Negative direction N=284. See methods section for scales of the continuous variables. Model 1 – Negative direction (0=No change, 1=Negative direction). Model 2 – Positive direction (0=No change, 1=positive direction). The models are also controlled for age and education with so significant effects (not shown).*

Overall the model presented in Table 3 helped to explain the polarization of attitudes in a negative direction (model 1) and a positive direction (model 2). Model 1 showed some interesting and

quite surprising patterns. First, it showed that remembering the cases did not have a significant impact on attitudes. Thus I initially had to reject the first part of thesis 1 – that remembering the cases had a negative impact on attitudes. This initially seemed like a strange result, as it suggested that remembering the cases was entirely separate from a negative reaction. One explanation for this pattern might be that there was an overlap of Thesis 1 about receiving the message and Thesis 2 on rejecting or accepting the message on the basis of egalitarian/anti-egalitarian values. Here model 1 showed a significant effect (odds ratio 1.2,  $p=0.03$ ) indicating that people with more anti-egalitarian values were more likely to move in a negative direction. This suggested that people made a self-selection in their sources of news based on predispositions in order to confirm their preconceived stereotypes (Lord et al., 1979; Taber & Lodge, 2006). This could happen through people choosing to ignore or discredit news that did not fit their predispositions. This would also explain why the effect of remembering the cases disappeared with control for egalitarian values, compared to the bi-variate relationship between remembering the cases and a movement in a negative direction (not shown). Being a recipient of social assistance now or within the last 12 months (1<sup>st</sup>-order proximity) also had a significant effect as it made respondents much less likely to move in a negative direction compared to respondents with no proximity. The other proximity variables did not, however, have a significant impact on the chance they would move in a negative direction. The other type of self-interest investigated was the protection offered by social assistance and how it affected respondents who felt more or less at risk of losing their jobs. Here, the more respondents felt secure in their jobs, the more they were likely to move in a negative direction (odds ratio 1.2,  $p=0.055$ ). This, combined with the proximity variable, indicated the importance of self-interest. This confirmed thesis 3 on the effect of self-interest, but not thesis 4 on the effect of proximity, as the effects were insignificant.

Model 2, which explained movements in a positive direction, displayed the same overall patterns as model 1. Similarly to model 1 there was no effect from remembering the cases, but that was in agreement with Thesis 1, as it states that respondents who do not remember the cases do not change attitudes in any direction. This again might be due to the effect of egalitarian values, which display a strong and significant effect (odds ratio 0.8,  $p<0.000$ ). The proximity variable did not create significant differences, not even for 1<sup>st</sup>-order proximate respondents receiving social assistance at the time or within the last 12 months (odds ratio 2.3,  $p=0.136$ ), though this maybe was due to

the low number of respondents (N=31). Finally, the perceived risk of unemployment also showed a significant effect of dependence on the social safety net that benefits represent.

Overall, the results indicate that Danes became more polarized on attitudes towards social assistance. The models outlined above found this polarization to happen along two dimensions: egalitarian values and self-interest. This shows that the chance of picking negative or positive stereotypes of people on social assistance is not uniform in the population. The polarization effect further explains why so little overall effect from the debates was found: It conceals a lot of the movement when looking in the aggregate attitude changes compared to the individual attitude changes.

## **Discussion**

Can negative stereotypes undermine the public's support for welfare-state policies? Much of the literature on welfare attitudes and the impact of media coverage implicitly assume that there is a strong and uniform effect on the public. However, studies from other fields suggest that the effect is more complex. Instead of an overall movement of public opinion we might see a polarization of the public, as individuals seek out information that aligns with their predispositions and thus their confirmation biases.

To investigate the impact of a salient and overall negative debate, the cases of 'poor Carina' and 'lazy Robert' were described. These single-case stories of recipients of social assistance received much attention and presented strong stereotypical images of the recipients. The cases touched on the classic critiques and stereotypes of social assistance which – other studies argue – create negative attitudes in the population. In addition, the case was set in the wake of the financial crisis, when a public discussion of budget cuts was taking place. There were, however, also positive stereotypes of deserving recipients put forward during the debates. This allowed individuals to pick the version of the story that best fit their worldview and self-interest. By using panel data to track individual attitudes before and after the two cases, the article shows that there was only a small drop in public support for social assistance. The small overall change in attitudes, however, hid a larger polarization, as 39 per cent changed their attitudes. Inspired by Zaller's (1992) RAS model and theories of welfare attitudes, I outlined four theses to capture the polarization in

attitudes. This, I believe, is a more realistic model of attitude change during increased media attention, as it includes political values, self-interest, and personal experiences. Using the theses to explore the variations in attitudes, I show how part of the population became more polarized along the two dimensions of egalitarian values and self-interest. This article thus shows that people tend to seek out information that aligns with their predispositions and thus confirm their biases. Therefore we should not expect a single debate to create large changes in public support and thereby undermine the existing support for social spending and the welfare state.

The bulk of this article concerns the 39 per cent who changed opinion, but maybe just as importantly, the 61 per cent who did not change their opinion. This shows that it takes more than one debate to alter public opinion. The question is then whether, or for how long, the stereotypes stick in the public's consciousness. If the stereotypes do stick longer in public consciousness this might lead to a harsher debate the next time, with stronger negative reactions among the 61 per cent, and thus a downward cycle of debates and more sceptical attitudes among the majority. Alternately, if the stereotypes are quickly forgotten or only available to those with anti-egalitarian values, there might be little or no long-term impact from the debate. Another stabilizing factor might be that the universalistic Nordic welfare states tend to create a feedback effect whereby the overall values of the welfare state affect attitudes in other areas (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Larsen & Dejgaard, 2012; Svallfors, 2007).

Finally, it is worth noticing that though the debate had little impact on public opinion, it potentially had an impact on policy developments. In May 2012 the social democratic government introduced a tax reform that tripled the income-tax deductions for working single mothers. This aimed at fixing the incentive problems presented by the Carina case, in which she faced a gap between social assistance and low-wage work, i.e. to make low-wage work financially more attractive than social assistance. This was followed by a large-scale reform of social assistance in January 2014. This reform emphasized moving all 'job-ready' recipients into the workforce, and deepened cuts in benefits to recipients of age 25 to 30 without an education. These were significant policy changes, and I would argue that my findings show that they were not made because of changes in public opinion. Instead we have to look to other possible explanations such as political opportunities and paradigm changes in the perception of the unemployed (Torfing, 2004).

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