

Welfare supporters better informed than skeptics, study suggests

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People who support greater state involvement in delivering services know more about economics and welfare provision than those favoring smaller government, research suggests.

Researchers questioned nearly 4,500 adults on the workings of the U.K. economy and [social services](#) to better gauge how people's understanding influences their [political views](#).

Analysis showed supporters of a more comprehensive welfare system—including greater wealth redistribution and more generous benefits—scored higher than skeptics. The results are published in the journal *Social Policy & Administration*.

Pro-welfare respondents answered more fact-based questions about finance, benefits and employment rights correctly than those who are anti-welfare.

Similarly, people who advocate state delivery of key services such as health care, education and transport revealed greater knowledge than those who support private provision.

Attitudes that favor greater state involvement are therefore grounded in a fuller understanding of how the system works, researchers say.

"Often small-state commentators allege that people only support more welfare because they benefit from it and because they don't understand how things work in reality—but that isn't true," says lead researcher Dr. Jan Eichhorn, of the University of Edinburgh.

The study, however, revealed significant knowledge gaps in people's understanding of the U.K.'s economy and welfare system—particularly finance, benefits, and employment rights.

Most respondents massively over-estimated the proportion of welfare budget spent on [unemployment benefits](#)—the average guess was 36.9% but the true figure is less than 5%.

People also hugely miscalculated levels of benefits fraud—the average guess was 28.1% while the actual amount of overpayments attributable to fraud is just under 3%.

Crucially, the team says, those who back higher welfare spending and greater state involvement in the delivery of services were less likely to overestimate these statistics.

Researchers say [political affiliation](#) is a key factor. Labor (and SNP?) voters were less likely to over-estimate than Conservative voters and also scored higher on fact-based questions.

Dr. Eichhorn, who is based in the University of Edinburgh's School of Social and Political Science, says, "Previous studies revealed significant gaps in the U.K. public's knowledge of the [welfare state](#) and economy without revealing which groups knew more, and which less.

"While men, [older people](#) and graduates show slightly better knowledge on average, substantial differences appear when we distinguish specific domains of knowledge. Women, for example, know more about benefits but men more about finance."

Understanding patterns of economic knowledge requires more complex engagement than has been undertaken to date, says Dr. Eichhorn.

Data was generated by a survey of U.K. residents in July 2021. Researchers say the findings could have a significant impact.

Given that attitude surveys are so influential in shaping policy, the findings could contribute to a political debate on [welfare](#) that is more nuanced than previous discourse.

Identifying knowledge gaps among people who rely on the social

security system can help efforts to better inform people of their rights and improve how the system functions.

The team says further research is needed to explore the findings further. There is a clear link between attitudes and knowledge but other factors shape people's views too, says Dr. Eichhorn.

More information: Jan Eichhorn et al, Public understandings of welfare and the economy: Who knows what and does it relate to political attitudes?, *Social Policy & Administration* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/spol.12963](https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12963)

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