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The de-ideologization of welfare politics: Political governments' social policy measures in eight welfare states during the COVID-19 pandemic

Johanna Peltoniemi[1] ⓘ, Eeva-Leena Ketonen[2] ⓘ and Heikki Hiilamo[3] ⓘ

[1]Welfare State Research, Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, Helsinki, Finland; Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland; [2]Eeva-Leena Ketonen, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland and [3]Heikki Hiilamo, Welfare State Research, Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, Helsinki, Finland; Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland
Corresponding author: Johanna Peltoniemi; Email: johanna.peltoniemi@thl.fi

Abstract

During the global COVID-19 pandemic, many countries have expanded the level and coverage of current social insurance and social assistance programs as well as implemented new programs. Based on three separate datasets, V-Dem V-Party dataset; fourteen structured expert interviews; and a dataset of 114 social security measures, we study the link between the welfare regime, pandemic-related social policy measures, and incumbents' ideological stand. Does the pandemic-related social policy measures mirror the political attitudes of the incumbents? What role did the welfare regime play? We scrutinise eight OECD countries (Denmark, Finland, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, UK, and the US) representing three different welfare regimes: corporatist-conservative countries, liberal countries, and socio-democratic countries. The key findings of this article show that the pandemic-related social policy measures did not mirror the political attitudes of the incumbents.

Introduction

Political parties are often distinguished by their fundamental socio-economic ideologies, which have profound implications for social policies and the role of government. At the heart of these ideological divides is a fundamental disagreement on the extent and nature of government intervention in the economy (see e.g. Lipset & Rokkan, 1967; Henjak, 2010). Parties on the economic left advocate for a robust role of government, characterised by higher taxes, increased regulatory oversight, significant government spending, and a comprehensive welfare state designed to mitigate inequalities and provide a safety net for the most vulnerable in society. This perspective is grounded in the belief that market failures and social inequities necessitate active government intervention to ensure fairness and social justice. Conversely, parties on the economic right champion a minimalist approach to government's economic role, advocating for privatisation, lower taxes, reduced regulation, minimal government spending, and a leaner welfare state.

The divergent views of parties on the economic left and right on the role of government in the economy have significant ramifications for social policy and the welfare of citizens. In normal times, these ideological positions shape debates and policies on a wide range of issues, from healthcare and education to social security and unemployment benefits. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has

highlighted concerns about inequality in society and societies throughout the world have been challenged with new and unexpected needs regarding social security (see e.g. Mäntyneva et al., 2021).

As Cappelen et al. (2021) have noted, the most immediate consequence of the pandemic is that it creates health and economic inequality as a product of chance. Whereas some people have bad luck with the virus and become severely ill, others might have bad economic luck and become unemployed or experience some other unforeseen economic loss because of the crisis. This has highlighted how important life outcomes can be triggered by factors beyond individual control and showed how the crisis reinforces existing inequalities.

Globally, the pandemic had severe economic consequences across the world. At the same time, the pandemic did not affect the welfare states of the Global North equally. To mitigate and respond to these implications and prevent new risks from being realised, public policies, lockdowns, and diverse restrictions have been applied. Many countries have expanded the level and coverage of current social insurance and social assistance programs and implemented new programs such as emergency basic income or similar direct cash support. Furthermore, governments have presented various measures to prevent job losses and income drops. Simultaneously, increased public expenditures have raised concern in many countries.

Besides support measures implemented by governments, informal support between people also increased (see e.g. Grimalda et al., 2021). While the increased support reflects that the crisis makes salient the selfless behaviour of others in society, it also reflects an increased recognition of the mutual dependence. Thus, we are interested in whether solidarity has taken over ideology in the political decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the pandemic, comparative research on social security measures accumulated: A shared understanding was that welfare states, public and social policy in particular, had a crucial role in crisis management, emergency relief, and early recovery from the pandemic (e.g., Aidukaite et al., 2021; Greer et al., 2020; Greve et al., 2020; Nieuwenhuis and Yerkes, 2021; Moreira and Hick, 2021; Pereirinha et al., 2021; Seeman et al., 2021). A large share of the literature has focused on the how question of pandemic social measures, which schemes have been introduced, and how the measures have been implemented (see e.g. Chung and Thewissen, 2021; Nettle et al., 2021; De Wispelaere and Morales, 2021) and addressing path dependency of social policies during the pandemic (e.g. Bali et al., 2022; Engler et al., 2021; Mäntyneva et al., 2021; Migone et al., 2020). Moreover, previous research (e.g. Allcott et al., 2020, Gollwitzer et al., 2020, Grossman et al., 2020, Campos-Mercade et al., 2021, Gadarian et al., 2021, Grimalda et al., 2021, Grimalda et al., 2022) has studied exhaustively the association between political/ party identification and COVID-19-health-related behaviour and found that there really seems to be a clear link between political partisanship/party identification and pandemic related behaviour. Similarly, Crayne and Medeiros (2021) have argued how a leader's sensemaking approach is a critical element in successful crisis management. However, the relationship between ideology and COVID-19-related political decisions has, to the best of our knowledge, not been studied until now.

In this article, we study the link between pandemic-related social policy measures, incumbents' ideological stand, and the welfare regime. The two research questions asked in this article are: (1) Does the pandemic-related social policy measures mirror the political attitudes of the incumbents? and (2) What role did the welfare regime play? To address the presented research questions, we utilise three datasets: V-Dem V-Party (v2) dataset from February 2022; a dataset covering social security measures made in 2020–21 in the welfare countries studied in this article; and *Social Policy Innovations in the Wake of Automation and COVID-19 Outbreak* dataset of structured expert interviews in 2020–21.

The key findings of this article suggest that the pandemic-related social policy measures do not mirror the political attitudes of the incumbents, and welfare regime did not seem to play any significant role. Thus, we argue that solidarity beat political ideologies when social policy measures were adopted during the pandemic. However, the expert interviews revealed some differences among countries: Nordic experts had a more optimistic views of the future, suggesting that the key characteristics of socio-democratic regime helped the countries to tackle the new and unexpected needs regarding social security, presented by the global pandemic. The following section reviews the previous literature on solidarity and

fairness during the times of crisis, and in the third section, we outline the research design. The fourth and fifth sections present the analysis and conclusions.

Welfare during the times of crisis

The concept of solidarity is often traced back to Émile Durkheim and the division between mechanical and organic solidarity (Sister, 1955, Herzog, 2018). Despite the popularity of Durkheim's theory of solidarity presented in *The Division of Labour in Society* ([1893] 2014), the distinction between mechanical and organic solidarity has received a lot of criticism (Thijssen, 2012). The semantics of the concept of solidarity are complex. To overcome this, Dawson and Jennings (2012) have suggested three ways to express solidarity as a rational concept: "Standing up for," "standing up with," and "standing up as." "Standing up for" relates to the idea of representation, advocating for, acting or speaking on behalf of the other. In this sense, solidarity is presented as protecting another who is disadvantaged or unable to articulate their needs in some way or to promote the return of the "other" back to a state where they can achieve their full potential.

The key idea of the second relational dimension, that of "standing up with," is to seek to capture the equality between the parties, a firm mutuality. The third relational dimension is that of "standing up as," which contains the strongest degree of affiliation with the "other." "Standing up as" does not require the eradication of individuality and difference. A plausible way of seeing this element in action is to see it at work not just in the grounded biological nature of human vulnerability but also in a shared polity or culture that requires a shared commitment to equal respect, civil discourse, and tolerance of difference and disagreement. More precisely, solidarity is not just something that we reserve for those whom we agree with. Instead, it entails a shared space where we listen to and learn from each other (Dawson and Jennings, 2012).

According to Durkheim (Thijssen, 2012), individuals tend to look for functional differences, which are complementary rather than mutually exclusive. In this sense, opposites attract, but not all opposites attract equally strongly. Thus, complementary differences breed solidarity. Solidarity can be understood as the degree to which people think society's problems should be given priority over one's own problems (Cappelen et al., 2021). In fact, Axel Honneth has introduced the term "social solidarity" to explicitly point out the fact that solidarity is connected to and bounded by the normative framework of society (Petersen and Willig, 2002, Thijssen, 2012). In this article, we understand solidarity similarly, as a social unity of togetherness.

Sociologists have long studied emergent behaviour, an area of study, "collective behaviour," which focuses on dynamic social phenomena such as crowds, riots, fads and fashion, panic, revolutions, origins of cults, ephemeral mass actions, and changes in public opinion. The common element is the nontraditional nature of the behaviour, which generally arises because the standard ways of acting cannot be followed or are not appropriate for certain occasions (Park and Burgess, 1921, Rodríguez et al., 2006). During the crisis period, there is a great deal of emergent behaviour, both at the individual and group levels. The emergent behaviour can be described as nontraditional or new behaviour, different from routine or customary norm-guided actions. This new behaviour is often heavily prosocial, helping immensely in coping with the extreme and unusual demands of a disaster situation (Rodríguez et al., 2006).

As Dawson and Jennings (2012) have noted, solidarity allows us to see different factors such as the distribution of health and disease, as being of joint and common concern. While classical economic theory has generally assumed the preferences of trust, risk, and time to be immutable individual characteristics, more contemporary studies with experimental evidence have drawn a quite different picture and even argued that preferences can be affected by events and circumstances in the long term (see e.g. Loewenstein and Angner, 2003, Cassar et al., 2017). In an experimental study conducted in Thailand after the 2004 tsunami, Cassar et al. (2017) found that natural disasters may cause their victims to become significantly more trusting, risk-averse, and impatient. Similarly, previous studies have shown

that people tend to become more altruistic after being exposed to violence or war (Voors et al., 2012, Bauer et al., 2016). In contrast, economic recessions are argued to make people more selfish (Fisman et al., 2015).

Previous research has argued that global pandemic has the potential to change moral views and public policy. For instance, in the US, the pandemic has been shown to have increased solidarity among Americans – independent of political affiliation, gender, age, or geography. However, people's moral views were strongly associated with their policy preferences for redistribution. (Cappelen et al., 2021). According to Cappelen et al. (2021), a reminder of the crisis makes people not only more willing to prioritise society's problems over their own problems but also more tolerant of inequalities due to luck. Yet, morals and fairness are highly contextual questions even during "normal times." As Almås et al. (2019) have suggested in a large-scale study of the US and Norway, there are significant differences in fairness views between countries: Americans are much more accepting of inequalities due to luck than Norwegians.

During the pandemic, questions regarding solidarity and fairness were first considered with regard to fair allocation of the scarce medical resources, such as deciding which patients receive life-saving care and which do not in the occasion when not everyone needing the treatment can be treated due to lack of resources (Emanuel et al., 2020). The ethical values were tested as choices between benefit maximation (save most lives/save most life-years), equal treatment (first come-first served), benefit to others (priority to research participants and health care workers), and prioritising worst off (sickest first, youngest/oldest first) were made (Emanuel et al., 2020). Further along, similar questions regarding prioritisation were raised regarding, e.g., access to vaccines.

Alongside health risk mitigation, the pandemic also revealed an urgent need to improve social security worldwide. As noted by Cassar et al. (2017), disasters constitute a persistent threat to economic welfare. Thus, aid directed at diverse groups (including e.g., at-risk employees, students, and families) raised a new set of questions regarding solidarity, fairness, and the role of the state. As Lopez-Valcarel and Barber (2017) have pointed out, some health problems have a clear social dimension, which becomes more acute during a crisis. On the other hand, there is a real risk of a "post-pandemic double burden of disease," where the pressures of having to manage the COVID-19 pandemic have caused significant disruptions to the usual healthcare systems and society, possibly leading to increased morbidity and mortality in the long-term if not managed appropriately (Chan and Horne, 2021). Thus, the "third wave" of crisis caused by the pandemic, the overdue health care burden, might still offer yet another perspective on the solidarity viewpoint.

Previous research regarding the global pandemic has been done from diverse societal viewpoints: Campos-Mercade et al., 2021 have studied the impact of diverse policies aimed at diminishing the effects of the COVID-19 depending on the degree of prosociality in a population. Several studies (see e.g. Bruine de Bruin et al., 2020, Bobba and Hubé, 2021, Kerr et al., 2021) have pointed out that political polarisation was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. With a survey of a representative sample of the US population in 2020, Grimalda et al. (2022) found that during the pandemic, political polarisation was considerably larger than behavioural polarisation. Yet, as Campos-Mercade et al. (2021) have found, a large majority of people were very reluctant to put others at risk for their personal benefit. Similarly, previous research has found that political identification and partisanship have played a significant role in COVID-19-health-related behaviour (Allcott et al., 2020, Gollwitzer et al., 2020, Grossman et al., 2020, Gadarian et al., 2021). However, the relationship between political ideology and COVID-19-related political decisions has not been studied until now.

Political incumbents during the pandemic

As shown in Table 1, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the eight countries studied in this article saw several governments from all parts of the political spectrum. During 2020 and 2021, Denmark, Finland, Netherlands, and UK had only one incumbent government, whereas Germany, Norway, Sweden, and the

Table 1. Political powers in the eight case study countries

	Welfare regime	Incumbents 1 January 2020	Incumbents 1 January 2021	Incumbents 1 January 2022
Denmark	Socio-democratic	Mette Frederiksen's I government: Social Democrats	Mette Frederiksen's I government: Social Democrats	Mette Frederiksen's I government: Social Democrats
Finland	Socio-democratic	Sanna Marin's centre-left government: Social Democratic Party, Centre Party, Green League, Left Alliance and Swedish People's Party.	Sanna Marin's centre-left government: Social Democratic Party, Centre Party, Green League, Left Alliance and Swedish People's Party.	Sanna Marin's centre-left government: Social Democratic Party, Centre Party, Green League, Left Alliance and Swedish People's Party.
Germany	Corporatist-conservative	Angela Merkel's IV government: Christian Democratic Union, Social Democratic Party and Christian Social Union in Bavaria	Angela Merkel's IV government: Christian Democratic Union, Social Democratic Party and Christian Social Union in Bavaria	Olaf Scholz's central-left government: Social Democratic Party, Alliance 90/The Greens, and Free Democratic Party.
Netherlands	Corporatist-conservative	Mark Rutte's III, centre-right government: consisting of People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, Christian Democratic Appeal, Democrats 66, and Christian Union.	Mark Rutte's III, centre-right government: consisting of People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, Christian Democratic Appeal, Democrats 66, and Christian Union.	Mark Rutte's III, centre-right government: consisting of People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, Christian Democratic Appeal, Democrats 66, and Christian Union.
Norway	Socio-democratic	Erna Solberg's right-wing government: Conservative Party, Progress Party (until 2020), Liberal Party, and Christian Democratic Party.	Erna Solberg's right-wing government: Conservative Party, Liberal Party, and Christian Democratic Party.	Jonas Gahr Støre's centre-left government: Labour Party and Centre Party.
Sweden	Socio-democratic	Stefan Löfven's II centre-left government: Social Democrats and Green Party	Stefan Löfven's II centre-left government: Social Democrats and Green Party	Magdalena Andersson's centre-left single-party government: Social Democrats
UK	Liberal	Boris Johnson's II conservative government	Boris Johnson's II conservative government	Boris Johnson's II conservative government
The US	Liberal	President, Senate and House: Republicans	President, Senate and House: Democrats	President, Senate and House: Democrats

US saw changes in the state leadership. Of the socio-democratic regime's countries studied in this article, in Denmark, Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen has been in power since 2019, first leading Frederiksen I, a minority government of the Social Democrats in 2019–2022, followed by Frederiksen II, majority government consisting Social Democrats, Venstre, and the Moderates. In Finland, Sanna Marin's majority government was in power from 2019 to 2023, consisting of the Social Democratic Party, Centre Party, Green League, Left Alliance, and Swedish People's Party. In Norway, Erna Solberg's right-wing government was in power from 2013 to 2021, consisting of Conservative Party, Progress Party (until 2020), Liberal Party (2018–2021), and Christian Democratic Party (2019–2021), followed by Jonas Gahr Støre's minority centre-left government (from 2021 onwards), consisting of Labour Party and

Centre Party. In Sweden, three governments had been in power during the pandemic. First, Stefan Löfven's II centre-left coalition minority government was in power from 2019 to 2021, consisting of Social Democrats and Green Party, followed by Stefan Löfven's III government (2021–2021), centre-left coalition minority government, consisting of Social Democrats and Green Party, which in turn was followed by Magdalena Andersson's centre-left single-party minority government (2021–2022), consisting of Social Democrats, followed by Ulf Kristersson's right-wing minority government (2022-), consisting of Moderate Party, Christian Democrats and Liberals.

Of the corporatist-conservative regime's countries, in Germany, Angela Merkel's IV coalition government was in power for 2018–2021. Merkel's majority government consisted of the Christian Democratic Union, Social Democratic Party, and Christian Social Union in Bavaria, and it was followed by Olaf Scholz's centre-left majority coalition of Social Democratic Party, Alliance 90/The Greens and Free Democratic Party. In Netherlands, Mark Rutte's III, a majority centre-right government was in power from 2017 to 2022. Of the liberal regime's countries, Boris Johnson's II conservative government was in power from 2019 to 2020. Finally, in the US, the power changed during the pandemic, as the Senate and House were both held by Republicans until the 2020 presidential elections, after which the power shifted to the Democrats in both.

Research design

In this article, we scrutinise eight OECD countries: Denmark, Finland, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, UK, and the US. The countries were chosen on the basis of traditional welfare state regime theory (Esping-Andersen, 1990). The countries represent three different welfare regimes: Corporatist-conservative countries (Germany and Netherlands), liberal countries (UK and the US), and socio-democratic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden). Nordic countries are overrepresented to provide a comparative setting for socio-democratic welfare regime, which is known for a high level of solidarity. In order to analyse the political governments' social policy measures in welfare states during the COVID-19 pandemic, we utilise three data sets. First, in order to determine the party positioning and parties' promotion for means-tested or universalistic welfare policies, we used the V-Dem V-Party (v2) dataset from February 2022. This dataset includes more than 1,900 parties in 168 countries during the years 1970–2019 (Lindberg et al., 2022b, Lindberg et al., 2022a, Düpont et al., 2022). We utilised OLS regression to estimate the coefficients of linear regression equations to describe the relationship between party positioning and means-tested or universalistic welfare policies.

The second dataset we used in this article was collected between July 2020 and January 2022. The dataset covers a total of 114 social security measures, which addressed both traditional risks (such as unemployment and sickness) and new risks (such as over-indebtedness). The data set includes eight welfare states: Denmark, Finland, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, United Kingdom, and the United States. The data were collected from parliaments', ministries', and governments' official documents and bulletins focusing on social security measures (Mäntyneva et al., 2021). In addition, data were collected from COVID-19 databases such as those conducted by Eurofound, ISSA, and IMF. The measures included in the dataset were introduced in 2020, and then we followed whether or not the measures were continued in 2021. The dataset includes the measures' content, scope, size (amount), and timing of the social security measures. The data collection was funded by Academy of Finland (special funding for COVID-19 -related research, 13355273).

We used this dataset to compare the party positioning of the incumbent parties and the pandemic-related social policy measures. Seeing that both the size of population (5 million of Norway and Finland; 331 million of the US) and the size of the economy (GDP per person UK 46,510.3 US$; Norway 89,154.3 US$) vary extensively among the countries chosen for this article (The World Bank, 2023), we have chosen to analyse the number of social policy measures instead of, e.g., the spending or the number of populations covered. Seeing that the number of social policy measures is a more equal variable, as, in

principle, social policy measures are adopted only once; it offers a more comparable setting for the analysis of this article.

Third, we used *Social Policy Innovations in the Wake of Automation and COVID-19 Outbreak* dataset to gain more profound understanding on the pandemic-related social policy measures taken, as well as the underlying context of the decision-making in the studied countries. This data set was combined with structured expert interviews in 2020–21. The data collection took place between 1 October 2020 and 30 November 2021. An invitation letter was sent via email to a number of experts in the following fields: economics; public policy; social policy; and health sciences. In practise, policymakers, economists, and researchers from within these fields were invited to take part in the study. The experts were identified by an online search of the leading relevant institutions (such as ministries, labour market organisations, universities, research institutions, and chambers of commerce) in the selected countries.

The interviews were carried out anonymously using an online questionnaire that included open-ended, structured questions relating to social policy innovations in the wake of automation and the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants self-generated the data by filling in their answers. Thus, our methodology combined traditional interviews with surveying. The aim of this type of data collection was to allow participants to extend their responses further than what survey questionnaire would have allowed, yet enabling comparative analysis by keeping the questions structured. The data set used in this article includes fourteen interviews of experts from Denmark, Finland, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the US. In this article, the interviewees are identified with a running identification number that corresponds to the order in which the interviews were recorded. The complete list of the interview questions is presented in Appendix Table 1. In this article, we analysed the responses to the sections E-K. The data collection was funded by Strategic Research Council (Academy of Finland) project Manufacturing 4.0 – Reshaping social policies. Our aim is to be able to tease out additional viewpoints with the expert interview data, information which cannot be discovered by using solely quantitative data sets. While the quantitative aspects of the research allow us to answer the questions of "what", the qualitative aspects illustrate the reasoning for "why" and "how". Thus, we believe that the mixed methods design allows us best to answer the research questions of this study.

Results

Traditionally, parties on the economic left want government to play an active role in the economy. This includes higher taxes, more regulation and government spending, and a more generous welfare state. Similarly, parties on the economic right emphasise a reduced economic role for government: privatisation, lower taxes, less regulation, less government spending, and a leaner welfare state. We tested this assumption with the V-Party dataset. In Figure 1, all the nearly 2,000 parties in 168 countries of the V-Party dataset have been included. On the y-axis is the extent to what parties promote means-tested or universalistic welfare policies, and on the x-axis, the parties' overall ideological stand on economic issues[1]. The linear trend is really quite clear. The regression analysis of Figure 1 is also presented in Appendix Table 3.

It seems clear that in "normal times" political parties have clear, ideologically bound, standing on what type of welfare policies they promote. Thus, we wanted to test whether or not the left–right spectrum of political parties and their promotion of universalism was prevalent also during the global pandemic. First, we explored the social policy measures implemented in the eight countries during the first year of the pandemic. As shown in Table 2., we categorised the social policy measures implemented in eight countries under ten categories. The most prevalent types of measures were those either tackling unemployment or promoting employment. Conversely, the number of direct income transfers, as well as measures regarding housing, pensions, or last resort assistance remained low.

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[1]The precise wording of the questions behind these variables has been presented in Appendix Table 2.
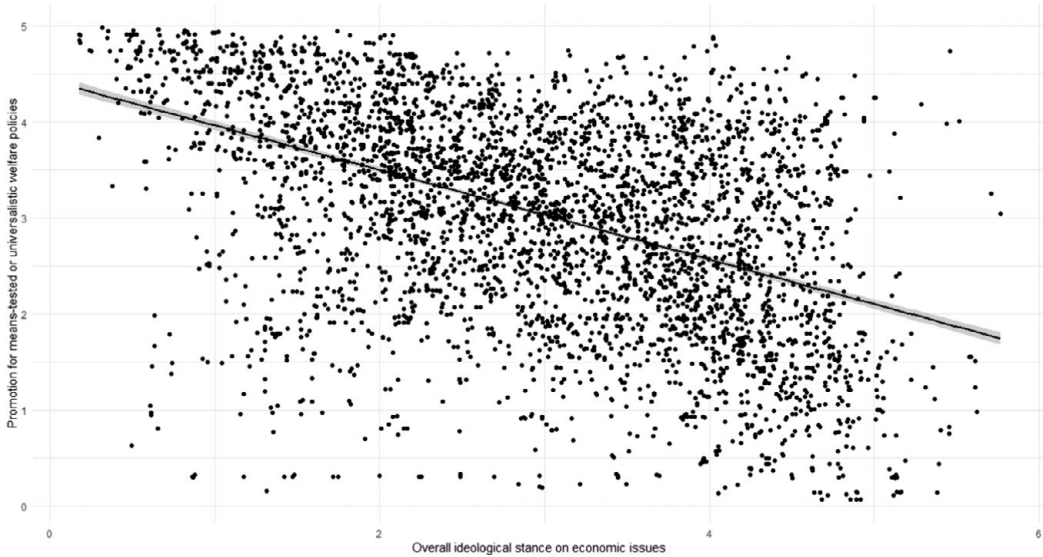
Figure 1. Economic left–right spectrum of political parties and their promotion for universalism.

Next, we compared the eight countries (Denmark, Finland, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, UK and the US) with regard to the median value of the incumbent parties on an economic left–right scale and the total number of the COVID-related social policy measures implemented in the countries. The median value of the governing parties standing on the economic left–right scale was adopted from the V-Parties v2 dataset (the variable *v2pariglef*) (Lindberg et al., 2022a). After this, we calculated the median value of the governing parties of each country and compared it with the total number of COVID-related social policy measures (Figure 2). This provides crucial information on the ideological orientation towards the left/right spectrum that the incumbent governments were leading towards. Interestingly, as shown in Figure 2, there was no relation between the governing parties' positioning on the traditional left–right scale and the number of the COVID-related social policy measures. This means that it did not significantly matter whether the governing parties of the eight countries under scrutiny were from the economic left or right, on how many COVID-related social policy measures were made in these countries. Unlike the findings of the OLS regression (Figure 1.), for the adoption of the pandemic-related social policy measures, it did not matter whether the incumbent parties were on the left or the right side of the political spectrum. More precisely, it seems that the political identification of the parties did not influence the number of the measures.

Similarly, as shown in Figure 3, the comparison of the three welfare state regimes did not show linear trends either. The trends were also very similar when comparing the percentage of social policy expenditure relative to the Gross domestic product (GDP) (Figure 4). This is remarkable, as the welfare state regimes have traditionally been a rather good variable to predict socio-political context (e.g. Papadakis and Bean, 1993, Gelissen, 2000, Levecque et al., 2011. Thus, it seems that unlike during the "normal times," during the times of pandemic, the governing parties' political or ideological stand on welfare state does not really play a role when adopting social policy measures. Instead, a united front seems a more likely way to go.

There were, however, some differences on the measures adopted in different regimes. As shown in Figure 5, all the studied countries implemented measures especially regarding to unemployment and employment promotion. The corporatist-conservative countries of our sample did not implement health-related social policy measures nor measures regarding last-resort assistance or direct income transfers, unlike countries in other regimes. On the other hand, the socio-democratic countries did not

Table 2. Social policy measures in 2020

|	Unemployment	Health	Pensions	Families with children	Last-resort assistance	Direct income transfers	Employment promotion	Students	Over-indebtedness prevention	Housing	In total
Denmark	3	1	1	1	1	1	4	1	0	0	**13**
Finland	3	1	0	1	2	0	6	3	1	1	**18**
Norway	3	1	1	1	1	0	4	1	1	0	**13**
Sweden	2	3	0	1	0	0	4	3	1	1	**15**
Germany	2	0	1	4	0	0	2	2	4	0	**15**
Netherlands	2	0	0	1	0	0	5	1	1	1	**11**
UK	0	3	1	1	1	0	3	1	2	1	**13**
the US	3	1	1	2	0	2	2	2	2	1	**16**
In total	**18**	**10**	**5**	**12**	**5**	**3**	**30**	**14**	**12**	**5**	**114**
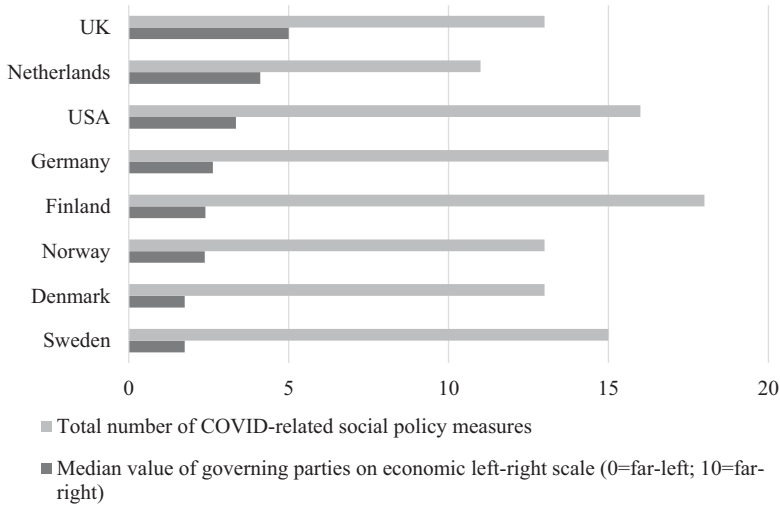
Figure 2. Governing parties' standing on economic left–right scale compared with the total number of COVID-related social policy measures.
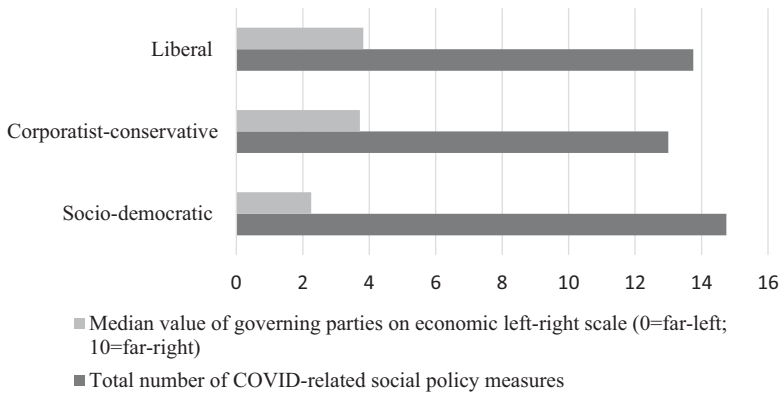

Figure 3. Number of COVID-related social policy measures in three welfare regimes.

implement measures to prevent over-indebtedness as eagerly as countries in other regimes. Considering that the overall number of the measures did not vary significantly among the regimes or on the country level, we deduct these differences can be explained with the country-specific details of the selected countries. For instance, in some countries, the last-resort assistance may have needed reforming, while in other countries, students may have had stronger social security already prior to the pandemic and thus did not necessarily need any targeted measures. These notions were most likely present also in the decision-making processes.

Next, in order to gain more in-depth understanding of the role of solidarity in the decision-making context behind the COVID-related social policy measures, we analysed the interview data. Even though there was not much variation in the number of implemented social policy measures, Nordic countries (socio-democratic regime) stood out in the crowd in managing and funding the combat against the COVID-19. In the expert interviews, most country experts noted that managing the lockdown period and subsequent economic distress as well as the costs caused by the measures were funded with debt. However, despite higher debt levels, country experts of Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden seemed to have been more optimistic with view on future for well-being than country experts from other countries.
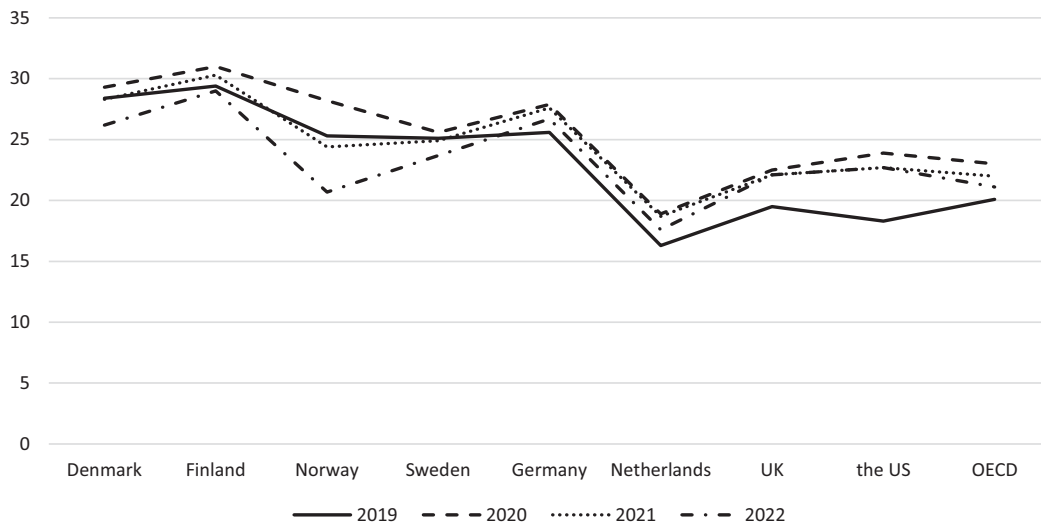
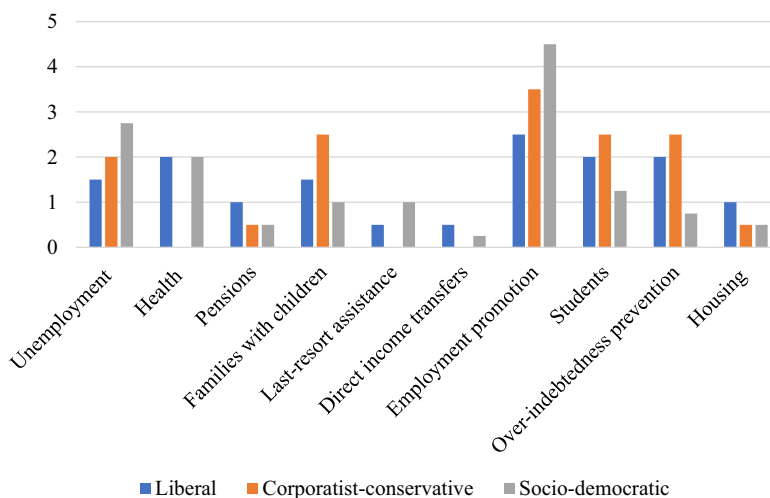**Figure 4.** Public Social Spending, % of GDP.
Source: OECD, 2024.

Figure 5. COVID-related social policy measures in three welfare regimes.

An interviewee from the US noted that the lockdown period and the subsequent economic distress were funded "*through direct payments to employers and employees,*" whereas the costs were covered with "*short term deficit spending*" *(16, the US)*. Similarly, in Denmark "*government debt has increased substantially. That is possible given that we are targeting temporary measures. Given the low interest rate and the low level of government debt initially, that is not a problem*" *(I9, Denmark)*. "*So far it looks as if the costs will be funded by increasing debt. This is not a problem at present. Danish government debt levels are low (net debt is close to zero, gross debt around 40 pct. of GDP.) and interest rates are exceptionally low. The COVID-19 crisis has not changed the long-term assessment of the public finances as clearly sustainable.*" *(I4, Denmark)*. Also, in Sweden and in Netherlands, the costs were covered with increased debt: "*The costs will be covered by increased government debt and slightly higher governmental interest*

payments" (I11, Sweden). "*Public debt has risen. NL had a very low public debt and this has now risen to the EU-maximum levels [ ]*" (I21, Netherlands).

Especially the experts from Netherlands were worried about the economic future, the repayment of the public debt, and the future generations. '*It [the costs of the COVID-19-related social policy measures] will be paid for by the inhabitants of the country of course, it is many loans that will be paid with taxes. Of course, also the next generations will pay dearly for this*'. (I15, Netherlands). '*[ ] Current funding of self-employed and companies is funding that needs to be repaid. It is a type of loan. Personal opinion: a lot of funding has created ghost-companies, that is companies that should have stopped functioning but keep on acting as if nothing happened. The public funding will be hard to recover from these companies. It is inefficient. We will see a lot of failures in 2021 and rising unemployment. And the issues with the self-employed have not been solved*'. (I21, Netherlands). '*[ ] Depends on the fact if the tide can be turned in foreseeable time span. If yes, then no new problems; if no then several issues, like: -arrears in education (schools closed) -arrears in healthcare (suspended treatments) -social disruption due to unemployment and income loss, bankruptcy of many companies, "lost generation"*'. (I16, Netherlands).

The Nordic experts' key notions highlighted the good prepandemic economic situation, consensus politics, tripartite agreements, and cooperation between social partners and government. "*The Danish system of consensus politics and tripartite agreements have helped a lot. Free health care and sickness coverage has also helped*" (I4, Denmark). "*The Government gives compensation to workers and employers affected by COVID19/Locked downs. The different systems are evaluated as we go, and adjusted to the situation. It is hard to say what will be the situation after the pandemic, but we have a close cooperation between the social partners and the Government on what is needed, learnt during the pandemic*" (I8, Norway). In this sense, expert interviews revealed more optimistic views for future among the Nordic experts.

However, while the pandemic demonstrated the well-functioning features of the society, the pandemic and lockdowns also highlighted the need for future improvements: "*Lockdown has increased awareness of the inequalities in the Danish Labour market, with white collar workers retreating to working from home and blue-collar workers in transport, hotels and restaurants being laid off or working in covid-19 exposed positions in retail, health care and care for the elderly.*" (I4, Denmark). "*Our Social Security Trust Fund is spending more than it brings in and expected to run a deficit within the next decade or so. We're facing a reduction in paid benefits on the one hand and a change in how these benefits are distributed on the other [ ] We have a relatively paltry welfare state, for example our Congress has been unable to provide unemployment support for those left jobless as a result of the COVID pandemic.*" (I6, the US).

Conclusions

We asked if the pandemic-related social policy measures mirror the political attitudes of the incumbents and what role does the welfare regime play. The previous studies on solidarity during the times of crisis have noted that there is a great deal of emergent behaviour, both at the individual and group levels (Rodríguez et al., 2006). A crisis makes people more willing to prioritise society's problems over their own problems, but also more tolerant of inequalities due to luck (Cappelen et al., 2021). Natural disasters may cause its victims to become significantly more trusting, risk-averse, and impatient (Cassar et al., 2017), and people tend to become more altruistic after being exposed to violence or war (Voors et al., 2012, Bauer et al, 2016). In contrast, economic recessions make people more selfish (Fisman et al., 2015), but the impact of diverse policies aimed at diminishing the effects of the COVID-19 depends on the degree of prosociality in a population (Campos-Mercade et al., 2021). However, while the increase in solidarity may reflect that the crisis makes salient the selfless behaviour of others in society, it may also highlight the growing awareness and recognition of mutual dependence.

The key findings of this article suggest that unlike during the normal times, during the times of pandemic, the governing parties' political or ideological stand on welfare state does not really play a role

when adopting social policy measures. While during "normal times," parties on the economic left want government to play an active role in the economy, and parties on the economic right emphasise a reduced economic role for government, during the pandemic, the political standing of the incumbent parties remained insignificant. Instead, a united front seems a more likely way to go. Therefore, not surprisingly, the comparison of three welfare state regimes did not show linear trends either. In fact, despite being in three different types welfare state regimes, all selected welfare states during the crisis have promoted social policy, without fundamental differences according to the types of the welfare state. However, expert interviews revealed a more optimistic views for the future among the Nordic experts, possibly due to the key characteristics of socio-democratic regime. Thus, it seems that pandemics relate more to war-like situations than economic crisis.

While we cannot measure solidarity as a basis for social policy measures per se, our findings regarding similarities in policies are partly in line with the previous research: According to Cappelen et al. (2021), the pandemic has been shown to have increased solidarity among Americans. However, unlike Cappelen et al. (2021), arguing that people's moral views were strongly associated with their policy preferences for redistribution, we found that this was not the case with governments and social policy measures. As noted by Cassar et al. (2017), disasters fundamentally change people and the communities in which they live. Previous research (e.g. Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004, Cassar et al, 2017) has observed that severe (natural) disasters often foster a sense of community. This seems to have also been the case during the COVID-19 pandemic and the new public policies adopted by governments to prevent further suffering (such as job losses and a drop in income).

Politicians and parties which enter government should fulfil their pledges, and they are indeed under some moral obligation to at least attempt to do so. For instance, Costello and Thomson (2008) have argued that most coalition parties fill more than half of their pledges, and for one-party cabinet, the number is presumably higher. Therefore, for politicians, following the ideological traits of their party and fulfilling their pledges are extremely important for remaining in office. Thus, the result that governments, regardless of their political ideology and regime, carried out similar policy measures throughout the world, is an exceptional finding. The key takeaway of this article is that political decision-making and policymaking in future crises and shocks (such as regarding the climate change) might in fact not be as closely connected to political ideologies as they have been in the past. Instead, as the findings of this article point out, in future crisis there may be fewer options, and thus, the decision-making might be less ideology-based.

While the pandemic is eventually receding in terms of excess mortality, it is still difficult to draw conclusions on how it changed societies and whether these changes will become permanent. Moreover, as the "third wave of crisis" caused by the pandemic, the overdue healthcare burden, is still to be solved, and many unforeseen questions are still rising.

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APPENDIX TABLE 1. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

A BACKGROUND INFORMATION	
Your country: Choose: Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Singapore, South Korea, United States, other Your gender: Choose: Female, male, other, prefer not to say Your year of birth: Choose: [1945–2002] Your field of expertise: Economics, public policy, social policy, health sciences, other	
B NEED TO REFORM SOCIAL SECURITY	open-ended question
Many countries are facing new challenges in their social policies. Automation and technological innovations are causing job loss. Simultaneously increasing costs for social benefits are forcing aging countries to re-evaluate and renew social security. **Is there a need for a comprehensive social security reform in your country? If yes, why?**	
C SOCIAL SECURITY INNOVATIONS	open-ended question
New challenges also provide social security systems new untapped opportunities to deliver social security. **Which types of social security innovations have been proposed in your country to reform social security?** **Which are the solutions available for answering to emerging need in your country?** **Which would be the best practices to deliver social security in your country?** **What type of social security innovations would be most useful for your country?**	
D PERSONAL SOCIAL ACCOUNTS	open-ended question
Some countries have adopted social accounts (such as unemployment account, education account and social and healthcare accounts) as a part of social security. **Are there any personal social accounts in use in your country or has there been discussion on possible adoption of social accounts in your country? If yes, which?** **What has been the reasoning for and against social accounts and which goals have been proposed for them?** **If there currently are, or there have previously been, any social accounts in use in your country, what were the key experiences of them?**	
IMPLEMENTATION OF NEW SOCIAL SECURITY INNOVATIONS DUE TO THE COVID–19	
Many countries have adopted new social security and social policy responses to combat the distress caused by COVID–19 crisis. These responses have included for instance different universal benefits as well as more focused benefits (such as implementing unemployment benefits for entrepreneurs or universal monetary aid). Next, we ask you to consider if the ongoing COVID–19 crisis has caused or accelerated the implementation of any new social security and social policy innovations, reforms or benefits in your country.	
E BENEFITS RELATED TO COVID–19 PANDEMIC: Unemployment	
Has the ongoing COVID–19 crisis caused or accelerated the implementation of any new social security and social policy innovations, reforms or benefits in your country?	Yes; No
If yes, which type of benefits? Are they planned to be temporary or permanent? Are they universal or distributed on a case-by-case basis?	open-ended question
F BENEFITS RELATED TO COVID–19 PANDEMIC: Sickness	
Has the ongoing COVID–19 crisis caused or accelerated the implementation of any new social security and social policy innovations, reforms or benefits in your country?	Yes; No
If yes, which type of benefits? Are they planned to be temporary or permanent? Are they universal or distributed on a case-by-case basis?	open-ended question
G BENEFITS RELATED TO COVID–19 PANDEMIC: Parental	
Has the ongoing COVID–19 crisis caused or accelerated the implementation of any new social security and social policy innovations, reforms or benefits in your country	Yes; No

If yes, which type of benefits? Are they planned to be temporary or permanent? Are they universal or distributed on a case-by-case basis?	open-ended question
H BENEFITS RELATED TO COVID–19 PANDEMIC: Social assistance/minimum income Has the ongoing COVID–19 crisis caused or accelerated the implementation of any new social security and social policy innovations, reforms or benefits in your country?	Yes; No
If yes, which type of benefits? Are they planned to be temporary or permanent? Are they universal or distributed on a case-by-case basis?	open-ended question
I BENEFITS RELATED TO COVID–19 PANDEMIC: Other Has the ongoing COVID–19 crisis caused or accelerated the implementation of any new social security and social policy innovations, reforms or benefits in your country?	Yes; No
If yes, which type of benefits? Are they planned to be temporary or permanent? Are they universal or distributed on a case-by-case basis?	open-ended question
J SERVICES RELATED TO COVID–19 PANDEMIC Has the ongoing COVID–19 crisis caused or accelerated the implementation of new public services (such as employment promotion services) in your country? **If yes, which type of services? Are they planned to be temporary or permanent?**	open-ended question
K FUNDING THE COVID–19 COMBAT The epidemic and subsequent lockdowns will most likely be followed by distress in many sectors in society. For instance, many countries have been forced to increase the government debt. **How has your country planned to fund the lockdown period and the subsequent economic distress?** **How the costs will be covered?** **How will the new social security measures implemented now be funded in the future?** **What is your personal opinion, will some new social problems arise due to the lockdowns and other COVID19-related measures? If yes, which?**	open-ended question

APPENDIX TABLE 2. V-PARTY VARIABLES UTILISED IN ANALYSIS (LINDBERG ET AL., 2022A)

Variable	Variable label	Question	Responses
Economic left–right scale	v2pariglef	Please locate the party in terms of its overall ideological stance on economic issues	0: Far-left. 1: Left. 2: Center-left. 3: Center. 4: Center-right. 5: Right. 6: Far-right.
Welfare	v2pawelf	To what extent does the party promote means-tested or universalistic welfare policies?	0: The party does not support either type of policies and opposes any public welfare policy. 1: The party solely promotes means-tested welfare policies. 2: The party mainly promotes means-tested policies, but a significant portion (e.g. 1/4 or 1/3) is universalistic and potentially benefits everyone in the population. 3: The party roughly equally supports means-tested and universalistic welfare policies. 4: The party mainly promotes universalistic policies, but a significant portion (e.g. 1/4 or 1/3) of its policies are means-tested. 5: The party solely promotes universalistic welfare policies for all groups of the society

APPENDIX TABLE 3. RESULTS OF THE OLS-REGRESSION (FIGURE 1)

	Economic left–right scale
Intercept	4.828***
The extent to what the party promotes means-tested or universalistic welfare policies	−46.398***
R^2 (adj)	0.255

***$p < 0.001$
**$p < 0.01$
*$p < 0.05'$