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The political determinants of housing benefits

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Abstract

Housing benefits differ substantially across countries. In this paper, we apply power resource theory, developed primarily in relation to the emergence and subsequent expansion of social citizenship, to housing policy. The purpose is to analyse the political determinants of housing benefits, and particularly the role of left parties and the partisan mobilization of labour. The empirical analyses are based on new housing benefit data for 31 affluent democracies from the period 2001–2018. The results of a series of fixed effects pooled time-series regressions show that the strength of left government is positively associated with the size of housing benefits. However, the positive influence of left cabinets is conditional on the relative size of rental housing and the fractionalization of the party system. Our findings highlight the need to combine actor-oriented explanations of the welfare state with theories about the corporatist power structures of society.

JEL classification: I38

Introduction

Housing benefits exist in nearly all affluent countries. Nonetheless, they are poorly analysed from cross-national and longitudinal perspectives. With few notable exceptions (Griggs and Kemp, 2012), comparative analyses of housing benefits tend to be descriptive in character, mapping current legislation across countries or documenting differences in spending levels or case-loads (Kemp, 1997; Steele, 2001; Bradshaw and Finch, 2002; Haffner and Boelhouwer, 2006; Salvi del Pero *et al.*, 2016). In this paper, we bring housing policy into the comparative analysis of welfare states and put determinants of housing benefits to rigorous empirical test.

Following Kemeny's (1995) seminal contribution to the literature on rental regimes, the complex relationship between housing policy and the welfare state is often explained with reference to the degree of corporatism in policymaking and the extent to which the democratic system forces governments to strike a balance between a greater variety of specialized interests. We diverge from this tradition in research by bringing actors and political parties into the analysis of housing policy, as suggested by Bengtsson (2015). The purpose

is to analyse how partisan politics is linked to the generosity of housing benefits. Based on power resource theory, we ask whether political mobilization of the working class in left parties increases the size of housing benefits.

Most studies on partisan effects and the welfare state focus on social citizenship as manifested in social insurance legislation (Korpi, 1989; Esping-Andersen, 1990; Palme, 1990; Carroll, 1999; Ferrarini, 2006). Housing benefits are at the margin of the social security system, functioning also as a demand-side housing policy instrument, analogous to low-interest loans for home buyers and mortgage interest tax reliefs (Oxley, 1987; Hills, 1991; Doling, 1997). Housing benefits thus provide an interesting test case for contemporary theories of the welfare state, by assessing whether these explanations are valid also outside the core of social citizenship.

All housing benefits in this study are directed to families with limited incomes via some kind of means-testing, which further contributes to theory building. Due to their similarity with the old poor relief programs, means-tested benefits were long considered excluded from modern forms of social citizenship. Means-testing in social policy was also heavily opposed by labour movements in the

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early development of the welfare state (Esping-Andersen and Korpi, 1986). Left parties typically objected against the stigma attached to means-testing and how it politically divided their constituency.

There is an ongoing critical discussion in housing research about the relevance of Esping-Andersen's (1990) seminal and partisan-inspired categorization of liberal, conservative, and social democratic welfare state regimes (Allen *et al.*, 2004; Stamsø, 2008; Hoekstra, 2010; Matznetter and Mundt, 2012; Dewilde, 2017). Although left parties historically have been opposed to means-testing in social policy, we believe that it is premature to totally discard the political mobilization of labour on the list of potential determinants for housing benefits. Some of the properties that made left parties repel means-testing are less prominent for housing benefits. Housing benefits often go further up the income scale and provide a more inclusive targeting than typical anti-poverty programs, such as social assistance (Nelson, 2013). Nor are housing benefits used primarily to substitute work income. Thus, they do not necessarily conflict with the objective of left parties to promote social citizenship foremost via legislated social insurance rights.

The empirical analyses in this study are based on a new comparative dataset on housing benefits, that for the first time is introduced to research. Based on the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) tax and benefits data, we have for the purpose of this study calculated entitlement levels and collected new indicators on the size of housing benefits for a large number of countries and years. To analyse this new data, we utilize unbalanced pooled time-series cross-sectional regression including 31 democratized countries for a maximum time span of 18 years (2001–2018).

The paper is organized as follows. Next, we theoretically outline our left partisan politics hypothesis and situate it against alternative explanations and the housing rental regime debate. Thereafter we introduce our data, and discuss some methodological considerations, before presenting the results. The paper ends with a concluding discussion.

Left parties, rental regimes, and housing benefits

The publication of a few seminal studies in the 1980s changed the theoretical landscape of the welfare state. Until then, the development of the welfare state and social policy had largely been explained as a functional response to industrialization and technological change (Kerr, Dunlop and Harbison, 1960; Wilensky, 1975). To the extent that countries differed in the size of social spending, the answers were primarily sought

in economic development, not necessarily in politics (Form, 1979). The formulation of power resource theory in the early 1980s challenged contemporary (at that time) doctrines and questioned the dominance of structural theories in explaining the emergence and consequent expansion of the welfare state. Particularly Korpi (1983) and Esping-Andersen (1990) set the scene for more actor-oriented perspectives, which replaced industrialization and economic growth with partisan politics as major driving forces of social policy.

The point of departure for power resource theory is the unequal distribution of social risks that people face throughout their lives, largely following socio-economic dividing lines. Ageing, illness, unemployment, but also inadequate housing, are examples of such fundamental risks in capitalist societies. As a large share of the workforce lacks individual means to cope with social risks of this kind, they have rational reasons to exercise their great power in numbers, organize for collective action in political parties, and legislate how resources are to be allocated and redistributed in society (Korpi, 1983).

Power resource theory does not rule out the possibility that structural factors affect social policymaking, but argues that these are moderated by distributional conflicts between major interest groups in society, ultimately shaping how countries have organized their welfare states. The most important conflicts are supposed to appear around organized labour and capital, where mobilization of workers in left parties is assumed to expand social policy, and increase the size of benefits. Parties to the right of the political spectrum are supposed to be less pro-active towards redistribution and the welfare state. According to this actor-oriented framework, it is not far-fetched to expect that left parties also are in favour of an expansion of housing benefits. From this, we may formulate our first hypothesis.

H1: The strength of left government is positively related to the size of housing benefits.

Notably, our left partisan hypothesis gains strength by the shifting position of housing benefits from a demand-side housing subsidy to a measure of income support in recent decades. In its former role, the chief objective was to provide adequate housing. Nowadays, it should also secure that families have enough financial resources for consumption after housing costs (Griggs and Kemp, 2012). The extent to which housing benefits have redistributive objectives that go beyond helping families to cope with housing costs of course differs across countries, and in some instances, it is not a totally new characteristic. Already in 1969, Sweden introduced a basic allowance in the housing benefit system, which was unrelated to the level of housing costs (Elmer, 2000).

In a pioneering study, [Schmidt \(1989\)](#) analysed determinants of housing expenditures in 18 OECD countries from the early 1970s to the mid-1980s. Recognizing the limitations of social spending indicators in analyses of policy, the data gave no empirical support for power resource theory or left partisanship. Instead, corporatist bargaining structures in the form of administrative and financial ties between the state and market actors were considered crucial. In explaining the emergence of different rental systems, [Kemeny \(1995\)](#) was also heavily influenced by political theory and how corporatist structures of interest formation, negotiation and decision-making inform policy. The party system was considered crucial in this regard, and especially whether there are more than two parties (or partisan fractions) in the parliament competing for power ([Kemeny, 2006](#)).

In this state-centred theoretical framework, multi-party systems are supposed to create a political environment built on compromise between sectorial interests, having strong presence of hegemonic coalition governments or minority governments seeking support from parts of the political opposition.¹ A diversity of actors in the housing market may thus find representation in politics, which is expected to create an integrated rental regime characterized by tenure-neutral housing policies and high degrees of competition between non-profit and for-profit landlords. Governments tend to provide subsidies to both sectors, in many cases conditioned on housing providers meeting certain standards in relation to quality of accommodation, security of tenure, and rent levels, supposedly reducing the need for generous housing benefits ([Hulse, 2003](#)).

In countries with dual-party systems, the political landscape is instead polarized into two major blocks that are in clear opposition to each other. The lesser scope for political compromise and support for different forms of housing tenure is supposed to create a dual rental regime characterized by a dominating for-profit market, which is sheltered from competition by a separate public rental system with below-market rents. The financial difficulties of low-income private renters are seldom explained in terms of market failure, but more often as an inability of some households to pay market rents. To avoid an expansion of below-market rent public housing, governments in dual-party systems are assumed to tackle the problem of affordable housing through housing benefits, rather than via regulating the housing market. Besides providing financial assistance to low-income households, housing benefits also have broader implications for the housing sector, for example, by keeping state subsidies to below-rent public housing at bay and making it easier for governments to relax rent control regulations. With housing benefits in place, households with low incomes are assumed to

be less affected by rent increases in the private sector ([Turner and Elsinga, 2005](#); [Kettunen and Ruonavaara, 2021](#)). Based on the discussion about dual- and multi-party systems above, we may formulate the following alternative hypothesis.

H2: Dual-party systems are positively related to the size of housing benefits.

Our left-partisan politics and dual-party systems hypotheses are not mutually exclusive, as both factors may be decisive for the ways in which countries have organized their housing benefits. One interpretation of [Kemeny's \(2006\)](#) analysis of rental regimes is that characteristics of the party system moderate the effects of organized labour ([Stephens, 2020](#)). In dual-party systems, left parties are not in a favourable position to strike a balance between the organized interests of capital and labour, which is assumed to generate high degrees of statism in policymaking and a public housing program that is kept separate from the market as explained above. Thus, when the political environment is dominated by two major (blocks of) parties, left governments may have less options to improve the housing market through corporatist bargaining. In such a political environment, housing benefits may—so to say—be the best the left can do. Consequently, we may specify a third hypothesis of left partisan moderation.

H3: The positive association between left government and the size of housing benefits is stronger in presence of a dual-party system.

With the stagnation and retrenchment of welfare states from the mid-1970s and onwards, partisan politics and particularly that of mobilized labour were gradually assumed to have lost explanatory power. Instead, structural theories on the causal processes of welfare states were again put forward, albeit in revived form. According to the so-called new politics paradigm, developed primarily by [Pierson \(1996, 2001\)](#), de-industrialization and the rise of employment in the low-productivity service sector placed serious constraints on state budgets and forced national governments to work in a context of nearly constant austerity.² Class-based politics was thought to have eroded, leaving room for a greater variety of more narrowly defined interests and new strategies in policymaking, such as blame-avoidance.

Exogenous structural forces are also discussed in housing policy research. Both [Aalbers \(2016\)](#) and [Ruonavaara \(2020\)](#) raise how national housing systems have become increasingly financialized and more strongly embedded in global capital, as states have retreated from and liberalized the housing market, making home ownership the preferred tenure type. Alongside permissive mortgage credit institutions

and favourable tax rules there have also been massive increases of household debt in some countries (Johnston, Fuller and Regan, 2021), which supposedly have generated new political cleavages in housing related to age, geographic location, and migration status (Fuller, 2019).

The exact consequences of housing financialization for housing benefits are unclear. Nonetheless, it seems reasonable to expect that increased home ownership rates more generally create downward pressure on housing benefits. Not primarily because many homeowners may be formally excluded from benefits, but rather because the organized interests of landlords and tenants have lost political power as their numbers have declined. Both landlord associations and tenants' unions have traditionally been in favour of the state providing cash support to low-income renters (Bradley, 2014). Considering the interests of the former, several studies show that housing benefits are passed over to landlords via increased rent (Laferrère and Le Blanc, 2004; Fack, 2006; Viren, 2013). Without a large rental sector, the interests of left parties to compensate households for parts of their housing costs may thus have been eroded. Consequently, we may formulate an additional hypothesis of left partisan moderation.

H4: The positive association between left government and the size of housing benefits is stronger in presence of a large rental sector.

Data

Lack of data have long restricted the comparative analysis of housing benefits. We were granted access to the OECD Benefits and Wages (tax/ben) online platform.³ OECD tax/ben includes detailed information about taxes and benefits (including housing benefits) for a large number of countries and years. The platform is based on explicitly defined model families, and by keeping the composition and socio-economic background of the families constant, policies can accurately be compared across countries and years (Bradshaw *et al.*, 1993). For most countries, simulations are possible for every year between 1995 and 2019. However, the Central and Eastern European countries together with Cyprus were not included in OECD tax/ben from the start. Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia were added to the platform in 2001, Cyprus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovenia in 2005, Romania in 2008, and Croatia in 2013.

Assistance towards housing costs is often provided in the form of a separate housing benefit that help low-income families to cover their rent expenses, but also within social assistance, and sometimes as a combination of both. In OECD tax/ben, focus is on stand-alone

housing benefit programs available to tenants in the regular housing market.⁴ The size of the housing benefit is usually determined based on household income and size, as well as the actual housing costs or rent. OECD tax/ben is confined to rent payments, and does not include (if available) any assistance towards utilities, insurance, maintenance, electricity, fuel, water, etc.⁵ A few countries in OECD tax/ben lack housing benefits, including Belgium, Canada, Lithuania, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and the United States.⁶ For these particular countries, the housing benefit variable was coded as zero. Further discussion about this limitation is provided in the sensitivity analyses below.

We used all three model families in OECD tax/ben to simulate the level of housing benefits: a single person, a single-earner couple with two children, and a single parent with two children. The adult family members were assumed to be 35 years of age. The ages of the children were set to 7 and 14 years. Benefits were simulated at various wage levels, ranging from 50 to 200 per cent of the national average wage (with 5 percentage points increments). The lower-bound truncation of wage levels was imposed on our data to avoid confusion with social assistance, which is the last-resort safety net available to those with no other means of income.⁷ It also provides a more realistic scenario as wages below 50 per cent of the average wage are unlikely due to legislated or collectively agreed minimum wages in many countries.⁸

The rent paid was allowed to vary between model families, but not across wage levels. For the European countries, we used the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) to calculate actual rents for each model family. EU-SILC started in 2004, and data on rent levels for 2001–2003 were extrapolated from the first wave by movements in consumer prices.⁹

For the non-European countries, we relied on household expenditure surveys carried out by national statistical agencies. To facilitate cross-national analyses, the housing benefit of each model family is expressed as a percentage of the gross wage of the same model family. The main dependent variable in the empirical analyses below is an average of the housing benefit of the three model families for wage levels between 50 and 200 per cent of the average wage.¹⁰

To measure the strength of left governments, we used the cabinet seats of social democratic parties and parties to their left as a proportion of total cabinet seats, for each year weighted by the number of days in office. Although the move to the centre of many European Social Democratic parties since the 1990s may have weakened their ties to organized labour (Howell, 2001; Karreth *et al.*, 2013; Bremer, 2018), they still tend to receive stable and strong reputation by voters

on issues related to the welfare state, such as health, education, unemployment, jobs, social security, families, and elderly care (Seeberg, 2017). Similar formulas of left partisan politics are widely used in the comparative literature to analyse public commitments in areas of social security and welfare (Huber and Stephens, 2000; Korpi and Palme, 2003; Brady and Lee, 2014; Birnbaum *et al.*, 2017).

The distinction between dual- or multi-party systems is often fuzzy, as the former typically is used to characterize countries in which the political landscape is dominated by two major parties.¹¹ In reality, the legislature may include additional smaller parties with no stronger impact on the political discourse. To capture the distinction between dual- and multi-party systems, we followed Iversen and Soskice (2006) and used the Laasko and Taagepera's (1979) measure of the effective number of parties in the legislature. This measure weighs the number of parties in the legislature with their parliamentary seats share. The actual number of parties and the effective number of parties are only the same if all parties are of equal strength. Otherwise, the effective number of parties in the legislature is always lower than the actual number of parties. The adjustment is necessary to avoid biased results caused by a few dominating parties and a multitude of very small parties with limited political significance. Data is from the Comparative Political Data Set 1960–2018, collected by Armingeon *et al.* (2020).

To account for the broad structure of the housing market, we collected new data on housing tenure that motivate further discussion. Cross-national data on housing tenure are available from the OECD Affordable Housing Database, but only from 2010.¹² Similar to Czerniak and Rubaszek (2018), we were able to extrapolate data back in time by using information from national censuses. Due to differences in the definition of tenure types between national censuses, it was not possible to use a fine graded categorization of tenure types (i.e. own outright, owner with mortgage, renting at market prize, subsidized dwellings, accommodation for free, or something similar). However, we were able to collect reliable information that either matched or closely resembled OECD data on the share of households who owned or rented their dwellings. National censuses are not conducted every year, but at best at regular intervals (like every fifth year). Data on tenure was interpolated for years in which no national census was carried out, and for those countries in which national statistical agencies did not provide any alternative data.¹³

The empirical analyses also include a number of theoretically derived control variables as briefly discussed above, including the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita (economic development), service

employment as a proportion of total employment (de-industrialization), elderly population as a proportion of total population (population aging), household debt (all items) as percentage of GDP (financialization). GDP per capita is expressed in thousand purchasing power adjusted \$US. All these data are from the OECD, except household debt which is from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).¹⁴

Methods

The main goal of the analyses is to test if left cabinet shares are related to the generosity of housing benefits across a large set of countries and years. Praise-Winsten regression were used to adjust for first-order (AR1) autoregressive processes in our data. To adjust for heteroskedastic and contemporaneously correlated errors across countries, we applied panel-corrected standard errors as suggested by Beck and Katz (1995) for this type of data. We also included the full set of country and time fixed effects (country and time dummies) to account for the influence of unobserved time-invariant heterogeneity, as well as unobserved variables that are constant across countries but vary over time. A Durbin–Wu–Hausman test for endogeneity revealed that fixed effects should be used to analyse the data.

Results

For clarity, we have divided the presentation of the results into three sections: descriptive analyses, main effects, and interactions.

Descriptive analyses

To get a first impression of our data and the influence of left government, Table 1 shows the size of housing benefits in 31 countries by left cabinet shares. Only country averages and changes for the period 2001–2018 are shown. We have divided countries into three groups depending on the average cabinet strength of left parties. This categorization of countries is to some extent arbitrary. A closer inspection of our data nevertheless makes it reasonable to define weak strength of left parties as average cabinet shares below 20 per cent. Countries with average cabinet shares between 20 and 40 per cent have moderately strong left parties. Strong left parties are defined as average cabinet shares above 40 per cent.

Countries with strong left parties tend to have higher housing benefits. In the countries with left cabinet shares of more than 40 per cent, housing benefits correspond to 1.2 per cent of the gross wage. The similar percentages for countries with weak or moderately strong left parties are 0.7 and 0.8 per cent, respectively. The percentages may seem surprisingly small,

Table 1. Left party cabinet shares and housing benefits (as percentage of gross wages) of three model families in 31 countries, 2001–2018

(A)

	Weak left parties (left cabinet shares below 20%)		
	Left cabinet	Housing benefit	Change housing benefit
Canada	0.00	0.00	0.00
Cyprus	19.02	0.83	–1.20
Denmark	18.86	1.55	0.33
Estonia	14.6	0.00	0.00
Japan	0.22	2.97	–0.32
Latvia	0.00	0.07	–0.29
United States	0.00	0.00	0.00
<i>Average</i>	7.53	0.77	–0.21

(B)

	Moderately strong left parties (left cabinet shares between 20 and 40 per cent)		
	Left cabinet	Housing benefit	Change housing benefit
Australia	32.18	1.39	–0.43
Austria	30.37	1.00	–2.13
Belgium	31.15	0.00	0.00
Croatia	32.83	0.00	0.00
Czechia	33.94	2.01	–0.21
Finland	29.2	1.57	0.77
France	35.39	0.89	0.42
Hungary	38.58	0.36	–0.85
Italy	29.42	0.55	–0.51
Luxembourg	38.02	0.53	1.01
Netherlands	22.60	0.87	1.14
Norway	39.74	0.31	–0.28
Poland	22.87	0.87	0.33
Portugal	33.74	0.00	0.00
Romania	38.24	0.00	0.00
Switzerland	28.57	0.07	0.14
<i>Average</i>	32.30	0.65	–0.04

(C)

	Strong left parties (left cabinet shares above 40 per cent)		
	Left cabinet	Housing benefit	Change housing benefit
Germany	48.52	0.23	0.06
Lithuania	62.40	0.00	0.00

Table 1. Continued

(C)

	Strong left parties (left cabinet shares above 40 per cent)		
	Left cabinet	Housing benefit	Change housing benefit
New Zealand	49.03	3.58	1.35
Slovakia	50.05	0.06	–0.49
Slovenia	64.54	2.95	0.74
Spain	45.38	0.00	0.00
Sweden	55.56	0.70	–0.61
United Kingdom	52.10	1.89	–2.24
<i>Average</i>	53.45	1.18	–0.15

Source: Own calculations based on the OECD tax-benefit model (<http://oe.cd/taxBEN>).

irrespective of the strength of left parties. However, it should be remembered that our housing benefit variable is an average of model families with wages corresponding to 50, 55, etc. and up to 200 per cent of an average wage. For families in the lower wage brackets, the size of housing benefits is in many countries substantially higher.¹⁵

The association between left cabinet shares and the size of housing benefits is far from perfect. Several countries with weak or moderately strong left parties have more generous benefits than countries with strong left parties and vice versa. Japan (weak left parties) and Czechia (moderately strong left parties) are two notable examples. Left parties in Japan typically enjoy significant electoral support, but are often excluded from the executive branch of government, as revealed by our data. In Czechia, the Social Democrats reached a coalition deal with the anticorruption ANO movement and the centre-right Christian Democrats in December 2013, after which housing benefits were substantially raised. Two other examples at the other end of the housing benefit spectrum are Spain and Lithuania, which lack national frameworks for a separate housing benefit as defined by the OECD in their tax and benefit simulation model.¹⁶

We also show the change in housing benefits between the first year of observation and the last, in most countries covering the period 2001–2018 as noted above. Several countries have experienced benefit cutbacks, either because of an insufficient uprating of benefits to prices or due to outright cuts in benefit scale rates. Similar results have been noted before, as several countries reduced benefits in the 1990s to control escalating expenditures (Kemp, 2000). This downsizing of housing benefits continued well into the 2000s in some countries (Van Kersbergen, Vis and Hemerijck, 2014).

Judged by the average values reported here, countries with weak left parties experienced the most substantial cutbacks to housing benefits, closely followed by countries with strong left parties. Notably, the latter group of countries had higher values to fall from. The generosity of housing benefits in countries with moderately strong left parties has on average been more stable.

Main effects

The descriptive results above indicate that partisan politics and housing benefits are related. To provide more robust evidence of this association, we will next move from descriptive data to statistical regression. Table 2 shows the results of this exercise, in a stepwise manner. There is a statistically significant and positive association between left cabinet shares and the generosity of housing benefits (model I). Thus, housing benefits tend to be higher in presence of strong left-party governments. We also show the relationship between the size of housing benefits and the number of effective

parties in the legislature (model II), as well as the association between the size of housing benefits and the relative size of rental housing (model III). Without the inclusion of confounding factors, both variables tend to increase the size of housing benefits. Note that the positive coefficient of the multi-party structure of the legislature is in the opposite direction of what we expected from theory.

Next, we tested the relationship between left cabinet shares and the size of housing benefits, holding the effective number of parties and the relative size of the rental sector constant (model IV). The coefficients associated with the effective number of parties and the relative size of the rental sector are still statistically significant, but hardly affect that of left cabinet shares.

The positive association between left cabinet shares and the size of housing benefits is still present, despite the inclusion of a broader set of confounding factors (model V), including GDP per capita, service sector employment, the old age dependency ratio,

Table 2. Prais-Winsten unbalanced fixed-effects regression of the size of housing benefits in 31 OECD countries, 2001–2018

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII
1. Left cabinet share	0.112* (0.053)			0.112* (0.055)	0.095** (0.028)	0.518** (0.088)	0.024 (0.043)	0.084 (0.062)
2. No. effective parties		0.040* (0.019)		0.039* (0.019)	0.041** (0.016)	0.074** (0.019)	0.037* (0.016)	–0.030 (0.022)
3. Size of rented housing			1.751* (0.833)	1.631* (0.696)	1.576** (0.597)	1.534* (0.636)	1.409* (0.615)	0.427 (0.384)
4. GDP/cap					0.013 (0.010)	0.014 (0.010)	0.013 (0.010)	0.015 (0.010)
5. Household debt					0.067 (0.173)	0.055 (0.156)	0.052 (0.174)	0.067 (0.170)
6. Service sector employment					–0.105 (0.597)	0.014 (0.597)	–0.103 (0.596)	–0.016 (0.605)
7. Old age dependency ratio					1.556 (0.781)	1.641* (0.776)	1.525* (0.775)	1.696* (0.812)
8. Interaction 1 × 2						–0.105** (0.020)		–0.023 (0.016)
9. Interaction 1 × 3							0.308* (0.155)	1.393** (0.419)
10. Interaction 2 × 3								0.277** (0.057)
10. Interaction 1 × 2 × 3								–0.217* (0.092)
No. observations	553	553	553	553	553	553	553	533

* $P < 0.05$; ** $P < 0.01$.

Standard errors within parentheses. All models are estimated with panel corrected standard errors and AR(1) correction. Country and year dummies are included, but not shown.

and household debt. The multi-party structure of the legislature and the relative size of rental housing also retain their positive and statistically significant coefficients. Among the confounding factors, only the positive coefficient of the old age dependency ratio is statistically significant. Thus, ageing populations are not necessarily linked to housing benefits becoming less generous.

Interactions

We have so far provided support to our main hypothesis (i.e. that the strength of left government is positively related to the generosity of housing benefits), while rejecting our second hypothesis (i.e. that dual-party systems are positively related to the generosity of housing benefits). Next, we will focus on our third and fourth hypotheses of left partisan moderation (i.e. that the effect of left government on the size of housing benefits grows stronger in presence of a more dualized party system and a large rental sector). Model VI includes an interaction between left cabinet shares and the effective number of parties in the legislature. The interaction coefficient is negative, while the main effects of left cabinet shares and effective number of parties are positive. However, interactions are often tricky to evaluate and much easier to interpret using predicted values. Figure 1 shows the predicted scores at different levels of left government strength when the effective number of parties is set at its minimum, average, and maximum levels (as observed in our group of countries). All other variables are held at their sample means. The positive association between left government and housing benefits grows stronger in less fractionalized party systems. As the effective number of parties increases and approaches the maximum level observed in our data, the association between left cabinet shares and the size of housing benefits even turns negative. Our third hypothesis on the moderating effect of the party system is thus supported by our data.

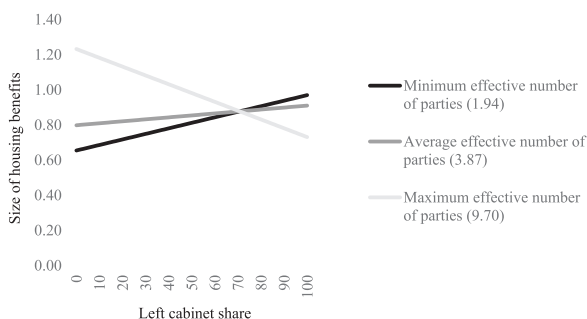


Figure 1. Predicted scores by left cabinet shares and effective number of parties in 31 countries, 2001–2018. Predicted scores at sample means.

Turning to our fourth hypothesis of left partisan moderation, Figure 2 shows the predicted scores at different levels of left government when the rental housing sector is set at its minimum, average, and maximum levels (as observed in our group of countries). The predicted scores are based on model VII, in Table 2. Again, all other variables are held at their sample means. Evidently, the effect of left partisanship grows stronger in presence of a large rental sector, thus supporting our fourth hypothesis of left partisan moderation.

We will next combine these insights of left partisan moderation by analysing the three-way interaction between left cabinet shares, the multi-party structure of the legislature, and the relative size of rental housing. Figure 3A–C shows the predicted scores at different levels of left government strength resulting from this exercise. The predictions are based on model VIII in Table 1. Notably, the moderating effect of the party system observed above (Figure 1) only appears in presence of a sizeable rental housing sector. When the rental sector is small and reach its minimum level, the moderating effect of the party system is negligible, as indicated by more similar parallel diagonal lines in Figure 3A.

Sensitivity analyses

We have iteratively deleted one country at the time from the regressions to check the robustness of our findings. We also re-run the analyses excluding countries that lack a separate housing benefit according to the coding principles applied in OECD tax/ben. The results did not change in a substantive way by these modifications. We tried different truncations of the dependent variable. A redefinition of our dependent variable to include model families with wages between 50 and 150 per cent of the average wage did not substantively change the results. A dependent variable including model families with wages between 5 and 200 per cent of the average wage turned the positive coefficient of left cabinet shares non-significant ($P =$

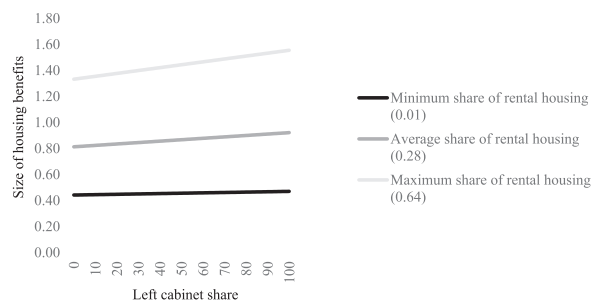


Figure 2. Predicted scores by left cabinet shares and size of rental housing in 31 countries, 2001–2018. Predicted scores at sample means.

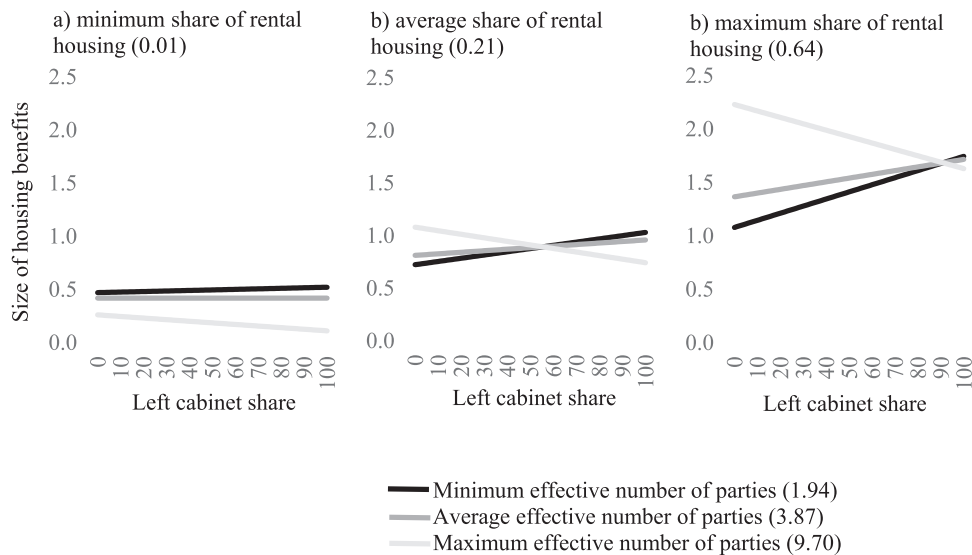


Figure 3. (A–C) Predicted scores of left cabinet shares by effective number of parties and size of rental housing in 31 countries, 2001–2018. Predicted scores at sample means.

0.167). This result is most likely due to the inclusion of means-tested social assistance in the income packages of the model families with extremely low work income. The housing benefit level variable above is based on estimated rents of the model families. The positive and statistically significant parameter estimate of our housing benefit variable is retained after changing the simulation assumptions to fixed rents (using the OECD procedure of setting the rent levels of all model families to 20 per cent of the average wage). We tested alternative specifications of the multi-party structure of the legislature, including the formula of legislative fractionalization of the party system proposed by Rae (1968), without any major changes in our results. Rae's (1968) fractionalization index also combines information about the number of parties and seats in the legislature, but produces less intuitive results than the index proposed by Laakso and Taagepera (1979).

We also controlled for alternative structures of corporatism (i.e. arrangements for wage bargaining), as suggested in the literature (Kenworthy, 2016). As previous indices on wage-setting arrangements are not available for all countries and years analysed in this study, we used a set of indicators from the Database on Institutional Characteristics of Trade Unions, Wage Setting, State Intervention and Social Pacts (ICTWSS) at the University of Amsterdam. This included the degree (i.e. binding norms, guidelines, etc.) and type (i.e. behavioural patterns or activities of unions, employers, and governments) of coordination involved in wage setting procedures, as well as the role of the government in wage bargaining. We also included a

variable capturing the degree of centralization in wage bargaining (i.e. the predominant level at which wages are set). We tested all these variables of wage setting one at a time, and in the form of an index where each item received a weight corresponding to their linear scores in a factor analysis. None of these variables, nor the index, turned out statistically significant. More importantly, their inclusion in the regression models did not change the main findings of partisan politics (models I–V in Supplementary Appendix). As housing benefits sometimes are considered an alternative to rent regulation, we included an indicator on rent control collected by Kholodilin (2020), and used by Kholodilin and Kohl (2021) in an analysis of homeownership and housing market regulations. Rent control is a six-item index showing the extent to which rents are allowed to grow faster than inflation, whether they can be frozen in nominal terms, if rents are allowed to be changed at the beginning of a new contract, if rent control ceases with a change of tenant, and if certain types of dwellings are either exempt from or subject to more stringent rent control. The coefficient associated with the rent control variable were not statistically significant, and did not reduce the effect of left government strength (model VI in Supplementary Appendix).

We also included a measure on constitutional structures (or veto points). Although we used an augmented index of constitutional structures (Armingeon *et al.*, 2020), which changes the time-invariant variable originally proposed by Huber, Ragin and Stephens (1993) into a time-variant score, the results were not statistically significant. Nor did the inclusion of constitutional veto points change our main findings of partisan effects

(model VII in [Supplementary Appendix](#)). Finally, we included imports and exports as a share of GDP, which is a commonly used indicator of economic globalisation or trade openness in the welfare state literature ([Swank and Betz, 2003](#)). This variable did not reach statistical significance, nor change the interpretation of left government strength (model VIII in [Supplementary Appendix](#)).

Conclusions

We have in this study linked left partisanship to the size of housing benefits. The empirical analyses showed that left government strength is positively associated with the size of housing benefits, particularly in the context of a large rental sector and a less fractionalized party system. The results are robust to the inclusion of a wider set of confounding structural and demographic factors, and thus lend support to actor-oriented theories in welfare state research emphasizing the political mobilization of labour in left parties. Our explanatory framework and statistical analyses have contributed to state-of-the-art in housing policy research by going beyond mere descriptions of countries' housing benefit systems. We have also broadened the analysis of partisan politics in comparative welfare state research to encompass not only social citizenship rights as manifested in social insurance legislation, but also low-income targeted policies.

Despite the novelty of our findings, further research is needed to fully understand why countries have organized their housing benefits differently. The moderating roles of the party system and the rental sector on left partisanship are particularly interesting. The former points to the importance of situating working class political mobilization in the larger context of corporatist bargaining structures embedded in the political system, as originally suggested by [Kemeny \(2006\)](#) and further elaborated by [Stephens \(2020\)](#). The latter brings up the issue of policy feedback and how regulations in areas that are difficult to change in the short-term perspective may reconfigure the underlying terms of power, reposition actors in political relations, reshape interest group formation, and change the underlying preferences of citizens ([Skocpol and Amenta, 1986](#); [Pierson, 1996](#); [Moynihan and Soss, 2014](#)), and ultimately define what left parties in cabinet can and cannot do. Particularly the relationship between renters and homeowners as new stakeholders with their own unique claims in the welfare state needs further investigation in this regard, including how their interests are shaped by social class and intersect with or diverge from those of organized labour. Another issue that deserves closer inspection is the nature of policy change, and how it relates to partisan politics. Changes

to social policy are often incremental, although minor adjustments over time may accumulate and become consequential even in the absence of major reforms ([Hacker, 2004](#); [Streeck and Thelen, 2004](#)). Housing benefits are no exception to this general pattern in policymaking. In most instances, countries adjust housing benefits upward or downward by minor changes to benefit formulas, income thresholds, or eligibility criteria. However, this is not to say that housing benefits are immune to radical change. There are several examples of more substantial changes to housing benefits in our data. In 2004, the Slovak Republic revoked all legislation on housing benefits introduced just a few years earlier, and introduced instead a less generous housing supplement to social assistance. Hungary abolished housing benefits for rented accommodation altogether in 2015, whereas the introduction of Universal Credit in the United Kingdom in 2013 replaced six different benefits for working-age people, among them the Housing Benefit. In the United Kingdom, however, the level of housing support for rented accommodation was largely sustained according to our data. The list of major changes to housing benefits in recent decades could be extended. The point we wish to make is merely that housing benefits are far from being excluded from major change. Instead, they seem to be subject to a process of punctuated equilibrium, in which policy change most of the time is gradual, but on fewer occasions develop more dramatically ([Hall, 1993](#)). The extent to which the forces that drive housing benefits differ between periods of steady state and those dramatic events needs to be further investigated, probably by applying different methods than the ones used in this study. Case-based approaches for policy analysis are one viable alternative, including methods specifically designed to deal with conjunctural causation and how past choices affect future policymaking. Preferably, these analyses would include factors that are difficult to include in a statistical regression framework covering developments in a large number of countries, not the least because necessary data often are missing. The mobilization of organized interests in landlord associations and tenants' unions is again one example of relevance for housing policy. Another example is developments at the local level, such as the rescaling and multilevel governance of public policies, which often apply to benefit programs that are targeting low-income families ([Kazepov, 2010](#)).

Although the data on housing benefits that we have collected for the purpose of this study represent a major improvement, several aspects are left out of the empirical analysis, basically for reasons of data availability. One issue concerns the coverage of housing benefits, another aspect is non-take-up. Both factors are likely to affect the extent to which housing benefits fulfil their

core objectives. The low-income targeted character of housing benefits implies that large groups of the population are excluded from benefits, and in some countries, additional eligibility criteria apply. The extent to which housing benefits reach up the income scale is partly captured by our data (as exemplified by Croatia and Estonia above). Nonetheless, an explicit focus on benefit coverage is certainly warranted. Compared to contributory social insurance, means-tested benefits often suffer from incomplete take-up, partly caused by stigma but also related to complex policy rules and administrative errors. For example, field experiments in Sweden show that non-take-up of housing benefits often is due to insufficient knowledge about the program (Engström *et al.*, 2019). Non-take-up of last-resort social assistance is often extensive, but there are large differences across countries (Bargain, Immervoll and Viitamäki, 2012; Figari, Matsaganis and Sutherland, 2013). Unfortunately, comparative data on the non-take-up of housing benefits are missing, and there are hardly any international investigations of how frequently housing benefits are used by those who are eligible for support. Due to less stigma, non-take-up is probably lower for housing benefits than social assistance, but still substantial in some countries.

Housing benefits are an essential part of the welfare state. The empirical analyses of left partisan politics in this study show the fruitfulness of utilizing how countries have organized policy differently. However, to further improve research, additional investments in infrastructure and data collection are needed, as well as continued theoretical development. The latter may aim to bridge actor-oriented perspectives common to sociology and historical institutionalism prominent in political science. Such combinations of theoretical perspectives may further our understanding of when and why partisan effects appear.

Notes

- 1 This type of corporatist bargaining structures and coalition dynamics associated with different electoral systems (i.e. majoritarian vs proportional) has been used to explain income redistribution in affluent countries more generally (Iversen and Soskice, 2006).
- 2 Iversen and Cusack (2000) argue that the internal processes of de-industrialization were more fundamental to welfare state development than the constraints on government action originating from national and trans-national capital, or 'globalization'. Population ageing is another exogenous factor that figures prominently in the welfare state retrenchment literature, particularly in relation to changes in the age-related distribution of social spending (Castles, 2004). It is not far-fetched to assume that demographic changes in the electorate affect the political mobilization of labour, as

well as the commitment of governments to regulate housing markets (Carbonaro, 2016).

- 3 A streamlined version of the platform can be accessed online, at <http://oe.cd/TaxBEN>. It includes an OECD tax-benefit web calculator, which can be used to extract the same data as analysed in this paper. The online platform that we used is specifically designed for users requiring larger-volume output for academic projects, or for other non-commercial uses. Access to the online platform is subject to an access agreement and requires valid credentials that registered users can obtain from the OECD.
- 4 For the most recent year, the following housing benefit programs were included in the calculations: Commonwealth Rent Assistance (Australia), Mietbeihilfe/Wohnbeihilfe (Austria), Příspěvek na bydlení (Czech Republic), Boligsikring (Denmark), ESTONIA, Yleinen asumistuki (Finland), Allocations logement (France), Wohngeld (Germany), Lakásfenntartási támogatás (Hungary), Rent Supplement/Housing Assistance Payment (Ireland), Contributo per l'affitto (Italy), Provision of Benefits for Securing Housing (Japan), Dzīvokļa pabalsts (Latvia), Būsto nuomos mokesčio dalies kompensacija (Lithuania), Subvention de loyer (Luxembourg), Huurtoeslag (Netherlands), Accommodation Supplement (New Zealand), Bostøtte (Norway), Dodatki mieszkaniowe (Poland), Príspevok na bývanie (Slovakia), subvencija najemnine (Slovenia), Bostadsbidrag (Sverige), Frais de logement/Wohnkosten (Switzerland), Universal Credit/Support for housing costs (United Kingdom). Detailed information about eligibility criteria and benefit formulas for these benefits (and those of earlier years) are available online, at <http://oe.cd/TaxBEN>.
- 5 Housing benefits are available to homeowners in Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Slovakia, Sweden, and Switzerland. Latvia, Luxembourg, and New Zealand have restricted access to housing benefits for tenants in social housing, where rents are provided for free or below market price.
- 6 Even if some countries lack housing benefit programs that correspond to the definitions and coding principles of OECD tax/ben, other forms of assistance toward housing of low-income households are often in place. Belgium has grants for home ownership, and low-income families may also qualify for housing with reduced (below market) rent. In Canada, financial assistance towards housing costs is often provided within the overall system of minimum income benefits, which are provided at provincial level. It is not possible in OECD tax/ben to isolate such housing supplements to social assistance. Before 2015, Lithuania only provided assistance towards heating and hot running water. Social assistance recipients in Portugal (i.e. those receiving rendimento social de inserção) may in some situations receive a housing subsidy. Similar to Canada, it is not possible in OECD tax/ben to identify this rent supplement to social assistance. In Spain, only some regions have a separate housing benefit. There is a tax credit for housing expenses at national level. While the former is not included in OECD tax/ben, the latter is not distinguishable from the total taxes paid by the model families. The United States has tenant-based Section 8 vouchers, and some states also use funds from other federal programs to provide rent assistance. These programs are not included

- in OECD tax/ben due to long waiting periods and high levels of discretion.
- 7 For those with zero or extremely low incomes, assistance towards housing costs are often provided via social assistance, and sometimes in combination with a separate housing benefit (i.e. the focus of this study).
 - 8 For the EU countries, Eurostat regularly publishes data on minimum wages as percentage of median gross wages. This percentage was below 50 per cent only in five out of 20 EU countries with statutory minimum wages in 2014. No country was below 40 per cent. According to the [International Labor Organization \(2016\)](#), minimum wages in long-standing democracies typically range from 35 to 60 per cent of the average wage.
 - 9 For consumer prices we used data from the International Labour Organization. When available we used the consumption cost category 'actual and imputed rentals for housing'. Alternatively, we relied on movements in the price index for 'housing, water, electricity, gas, and other fuels'.
 - 10 Our data on housing benefits are available from the corresponding author, upon request. The housing benefit level data will also be made publicly available as a separate module of the Social Policy Indicators Dataset ([Nelson et al., 2020](#)).
 - 11 Our interpretation of [Kemeny's \(1995\)](#) housing regime theory is consistent with this definition of dual-party systems.
 - 12 OECD use EU-SILC to collect data on tenure types for the European countries. EU-SILC only includes information on the tenure status of respondents from the 2010 wave.
 - 13 The data on tenure structures can be obtained from the authors upon request.
 - 14 Unfortunately, mortgage data for our countries and years are not readily available. [Dewilde and De Decker \(2016\)](#) analyse mortgage as percentage of GDP for 13 European countries, but only for 1995. The European Mortgage Federation (EMF) have mortgage debt data, but only from the early 2000s onwards. IMF household debt data are nearly perfectly correlated with EMF mortgage data (Pearson correlation coefficient of around 0.90). Total household debt has previously been used in analyses of the financialization of housing markets ([Johnston, Fuller and Regan, 2021](#)).
 - 15 In countries with strong left parties, the average housing benefit for the period 2001–2018 was around 14 per cent of the gross wage for the single parent model family earning 50% of the average wage. In countries with weak and moderately strong left parties, the corresponding percentages were 11 and 7, respectively.
 - 16 In Croatia and Estonia, housing benefits are exclusively targeted to very low-income households, and hence score zero on our benefit level indicator.

Supplementary data

Supplementary data are available at *ESR* online.

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