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Education a top priority

A public opinion survey conducted in eight Western European countries by university researchers from the working group of policy analysis and political theory provides detailed new information about the public's viewpoint on education policy

Various studies have revealed that a majority of Western European populations support increased investment in education. The Konstanz political scientist Professor Marius Busemeyer and his working group have conducted an original survey of public opinion in eight Western European countries that confirms and further differentiates these findings. The survey evidence shows that supporting general schools as well as vocational education and training are top priorities for European citizens. Almost 80 percent of respondents support more or even much more spending on education, whereas only 20 percent would support more spending on defense policy. In a number of countries, a majority of respondents is even willing to pay higher taxes in order to finance additional spending on education. The details of the study have been published as online pre-prints in the *Journal of European Social Policy* and the *Journal of European Public Policy*.

The survey was conducted via computer-assisted telephone interviews as part of the project "Investing in Education in Europe: Attitudes, Politics and Policies" (INVEDUC), which is financed with a Starting Grant from the European Research Council (ERC). It significantly advances scientific knowledge as it is the first international comparative survey of public opinion on details of education policy. It provides evidence on public attitudes on education spending and financing, the distribution of financial and other resources across different sectors of the education system, the governance of education as well as potential fiscal trade-offs between educational investments and other social policies.

The survey covers eight countries with different types of welfare states: Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Sweden, Denmark, Spain and Italy. In order to achieve the best possible data quality, the university's researchers collaborated with a professional survey institute specialising in international comparative surveys. One further innovative feature of the survey is to include experimental components: "Different from previous surveys, we examined whether public support for higher education expenditures changes when people are confronted with various kinds of budget constraints", explains Marius Busemeyer.

When participants were asked to name just one out of several key areas of the welfare state – besides education, these were, for instance, labour market policy, pensions, family policy, health care or social assistance - education policy did best at an approval rate of 29%, closely followed by

health policy (22%). Other supposedly popular social policies such as pensions or family policy ranked considerably lower. A majority of participants supported greater state spending on education in countries like Germany and Italy, where expenditure is below average.

When asked about which sectors of education should be prioritized, respondents assigned top priority to general school education and vocational education and training (VET). Across all countries, 62 percent of respondents demanded more or even much more spending in these two sectors. This is surprising given the fact that public debates often focus on expanding opportunities in early child education and higher education. In direct comparison, however, the public rather supports additional investments in general schools and VET.

In basically all surveyed countries, support for VET is higher than for higher education. This is especially true for countries like Italy or Spain, which suffer from high levels of youth unemployment rates. Germany, which is doing well in this respect, makes for the exception to the rule: here, expanding early child education is considered the more urgent issue.

Then there's the money problem: in view of shrinking public budgets, political attempts to increase education spending can pose a challenge. In order to gauge the robustness of public support for education spending when confronted with budget constraints, the survey contains experimental components, which confronts citizens with different trade-off scenarios. The survey evidence reveals that, as long as people did not have to worry about how to finance additional spending on education, more than 73% came out in favour of more or even much more investment in education. When reminded that this would involve tax hikes or greater national debt, support dropped to 54% and 42% respectively. This effect is even more pronounced in cases where more spending on education would lead to cutbacks in other areas of the welfare state, such as pensions. In this case, support for education plummets to 27%. These findings show that politicians keen on expanding public spending face tough choices, because they are often forced to finance additional spending with cutbacks or tax hikes.

Generally, cutting back spending on other areas of the welfare state is less popular than tax increases or increasing the national debt. Across countries, a majority of respondents would accept higher taxes to bolster the education budget. Here, too, general school education and vocational education and training are deemed particularly worthy of investment with 57% of respondents expressing a willingness to pay additional taxes for the former and 54% for the latter, respectively. In Sweden, the discrepancy between popular demands for more education spending and people's actual willingness to pay higher taxes is relatively small. In Germany, however, respondents were less willing to tolerate higher taxes: 60% support greater education spending, but only 44% would be prepared to accept higher taxes in return.

Original publications:

Marius R. Busemeyer and Julian L. Garritzmann (2017) Public opinion on policy and budgetary trade-offs in European welfare states: evidence from a new comparative survey, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 24:6, 871-889,
DOI: 10.1080/13501763.2017.1298658
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2017.1298658>

Marius R. Busemeyer, Julian L. Garritzmann and Erik Neimanns (2017) Investing in education in Europe: Evidence from a new survey of public opinion, *Journal of European Social Policy*, 1–21
DOI: 10.1177/0958928717700562
<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0958928717700562>

Facts:

- The INVEDUC project is being funded by an ERC Starting Grant in the amount of EUR 1.5 million.
- The survey was conducted in April and May 2014.
- Approximately 9,000 individuals were surveyed.
- In each of the eight countries, about 1,000-1,500 individuals were consulted.

Note to editors:

You can download a photo here:

Image link:

https://cms.uni-konstanz.de/fileadmin/pi/filesserver/2017/0_51_Busemeyer.jpg

Caption: Professor Marius Busemeyer

Photo: University of Konstanz

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