

# VOICES FROM THE WELFARE STATE

Dissatisfaction and Political Action in Sweden

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this study is to investigate the relationship between citizens' dissatisfaction with the welfare state and political action on welfare state issues, and to what extent institutional arrangements affects this relationship. The point of departure for this study is the policy feedback perspective, which acknowledges that the design of institutions shape and constrain citizens' political preferences and behaviors. The theoretical foundation of the study is then formed by intersecting research on how citizens' evaluations of government output affect political behavior, research on political participation and research on policy feedback effects. To reach the aim, two research questions are put forward asking whether the relationship between welfare state dissatisfaction and 1) the *level* of political action and 2) *form* of political action vary depending on the institutional design of welfare state institutions?

To capture the design features of welfare state institutions that potentially give rise to feedback effects, the concept *institutionalized citizen empowerment* is used. Institutionalized citizen empowerment should be understood as a power balance between the institution and the individual encountering the institution. To measure institutionalized citizen empowerment, the degree of universalism, bureaucratic discretion, exit options, voice opportunities, and legal rights is compared across four public service institutions: public schools, hospital care, primary care and elderly care. The results of the comparison show that public school is a highly empowering institution while elderly care is a low empowering institution. Hospital care and primary care take an intermediate position and are labeled medium degree of empowerment. Based on these results, a hypothesis is formed: The higher degree of institutionalized citizen empowerment, the stronger the positive relationship between public service dissatisfaction and political action. To specify, it is hypothesized to find the strongest dissatisfaction effect on political action about public school issues and weakest effect of dissatisfaction on political action about elderly care issues. Moreover, it is hypothesized that the higher degree of empowerment, the higher the degree of *contact* political action when expressing dissatisfaction.

The testing of the hypothesis is carried out using data from the 2004 and 2006 Swedish national survey on Society, Opinion, and Mass media. The results of the statistical analyses confirm the hypotheses on a general level, that is, the strongest effect of dissatisfaction on political action is found on public school issues and weakest effect on elderly care issues. Thus, the higher degree of empowerment, the stronger the relationship between dissatisfaction and political action in general and through contacting in particular. Still, some specifications of the hypotheses show results deviating from the expected pattern which raises further questions about the conditions for policy feedback effects.

**Keywords:** political action, dissatisfaction, welfare state, policy feedback, institutions, empowerment, political participation, Sweden