Explaining perceptions of the unemployed in Europe

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Explaining Perceptions of the Unemployed in Europe

Tim Vlandas *

Abstract. This article explores the determinants of the perceptions of the unemployed in 29 European countries along three dimensions: whether people see the unemployed as the ‘government’s responsibility’; whether they believe the unemployed do not ‘try hard to find a job’; and whether they think that the standard of living of the unemployed is ‘bad’. I derive a number of expectations from the political economy literature on policy preferences and test whether these expectations explain variation in the perceptions of the unemployed. Using logistic regression analysis, I find that labour market status and occupations influence individuals’ perceptions of the unemployed. For instance, the unemployed and workers in low skill occupations are most likely to think that the government is responsible for the standard of living of the unemployed. However, certain factors such as gender, occupations, education, and union membership affect distinct types of perceptions differently. The determinants of policy preferences help us make sense of perceptions of the unemployed but certain factors affect different types of perceptions in distinct ways.

Keywords: Perceptions of the Unemployed, Labour Market Dualisation, Europe, Occupations, Political Economy.

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1. Perceptions of the Unemployed in Europe

Unemployment has been a policy concern in many European countries since at least the early 20th century. Movements of the unemployed have struggled for a social settlement between the two world wars and many governments consequently introduced unemployment insurance. Once the welfare state was in place, attitudes towards welfare state policies have been found to be fairly stable at least until the 1980s and 1990s. However, unemployment is a significant problem in many European countries in the context of the ongoing economic crisis. Recently, many governments have chosen to curtail welfare state benefits in the pursuit of austerity. Yet, policy makers are at least partly constrained in what they can do to address unemployment by the perceptions of the unemployed among the wider population. There is for instance some evidence that public policy and policy outcomes are in part shaped by public opinion. It is therefore important to identify the determinants of perceptions of the unemployed. How does unemployment and individual characteristics affect perceptions of the unemployed?

There is a large literature on both perceptions of the welfare state and benefit recipients. More recently, there has been a growing body of

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research on the political economy determinants of labour market policy preferences and the implications for the cross-national variation in policies across European countries. Yet, the insights of this latter literature, for instance on the role of occupations and labour market position, have not been applied to the study of perceptions of the unemployed.

In this paper, I build on the political economy literature on individual policy preferences to derive expectations concerning the determinants of perceptions of the unemployed in European countries. In contrast to much of the earlier literature on labour that posited homogenous interests and preferences among workers, recent contributions in the labour market dualisation literature emphasise various divides in post-industrial labour markets between workers that face different risks. Put simply, this literature finds that those with low risk of becoming unemployed increasingly stop caring about the rest of the workforce, with important implications for the politics of labour market policy in Europe.

Two sets of factors are generally delineated in the literature on the perceptions of benefit recipients: self-interest and ideological factors. This paper focuses on the effect of self-interest. In the political economy literature on policy preferences, two approaches to identifying individual self-interest can be delineated. First, the ‘dualisation approach’ contends that labour is systematically divided between insiders in well-protected and permanent jobs whereas outsiders are in non-standard forms of work. Second, the ‘ideological approach’ contends that public support for public assistance is driven by ideological values.

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employment or unemployment. Because insiders are unlikely to become outsiders, they are expected not to favour policies that benefit these groups. Second, the ‘occupational approach’ instead posits that individuals in distinct occupations have different skills and hence face different risks. Where individuals work in occupations with specific skills, they may be less likely to find a new job that relies on their skill set. Therefore, individuals in specific skills occupations will favour labour market policies to insure themselves against the risk of job loss.

Building on this literature, the present article explores whether the determinants of policy preferences also affect the perceptions of the unemployed. In contrast to much of the political economy literature however, I treat the ‘dualisation’ and ‘occupational’ approaches as complementary rather than alternative drivers of perception. While the ‘dualisation approach’ emphasises a discontinuous distribution of risk generated by labour market contracts and status, the ‘occupational approach’ focuses our attention on a more fine grained distribution of risk that cuts across labour market status.

I analyse the determinants of the perceptions of the unemployed using several questions from the European Social Survey. Results from a logistic regression analyses suggest that being unemployed or on a temporary contract makes you more likely to have positive perceptions of the unemployed. Women and those with partners in unemployment are similarly more favourable to the unemployed. The effect of being in different labour market occupations is less clear cut and depends on which dependent variable is used.

The rest of this article enfolds as follows. Building on the political economy literature analysing the determinants of policy preferences, the next section discusses some theoretical expectations concerning the perception of the unemployed. Next, I outline my empirical strategy and present results from several logistic regression analyses on survey data from 29 European countries. The last section concludes.

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2. The Determinants of Policy Preferences and Perceptions towards the Unemployed

Perceptions of the welfare state are important because they may have important effects on policies\(^\ast\). The unemployed are generally seen as the least ‘needy’ benefit recipients\(^\dagger\), partly because unemployment benefits are less universal than other benefits such as pension schemes\(^\ddagger\). In addition, most studies suggest that there is a large part of the population in Europe and the US that does not believe the unemployed really want to return to work\(^\|\) as they are seen to have greater ‘control over their neediness’\(^*\).

The literature contends that both self-interest and ideology shape individuals’ perceptions of the unemployed\(^\text{\textsuperscript{17}}\). This paper focuses on the effect of self-interest, which implies that the likelihood of someone becoming a recipient of a benefit improves their perceptions of benefit recipients. In other words, individuals display more positive views of social and labour market policies when they may themselves depend on these policies in the future\(^\text{\textsuperscript{18}}\). Previous work suggests self-interest

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influences perceptions of the unemployed. Thus for instance, individuals in different social classes, as well as with different levels of education, express different levels of support for welfare state policies. Younger individuals with lower income are more likely to be supportive of welfare state benefits because they are more likely to benefit from the welfare state. Conversely, individuals with higher income are less supportive of benefits. Women are more supportive of the welfare state because they face greater risks and hence higher likelihood of becoming recipients. Unemployed respondents are more supportive of the unemployed. Age also has an effect though it is not always consistent across studies, with some finding that younger respondents are more supportive and other studies finding that support increases with age.

The political economy literature looking at preferences for policies also starts from the premise that the likelihood that one will benefit from the policy is a key determinant of their preference for this policy. As a result, the risk profiles of individuals shape their preferences for welfare state policies. As was the case for the determinants of perceptions discussed above, the expectation is straightforward: the higher the likelihood of becoming unemployed, the more the individual will support more generous labour market policies. However, the literature on policy preferences has gone further in theorising and analysing what factors

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shape workers’ risk of becoming unemployed and how this in turn determines their preferences for policies that benefit the unemployed. In what follows, I discuss which insights from the policy preferences literature may be applied to the study of perceptions.

Earlier literature analysing how partisanship might affect policy making conceptualised labour as being one fairly homogenous group with broadly favourable preferences for policies that are seen to benefit the unemployed and/or maximise employment. The representatives of labour, whether in unions or social democratic parties, could therefore be expected to demand more welfare state policies, more redistribution and attempt to lower inequality.

However, in an ‘age of dualisation’ characterised by a shift to a post-industrial labour market as well as enduring differences between workers, more recent scholarship has shown that different workers may have very different preferences for labour market policies because the risks they face are now very diverse. Specifically, there are robust empirical findings suggesting workers are divided between labour market insiders and outsiders: whereas insiders are in fairly stable permanent employment, outsiders oscillate between unemployment and non-standard forms of employment such as temporary work. Because they face systematically distinct risks, insiders and outsiders also exhibit different policy preferences.

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preferences. Thus, for instance, unemployed individuals are less likely to favour cuts in unemployment benefits\textsuperscript{30}.

This is not to suggest that the consensus concerning the effect of divides on preferences is total. Indeed, the effect of risk on certain policy preferences remains contested, for instance in the case of employment protection legislation\textsuperscript{31}, and it is as a result not clear whether social democratic parties in Europe have necessarily been unresponsive to the standard of living of unemployed and temporary workers\textsuperscript{32}. For instance, permanent workers may under certain conditions, such as low wage coordination and a predominance of general skills among the workforce, promote the re-regulation of the temporary work sector\textsuperscript{33}. Deregulation at the margins, for example through reducing the employment protection legislation of temporary workers, may increase wage inequality between insiders\textsuperscript{34}. But despite these ongoing debates, the conventional wisdom now is that insiders should be much less favourable to generous labour market policies than outsiders.

How we should operationalise the dividing line between insiders and outsiders is also contested. While some authors in the dualisation literature in political science conceptualised the divide in contractual terms – i.e. whether one is in a permanent or temporary contract, or in unemployment\textsuperscript{35}, others posited that occupations and skills shape


\textsuperscript{34} Vlandas, T. (2013) ‘Coordination, inclusiveness and wage inequality between median- and bottom-income workers.’ Comparative European Politics. First online.

individuals’ exposure to risk and hence preferences in perhaps more significant ways\textsuperscript{36}.

Moreover, what is still not clear is whether this divide is also salient when analysing the perceptions of the unemployed. In this article, I want to explore whether both these alternative ways of thinking of the emerging divides in the labour market influence perceptions. If the risk of becoming unemployed affects the perceptions of the unemployed, there is no a priori reason to expect only occupation or labour market status to matter. Thus, I expect individuals in unemployment or temporary contracts, and those in low and general skills occupations to hold more positive perceptions of the unemployed. Note that it is important to distinguish between unemployed and temporary workers because they have been shown to have different preferences\textsuperscript{37}.

Other factors besides contracts and occupations may capture important divides in the labour force. Previous literature for example suggests that the status of an individual’s partner may also matter, so I expect individuals with unemployed spouse to have more positive perceptions of the unemployed. Similarly, women and the young are often considered to be closer to outsiders\textsuperscript{38} than middle aged men so this could potentially feed into perceptions of the unemployed.

The expectations concerning union membership are more indeterminate. On the one hand, an approach emphasising material interests would focus our attention on their lower risk of dismissal and hence expect less favourable perceptions of the unemployed – if perceptions have similar drivers to policy preferences. On the other hand, unions may through a more sociological logic render their members more favourable to the unemployed\textsuperscript{39}. The matter is further complicated by the fact that different


\textsuperscript{39} For the case of active labour market policies, see Nelson, M. (2006), ‘Unionized Workers and Support for Active Labour Market Policies.’ Fifteenth International Conference of the Council for European Studies Chicago (Chicago).
unions within a country may have opposite preferences towards certain labour market policies. This is ultimately an empirical issue. Finally, while the direction of the effects for each variable can be inferred deductively, the relative magnitude of these factors in determining perceptions of the unemployed is an open question. For instance, does occupational or labour market status divides matter more for explaining the perceptions of the unemployed? A related question is whether the magnitude and sign of each independent variable is contingent on the type of perception of the unemployed that we consider. In the next section, I discuss the data that is used to test these expectations and set out my empirical strategy.

3. Data and Empirical Strategy

I test these expectations using the European Social Survey (henceforth ESS). The ESS is a cross-national survey led by a team of academics that carries out face-to-face interviews every two years. It utilises rigorous pre-testing and piloting procedures, and ensures that equivalent sampling designs are implemented in all participating countries. For the purpose of analysing perceptions of the unemployed, I use the fourth round of the ESS (ESS4-2008 Edition 4.2) that was carried out in late 2008 and early 2009, and covers a number of relevant questions concerning labour market status and perceptions. This dataset covers 31 countries but due to data limitations for certain variables, the full model only comprises of 29 countries in Western and Eastern Europe.

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42 This includes European Union countries - Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom; and non-European Union countries: Israel, Norway, Switzerland, Russian Federation, Turkey, and Ukraine.
Table 1: Perceptions of the Unemployed across Countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>% that believe ‘Standard of living for the unemployed, governments' responsibility’</th>
<th>% that believe ‘Unemployment standard of living is bad’</th>
<th>% that disagree or strongly disagree that ‘Most unemployed people do not really try to find a job’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>62.4</td>
<td>65.6</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>72.5</td>
<td>99.7</td>
<td>48.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>65.5</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>47.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyprus</td>
<td>82.4</td>
<td>70.3</td>
<td>27.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>57.1</td>
<td>77.5</td>
<td>30.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>61.3</td>
<td>85.6</td>
<td>38.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>70.3</td>
<td>61.1</td>
<td>57.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>96.4</td>
<td>41.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>86.4</td>
<td>89.1</td>
<td>45.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>87.6</td>
<td>77.1</td>
<td>41.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>60.4</td>
<td>86.6</td>
<td>33.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>57.3</td>
<td>70.1</td>
<td>29.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>90.5</td>
<td>96.3</td>
<td>45.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croatia</td>
<td>79.3</td>
<td>96.3</td>
<td>33.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>67.9</td>
<td>96.6</td>
<td>24.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>71.4</td>
<td>69.9</td>
<td>52.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>78.5</td>
<td>86.5</td>
<td>37.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>87.1</td>
<td>96.6</td>
<td>47.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>71.6</td>
<td>56.5</td>
<td>40.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>82.2</td>
<td>65.3</td>
<td>55.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>60.3</td>
<td>96.3</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>76.7</td>
<td>92.8</td>
<td>30.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>79.4</td>
<td>90.8</td>
<td>26.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>67.8</td>
<td>96.4</td>
<td>28.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>82.9</td>
<td>81.1</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>69.2</td>
<td>87.3</td>
<td>20.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>51.2</td>
<td>92.6</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>78.8</td>
<td>90.7</td>
<td>34.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>81.7</td>
<td>98.5</td>
<td>43.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>69.6</td>
<td>87.8</td>
<td>34.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: population and design weight applied. Source: ESS2008.
Three separate dependent variables are constructed to capture perceptions towards the unemployed. First, I create a binary variable “unemployed is government responsibility” which is coded 1 if respondents have chosen strictly more than 5 in the ESS variable ‘gyslue’ which measures respondents’ views on whether the standard of living of the unemployed is the government's responsibility, and 0 otherwise. Respondents choose a value between 0 if they think it is not at all government responsibility and 10 if they think the government is entirely responsible. Table 1 shows that between 51.2% (in Slovakia) and 90.5% (in Greece) believe that the unemployed are the government’s responsibility. Second, I create a binary variable “unemployed standard of living is bad”. It is coded 1 if respondents answer between 1 and 5 and 0 if respondents answer between 6 and 10 to the question: “What do you think overall about the standard of living of people who are unemployed?”; where they choose a number between 0 (extremely bad) and 10 (extremely good). As shown in table 1, between 56% (in Netherlands) and 99.7% (in Bulgaria) of respondents believe the standard of living of the unemployed is bad. Third, I create a binary variable “unemployment try to find a job” which is coded 1 if respondents answer that they strongly disagree or disagree with the statement “most unemployed people do not really try to find a job”, and 0 otherwise. Table 1 shows that between 15% (in Slovakia) and 57.9 (in Denmark) disagree or strongly disagree that ‘most unemployed people do not really try to find a job’.

For the independent variables, I create a series of binary variables to capture the respondents’ gender, whether they are unemployed, on a temporary contract, a union member and whether their spouse is unemployed. I also control for the number of years of education they completed, their age in a quadratic specification to allow for non-linearity, and their occupation by recoding the ISCO88 occupational scheme into 9 categories using Torben Iversen’s do-file.


The nine occupations are: (1) Legislators, senior officials and managers (reference category for occupations); (2) Professionals; (3) Technicians & associate professionals; (4) Clerks; (5) Service workers & shop & market sales workers; (6) Skilled agricultural & fishery workers; (7) Craft & related trades workers; (8) Plant & machine operators & assemblers; (9) Elementary occupations. Category is the reference category, meaning that the effect of belonging to other occupations is relative to an individual in category 1.

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To test the impact of the independent variables on my dependent variable, I run binary logistic regression analyses while including country fixed effects to capture unobserved country heterogeneity. I report robust standard errors clustered by country. I do not model the hierarchical nature of the data using a multilevel approach because I have less than 30 units at the national level whereas one generally need more than 30 cases at that level to employ this method. Note further that I am not primarily interested in explaining variation at this level. All results are plotted graphically to facilitate interpretations.

4. Empirical Results

To evaluate the relative importance of each independent variable, Figure 1 plots semi-standardised coefficients that have been rescaled by the standard deviation of the variable in the data. For each variable, a positive coefficient suggests the factor under consideration increases the probability of the respondent holding favourable perceptions of the unemployed. The figure displays the 95% confidence interval which is shown by the line around the point estimate. Where the line intersects the 0-line, the variable is not statistically different from 0 at that level of confidence.

The results are as follows. Being a female respondent, unemployed, or having an unemployed spouse makes it more likely than an individual thinks “the unemployed are government responsibility”. Being in a temporary contract has a similar effect to that of being unemployed. Union members do not have a statistically different perception of the unemployed. Education makes you less likely to agree that the unemployed are government’s responsibility but this effect disappears when occupational dummies are included, suggesting the effect of occupation might occur through occupational sorting into high/low skill occupations.

do file can be accessed at: http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~iversen/SkillSpecificity.htm

Figure 1: European Social Survey Results – “Standard of Living for the Unemployed, Governments’ Responsibility”, with rescaled Coefficients

Note: Country fixed effects and age (not significant) are included but not shown. Robust standard errors clustered by country. Effects are rescaled by the standard deviations of the predictors (semi-standardized effects).

The effect of occupations themselves seems less clear cut. Craft workers, those in elementary occupations as well as plant and machine operators are all significantly more likely to agree that the unemployed are government’s responsibility (the reference category is being in the occupation “Legislators, senior officials and managers”). The effect is similar but less strong for technicians, service workers and clerks. Taken together these results do not seem to suggest that perceptions are strongly influenced by skill specificity since the occupation with the highest specific skills - craft workers - are not noticeably more favourable to the unemployed than those with low but more general skills such as workers in elementary occupations (which have the lowest ISCO skill level of all occupations).

If we turn our attention to other variables that measure perceptions of the unemployed, the results are similar in some respects but quite different in other ways. On the one hand, Figure 2 reveals that being unemployed or
having an unemployed partner makes it more likely to think that the standard of living of unemployed people is bad and more likely to disagree that unemployed do not try hard to find a job. The variable capturing whether the respondent is on a temporary contract and being a female respondent only have a statistically significant effect on perceptions of the unemployed standard of living. In contrast to Figure 1 however, being a union member is now statistically significant: union members are more likely to have be sympathetic to the unemployed as captured by these two dependent variables.

**Figure 2: European Social Survey Results – Alternative Dependent Variables**

Note: Country fixed effects and age (not significant) are included but not shown. Robust standard errors clustered by country. Effects are rescaled by the standard deviations of the predictors (semi-standardized effects): with and without occupational dummies.

On the other hand, education now has the opposite effect than before: more highly educated respondents are more likely to disagree that unemployed do not try to find a job (but this has no effect on the perceptions of their standard of living). Occupations now surprisingly seem to have opposite effects on the two dependent variables, though
they are often not statistically significant. One exception is being in craft and related trade, an occupation that requires very specific skills, which makes it less likely that respondents disagree that unemployed do not try to find a job. In other words, workers with more specific skills seem to have worse perceptions of the unemployed in this respect. By contrast, the other exception is being in a professional occupation which makes it more likely to disagree that unemployed do not try to find a job.

5. Conclusions

The literatures on perceptions of the unemployed and the determinants of policy preferences have largely developed in parallel. This is surprising because, as I have tried to show in this article, insights from the political economy literature on policy preferences are also relevant when considering perceptions of the unemployed. The more refined conceptualisation of various forms of labour market risks and how these may affect preferences sheds some interesting light on the determinants of perceptions.

This article has shown that labour market dualisation also has some explanatory power when looking at perceptions of the unemployed. Where one stands along several dividing lines in the labour market shapes whether individuals think the standard of living of the unemployed is governments' responsibility: the unemployed, those in low skill occupations or those on temporary contracts are more likely to think so. Thus, as high skill occupations have expanded over the previous decades, those believing the government is not responsible for the unemployed have become more numerous. On the other hand, there has also been a rise in the number of unemployed and precarious workers who tend to think the unemployed are governments' responsibility.

Being unemployed or having an unemployed partner makes it more likely to think that the standard of living of unemployed people is bad and more likely to disagree that unemployed do not try hard to find a job. Union members are also more likely to have positive perceptions of the unemployed using these two dependent variables. The falling share of the workforce that is unionised in many European countries may have had adverse implications for the perceptions of the unemployed. Interestingly, more highly educated respondents are more likely to disagree that unemployed people do not try to find a job but less likely to think that their standard of living is government's responsibility. Occupations have different effects on the three dependent variables. Being in craft and
related trade, an occupation that requires very specific skills, makes it less likely that respondents disagree that unemployed do not try to find a job, but more likely to think that the standard of living for the unemployed is governments' responsibility.

Together these findings make two broader contributions. First, they suggest that different types of perceptions of the unemployed have partly distinct drivers: certain factors affect all types of perceptions of the unemployed similarly (e.g. being unemployed and having an unemployed partner make individuals more positively inclined towards the unemployed); other factors are only significant for certain types of perceptions (e.g. being a temporary worker and being a union member); and yet other factors have opposite effects on different perceptions (e.g. being a craft worker and years of education). Thus, reforms that increase the requirements for the unemployed to look for jobs and those that cut the unemployment benefit replacement rate may not build on the same underlying coalition.

Second, this paper shows that unemployment influences perceptions through multiple channels. The first channel is that being unemployed not surprisingly makes you much more likely to have positive perceptions of the unemployed. However, the effect of unemployment does not stop here. A second channel operates through having an unemployed spouse, which also positively influences your perceptions of the unemployed. As countries have an increasing number of unemployed workers, it makes it more likely that at least one household member experiences an unemployment spell, and a growing part of the population may therefore develop more positive perceptions of the unemployed. On the other hand, this also has the important implication that if unemployment is increasingly concentrated in certain households, the share of the population that has positive perceptions of the unemployed is likely to shrink because fewer employed workers have perceptions that may be influenced by an unemployed spouse. If the distribution of unemployment risk is driven by the distribution of skills, homogamy may lead to more concentrated perceptions of the unemployed and a lower overall share of the population with positive perceptions of the unemployed.

Thus, in times of higher unemployment and rising numbers of precarious jobs, my findings suggest that the politics of unemployment may change in important ways.
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