**Why Citizens Want Something for Nothing: Three Explanations for Unfunded Spending Demand**

**Abstract**

Several studies have documented "something for nothing" (SFN) attitudes among citizens: preferences for increased government spending *and* lower taxes. Such a demand for unfunded public spending may generate unsustainable fiscal pressures. However, it is unclear what causes SFN attitudes at the individual level. While previous research emphasizes the role of political information, we explore how SFN attitudes represent a rational response to economic vulnerability and service dissatisfaction. Using an original survey in Norway, we find that economic vulnerability is a pivotal explanation of SFN attitudes: Lower income and education, being a benefit recipient, and perceived economic risks drive demand for welfare state support, but dampen support for taxation. We also observe that political information and service satisfaction partially alleviate SFN attitudes by increasing taxation support more than spending demand. Understanding these drivers for unfunded public spending has implications for the sustainability of the welfare state.

**Keywords**: Economic vulnerability; service satisfaction; political information; spending; taxation; Norway

# Introduction

As democracies grapple with evolving expectations from their citizens, the alignment of public finance with public sentiment is crucial for maintaining trust and the legitimacy of political decision-making more in general (de Blok and Kumlin 2022; Downs 1960; Gidron and Mijs 2019; Rehm 2011). Efficient and sustainable public finance requires a certain congruence between spending and funding. Addressing growing demands for social policies without corresponding budgetary means is difficult in the short run and fundamentally unsustainable in the long run. This has always been true but is becoming a more pressing problem in mature welfare states, which must increasingly respond to growing needs and risks (Zutavern and Kohli 2021) while demographic changes and tax competition generate fiscal pressures.

In democracies, where public opinion partly shapes policy, we expect some congruence between spending and funding also in citizens’ political reasoning. This cannot be taken for granted, however. Indeed, Sears and Citrin noted in *Tax Revolt: Something for Nothing in California* (1982: 3) a “widespread tendency…to desire simultaneously lower taxes but increased government services.” This “something for nothing” tendency (SFN) entails that costly redistributive demands are not backed up with sufficient support for taxation. Unfunded spending demands have been presented in previous research as reflection of a lack of information about what the government does and how expensive its policies are (Bartels 2005; cf. Winter and Mouritzen 2001). To capture this asymmetry, some scholars have used the concept of “fiscal illusion” to illustrate the alleged inability among the public to see, or even understand, the connection between the spending and funding sides of public finance (Downs 1960).

Yet, a recent study on Sweden found a low incidence of SFN attitudes and argued that it is economic vulnerabilities, rather than low information levels, that explain why some support public spending and redistribution while suggesting that somebody else should pick up the bill (Edlund and Johansson Sevä 2013). Thus, in their view, economic rationality and self-interest, rather than ignorance and cognitive inability, explain SFN attitudes. Against this background, our first contribution is to consider *both* political-informational as well as rational-economic factors behind SFN attitudes.

A second contribution is to analyze how economic interests may influence support for public spending and for taxation differently. Few studies in this vein simultaneously examine attitudes towards spending and taxation. This imbalance is partly due to practicalities, as most surveys ask more questions about spending than taxation. But arguably it also reflects deeply engrained theoretical assumptions about “left-right ideology”, implying that spending and taxation preferences belong to one latent ideological conflict shaping attitudes in similar directions (Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012). If true, omitting one of these aspects does not impede inferences about how economic interests structure stances in the broader latent conflict. However, such inferences do not hold if economic conditions affect spending and taxation support differently. We show that while economic vulnerability increases spending demand, it decreases taxation support and is thus associated with demands to receive something for nothing.

A third contribution is to develop the rationalist perspective on SFN to include policy output assessments. Not only do we consider a range of economic vulnerability variables that may affect the individual’s ability to pay for needed services, but we also consider citizens’ evaluations of welfare state services. This tests the possibility that SFN reflects a broader rational calculus, including not only of what people need and can afford to pay, but also a quality assessment of the services they are likely to get in return. Our survey offers extensive information about respondents’ evaluations of the quality of public services, allowing us to contribute to the literature on public support for the welfare state by highlighting this understudied mechanism. Our analysis reveals that service satisfaction and political information alleviate SFN attitudes by increasing support for tax levels more so than they increase spending demand. Moreover, we show that the effects of service satisfaction and political information should be seen as independent from the role of economic vulnerability.

A fourth contribution arises as most current research differentiating redistribution and taxation preferences focuses on “liberal” Anglo-Saxon welfare states and the US in particular (Jacques and Weisstanner 2022). By contrast, we analyze Norway. As we explain below, this makes for a harder test due to (1) Norway’s cleavage-based and ideologically structured political system, (2) its exceptional macroeconomic context, and (3) its generous and—as citizens see it—unusually well-performing social transfers and services. Overall, examining our hypotheses in this context exposes the SFN logic to a harder test compared to most past work. Are self-serving and ideologically inconsistent SFN patterns present, and possible to explain systematically, in an affluent, ideologically structured, well-performing welfare state environment? If the answer is yes, then the phenomenon appears to travel well across advanced industrial democracies. If the answer is no, then we may have a more variable phenomenon at hand, one that should be generalized with caution, and where more comparative research is needed.

The next section discusses political-informational explanations for SFN. We then turn to rational-economic processes, and consider a number of concrete economic “vulnerabilities” as explanations. The subsequent section extends this perspective to also include assessments of public service quality on the policy “output” side. We then discuss our country context, after which we turn to data, measures, and ultimately analysis.

# Three Explanations for “Something for Nothing” Attitudes

Three main perspectives can be derived from previous literature to explain why some people want additional public spending without accepting corresponding funding increases. The first concerns an informational problem, where SFN attitudes are argued to be “irrational” and driven by a lack of knowledge about political decision-making. The second and third perspective, on the other hand, see SFN attitudes as a rational reaction. One rationalist perspective argues that economically vulnerable citizens maintain unfunded demands for public spending since they do not have the means to pay for taxes. Another rationalist explanation suggests that citizens who are dissatisfied with the quality of public services may not be willing to pay for the services they demand. We discuss each perspective in turn.

## Political Information

One point of view suggests that individuals may lack well-formed or internally consistent views on complex matters of politics and public policies (Bartels 1996; Converse 2006). This leads to “fiscal illusions,” where citizens hold distorted perceptions of government finances by supporting government spending without a corresponding willingness to pay taxes (Barnes and Hicks 2018; Confalonieri and Newton 1995). Past research documented that a lack of political information leads to SFN attitudes. For instance, Downs (1960) highlights that most benefits offered by the government are remote for voters, as they are far-removed from their daily lives. It is often uncertain for voters (and indeed policy makers themselves) how specific policy changes will impact society in general, and policy beneficiaries in particular. In contrast, taxes are much more tangible for citizens: they are visible and measurable, especially in the case of direct taxation, making citizens wary about them. Moreover, there is rarely a direct connection between taxes paid and benefits received, and voters may perceive that some government spending is allocated to policy areas that they dislike. Hence, an information imbalance occurs, which leads to less support for government spending than what might be the case if voters were fully informed about the benefits to society of social policies (Downs 1960).

A clear example of such internally inconsistent views is Bartels’ “Homer gets a Tax Cut” (2005) study, which shows that most Americans believe that the rich pay too little taxes and disapprove of existing inequality levels. Yet, most Americans overwhelmingly supported the 2001 and 2003 Bush tax cuts, which included cuts on inheritance taxation, capital gains taxes and top marginal tax rates, because these reforms also included (smaller) tax cuts for middle-class citizens. Thus, even though these tax cuts mainly benefited the rich and increased economic inequality, most citizens did not couple their short-term financial gains with the long-term negative societal consequences that this policy change would entail for inequality and public finances.

Political information plays a significant role in shaping citizens' social policy and taxation views, as politically informed individuals were slightly more likely to make accurate evaluations of the societal and economic consequences of the Bush tax cuts (Bartels 2005). Indeed, citizens can maintain more coherent policy preferences if they are well informed about public policies (Converse 2006; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Zaller 1992). Political information is part of the wider concept of political sophistication, which encompasses a person's knowledge about political institutions, policies, and processes, their interest in politics, as well as their ability to critically analyze and navigate complex political issues (i.e., their intelligence or cognition). More politically sophisticated citizens can engage in more complex and long-term political reasoning, have more diverse political attitudes, and are better able to process and assess the accuracy of new political information (Gallina 2023; Krosnick 1990; Luskin 1987). Kölln (2018) revealed that during economic crises, the politically sophisticated were more inclined to support countercyclical or Keynesian government spending on social policies, while the less sophisticated tended to favour austerity measures. This suggests that the politically sophisticated adopt a more long-term perspective on government spending consequences and are more likely to think counterintuitively. Additionally, financially well-off, politically sophisticated citizens often express stronger support for progressive taxation, which is driven by altruism but also by a more profound understanding of how income redistribution can benefit public health, safety, social cohesion, and potentially themselves in the longer run (Stiers et al. 2021). In sum, political information should lead to more coherent support for taxes and social policies, leading to the following first hypothesis:

*H1. Higher levels of political information are associated with lower levels of unfunded demands for public spending.*

## Economic Vulnerability

A long-standing social science research program has asked how economic vulnerability affects political orientations towards redistributive policies. Economic vulnerability is associated with more support for redistribution: if citizens become poorer, they want the help of the state to improve their living conditions (Margalit 2019). Most studies confirm such a relationship at the macro as well as micro level. Higher unemployment rate (Blekesaune 2007) is associated with more support for redistribution, while individual-level economic strain (Blekesaune 2013), income loss (Gidron and Mijs 2019; Helgason and Rehm 2023; Rueda and Stegmueller 2019) and job loss (Martén 2019; Owens and Pedulla 2014; Rehm 2011) increase support for redistribution. Moreover, redistribution support decreases when an individual wins the lottery, which represents an exogenous positive economic shock (Doherty, Gerber, and Green 2006).

Much research concentrating on the effect of economic vulnerability on welfare state preferences focuses on the spending side. They analyze dependent variables tapping into public support for spending on different types of policies or for considering that it is the “government’s responsibility” to protect “the unemployed,” “the old” and other implicated groups. While these are key dependent variables, this exclusive focus on the spending side is unfortunate as economic vulnerability may influence support for social spending and taxation differently. Previous studies on the relationship between economic hardship and taxation attitudes tend to concentrate on support for taxes on the rich. Such taxation support appears to be boosted by economic crises (Garcia-Muniesa 2019; Limberg 2020), as well as by unemployment risk and income reductions (O’Grady 2019).

Increased support for taking from the rich does not necessarily equal greater support for generally higher taxation or personal willingness to pay taxes. Few perceive themselves to be rich so that preferences for higher taxes on the rich may simply reveal a penchant to shift the burden to a very specific group (Cansunar 2021). This is a problem to the extent that increasing demands cannot be entirely funded only by taxing the rich but rather require spreading the burden over most people that can pay taxes (Lindert 2004). Indeed, studying public opinion in residual welfare states in the United States, Japan and Canada, Jacques and Weisstanner (2022) find that when income is declining, citizens become *even less* supportive of taxes generally, possibly because tax increases would imply a reduction of their consumption level. These results suggest a severe version of SFN: vulnerability does not only generate unfunded demands, but involves that growing demands and general taxation support move in different directions.

Theoretically, several mechanisms could link economic vulnerability to lower willingness to pay taxes and potentially lower support for general levels of taxes. For example, taxes force citizens to make policy trade-offs between potential public benefits and their contributions. They impose direct costs to all taxpaying individuals; as individuals become worse off, they might become less willing to provide resources to finance policies that partly benefit themselves and partly benefit others. Also, taxes can be seen as a luxury good for which demand decreases when income declines. This argument builds on classical studies in social sciences such as Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (1943) and Inglehart’s (1997) post materialism. Maslow argues that people can turn their attention to self-actualization only when their basic needs are fulfilled, whereas Inglehart suggests that post-materialist values flourish when material needs are satisfied. Morals are also a luxury good: as voters become richer, their moral values (ideology) become more important to them, whereas self-interest matter more when they become poorer (Enke, Polborn, and Wu 2022). Indeed, Fisman et al. (Fisman, Jakiela, and Kariv 2015) find that exposure to economic recession generates greater “selfishness” and less willingness to contribute to the common pool in laboratory studies. Researchers using cross-sectional surveys (Jacques 2023) or online budgetary tools (Tuxhorn, D’Attoma, and Steinmo 2022) have found a positive relationship between income and willingness to pay taxes.

In sum, then, economic vulnerability may even be associated with lower willingness to pay taxes, as citizens facing economic hardship focus on their self-interest: they demand more spending, but do not have the means to pay for it and prefer to shift the tax burden to the more well-off. This is what Edlund and Johansson Sevä (2013) find as they show that low-income respondents tend to withdraw previously expressed spending support when “priced” survey items ask if they are willing to pay higher taxes themselves. Building on their important study, we investigate whether the economically vulnerable tend to demand higher public spending and lower tax levels at the same time. However, whereas Edlund and Johansson Sevä study differences between priced and unpriced survey items, we directly compare the effect of economic vulnerability on both measures of spending and taxation support. Moreover, we consider the possibility that economic hardship may not only lead to unfunded spending demands but might even move opinions about spending and general taxation support in opposite directions, which is an even stronger version of SFN. Therefore, we formulate the following hypothesis:

*H2. Economic vulnerability is associated with higher levels of unfunded demands for public spending.*

## Welfare State Satisfaction

Research on unfunded spending demands is generally silent on how citizens assess the quality of social protection they demand. If anything, the “something for nothing” terminology might reveal a tacit assumption that protection is somewhat mediocre or untrustworthy. If citizens perceive that governments waste a lot of money with inefficiencies or corruption, they may rationally want their spending demand to be paid for by a reduction of this waste rather than by paying more taxes (Williamson 2017). Consequently, it seems reasonable that individuals hesitate to pay for increasingly needed social protection. However, if citizens are satisfied with social protection, they must decide whether to free-ride in a system they typically perceive as high-quality, or whether to support some tax hike in exchange for high quality social protection.

To our knowledge, few studies have compared the impact of service satisfaction on demands for additional spending and on support for taxation. In doing so, we draw on several studies suggesting that service satisfaction is associated with a greater willingness to pay taxes (Gugushvili 2022; Habibov et al. 2018; Steinmo 2018). However, the picture is incomplete as satisfaction may not only boost tax support, but might also fuel greater spending demands. If so, satisfaction increases support for spending and funding alike, and does not influence SFN. Paying attention to this possibility is key as past research sends unclear signals on how satisfaction correlates with spending support. Some studies find that “quality of government” *builds* welfare state support broadly in terms of both spending and taxation support (Svallfors 2013), whereas others detect “thermostatic” reactions such that satisfaction *reduces* support for further spending (Busemeyer 2023; Gugushvili 2022; Hedegaard 2018; van Oorschot and Meuleman 2012). These seemingly contradicting results are yet to be fully explained. What is important here is that no studies find that performance satisfaction reduces tax support and we are not aware of any theoretical reasons that would predict this. If anything, it seems reasonable that people normally hesitate to pay for social protection if it is mediocre, whereas dissatisfaction entails potentially conflicting associations with support for public spending. Therefore, we expect that service satisfaction increases support for taxation more so than it raises demand for spending, thereby alleviating SFN attitudes.

*H3. Welfare state performance satisfaction is associated with lower levels of unfunded demands for public spending.*

## Norway as a Hard Case

We test our hypotheses focusing on the case of Norway. Norway may be an unusually difficult test case for three reasons: its strong economy, its ideologically structured political system, and its high service satisfaction. The most obvious way in which Norway stands out is economic, a situation that matters since self-interest is typically a stronger predictor of attitudes and behaviour under conditions of scarce resources where the economic stakes implied by political choices grow in size and clarity (Sears and Funk 1991). These preconditions are clearly less prevalent in Norway compared to most other advanced industrial democracies. Norway has exceptionally high income levels and low levels of inequality, unemployment, and poverty. Additionally, the Norwegian welfare state’s fiscal trustworthiness is underwritten by Norway’s exceptional oil and gas revenues accumulating in its oil fund, which is in turn bolsters the state budget annually, even if the government is only allowed to use a small fraction of its total value in any given year. Hence, worries about fiscal sustainability are significantly lower in Norway than in comparable countries such as Sweden and Germany (Kumlin and Goerres 2022).

In terms of the structure of *political conflict*, political scientists have documented high levels of left-right ideological divisions in Norway. This reflects the role of “cleavage politics” in Norway. On this view, interests are important but collective in nature. Sociologically meaningful group affiliations affect political behaviour through general ideological positions. Prominent among these are occupational classes (Svallfors 2006). Class positions, presumably charged by collective identification and contacts, drive preferences on both spending and taxation. The result is a tightly knit economic left-right ideological package that aligns with group interests. Empirically, Norwegian electoral research has reported cross-sectional evidence of a strongly integrated economic left-right dimension consisting of both opinions about expansion/privatization of public responsibility, as well as taxation (Aardal, Bergh, and Haugsgjerd 2019). A rarely studied implication of strong ideological constraint is that people who *become* more leftist on redistribution—perhaps as they face greater economic risk—will also find it natural to become more leftist on taxation. Such ideological adjustments of belief systems stand in contrast to the SFN syndrome which suggests that individuals make economically self-serving adjustments in the face of economic hardship, resulting in simultaneously leftist (more spending support) and rightist adjustments (less taxation support).

A third case in point concerns the Norwegian welfare state. Economic hardship is mitigated by unusually generous social protection and services. This is reflected in a comparatively high level of concrete satisfaction with public services and social protection policies in Scandinavia and Norway (Roosma, Gelissen, and van Oorschot 2013). These levels notwithstanding, however, satisfaction varies across individuals and evaluative aspects with a significant minority displaying welfare state performance dissatisfaction. Interestingly, this variation appears to have unusually strong effects on political attitudes in Norway, most notably on political trust (de Blok, Haugsgjerd, and Kumlin 2020).

In sum, examining our hypotheses in Norway exposes the SFN logic to a harder test compared to most past work. Are self-serving and ideologically inconsistent attitudinal adjustments present in an affluent, ideologically structured environment such as Norway, and even among Norwegians that are satisfied with welfare state performance? If the answer to these questions is yes, then the self-interested logic driving the something for nothing tendency appears to travel well across advanced industrial democracies. If the answers are no, then we would seem to have a more variable phenomenon at hand, one that should be generalized with caution, and where more comparative research is needed.

**Data and Methods**

This paper uses the “Support for the Affluent Welfare State” (SuppA) Study (2014-2017),

an original Norwegian panel survey aiming to study social capital and welfare state attitudes in Norway (Kumlin et al. 2020). A two-staged sampling procedure was followed. Respondents were drawn from TNS Gallup’s web panel and interviewed in 2014, 2015 and 2017.[[1]](#footnote-1) Norwegian adults (18 years or older) were the target group of the study. The survey is representative for place of residence (rural/urban), age, gender, and education levels of the Norwegian population. We use the second wave in 2015 and the third wave in 2017 for our analyses. We did not use the first wave since it did not contain the taxation preference items, which are crucial for our study. Further details about the sampling procedure and operationalization of all variables (including question wording) are presented in appendix A.

## Dependent Variables: Support for Spending, Taxes, and “Something for Nothing”

We leverage the SuppA survey to create three dependent variables: (1) spending preferences, (2) taxation preferences, and (3) an index estimating if respondents want “something for nothing”.

(1) *Spending preferences*. We operationalize support for welfare spending with an additive index based on five questions about government responsibility regarding the following policy domains: unemployment spending, social assistance spending, healthcare provision, pension spending and childcare provision. Factor analyses revealed that these five items form part of a latent spending preference (Cronbach’s alpha=0.83). Answer scales for each individual item range between 1 (not government’s responsibility at all) to 11 (government fully responsible). We rescaled the indicator to range between -1 and 1. Norwegians are strongly supportive of welfare spending by the government: average support is 0.59 (S.D.=0.32). We recognize that questions about preferences for government responsibility to cover social issues are not fully equivalent to preferences regarding public spending. While the former hinges more strongly on political ideology and normative views on the role of government, the latter is more dependent on contextual factors, such as the perceived trustworthiness of political actors (Kulin and Johansson Sevä 2019). Nevertheless, earlier studies have treated such questions as equivalent in researching support for public spending in general, and redistributive social policies in particular (Svallfors 1997, 2013). In addition, correlations between these normative and spending views are the strongest in country cases with high quality of government. In that perspective, earlier studies have found that in countries such as Norway, this correlation is particularly strong (Kulin and Johansson Sevä 2019).

(2) *Taxation preferences*. On the taxation side, we rely on two questions regarding Norwegians’ welfare state reform preferences in the context of pressures on the welfare state. Respondents were asked to consider the following: “*Some say that in the next 10-year period Norway will have to adjust social security and public services to changing circumstances. In the debate, several adjustment strategies have been proposed. People differ both when it comes to how much they like/dislike these proposals, but also when it comes to how necessary they think proposals are*.” Afterwards, they were presented with a series of reform proposals, including the following proposed tax reform: “*Increase the general level of taxation*”. Respondents were asked if they liked this proposal, and whether they thought the proposal to be necessary, regardless of whether they liked it. This division was implemented to ascertain if respondents make a distinction between their normative support for policies, as well as the degree to which they deem certain policy choices to be more urgent in view of ensuring the sustainability of their welfare state (Goubin and Kumlin 2022). We therefore created an index with these two items to measure support for taxation.[[2]](#footnote-2) Response categories for the first item – the perceived likeability of a tax increase as part of a welfare state reform proposal – were coded from -1 (“*mainly dislike*”), 0 (“*neither like nor dislike*”, “*don’t know*”), to 1 (“*mainly like*”) (mean=–0.18, S.D.=0.76). Response categories for the second item – whether respondents deem a taxation increase “necessary” – were coded from -1 (“*not necessary*), 0 (“*don’t know*”), to 1 (“*necessary*”) (mean=0.17, S.D.=0.94).[[3]](#footnote-3) We combined the two items into an index composed of the average between the two taxation items. On average, Norwegians’ taxation preferences are close to the neutral midpoint (mean=–0.01, S.D.=0.74), contrasting with the high support for spending (mean=0.59, S.D.=0.32, see above).

(3) *“Something for nothing” index*. Finally, we combine the indices for spending and tax preferences into a “something for nothing” (SFN) index designed to capture demand for unfunded spending. The SFN index is calculated as support for welfare spending minus support for taxation. Both the spending and taxation indices were z-standardized before calculating the SFN index to ensure that the two scales are fully comparable in terms of mean and variance. This also enables a meaningful comparison of individual attitudes relative to what others desire or expect as it removes the influence of different measurement scales or units. Higher values of the SFN index indicate that respondents are more supportive of spending and less supportive of taxation. The added value of this operationalization is that it measures the degree to which respondents are supportive of unfunded spending demands. However, it does not capture size differences or the internal consistency of respondents (e.g., preferring a lot less taxes, and a little bit less spending). Our SFN index has an average of -0.01 (S.D. 1.27) and an interquartile range of 1.72 (0.86 - -0.86). In Appendix A (Figure A1), we provide a full overview of the distribution of this variable. About 40% of the respondents hold something for nothing attitudes according to this operationalization.

Unfortunately, our survey doesn’t allow us to follow recent studies that take into account budgetary trade-offs when asking about citizens´ preferences to examine SFN preferences (Barnes, Blumenau, and Lauderdale 2022; Bremer and Bürgisser 2023; Tuxhorn, D’Attoma, and Steinmo 2021). By forcing respondents to consider the fiscal cost of their spending preferences, these studies relying on conjoint experiments or online budgetary tools have found strong willingness to pay taxes to fund additional spending (Barnes, Blumenau, and Lauderdale 2022; Tuxhorn, D’Attoma, and Steinmo 2021). In contrast, our survey allows respondents to demand something for nothing by allowing them to choose both lower taxes and higher spending in different questions.

## Independent Variables

To test hypothesis 1, on the role of political information, we rely on one aspect of the wider concept of political sophistication, i.e., citizens’ interest in politics, and the degree to which they inform and discuss politics, as we do not have questions on citizens’ political knowledge or cognition. This index is composed of three items: how interested respondents are in politics, how often they discuss issues concerning politics and society, and how often they receive news about society and politics from different media (on TV, radio, and in newspapers, including online newspapers and social media) (Gallina 2023; Luskin 1987). This index displays good internal consistency (alpha=0.73). The rescaled index ranges from 0 to 1 (mean=0.71, S.D.=0.18).

Our second hypothesis suggests that economic vulnerability correlates positively with wanting “something for nothing”. Previous studies analyzing the relationship between economic vulnerability and welfare state preferences rely on a diverse set of variables, with income or income shocks being the dominant concept, although lower education, unemployment or exposure to labour market risks are also prominent measures. Consequently, we are agnostic about which of the various possible measures of economic vulnerability may influence preferences the most. Therefore, we rely on four different measures of vulnerability that are akin to the varied measures used in previous studies of the effect of economic conditions on preferences. The first three ones, income, education and being a recipient of unemployment or social assistance benefits, serve as “objective” indicators of economic vulnerability. The fourth is a measure of economic risk perceptions.

As a first measure, we analyze the respondents’ annual household income. This indicator captures the gross annual household income (including transfers) before taxes and deductions in eight categories. We reverse the scale so that higher values indicate higher income vulnerability (recoded scale ranging from 1 “*1,400,000 kroner or more*” to 8 “*below 200,000 kroner*”, mean=4.48, S.D.=1.73). A second measure of economic vulnerability relates to the respondent’s educational background, which has a direct relationship with labour market risks. We measure it with a categorical variable recoded so that higher values indicate lower levels of completed formal education (1“Master’s degree”, 2 “Bachelor’s degree”, 3 “Post-secondary education”, 4 “Secondary education”, 5 “Primary education”, mean=2.37, S.D.=1.16). Third, we construct a measure that accounts for the respondents’ objective dependency on welfare benefits as the main source of livelihood. We restrict this “social benefits recipient” indicator to respondents that are receiving unemployment or social assistance benefits (8.8% of respondents are part of this group), which are closely related to labour market risks (Wehl 2019).

We also construct a composite “perceived economic risk” indicator. This original economic risk indicator captures respondents’ fear of facing an economic decline in the near future, which serves as a more subjective assessment of economic hardship. Perceived economic risk captures the degree to which respondents believe they will be facing the risk of unemployment and/or the risk of lack of money to cover household necessities in the next year. Answers range from 1 (“*not likely at all*”) to 4 (“*very likely*”) (mean=1.38, S.D.=0.57).

To test hypothesis 3, we analyze satisfaction with welfare services. In contrast to other studies, such as the European Social Survey, which only focus on satisfaction with a handful of services (usually education and health services in general), the SuppA study included a question on satisfaction with 18 different services. These ranged from medical services, such as the local general practitioner or emergency room, to satisfaction with schools, such as the local kindergartens, to satisfaction with nursing homes, or the national Norwegian Labour and Welfare Service (NAV). Respondents were first asked if they or a family member had used any of these services in the past 12 months, and afterwards to what degree they were satisfied with these services. We follow the operationalization of de Blok and Kumlin (2022) and construct an index based on respondents’ level of satisfaction with those services they were in touch with (1 = very dissatisfied with all services used, 5 = very satisfied with all services used) (mean = 3.71, S.D. = 0.68). This means that for the analyses regarding service satisfaction, we omit respondents who did not have any (in)direct contact with these services (only 1.4% of respondents).

In terms of control variables, we include sociodemographic indicators, age and gender, as well as the respondents’ political orientation, operationalized through a traditional left-right self-perception scale. All models also include wave fixed effects. Appendix A provides summary statistics for all variables. All variables were z-standardized to allow for direct comparison of the coefficients. After accounting for missing values, the final sample size for all models is n=5,333 (wave 2 = 4,002; wave 3 = 1,331).

## Methods

Using panel data, we take the clustered nature of the data into account by applying linear random effects multilevel regression models. Specifically, we include a random intercept at the respondent level, which accounts for the clustered nature of the respondents’ answers across the different waves (Gelman and Hill 2007). In terms of empirical modelling choices, we look at random effects models assessing the association between political information, economic vulnerability, service satisfaction, and “something for nothing” attitudes.

Before presenting the main results, we would like to stress that it is well documented that economically vulnerable individuals are less likely to be satisfied with welfare state services (Popic and Schneider 2018; Svallfors 2006; Yuan 2021). Moreover, economically vulnerable citizens are less likely to hold high levels of political information (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Gallina 2023) and governments are less likely to be reactive to the preferences of less informed citizens (Elkjær 2020), further reducing their political engagement. This would suggest that the relationship between economic vulnerability and SFN may be spurious and explained by omitted variables such as service satisfaction and political information. We therefore present analyses to ensure that the association between economic vulnerability and SFN remains strong even when we control for service satisfaction and political information and that the effect of these variables is not *particularly strong among economically vulnerable citizens.* Hence, we contend that the effects of service satisfaction and political information should be seen as independent from the role of economic vulnerability.

# Results

We start the analyses by investigating the degree to which political information, economic vulnerability and service satisfaction are directly related to the “something for nothing” phenomenon, captured by our three dependent variables: spending preferences, taxation preferences, and a composite index for SFN attitudes combining tax and spending preferences. As argued in the theoretical section, this should be a three-faceted phenomenon, where the less politically informed (H1), more economically vulnerable (H2) and dissatisfied (H3) citizens expect more from their welfare states and are especially supportive of welfare spending, whereas they should be less willing to pay taxes for it. Figure 1 first explores the direct effects of political information, economic vulnerability and service satisfaction on spending, taxation, and SFN attitudes and documents the results of three multilevel regression models, one for each dependent variable (see Appendix B, Table B1 for full regression outputs).

**Figure 1: Association between political information, economic vulnerability, service satisfaction and spending/taxation preferences**



*Notes:* Coefficient estimates with 95% and 90% confidence intervals. Models control for age, gender, ideology, and survey year. Full results: Table B1, Appendix B.

The findings in Figure 1 clearly reveal that citizens experiencing economic vulnerability, as measured by household income, education, the social benefit recipient indicator, and perceived economic risk, are more likely to want “something for nothing”. Economically vulnerable citizens have higher levels of support for government spending, compared to their less vulnerable counterparts. However, support for taxation does not match this demand for spending. Low-income individuals and welfare benefit recipients are not statistically significantly more in favour of taxation than high-income individuals or non-recipients. Low-educated individuals and individuals perceiving high economic risk are even *less* in favour of tax increases compared with high-educated and low-risk individuals. This directly goes against the traditional expectation that it would be mainly richer citizens or higher socioeconomic classes that are in favour of taxation cuts and a smaller scope of government (Kaase and Newton 1995), but is consistent with studies finding a positive relationship between socio-economic status and support for taxation (Barnes 2015; Bartels 2005) and a particularly clear relationship between higher education and support for taxation (Jacques 2023).

Overall, the broad pattern is remarkably similar across all four of our independent variables pertaining to economic vulnerability: they are associated with a relatively larger positive impact on support for spending over support for taxation, even when controlling for political information and for service satisfaction. This differential impact between spending and tax preferences produces the “something for nothing” logic of demand for unfunded welfare policies.

While vulnerability increases SFN attitudes, service satisfaction and political information have a positive association with both spending and taxation preferences. However, the positive effect of information and satisfaction is slightly stronger for taxation preferences, reducing support for SFN. Although the statistical association is more pronounced in the case of political information than for service satisfaction, the basic pattern is the same for both explanatory variables. Thus, in line with previous literature (Downs 1960; Gugushvili 2022; Habibov et al. 2018; Kölln 2018), service satisfaction and political information alleviate the “something for nothing” phenomenon.

## Robustness of Main Findings

We ran several additional analyses to ensure the validity of our basic findings. For these robustness checks, we replicated the model with the SFN index as the dependent variable (see Figure 1 and Appendix B). The findings in Appendix C (Table C1 and Figure C1) show, first, that the basic pattern of the SFN effect is robust to several alternative methods to calculate the SFN index. We find that the results go in the same direction when separating the spending items into labour market spending and life-cycle risk spending items (Jensen 2012). For an SFN index based only on life-cycle risk spending, however, low income and perceived risk is not statistically significantly correlated with SFN attitudes anymore, although education and receiving benefits remain strong predictors of SFN attitudes. We also find that analysing our two taxation items separately leads to very similar results.

Second, the robustness tests in Appendix C (Table C2 and Figure C2) show that the results are substantively similar if we use alternative model specifications, including models without a left-right ideology control variable, models with no control variables at all, models with survey weights, or models with personal instead of household income.

Third, we checked to what extent our results are driven by cross-sectional associations or by changes over time. For this test, we used hybrid “Random Effects Within-Between” models (see Appendix C and Figure C3 for details). We find that most of the associations between economic vulnerability and SFN is a “between effect”. The within evidence, by contrast, is weaker. As ever in these types of analyses, this might be due to relatively limited (though existing) within-respondent variation on economic hardship measurements (also see Appendix A). Potentially, respondents’ socioeconomic position does not change substantially enough over the two time periods (2015 and 2017) to make them update their spending and taxation preferences. This remark notwithstanding, we find hints that becoming a welfare benefit recipient tends to be associated with SFN attitudes. We hasten to say that this longitudinal evidence is imperfect and weak. However, the short-term within-individual effect for this measure of vulnerability points in the same direction as the between evidence. This is valuable as far as it goes, not least as between and within effects are frequently different or even run in opposite directions (Bell, Fairbrother, and Jones 2019; Bell and Jones 2015).

Finally, it is possible that the association between economic vulnerability and SFN attitudes may be spurious and explained only by lower service satisfaction and information among the economically vulnerable. However, Figure 2 shows little evidence for such an alternative interpretation (full model output in Appendix B, Table B2). These models are based on split samples, where the effect of economic vulnerability is contrasted between respondents with low (below median) service satisfaction or political information and high (above median) service satisfaction or political information, respectively. The estimates in Figure 2 reveal that the association between economic vulnerability and SFN attitudes remains substantively strong even in a subsample of highly satisfied and highly politically informed citizens. The estimates differ very little from a subsample of less satisfied and less politically informed citizens, although the confidence intervals of the four economic vulnerability coefficients widen among respondents with above average political information and the effect of income becomes insignificant among the satisfied users of public services. However, in Appendix D (Figures D1 and D2 and Tables D1 and D2), we show that the effect of economic conditions is not moderated by either service satisfaction or political information even if we compare the bottom and the top of the distribution of satisfaction/information or of we run an interaction model across the distribution of responses. This finding provides strong evidence that the mechanism at work indeed relates to economic vulnerability, rather than economic vulnerability being a spurious association with welfare preferences driven by service satisfaction or political information.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Figure 2: Split-sample analyses of the association between economic vulnerability and the SFN index**



*Notes:* Coefficient estimates with 95% and 90% confidence intervals. Models control for age, gender, ideology, and survey year. Full results: Table B2, Appendix B.

That said, it is important to note that service satisfaction and political information are not equally distributed across the Norwegian population. Service satisfaction and political information clearly vary with indicators for economic vulnerability, consistent with prior studies (Popic and Schneider 2018; Yuan 2021). It is hard to pinpoint the mechanism explaining the negative association between economic vulnerability and service satisfaction. Perhaps the economically vulnerable use more means-tested services that are stigmatizing (Larsen 2008), or are exposed to some form of discrimination when interacting with street-level bureaucrats, or it may be that the use of public services per se is related to lower satisfaction.

Individuals with lower household income, lower education, welfare benefit recipients, and higher levels of perceived economic risk are less likely to be satisfied with welfare state performance and less likely to be politically interested (see also Appendix A, Table A2). This shows that economically vulnerable groups – who were observed to hold spending and taxation preferences consistent with a “something for nothing” logic – have lower service satisfaction and political information, which in turn undermines support for taxation more strongly than it affects the spending measures. Taken together, these findings imply that welfare state performance satisfaction and, more significantly, political information can alleviate “something for nothing” tendencies by having stronger positive effects on support for taxation than for spending levels. However, the effects of service satisfaction and political information should be seen as independent from the role of economic vulnerability, which we highlighted in our analysis and which remains strong even when accounting for these alternative explanations.

# Conclusion

The suggestion that citizens want “something for nothing” has been around a long time (Downs 1960; Sears and Citrin 1982). Building on previous research (Edlund and Johansson Sevä 2013; Kaase and Newton 1995), we study the factors explaining why some segments of the population want “something for nothing”. We studied these issues in Norway, where favorable economic conditions, an ideologically structured political context, and a positively evaluated welfare state, might discourage SFN attitudes for the benefit of greater congruence between spending and taxation support.

Scholars have typically treated SFN attitudes as an information problem, implying that citizens either do not have enough information or do not have the knowledge to fully grasp the connection between government outputs and their funding (Bartels 2005). We confirm the main explanation of SFN attitudes proposed by previous research: unfunded public spending demands are more common among respondents who have a low degree of political information. Our results, however, do suggest that a diverse set of economic vulnerabilities drive up demands for social protection, while having no or negative effects on general taxation support. It is rational for the economically vulnerable respondents to demand more spending and, as they may not be able to pay for it themselves, to ask for lower levels of taxation at the same time. We also show that widespread satisfaction with public services in Norway alleviates SFN attitudes to a certain extent, by driving up taxation support more so than it increases spending demands. This is true only to some degree, however, as the relationship goes in the expected direction but is not significant. Rationally, citizens are more likely to accept to pay for the services they demand if these services are of high quality.

Interestingly, we find that economically vulnerable citizens are less likely to be satisfied with the state of public services and to have lower political information, but the association between economic vulnerability and SFN attitudes remains substantively strong, even in a subsample of highly satisfied and highly politically informed citizens. Hence, we do not find any interactive effect between economic vulnerability and service satisfaction or political interest, suggesting that the mitigation of SFN attitudes is not more likely among the economically vulnerable. Moreover, the association between economic vulnerability and SFN attitudes remain strong and significant even when we control for political interest and service satisfaction.

We recognize three main limitations in this article. Our panel is very short with only two years as one of the core questions of our survey was not included in the first of the three waves of the survey we rely on. Moreover, there are few within-subject changes to the main independent and dependent variables. This makes it particularly difficult to find within-respondents evidence of the main effect, although the within-respondent evidence points towards the same direction as the between-respondent evidence on which we rely. Without panel evidence we cannot confirm a causal relationship between economic conditions and SFN attitudes. Secondly, while our measure of political information is adequate, ideally, our survey would also have contained measures of factual political knowledge, rather than only self-reported interest in politics and news consumption. Further, while the SFN index gives crucial insights into inconsistent social policy and taxation preferences, it is less well equipped to measure trade-off preferences of respondents (e.g., supporting tax hikes to finance a specific policy, over increasing taxation or social spending overall), or imbalanced preferences (wanting a little bit less spending, but a lot more taxes). While we have provided several robustness tests which explored alternative operationalizations of SFN preferences (including holding extremely inconsistent opinions), measurement remains a limitation of this study.

We believe that our contribution opens new avenues of research regarding the causes and effects of public service satisfaction. Interestingly, the economically vulnerable support social policies that are conductive to income redistribution but are less satisfied with the public services they receive than less vulnerable citizens, who may be less supportive of the outcome (redistribution) but more approving of the outputs (services). This disconnection between public support for the social policy outputs and the outcomes should be studied in future research.

The uncovered patterns have broader implications for the sustainability of welfare states and the politics of welfare state reform. Mature welfare states must increasingly handle growing individual and regional inequalities (Rodríguez-Pose 2018). According to our own and others’ results, these economic disparities are likely to drive demand for costly redistributive policy. Meeting this demand is already difficult due to a host of fiscal pressures, including population ageing, which shrinks the tax base and strains available public funding (Hemerijck 2013). On top of this, our results suggest that increasing demands may not come with congruent increases in support for taxation. This helps to explain why economic decline and increased inequality does not lead to a political shift towards the left and towards welfare state expansion, since public spending cannot be deficit-funded indefinitely. Our findings suggest that positive views of the services one gets in return for taxation does mitigate the problem. But this seemingly positive finding also illustrates the potential perils of having growing demands coinciding with a constant or declining fiscal capacity. If this results in poorer services and more performance dissatisfaction, then the necessary taxation support might become weaker still.

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1. At the time of the survey, this panel consisted of about 50,000 Norwegians. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. These questions form a reasonable scale: Cronbach’s Alpha of 0.617. In supplementary analyses in Appendix C we find that analysing these items separately does not change the results. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The don’t know option was explicitly offered to the respondents within the survey, so we do not treat this as a non-response, but as having a neutral/no opinion. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Appendix D further explores the potential role of service satisfaction and political information in explaining SFN attitudes. These additional analyses corroborate the main results: the link between economic vulnerability and SFN mainly operates independently, and does only to a very limited extent depend on satisfaction with welfare services or the degree to which citizens are politically informed. In Appendix A, Table A2, the correlation matrix between these variables is reported: the correlations are weak (Pearson’s correlation coefficient is always below 0.30). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)