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'Guns versus butter' in public opinion: the politicization of the warfare-welfare trade-off

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ABSTRACT

The intensification of military conflict is leading to sharp increases in military spending across advanced democracies. As public budgets are constrained, the welfare state is a candidate for savings, which could lead to a trade-off between military and social expenditure. Our paper explores how the public perceives this possible trade-off. To do this, we use original public opinion data fielded in 10 advanced industrial democracies to examine the role of different individual and contextual factors that shape attitudes on this trade-off. The results reveal, firstly, widespread opposition to welfare retrenchment for funding military spending. Secondly, our regression analysis identifies unidimensional political conflict: opposition to welfare cuts decreases steadily from the radical left to the right. Thirdly, individual level of concern for war and socio-economic conditions seem to matter much less. Fourthly, individuals in countries with a stronger military presence are more inclined to support welfare cuts, although increases in national military spending further fuels opposition to cuts. The implication is that policymakers who prioritize defence expenditure for national security concerns, may be compelled to decrease welfare expenditure, but this could be politically contentious and could lead to electoral backlash.

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KEYWORDS Welfare state; military expenditure; 'guns-versus-butter'; trade-off; ideology; SCOAPP-10 project

Introduction

Trump's return to the White House in 2025 marks a historical turning point in international relations, accelerating the decline of the Western-led

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multilateral order that emerged after the Cold War. We may be witnessing a re-configuration of international security structures, particularly within NATO, as countries are prompted to re-consider their effort for national defense, underpinned by American military support since the end of World War II (Rathbone, 2022). In times of warfare intensification across the globe – e.g., Russian invasion of Ukraine, China's fiercer claims over Taiwan, and the conflicts in the Middle East – European countries have ramped up military spending. From 2014 to 2023, EU countries increased their contribution to NATO budget by 50 per cent (from 145€bn to 215€bn), and the 2 per cent (military expenditure over GDP) NATO target has been reached, although some countries, like Italy, remain below that (Bonaiuti *et al.*, 2023; NATO, 2024). Increases in military expenditure were particularly high in countries geographically close to war theatres: 180 per cent increase in Poland, as compared to 40 per cent in Belgium and Spain (Tian *et al.*, 2024). This trend, initially catalysed by Trump's pressure on NATO members during his first term, has taken on new urgency as he now calls for spending levels as high as 5 per cent of their GDP, a request now accepted – with the exception of Spain – by NATO allies in their 25 June 2025 meeting in The Hague (Foy *et al.*, 2025). The sense of urgency for European NATO countries is intensified further, as preoccupations grows that the US may no longer prioritize providing key capabilities for European defence (Politico, 2025a).

The pressure to increase defence and military expenditure may affect the financial capability of the advanced industrial democracies that are plagued by budgetary constraints due to reduced growth (Pierson, 1998), as well as the Great Recession (Armingeon & Sacchi, 2023) and the Covid-19 pandemic (Eichhorst *et al.*, 2020; OECD, 2021). Although literature on nation-building highlights the role of the two world wars for the formation of modern welfare states (Marwick, 1988; Obinger *et al.*, 2018; Titmuss, 1958), the current level of social expenditure – at 24 per cent of GDP in 2022 in the ten countries in our sample (OECD Social Expenditure Database, 2024) – make the potential emergence of a fiscal trade-off between military and social expenditure more likely. Of course, governments have various – albeit limited – tools to back political commitment to a rise in military expenditure, including increases in public debt. This is also a solution often supported by citizens, in line with the temporal discounting perspective from behavioural economics, as its redistributive consequences are not felt in the short-term (Jacobs & Matthews, 2012). In line with this, the 'ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030' Plan presented by the European Commission President von der Leyen aims to facilitate countries' resort to public debt by making exceptions for military expenditure. Overthrowing decades of tireless commitment to budgetary discipline, the German parliament lifted the constitutional brake on public spending to boost military expenditure. In countries with low public debt levels, an increase in this may be among

the tools used. Yet, such spending strategies may be less viable for more indebted countries, whose borrowing capability may even suffer from rising yields of German bonds (Smith & Storbeck, 2025). Given the limited prospects for an ambitious European common debt-based instrument, fiscal trade-offs between defence and social spending are more likely to emerge now than they were in the past.

Given the enduring legitimizing function of social policy for the ruling elites (Rothstein & Stolle, 2008), policymakers feel compelled to justify potential shifts from welfare to warfare expenditure. In November 2024, the Danish Foreign Minister, the centrist Lars Løkke Rasmussen, proclaimed that the Danish government intends to increase military defence expenditure rapidly, so that it would soon be close to 3 per cent of GDP (from its current 2 per cent). He linked this to welfare policy, arguing that the government's proposal of lowering the pension age would thus be precluded (Politiken, 2024). This declaration echoes the appeal of the Social-democratic Prime Minister, Mette Frederiksen, to 'naïve' European allies to undertake major budgetary reforms to spur military spending, including those curbing welfare expenses and tax reductions (Milne & Bounds, 2024). Thus even in a low-debt country such as Denmark, theoretically least likely to be compelled to cut welfare, the warfare-welfare expenditure is politicized. In other countries, trends are similar. In Germany, the budgetary revolution was supported by a bipartisan coalition, presented as a 'historic' commitment to do 'whatever it takes' to protect the country's integrity, although facing strong opposition by liberals and the radical right and left (Deutsche Welle, 2025). In Belgium, the Budget Minister, Vincent Van Peteghem (Christian Democrat), has flagged potential fiscal trade-offs, warning that rising military spending could lead to greater scrutiny over the sustainability of the welfare state (Politico, 2025b). Italy's Defence Minister, Guido Crosetto, also highlighted the trade-off as he asked for 'eliminating EU constraints regarding the incidence of defence spending on the stability pact', because 'at a time of total insecurity, they should not be put in competition with those for education and health' (Eunews, 2024). Reacting to NATO countries' decision to reach the new 5 per cent of GDP target by 2025, Elly Schlein, Italy's Social-democratic party leader, said 'this risks to be the end of the welfare state' (Partito Democratico, 2025). Thus, there is good reason to believe that the possibility of a trade-off between welfare and warfare spending will continue to be a prominent feature of political agendas. From a public opinion perspective, we believe it is important to focus on how citizens perceive such trade-off.

In contrast to the post-World War II period, when welfare state expansion was spurred (Obinger *et al.*, 2018), budgets are constrained and citizens' support for military expenditure can be compromised, if they fear that their core social rights are weakened in this current period of welfare state consolidation or recalibration. Since budget constraints force individuals to

incorporate policy trade-offs in their political preferences (Bremer & Bürgisser, 2023; Busemeyer & Garritzmann, 2017; Häusermann *et al.*, 2022), it is important to investigate how they would respond to the current or planned increases in military expenditure when pitted against welfare cuts. Empirical research on the support for military spending in a budget-constrained environment is scant (DiGiuseppe *et al.*, 2024). The existing literature shows that, in general, among citizens defence expenditure is the least preferred budget item *vis-à-vis* several other public interventions (e.g., education, health, social protection, etc.) (Bansak *et al.*, 2021; Barnes *et al.*, 2022; Gallego & Marx, 2017; Hübscher *et al.*, 2023). A recent public opinion poll carried out in Denmark reveals that 20 per cent of respondents would like to finance a potential increase in defence expenditure through cuts in welfare, compared to 36 per cent preferring higher taxes, and 31 per cent favouring a loan on financial markets (Politiken, 2025). While this poll highlights that options different than cuts to the welfare state are preferred, it underscores the presence of the warfare-welfare trade-off in public debate. To date, there is no literature examining individual attitudes over a potential trade-off between social and military expenditure, across countries. Furthermore, the literature lacks a comprehensive analysis of the individual and contextual features that may shape citizens' perspectives on this trade-off. This paper addresses this gap by shedding light on the politicization of the warfare-welfare trade-off.

Our empirical analysis relies on the Societal Challenges, Public Opinion and Public Policies (SCOaPP) survey data that includes 22,370 respondents from ten advanced industrial democracies (Denmark, Finland, Germany, Italy, South Korea, Norway, Poland, Sweden, the United Kingdom, the United States). We rely on a regression analysis to examine the correlation of economic insecurity, warfare risk perception, political ideology and countries' level of engagement in defence, with individual support for three welfare cutback scenarios. They include both passive transfers (i.e., pensions and social assistance) and social investment (i.e., education). Descriptive evidence from our survey shows a widespread opposition in advanced industrial democracies to welfare cutbacks to fund higher military spending. Inferential findings highlight individual political stances as the greatest predictor of fiscal preferences over the 'warfare vs. welfare' trade-off.

Our analysis contributes to the literature on such trade-off, focusing on the demand side of this policy dilemma in countries with different welfare states and with different levels of military expenditure in the context of the current wave of warfare. The rest of the paper is structured as follows. In section 2, we briefly review the literature on the nexus between military and social expenditure. In section 3, we present our theoretical expectations based on the literature on fiscal preferences. In Sections 4 and 5, we present the empirical strategy and the findings. The last section concludes.

The warfare-welfare nexus: from world wars to today

'War made the state and the state made war' argues Tilly (1975, p. 42) in his seminal work on nation-building in Western Europe. He demonstrated that mass warfare was a crucial engine of modern state formation, later evolving into an unprecedented expansion of public spending and enhanced capability of the state to penetrate civil society and implement specific policies (Mann, 1984). This last phase of nation-building is largely grounded on the development of social protection (Bartolini, 2005; Ferrera, 2005), that lies at the very source of legitimacy of modern nation-states (Flora & Heidenheimer, 1981) and the allegiance of citizens towards the state (Rothstein & Stolle, 2008; van Kersbergen, 2000). Different causal mechanisms behind the warfare-welfare nexus have been presented and tested in a more recent stream of empirical research, spanning from supply-side (e.g., higher taxation and economic planning) to demand-side explanations (e.g., demands for labour and health protection in response to new collective risks and sacrifices) (Obinger *et al.*, 2018; Obinger & Schmitt, 2020b).

More broadly, warfare has acted as a 'great leveller' in human history, being more effective in reducing socioeconomic inequalities than endogenous political changes (Scheidel, 2017). World Wars I and II exerted the most significant and long-lasting impacts on welfare states (Obinger & Schmitt, 2018), spurring the introduction of social insurance schemes and other income-support measures (Alber, 1982; Flora, 1986a, 1986b; Obinger & Schmitt, 2020a, 2024). Some authors argue that regime competition during the Cold War may have played a complementary role in welfare expansion. Rather than mass destruction, the main mechanisms linking the post-war latent conflict and social reforms concern the ideological competition between the Western and the Soviet blocs, prompting the rival political elites to ensure domestic social legitimacy and stability through generous welfare protection (Obinger & Schmitt, 2011; Petersen, 2013). However, this account of the impacts of post-war military engagement on the welfare state is not unchallenged, as part of the literature highlights the existence of a warfare-welfare trade-off in the post-war years (Peroff, 1977; Russett, 1969).

Empirical evidence from Cold War times onwards is inconclusive, leaving the question whether warfare and welfare were complements or substitutes an open question (Domke *et al.*, 1983; Grigorakis & Galyfianakis, 2024; Higgs, 1994; Ikegami & Wang, 2023; Russett 1982; Whitten & Williams, 2010). However, major differences between the Cold War and present times may undermine the chances of any positive association between countries' military engagement and social expenditure. Firstly, mass mobilization has been replaced by tech-intensive warfare that hardly gives rise to any demand for domestic compensation (Chin, 2019; Wilensky, 1975). Secondly,

the size of modern welfare states, and the burden of demographic ageing, suggests limited fiscal room for path-breaking expansion of military expenses, as 'permanent austerity' (Pierson, 1998), which has posed economic restraint on welfare states since the 1990s, is now further exacerbated by the increasing old-age dependency. This constrains the option of increasing public debt to raise military expenditure, which would otherwise be effective to appease citizens (Marzian & Trebesch, 2025; Narizny, 2003). Thus, a zero-sum equilibrium between defence and social spending, already under pressure, could emerge in the current context (Ikegami & Wang, 2023), especially in countries where fiscal space is more constrained. Additionally, for European countries, the prospect of a US withdrawal from the continent's defence places unprecedented fiscal responsibilities on Europe, on top of the already challenging new defence expenditure target of 5 per cent of the GDP. Finally, the ideological competition between the two blocs that spilled over into a welfare race does not seem to characterize the current conflict.

Therefore, structural conditions of the emerging conflicts and of modern welfare states suggest that a positive nexus between war and welfare expansion is unlikely to materialize in the context of the current geopolitical tensions. Instead, a trade-off between military and social expenditure may occur, and we are interested in citizens' perspectives on this. The current military conflict between Ukraine and Russia, but also in the Middle East, as well as China's aggressive military posture towards Taiwan, might pressure the welfare state's resilience, presenting voters in advanced industrial societies with an unprecedented trade-off since mass democratization, which interacts with divides over social policy preferences.

The politicization of the 'guns-versus-butter' trade-off

A voluminous literature on public opinion shows that individuals hold discernible welfare attitudes, albeit partially mutable and endogenous to their political-economic context (Ahrens, 2024; Ares *et al.*, 2024; Busemeyer *et al.*, 2021a; Naumann *et al.*, 2016; O'Grady, 2019). Citizens' policy preferences inform mass political choices and, in turn, policy change (Beramendi *et al.*, 2015; Brooks & Manza, 2007; Rehm, 2011). Mirroring the multi-dimensional nature of public policies, individual preferences incorporate possible trade-offs between different goals and instruments (Gallego & Marx, 2017; Roosma *et al.*, 2013), particularly emphasized by permanent budget constraints, prominent in countries of the Eurozone (Bremer & Bürgisser, 2023; de la Porte & Heins, 2015).

Growing empirical literature has been investigating individual fiscal preferences in a budget-constrained environment, highlighting cross-policy trade-offs. The framing by political actors, as reflected by current political discourse,

does evoke a trade-off between welfare and war. In this context, the view of citizens about a possible loss of social rights due to expansion of military and defence expenditure is important to explore, as democratically elected policymakers rely on citizens' acceptance to legitimize their decisions. Contributions that include defence expenditure in their proposed policy set reveal that spending on the military is the least preferred among various budget items (e.g., social protection, public services, education), and the most expendable in case of cutbacks (Bansak *et al.*, 2021; Barnes *et al.*, 2022; Gallego & Marx, 2017; Hübscher *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, a genuine 'guns-versus-butter' trade-off seems to emerge in public opinion, as individuals' preferences – when not explicitly coerced into a binary choice between military and social expenditure – spontaneously cluster around a pro-welfare and a pro-warfare group (Bonica, 2015; Branham & Jessee, 2017; Wlezien, 1995).

While evidence on fiscal preferences indicates that public opinion generally holds military spending in (low) regard when judging policy trade-offs, extant research lacks an empirical investigation of the individual attitudes over a welfare retrenchment scenario forced by renewed country's military effort. As discussed in the previous section, growing geo-political tensions are prompting advanced industrial democracies to re-arm, boosting the salience of military spending and, in turn, the politicization of a – so far – latent conflict between defence and social expenditure (DiGiuseppe *et al.*, 2024; Wlezien, 1995; Zürn, 2019). Beyond evidence on the noticeable reluctance of public opinion to cut welfare provisions to support the military, current debate over rearmament would benefit from an encompassing investigation of the individual and contextual factors that shape the emerging political conflict around the 'guns-versus-butter' trade-off. Such a comprehensive approach requires to model hypotheses parsimoniously, selecting major drivers that relate to both the rational-choice and the norm-abiding paradigms of political behaviour (Elster, 1989; Weale, 1992). Overall, the explanatory factors of individual preferences for social and military spending tap into risk perception (Kasperson *et al.*, 1988; Slovic, 2000), politically motivated reasoning (Lodge & Taber, 2013; Taber & Lodge, 2006), and policy feedback effects (Busemeyer *et al.*, 2021a; Wlezien, 1995). More specifically, we can list three analytical categories of attitudes' determinants: political ideology, insecurity related to economic and war risks, and military engagement at the domestic level.

The role of individual political ideology is the only one to be directly tested in the literature on fiscal trade-offs (Bansak *et al.*, 2021; Gallego & Marx, 2017; Hübscher *et al.*, 2023), whereas hypotheses on other determinants of attitudes over the warfare-welfare nexus have to be built based on contributions that tackle the two terms of the policy trade-off separately (Busemeyer *et al.*, 2021b; DiGiuseppe *et al.*, 2024; Häusermann *et al.*, 2022).

When confronted with potential budgetary trade-offs, individuals on the right-end side of the political spectrum – generally more sensitive to fiscal sustainability (Kumlin & Nemčok, 2024) – are less likely than left-wing individuals to demand cutbacks to the military expenditure to promote other state provisions (including social policy) (Bansak *et al.*, 2021; Barnes *et al.*, 2022; Bonica, 2015; Gallego & Marx, 2017; Hübscher *et al.*, 2023). Similar correlations between right-wing stances and support for military spending are observed in survey analyses that do not force respondents to formulate their public spending preferences in a budget-constrained environment (Eichenberg & Stoll, 2017; Williams, 2015), as in the case of arms transfers to foreign countries (Rudolph & Thurner, 2025). In addition to distributive attitudes, this left-right divide on the warfare-welfare trade-off is expected to be equally driven by individuals' stances on sociocultural issues, as patriotism and authoritarianism are expected to positively correlate with support for the military (Bartels, 1994; Villamil *et al.*, 2024).[1] This leads to our first hypothesis (H1).

> H1. Right-wing individuals are more willing to support welfare cutbacks in exchange for higher military spending than left-wing individuals.

Although the reference literature has generally indicated individual deep-seated political beliefs as the main determinants of defence expenditure preferences (Bartels, 1994), some contributions show that the latter are additionally shaped by mutable perceptions of exposure to the risk of armed conflicts. Similarly to self-interested support for redistribution and social protection among individuals worried about the economy (Duch *et al.*, 2000; Hacker *et al.*, 2013), some authors argue that information about military threats raises support for defence spending, regardless of its fiscal implications (DiGiuseppe *et al.*, 2024; Yang, 2024). We therefore posit our second hypothesis (H2).

> H2. Individuals highly worried about war are more willing to support welfare cutbacks in exchange for higher military spending than individuals not particularly worried about war.

It is surprising that not much attention is given to the relation between individual socioeconomic conditions and attitudes over the warfare-welfare trade-off. We expect income insecurity to introduce an additional political divide that is orthogonal to the warfare-welfare trade-off, namely the alternative between consumption-oriented and social investment policies. This divide – incorporated in public preferences – emerges following the 'recalibration' of welfare state functions that raised the prominence of so-called social investment policies aimed to boost labour-market participation – particularly through upskilling and reskilling programmes – at the expense of social transfers (e.g., unemployment benefit, early retirement, etc.) aimed at

income maintenance or support (Ferrera & Hemerijck, 2003). Following the extensive literature on social policy preferences (Busemeyer & Sahm, 2021; Häusermann *et al.*, 2022; Kurer & Häusermann, 2022), we expect that individuals that experience better economic conditions may be more willing to sacrifice consumption-oriented policies in exchange for higher military expenditure as compared to individuals bearing worse economic conditions, while the opposite is expected when the trade-off includes social investment. The mechanism lies in the need for immediate and dedicated income protection sought by economically vulnerable individuals, whereas social investment and measures geared to human capital enhancement tend to be associated with regressive distributive effects (the so-called 'Matthew effect') (Bonoli & Liechti, 2018). These findings lead to the following hypotheses (H3.1 and H3.2).

> H3.1. Individuals experiencing higher economic security are more willing to support cutbacks to consumption-oriented welfare policies in exchange for higher military spending than individuals experiencing lower economic security.

> H3.2. Individuals experiencing higher economic security are less willing to support cutbacks to social investment policies in exchange for higher military spending than individuals experiencing lower economic security.

Finally, we expect national public opinion to be affected by a country's level of engagement in defence. The literature on defence spending preferences has always placed great attention to contextual feedback effects associated with the national level of military expenditure. The incidence and visibility of the military apparatus in societies is expected to reinforce individuals' support for it, whether due to emerging material incentives (e.g., employment opportunities, centrality of armaments' industry in country's production) or through cultural attachment fostered by enduring value signalling (Dinas *et al.*, 2024; Gifford, 2006; Villamil *et al.*, 2024). In a more dynamic perspective, though, attitudes over this budget item may be a case of 'thermostatic' behaviour (Wlezien, 1995), a pattern in which public preferences respond to deviations from a desired level of policy by signalling the need for adjustment – favouring more spending when current levels fall short, and less when they exceed preferences. Indeed, public opinion research shows that support can be negatively related to increasing military spending commitment (Eichenberg & Stoll, 2003; Fay, 2020). However, it may be the case that rapidly increasing expenditure is a reflection of perceived threat from neighbour countries. In such case, in line with H2, citizens may be keen to support military spending and willing to prioritize their physical security over social security. These findings lead to hypotheses H4.1 and rival hypotheses H4.2a and H4.2b, respectively.

H4.1. Individuals living in countries with high levels of defence expenditure are more willing to support welfare cutbacks in exchange for higher military spending than individuals living in countries with low levels of defence expenditure.

H4.2a. Individuals living in countries that have significantly increased their defence expenditure are less willing to support welfare cutbacks in exchange for higher military spending than individuals living in countries where the former remained constant or decreased.

H4.2b. Individuals living in countries that have significantly increased their defence expenditure are more willing to support welfare cutbacks in exchange for higher military spending than individuals living in countries where the former remained constant or decreased.

Data and empirical strategy

The analysis is based on novel survey data collected between March and May 2024 as part of the SCOaPP-10 project (de la Porte *et al.*, 2025). The survey collects evidence on public preferences concerning various pressing challenges of modern times (e.g., climate change, technological innovation, old-age dependency, etc.) that resist linear policy solutions, underpinning countervailing effects and policy dilemmas (Peters, 2017; Rittell & Webber, 1973). The data include 22,370 respondents from ten different advanced industrial democracies (Denmark, Finland, Germany, Italy, South Korea, Norway, Poland, Sweden, the United Kingdom, the United States).[2] Quota sampling based on age, sex, region, and education is used to recruit respondents from YouGov's panel, ensuring sample's national representativeness for these characteristics. The countries selected ensure significant heterogeneity in political-economic institutional configurations (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Hall & Soskice, 2001), countries' economic performances, as well as great variation with regard to military's weight in social life and public spending. Furthermore, the sample composition is balanced between EU and non-EU member states, whose different commitment to fiscal discipline may affect individual preferences. We rely on regression analyses[3] to test the correlation of attitudes over the warfare-welfare trade-off with individual political stances, socioeconomic conditions, war risk perception, and national levels of military spending.

The main empirical novelty lies in the operationalization of the dependent variable, i.e., warfare-welfare trade-off in the current context of enhanced geo-political tensions. We use three survey items that capture respondents' attitudes toward various options of welfare cutbacks aimed to support an increase in military expenditure. Respondents are first presented with a hypothetical military spending increase amounting to 1 per cent of the country's GDP, which is also expressed in terms of multiple of public spending for

road infrastructure to make it more tangible for respondents. The survey question (q26) is phrased as follows:

> Imagine that COUNTRY [e.g., Italy; Denmark] will increase its military expenditure by an extra 1% of GDP per year over the next five years. The total increase over the period will be roughly equivalent to X [real data for each COUNTRY, e.g., for Italy: 4; for Denmark: 3] times of public expenditure on road infrastructure investment over the next five years. How do you think this increase should be financed?

The question is then followed by a battery of possible answers, each evaluated along a 1–5 Likert scale (from 1, strongly disagree, to 5, strongly agree).[4] We select three policy options that include both passive consumption-oriented measures (social assistance and pensions) and social investment (education).[5] Replications using three additional non-welfare items are run to test the robustness of the fiscal trade-off, allowing us to assess whether the main results are driven solely by social policy attitudes or reflect a broader perception of policy trade-offs among respondents. The three items include: increase public debt, increase weekly working hours for everyone, increase taxation for everyone.

We rely on a broad set of independent variables to operationalize the major drivers of policy preferences presented in the previous section. To operationalize political stances, we use both left-right self-placement (five-point categorical variable, from extreme left to extreme right) and preferred party.[6] This extensive measurement strategy aims to capture the broadest array of political beliefs – particularly including both distributive and sociocultural stances – as it deliberately eschews distinguishing between genuine and party-cued individual preferences. As robustness checks, we replicate the analysis for European countries regressing policy preferences on individuals' left-right economic and GAL/TAN positions derived from their preferred party (Special Edition Chapel Hill Expert Survey 2023).

Regarding risk perception, we rely on a survey item that captures the level of individual concerns for war (recoded as a three-point Likert scale: (a) not worried; (b) slightly worried; and (c) worried or very worried[7]). For economic security, we use three-fold variables indicating respondents' educational attainment ((a) primary or below; (b) secondary; (c) tertiary education) and household income ((a) below 75 per cent of the median income; (b) between 75 per cent and 200 per cent; (c) above 200 per cent). Despite missing information on many individual-level and regional economic conditions, this operationalization – building on the framework proposed by Kitschelt and Rehm (2022) – solely based on income and educational levels, supports a parsimonious but effective model of political behaviour in knowledge-economy societies.

Country-level feedback effects are estimated through additional OLS models that include the current national levels of military expenditure (per cent of GDP) and their average annual variation between 2014 (the start of the Russo-Ukrainian war) and 2023.[8] Alternative operationalizations use the ratio of military personnel over the entire working population and the enforcement of mandatory conscription.[9]

Control variables are selected based on the literature on fiscal preferences: gender, age, trade union membership, occupational category (five categories: (a) full and part-time employee; (b) retiree; (c) engaged in care duties; (d) student; (e) unemployed/inactive), centre-periphery divide (two categories: (a) city and town; (b) suburb and rural areas), country-fixed effects. Unemployment risk perception[10] is included as an additional control only in the robustness checks due to significant missing data. Standard errors are clustered at the country level.

Findings

In line with extant literature on fiscal preferences, descriptive evidence shows that, despite widespread concerns for armed conflicts, public opinion is, on average, reluctant to support increases in military spending through welfare cutbacks. The large majority of respondents tend to disagree with any option of welfare cutbacks proposed to increase military spending (Figure 1). Pensions, to which most individuals have contributed during their working lives, is the area citizens are most unwilling to reduce, closely followed by education: between 65 and 70 per cent of respondents

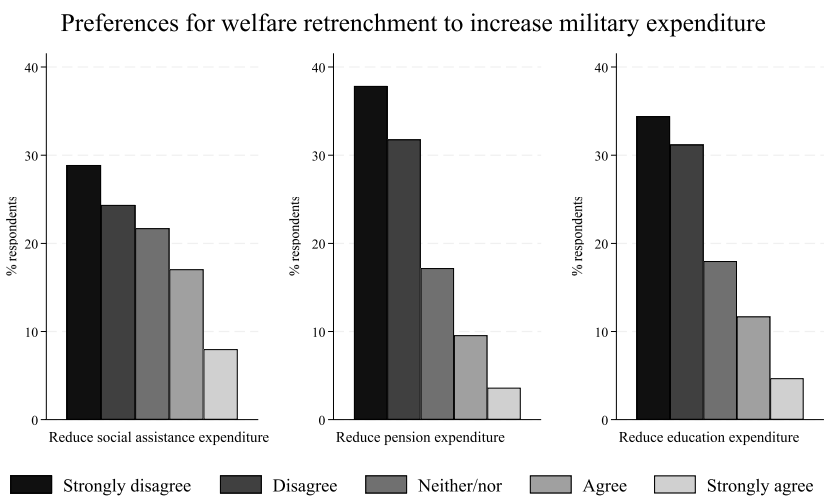

Figure 1. Distribution of preferences for three welfare retrenchment scenarios (% for each response category).

oppose cutbacks in such area, while less than 20 per cent agree. A somewhat less steep distribution characterizes the preference for a reduction in social assistance spending, traditionally among the most redistributive and politically sensitive budget items and, thus, more likely to rival with other expenditures (Peroff, 1977). However, still about 50 per cent of respondents do not support cutbacks in this area, as opposed to about 25 per cent who do.

Inferential results only partly confirm our hypotheses. Concerning political stances, all the tested models show strong and positive correlations between left-right self-placement and support for cutbacks (extreme left as the reference category), which (almost) monotonically increases when shifting toward the right-end side of the political spectrum (Figure 2, see Tables A1 and A2 in Appendix for full regression tables). The trend is confirmed for all trade-off scenarios proposed, peaking for social assistance retrenchment (differences in acceptance of welfare cutbacks between the two political extremes vary between approximately 10 per cent for pensions and education to 20 per cent for social assistance[11]). Poorer correlation emerges between preferred party and attitudes over all welfare cutback scenarios (radical left as the reference category), with the exception of social assistance cuts.[12] Individuals identifying with liberal, conservative, radical right parties are significantly more willing to sacrifice social assistance for military spending than radical left and green voters (for social democrats the large confidence intervals

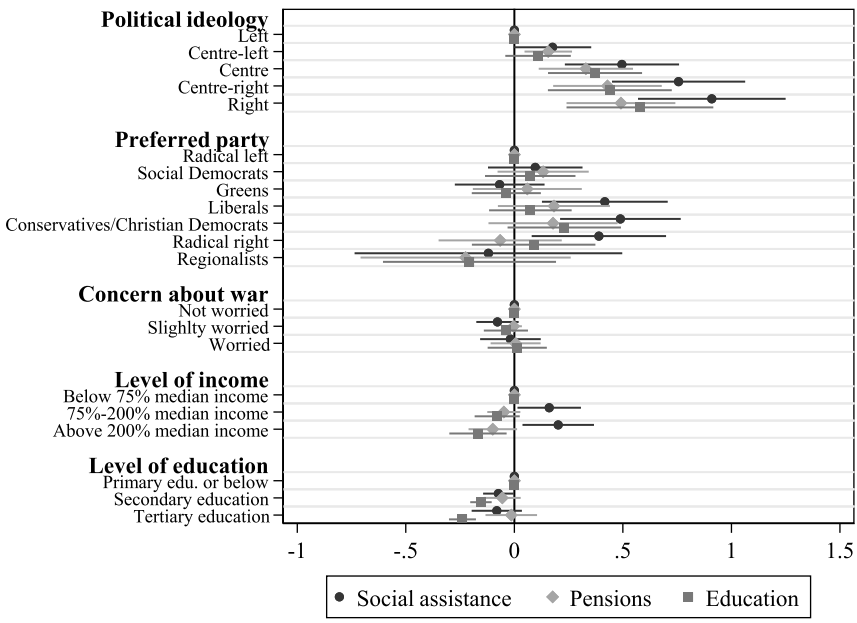

Figure 2. OLS models: coefficients and 95% confidence intervals. The models include the entire battery of controls (Table A1 in Appendix).

do not allow such statement). Results do not significantly change when including abstained and non-aligned voters (Table A3.2 in Appendix). This hints at a unidimensional configuration of the political conflict over the 'guns-versus-butter' trade-off, as anticipated in the literature review.[13] This simple correlation holds fairly homogenously across all welfare cutback scenarios, although retrenchment of social assistance is the most polarizing. Therefore, the evidence confirms H1, showing that right-wing individuals are more willing to support welfare cutbacks in exchange of higher military spending than left-wing individuals.

Our expectations on the perceptions and exposure to war and economic-related insecurity receive only partial confirmation. First, in all models tested, concerns for an imminent war do not seem to affect attitudes over the selected policy trade-off, meaning that there is no support for H2. As for specific policies, we do find robust confirmation of the expected negative correlation between economic security and support for cutbacks to education (H3.2) (decrease in support for education cutbacks reduces between 4 and 6 per cent when moving from the least to the most secure group, depending on the operationalization of economic security – income and education respectively). A contrasting scenario on consumption-oriented policies receives only qualified confirmation (H3.1). Individuals with higher income are significantly more prone to sacrifice social assistance spending for national defence (roughly 5 per cent increase in the level of acceptance of welfare cutbacks when switching from the lowest to the highest income group), while not particularly willing to reduce pension expenditure (the coefficient is only barely significant).[14] Therefore, preference formation over the warfare-welfare trade-off seems to fall within the well-known domestic class-based division around social policies (Häusermann *et al.*, 2022; Meltzer & Richard, 1981), whereas the recent military escalation in the international arena increases citizens' concerns but does not seem to alter their social policy priorities. This suggests that welfare rights are considered as a core aspect of citizenship, irrespective of the threat of war, pointing to a quandary for politicians, if they choose to cut welfare to fund an increase in defence expenditure.

We run robustness checks to test whether divides in preferences over the potential trade-off are exclusively driven by social policy attitudes. We run replications of the main models using other dependent variables that capture attitudes toward other policy interventions in support of military spending (Table A4.1 in Appendix). The main left-right divide holds for all trade-offs considered – increasing public debt, weekly working hours for everyone, taxation for everyone – , while the results become more blurred when it comes to income levels, as income security is (weakly) associated with stronger support for taxation and opposition to increasing debt and working hours. Furthermore, concerns for warfare weakly and positively

correlate with support for the policy options presented, whereas variation associated with party identity and education level is rarely significant. No significant differences in the main model results emerge when adding these three non-welfare items as controls (Table A4.2 in Appendix). The latter positively correlate with the support for the welfare retrenchment scenarios. Similarly, introducing unemployment concerns as an additional control does not affect the main results (Table A4.3 in Appendix) – and, surprisingly, it positively correlates with support for the proposed retrenchment scenarios[15] – , confirming that the preferences over this fiscal trade-off are not only driven by demands for social protection. Finally, main results remain fairly consistent in each country included in the sample (Table A5 in Appendix), especially with regard to the left-right divide, although substantial drop in statistical significance prevents robust analysis. Left-right divide widens in countries with high public debt (the threshold is set at 60 per cent GDP as for the Stability and Growth Pact), although the difference with low-debt countries is not statistically significant (Table A6.1). When included as a control, the level of public debt weakly but positively correlates with amenability to welfare retrenchment (Table A6.2). Overall, robustness checks corroborate the reception of a genuine fiscal trade-off by the public opinion that exceeds the welfare state, thus not being uniquely driven by socioeconomic insecurities and attitudes.

Finally, the feedback effects associated with national levels of military spending align with our expectations. Individuals living in countries with high levels of military spending (US, Korea, and Poland between 2.8 and 3.8 per cent of their GDP), larger army compared to the workforce size (Poland, Italy, and Korea are above a 1 per cent ratio in this regard), and mandatory military conscription are more likely to support cuts to social expenses to further boost defence expenditure (Figure 3, first three panels; Tables A7.1–7.3 in Appendix), confirming the expected positive feedback effect (H4.1).[16] One-percentage-point higher level of military spending is associated with a 3–8 per cent higher likelihood of supporting welfare retrenchment, depending on the specific social policy considered, *ceteris paribus*. As for the effect of recent increases of military spending on support for welfare cutbacks, evidence seems to adjudicate in favour of the 'thermostatic' hypothesis (H4.2a), discarding the rival expectation based on rising concerns for national security in remilitarizing countries (H4.2b): increases in military spending (highest recorded in Continental and Nordic Europe) correlate with lower individual support for welfare cutbacks aimed at further reinforcing the country's defence expenditure (Figure 3, fourth panel on the right; Table A7.4 in Appendix). An average increase in military spending by one percentage point reduces support for welfare cutbacks by 1–2 per cent.

Looking at the controls, we find that elderly individuals (both captured through age and retirement status) are more reluctant to cut any social

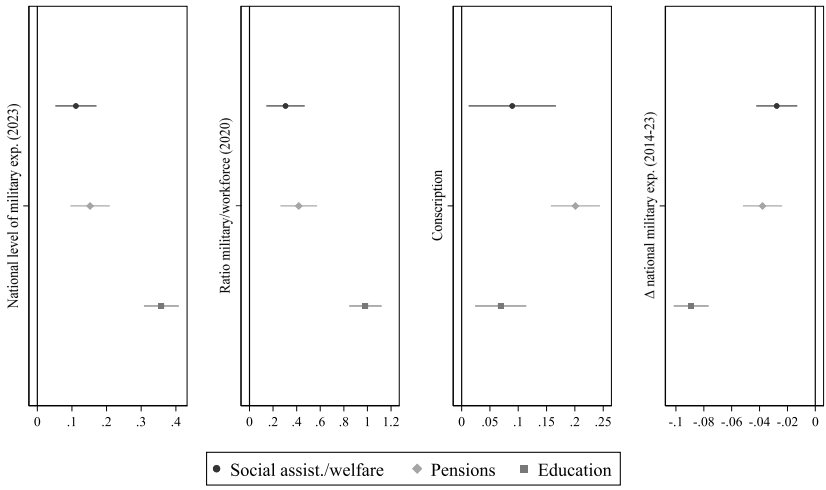

Figure 3. OLS models: coefficients and 95% confidence intervals. The models include the entire battery of controls (Tables A7 in Appendix).

policy in support of military expenditure. Compared to employed individuals, students appear to care more for education, while unemployed and caregivers are mainly interested in protecting social assistance. Union members seem more likely to support cuts to education to raise military expenditure. These findings suggest that citizens view welfare expenditure from their own vantage point, thus self-interested motives drive their leaning towards support for increased military expenditure.

Discussion and conclusion

The US stance on NATO funding, and especially on European defence, amidst multiples geopolitical crises, exposes citizens to the plausibility of the 'guns-versus-butter' trade-off, reinvigorating the political debate on military spending and its possible fiscal implications for the welfare state. Structural differences between the Cold War and present times, especially regarding budget constraints in the current era of permanent austerity as opposed to the *Trente Glorieuses*, threaten to turn the new militarization into a significant wave of welfare retrenchment. Although a fiscal trade-off between warfare and welfare expenditure is yet to be proven, the growing salience of war and military spending is likely to induce politicization of a latent conflict between two core functions of modern states, shaking public opinion and the political elites. Both functions are strongly related to national loyalty and legitimacy of the state among citizens.

This paper investigated citizens' attitudes over this potentially emerging trade-off, testing the empirical relevance of different individual and contextual factors that are expected to structure the 'guns-versus-butter' political conflict via a cross-sectional survey data fielded in ten advanced industrial democracies.

Overall, our findings confirm the opposition of public opinion to welfare retrenchment in support of a renewed military effort in advanced industrial democracies. The inferential analysis conducted shows that individual political stances are the most relevant determinants of attitudes over the warfare-welfare trade-off. A unidimensional left-right conflict emerges, with pro-welfare and pro-warfare fiscal preferences clustered at the two extremes. On the contrary, the perception of an imminent war does not significantly affect individual policy priorities, whereas socioeconomic conditions spur a measure of self-interested opposition to education cuts among high-skill and high-income individuals, together with preferences favouring cutbacks of social assistance among the better-off. Finally, the level of countries' military engagement appears to significantly matter for their citizens. Cross-country differences in defence spending show that individuals living in countries with a more pervasive presence of the military are also more prone to accept welfare retrenchment to fund rearmament. At the same time, however, those living in countries that have increased defence spending over the last decade are less willing to support welfare cutbacks to further strengthen national security. More broadly, this analysis significantly updates the literature on the warfare-welfare trade-off, showing that, in the current times characterized by intense military escalation at the global level, domestic drivers of political conflict – such as ideology and economic interest – preserve their primacy over concerns for armed violence (Bartels, 1994; DiGiuseppe *et al.*, 2024).

Some empirical limitations of this paper should be pointed out. Concerning the operationalization of both attitudinal determinants of policy preferences, alternative strategies could more accurately capture the GAL/TAN dimension of political values (e.g., through an additive index, Ansolabehere *et al.*, 2008). On the dependent variable side, further analysis is needed to test whether information on eligibility criteria of social policy may affect attitudes over the warfare-welfare trade-off (Häusermann & Kriesi, 2015; van Oorschot, 2006). A final limitation worth mentioning is the cross-sectional nature of the data that prevents tracking preferences' change as the ongoing conflicts escalate. Future research based on longitudinal data is called to validate the causal import of the correlations presented in this paper.

Despite these limitations, this paper provides some broader insights that might inform the debate on the arms race in advanced industrial democracies. First and foremost, the evidence suggests that marked ideological

divergences emerge about which items of social expenditure must be preserved and which addressed. Therefore, further expansion of military spending in advanced industrial democracies is unlikely to go undisputed, particularly if consequences for welfare spending emerge, as these are opposed by the public opinion. A particularly challenging task for policymakers may be that of meeting public opinion demands to preserve the pension system, whose financial sustainability already raises concerns in many countries regardless of additional military commitments. Based on aggregate preferences, cuts to social assistance seem the least unpalatable option, at least for cabinets appealing to right-wing voters, whereas progressive parties will be more constrained by their constituencies in this regard. Yet, compared to pensions, social assistance is a small share of social expenditure. Two alternatives emerge to fund military expenditure. Policymakers may opt for increasing taxation, which is the path usually chosen during the mobilization phase (Domke *et al.*, 1983; Marzian & Trebesch, 2025; Obinger *et al.*, 2018; Russett 1982). However, our robustness checks suggest that additional taxation can be equally divisive and poorly affected by warfare concerns, thus undermining the chances that a 'logic of equal sacrifice' may win support for this policy option, suggesting electoral backlash. Policymakers may, thus, opt for distributive interventions, displacing funds from public investment spending, although that would raise other critical policy trade-offs, worth exploring in future research. For instance, arms race may clash with the imperatives of investing in the green transition, as less environmentally concerned policymakers may be more willing to sacrifice climate targets, in order not to displease their electorates. Alternatively, policymakers may choose to maintain welfare expenditure, and to increase public debt, something possible also in the EU with the national escape clause to the Stability and Growth Pact, but this is difficult in countries that already have very high levels of debt.

A second important insight regards the spill-over effects of a transatlantic debate over the warfare-welfare trade-off. This paper suggest that marked differences in support for military spending persist between EU and non-EU countries (with the exception of Poland) even after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as national levels of military spending strongly correlate with support for the proposed welfare retrenchment scenarios. Furthermore, according to our findings, recent increases in national military spending reduce public opinion's acceptance of welfare retrenchment to fund rearmament. This could potentially accentuate the divergence between states with a long-standing high military engagement, and those with a more limited or recent involvement in defence spending. Therefore, the clash between domestic electoral dynamics and possible needs of additional contributions to collective security motivated by external military threats may drive the US and European countries further apart.

Finally, and surprisingly, citizens' attitudes over the 'guns-versus-butter' trade-off are not affected by international security concerns. As war menace looms large in the skies of Western democracies, this poses a difficult task to governments that have to face the imperative of increased defence expenditure, as decreasing welfare expenditure would be politically contentious, and may lead to electoral backlash.

Notes

1. However, it should be mentioned that public opinion research on this trade-off has devoted poorer attention to the GAL/TAN dimension of political identity compared to economic left-right ideology, except when analysing attitudes toward EU-level defence (Guth *et al.*, 2024; Nicoli *et al.*, 2024).
2. About 2,000 respondents for each country, except the US with 4,000.
3. We mainly use OLS models, while ordered logistic models are introduced as robustness checks. More parsimonious assumptions and easier interpretation of the results prompt us to employ OLS models as the main investigation technique.
4. Possible answers include (a) 'Increasing public debt'; (b) 'Increasing taxation for everyone'; (c) 'Increasing taxation for the rich only'; (d) 'Increasing the number of weekly working hours (everyone should work more hours per week to fund the increase in military expenditure)'; (e) 'Reducing education expenditure'; (f) 'Reducing pension expenditure'; (g) 'Reducing healthcare expenditure'; (h) 'Reducing expenditure for social assistance / [in the US: welfare]'.
5. 'Reducing education expenditure'; 'Reducing pension expenditure'; 'Reducing expenditure for social assistance/ welfare'.
6. All parties are classified in the following political families: radical left, social democrats, greens, liberals, conservatives/Christian democrats, radical right, regionalists. The US Democrats and Republicans are coded, respectively, as social democrats and conservatives.
7. Original scale is a 4-point Likert, as follows: 'not worried'; 'slightly worried'; 'worried'; 'very worried'. 'worried' and 'very worried' are here grouped together. The latter poorly correlates with unemployment concerns, thus accounting for a distinct source of subjective insecurity (r = 0,07).
8. Data on countries' military expenditure and its average annual variation collected from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, available at https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex). All values are multiplied by 100 to avoid overinflating regression coefficients associated with inevitable collinearity issues.
9. Armed forces personnel as share of total workforce (2020) collected from World Bank: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.TOTL.TF.ZS. Countries with mandatory conscription: DK, SE, NO, FI, KOR; countries without: UK, IT, DE, PL, US.
10. The item reads 'I might lose my job in the next 6 months'; possible responses vary between 'strongly disagree' (1) and 'strongly agree' (5).
11. This estimation approach calculates the percentage change in the dependent variable by dividing the regression coefficient of the independent variable of interest by the total range of possible values (the difference between the

highest and lowest values) of the dependent variable and then multiplying by 100.

12. Postestimation tests discard multicollinearity concerns, particularly associated with the use of different proxies of political identity.
13. Robustness checks confirm this, showing similar linear correlations between pro-military attitudes and more conservative stances on both the economic and the GAL/TAN dimensions (Table A3 in Appendix).
14. Operationalization of economic security in terms of education is never significant.
15. No issues of multicollinearity are detected.
16. Issues of collinearity emerge with country fixed-effects, which must nonetheless be kept in the model to avoid blurring feedback effects with other context-related confounding effects.

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Ethics declarations

On 23 March 2023, the Ethics Council at Copenhagen Business School reviewed the research project 'Societal challenges – sociopolitical attitudes and trust'. The council determined that the research project complies with ethical standards and requirements at Copenhagen Business School.

Data availability statement

The survey data used in this study are proprietary and cannot be made publicly available.

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