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Policy, power and pandemic: varieties of job and income protection responses to Covid-19 in Western Europe

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ABSTRACT
What explains variation in governments' policy choices to protect jobs and incomes at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in Western Europe? Departing from existing literature that emphasises path-dependency, this article proposes a dynamic model of policy-making in a major emergency. Building on the idea that governments face a trade-off between targeting and reversibility, the article develops a framework that accounts for both continuity and change in governments' policies to protect jobs and incomes during the pandemic. Introducing a four-fold typology of ideal-typical policy responses (strong reinforcement, weak reinforcement, over-provision and under-provision), it is argued that the interaction between institutional legacies and political power of the beneficiaries of a given policy determines the response that governments opt for. Case studies of three policy areas (short-time work; unemployment insurance and social assistance) across the five largest Western European countries (Germany, France, Italy, Spain, United Kingdom) support the proposed theoretical framework.

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Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic generated major social policy challenges for governments worldwide. Alongside the health response, foremost among these was provision of economic support to large sections of the working-age population unable to earn income due to health-related restrictions on business

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activity. To prevent a collapse in consumption, enable compliance with virus control measures or simply to maintain social order during an exceptional crisis, pressure on states to support working-age people's jobs and incomes was overwhelming.

Governments in Western European countries, which have the most developed social protection systems in the world, were better armed than most to face up to these challenges. However, social policy responses to the pandemic differed in significant ways. As empirical mapping studies show (Eichhorst et al., 2020; OECD, 2020), while some European governments bolstered means tested social policies others relied more heavily on adjustments to contributory social insurance. And while entirely new policies were created to plug gaps in social protection systems, these varied widely in their comprehensiveness. Such cross-country and cross-policy differences are obviously crucial for how effective European governments were in cushioning the impact of the pandemic on different parts of the working population. As such, there is an emerging literature seeking to make sense of the diverse public and social policy reactions of governments to this crisis (Béland et al., 2021a, 2021b; Capano et al., 2020; Ebbinghaus & Lehner, 2022; Hancké et al., 2022; Hick & Murphy, 2021; Moreira & Hick, 2021; Moreira et al., 2021; Natali, 2022).

How can the diverse policy responses at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in Western Europe be understood? Approaches to explaining cross-national variation in social policy by factors such as government partisanship or fiscal capacity appear likely to have less purchase in the peculiar context of a global pandemic, when 'politics as usual' was suspended and even champions of fiscal rectitude such as the International Monetary Fund pressed governments to borrow more. In an unprecedented crisis where speed was of the essence, the varied institutional legacies and thus capacities of Europe's social protection systems seem a more promising explanatory focus. But general arguments about path dependency cannot help account for why governments bolstered some pre-existing policies but not others, nor can they help make sense of the design of novel ad-hoc social policies that were developed where existing institutional capacities were weak or even absent.

In this paper we propose a model of (social) policy-making in a major but temporary emergency. Our assumption is that governments faced strong, if diffuse, pressures to promptly address needs created by the emergency, but were at the same time conscious of the long-term consequences of their decisions for public spending and future policy development. They were operating under strict time constraints, but not only with short time horizons. We identify in particular a possible trade-off between *targeting* and *reversibility*. Adjusting established policies to an emergency context – reinforcement – offered governments by far the surest way of efficiently getting help to those in need of urgent support. But especially for entitlement policies this move also carried the risk that when the emergency receded, it could prove politically difficult to return rules to their pre-existing settings. We assume governments will take this risk only where policies enjoy moderate to high levels of legitimacy among policy-makers. Contrarily, where a policy instrument either experiences low levels of elite legitimacy or is entirely absent from a country's policy mix, we predict that the resulting protective gaps will instead be addressed through *ad hoc* emergency-response policies. In this case, the problem is the opposite. As bespoke 'new' policies are relatively easy to phase-out when no longer required, the extant orientation of a social policy regime is no impediment to their introduction. But time pressures allied with the lack of a pre-existing institutional infrastructure to design and deliver them makes efficient targeting challenging. Targeting problems can in principle result in either *under-provision* or *over-provision*, and we hypothesise that which prevails will turn primarily on the socio-political power of the beneficiaries. Our core argument, then, is that *institutional inheritance* dictates how far governments rely on new as opposed to established policies to meet pandemic-related need, while it is *power dynamics* that shape the adequacy of new policies created quickly in response to the crisis. Evidence from a set of diverse cases, covering the five largest Western European countries (France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom), lends support to the argument.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section two reviews existing scholarship on variations in social policy responses to major crises in general and to Covid-19 specifically, before section three lays out our own explanatory approach in greater detail. After a discussion of research design and methods, the empirical part of the paper illustrates how our framework helps account for the varying policy choices in three policy areas – short-time work (STW), unemployment insurance (UI), and social assistance (SA) – in the five largest economies of Western Europe during the first wave of the pandemic. The final section concludes with some reflections on the implications of our argument.

Systemic crises and social policy responses

Historically, systemic crises have been crucial in driving welfare state expansion and reform (Castles, 2010; Steinebach et al., 2019). By most reasonable standards, the Covid-19 pandemic qualifies as such a crisis. We might especially expect some parallels with social policy developments arising from total war, another circumstance in which 'politics as usual' was suspended (Obinger & Schmitt, 2018; Obinger et al., 2018).

Following this literature, there could be a functional relationship between the problem pressure arising from Covid-19 and the social policy response to it. In this vein, Obinger and Schmitt's (2018, pp. 510–511) comparative historical analysis finds a robust and positive association between the severity of war and immediate post-war social spending. However, while the health and economic impacts of Covid-19 varied quite considerably across (and within) countries (Béland et al., 2021a), these differences seem weakly related to the extent of countries' spending in reaction to Covid-19. While not an exact proxy for social protection, plotting Bruegel data compiled in Anderson et al. (2020) on pandemic fiscal response in 12 mainly European countries against cumulative Covid-19 deaths in 2020 does not reveal a strongly positive association (see Online Appendix 1, Figures OA1.1 and OA1.2).[1] Further, though Moreira et al. (2021) emphasise how limited fiscal space was a significant factor constraining social policy responses to Covid-19 in Southern European countries, the relationship between pandemic responses and national public debt is also weak (see Online Appendix 1, Figures OA1.3 and OA1.4).

While functional explanations have limited explanatory purchase, recently the most prominent explanation for welfare state variation has been partisan politics (Beramendi et al., 2015; Manow et al., 2018). But the literature on war and social policy development throws doubt on the relevance of partisanship, emphasising that politics in wartime 'follows a quite different logic when compared with normal policy making in peacetime' (Obinger et al., 2018, p. 9). Though the analogy with war should not be strained, a 'rally round the flag' effect was a feature of politics under Covid-19 in several countries, especially in the early phase of the pandemic (Kritzinger et al., 2021; Louwerse et al., 2021). This argument appears to hold when plotting data on size of pandemic fiscal response against government partisanship, which again reveals no obvious relationship (see Online Appendix 1, Figures OA1.5 and OA1.6).[2]

Compared with the factors reviewed thus far, institutional differences may offer more insight into varieties of pandemic responses. We have long known that differences in established policy frameworks confer widely varying capacities on governments to respond to crises (Weir & Skocpol, 1985). The programmatic structures and distributive orientations of social protection systems vary considerably across European countries (Esping-Andersen, 1990), and it would be logical that the challenges of crisis management encourage governments to build their pandemic response on existing instruments and repertoires (Becker et al., 2020, pp. 11–12). Policy legacies may not offer much leverage in explaining differences in aggregate spending arising from the crisis, but they do seem promising in making analytical sense of more qualitative differences in policy response. Notably, the tendency 'to fall back on old habits' has been identified in a comparative analysis of immediate unemployment policy responses to the 2008 financial crisis (Chung & Thewissen, 2011). In line with this, Béland et al. (2021a, p. 255) argue that social policy responses to Covid-19 'reflect, at least in part, national policy legacies'. Bambra et al. (2021, p. 97) push this line of reasoning further and conclude that 'path dependence helps explain why the categorisation of rich democracies into 'three worlds' of welfare by Esping-Andersen in 1990 still does such a good job, 30 years later, of predicting how governments would respond to COVID-19'.

However, as the vast literature on critical junctures shows, crises – whether in the form of wars, natural disasters or of an economic kind – also give governments the opportunity to instigate policy change (Bermeo & Pontusson, 2012). Indeed, in the case of Covid-19 we also see instances – notably in Southern European countries (Moreira et al., 2021) and the UK (Ebbinghaus & Lehner, 2022; Hick & Murphy, 2021) – of entirely new social policies being introduced in response to the economic impact of the pandemic that do not necessarily follow pre-existing institutional policy logics. As these are countries with some of the least encompassing welfare systems in Europe, such examples perhaps lend support to Castles' (2010, pp. 98–99) suggestion, combining institutionalist and functionalist reasoning, that it is in welfare systems where needs and risks are least well covered that we will observe most social policy innovation in a crisis. What this reasoning cannot account for though is the fact that the Covid-19 social policy responses of governments have sometimes 'bypassed' existing policies while strengthening others (Cantillon et al., 2021; Hick, 2020). Nor does it shed much light on the challenges of crisis policy innovation, which in the absence of underlying institutional frameworks creates dysfunctions and dilemmas of its own (Hancké et al., 2022).

In short, though policy inheritance clearly matters, the combination of established and new policies that have been deployed to respond to pandemic-related need cannot simply be inferred from the structure of, and gaps in, pre-existing social protection systems. It may therefore be that the *interaction* between institutional and political dynamics at the onset of Covid-19 shaped the diverse responses observed. A similar approach combining political and institutional factors has been taken by Starke et al. (2013), who argued that political factors are conditioned by existing welfare state configurations when explaining the diversity of economic crisis responses over a 40-year period.

Policy legacies, power and pandemic responses

The starting point for our approach is that the pre-existing programmatic structures and distributive orientations of social protection systems mattered for the shape of governments' reactions to protect the jobs and incomes of working-age people at the onset of the pandemic. However, we contend that concepts such as path dependency and innovation are too broad to capture the variegated responses of governments to different types of pandemic-related need and the diverse ways in which existing policy instruments have been appropriated and new ones designed. The policy record suggests a need to distinguish between the nature of adjustments made to *existing* policies; and between more or less encompassing and effective *new* policies. To reflect this, we employ three main dimensions to examine each country's response measures: policy 'newness' (pre-existing or ad-hoc instrument), 'settings' (adjustments to generosity and eligibility), and 'speed' (quick or slow provision during the first Covid wave). These criteria allow us to distinguish between *four ideal-typical pandemic responses*. Two responses, which we term *strong reinforcement* and *weak reinforcement*, characterise governments' decisions with respect to existing policies. A further two responses, *over-provision* and *under-provision,* capture the crucial distinguishing features of new policies introduced during the pandemic (see further detail below). This typology helps to more effectively theorise the conditions under which governments choose specific courses of policy action in an emergency.

It is important to be clear that our approach takes *policies* or *policy areas* as the relevant units of analysis, while simultaneously being sensitive toward the broader welfare regime within which these are nested. This approach allows us to analytically leverage two important aspects: on the one hand, as Covid-19 has had profound socio-economic impacts, national responses entailed a combination of STW, UI and SA policies (OECD, 2020), which should therefore be systematically addressed; on the other, individual policies have traditionally enjoyed different degrees of legitimacy across various welfare regimes, which may influence how governments respond effectively in some policy areas but less so in others.

We categorise legitimacy according to three levels: high, moderate and low. A policy with high legitimacy has two key properties: (i) it has been part of the social protection institutional architecture of a country for a long period of time and (ii) elites across the political spectrum agree on its central role within the broader national social protection system (although they well may disagree on specific elements of policy design). Where (i) is present, but (ii) is not, a policy is considered as having moderate legitimacy and where neither property is present, a policy is regarded as having low legitimacy. A policy with low legitimacy is therefore one that is either a very recent addition to, or is outright *absent* from, a country's policy mix. Across the three welfare regimes that we examine in this article, we attribute the following levels of legitimacy to each policy examined across the three regimes. Online Appendix 2 provides a detailed discussion of how we assigned different levels of legitimacy to different policies across welfare regimes.

How do our ideal-typical response categories map onto various levels of policy legitimacy? The first response, *strong reinforcement*, entails expansionary adjustment across most policy settings, such as increasing the rate or duration of benefit payments, easing eligibility requirements to make protection more encompassing or removing categorical restrictions (e.g., extending STW schemes to new sectors or companies of a smaller size). Moreover, we expect these adjustments to be *swiftly* implemented in a strong reinforcement context. Given the efficiency advantages of processing claims through well-established administrative mechanisms, this is likely to be a preferred option for governments operating under substantial time pressure, provided that decision-makers do not have a particular aversion to enhancing the policy in question, i.e., provided it is a policy that enjoys high legitimacy. The second response, *weak reinforcement*, entails adjusting some – but not all – available policy settings. Moreover, weak reinforcement might also be characterised by belated rather than swift government action. This reflects a policy that enjoys moderate legitimacy levels – i.e., a well-institutionalised policy that in principle offers a suitable infrastructure for governments to utilise but that, at the same time, is not policymakers' preferred or priority option.

When then do governments choose to fill a protective gap through the deployment of newly established *ad-hoc* policies? We argue that this will be the case for policies that have low legitimacy in a given welfare architecture. As above, this applies both to existing policies that are not meaningfully institutionalised within a welfare regime and that furthermore may be highly contested among political elites, and where a certain policy type is almost wholly absent from a welfare state's infrastructure. Where an existing policy has low legitimacy, governments will be wary of reinforcing it, as it could prove politically difficult to withdraw later. While the fiscal constraints governments are operating under may be less than in normal times, it is naïve to assume that they are wholly indifferent to the longer-term consequences of policy choices made during the pandemic. IMF researchers argued, for example, that sizeable government spending was fully legitimate to respond to the socio-economic shock caused by extreme events like a pandemic, but also noted how fiscal flexibility should be treated as 'temporary' and should include a 'process to return to the rule' (Gbohoui & Medas, 2020). Balancing the need for immediate provision of support and its longer-term consequences is where a potential trade-off between targeting and reversibility is most evident. As the eligibility parameters of discretionary policies such as STW are more easily reversible, this trade-off pertains mainly to entitlement policies such as UI or SA. It is where either one of these policy types exists but has particularly low levels of elite legitimacy that we would expect governments to bypass existing policies and to meet need through more easily reversible *ad hoc* policies instead.

Meanwhile, where there is an outright lack of an institutionalised national STW or SA scheme[3], the main problem is on the other side of the trade-off between targeting and reversibility. There is little reason to think that governments will be concerned about bespoke support schemes, which often make explicit reference to the pandemic in their name, being 'sticky' beyond the crisis. However, absent an established institutional and administrative infrastructure, such policies will likely be very hard to target efficiently, especially when operating under severe time constraints. If an *ad hoc* scheme establishes very lax eligibility requirements, pays generous benefits and is procedurally simple, it will likely prove effective in meeting need but only at the cost of inducing claims even in the absence of need, so-called deadweight (Atkinson, 1995). If, on the contrary, eligibility is tight, benefits meagre and procedures complex it will minimise 'deadweight' but do a poorer job of meeting need. Put simply, regarding new policies, governments thus face the choice of erring on the side of either *over-provision* or *under-provision*.

Under what conditions will governments over- or under-provide? Put cynically, the simple existence of a new, *ad hoc* policy could be enough to allow governments to be seen to be responding to pandemic-related need of groups with low levels of power, even if the policy is not fully effective in doing so. Alternatively, cases of over-provision are more likely when the groups targeted by the policy wield high levels of power. Here there is a crucial distinction between governments innovating *ad hoc* STW schemes and new means tested SA-like policies. The former potentially benefit not only higher earners but also, indirectly, firms who wish to retain workers, whether to protect investments in worker skills or simply to avoid the costs of staff turnover (Hancké et al., 2022). The rapid creation of STW schemes occurs, therefore, in the shadow of the electoral power of the middle-class and especially of the structural power of business (Culpepper & Reinke, 2014). Here, governments might face a strong incentive to err on the side of over-provision. Means-tested policies, by contrast, target low-income groups on the margins of the labour market with limited political or economic muscle. Cases of under-provision might therefore be typically found to address protective gaps for these groups.

In sum, we argue that social policy responses to the pandemic result from the interplay of *institutional* and *power logics*. The institutional logic is shaped by the programmatic legacies of pre-existing social protection systems. What matters here is not the power of groups targeted by a policy but the policy's legitimacy in the domestic institutional and political landscape. Highly legitimate policies will be *strongly reinforced*, moderately legitimate ones will only be *weakly reinforced*. For new *ad hoc* policies, created under significant time pressures to fill protective gaps arising from illegitimate or absent policies, a political power logic comes to the fore. When the beneficiaries of these policies have high levels of power, governments will tend to *over-provide*, ensuring generous, encompassing and rapid protection but at the price of substantial costs and wider economic inefficiencies. When policies cater to weaker political-economic groups, they will tend to *under-provide*, privileging cost control and avoidance of deadweight over generosity, comprehensiveness and speed in meeting potential need.

Matching the information on varying levels of policy legitimacy summarised in Table 1 with the theoretical considerations elaborated thus far, Table 2 presents government responses as predicted by our theoretical framework.

Research design

To probe our argument, we systematically examine the pandemic responses across three policy areas that are crucial for job and income protection (STW, UI and SA) in the five largest Western European countries (France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the UK) providing instances of three welfare regimes (Continental, Mediterranean, Liberal). We focus on the first wave of Covid-19 (March – June 2020), with occasional references to later periods when needed to better understand decisions made during the first wave. Restricting the empirical analysis to the first wave rests on two considerations. Firstly, it allows us to observe pandemic policy-making in its 'purest' form, as decisions taken by governments later on were also responses to second-order effects of first-wave policies (Hancké et al., 2022). Secondly, we seek to minimise the risk of our findings being conditioned by coordination at the European level with the acceptance of the Next Generation EU package in July 2020 (Armingeon et al., 2022), which would be a potentially confounding factor for all our cases bar the UK. We chart the varieties in response across our three policy types in order to test our central theoretical contention: that the legitimacy of pre-existing programmes, coupled with the power resources of recipient groups where pre-existing programmes are absent or enjoyed low legitimacy, leads policy-makers to adopt various combinations of strong or weak reinforcement and over- or under-provision.

We opt for a diverse cases design (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). We focus on countries belonging to the Continental, Mediterranean and Liberal welfare states as each of the three models can be credibly considered to feature three different combinations of policy legitimacy at the onset of the pandemic. Our case selection furthermore allows us to restrict our focus to *large* European countries, as it has been shown that size matters in pandemic responses

Table 1. Variation in policy legitimacy at the onset of the pandemic.

	Welfare regime		
Policy	***Continental***	***Mediterranean***	***Liberal***
STW	High	High	Low
UI	High	Moderate	Moderate
SA	Moderate	Low	High

Table 2. Predicted government responses by policy area across welfare regimes.

Policy	Welfare regime		
	Continental	*Mediterranean*	*Liberal*
STW	Strong reinforcement	Strong reinforcement	Over-provision
UI	Strong reinforcement	Weak reinforcement	Weak reinforcement
SA	Weak reinforcement	Under-provision	Strong reinforcement

(Coccia, 2022). In addition to size-comparability issues, we exclude Nordic countries from our analysis also because given the universal and encompassing character of the social-democratic welfare regime all three policy areas enjoy high legitimacy, and reinforcement across the board would thus be theoretically expected (and has also been empirically confirmed, see Greve et al., 2021).

To reconstruct government pandemic responses and the process that led governments to make these choices, we collect empirical evidence by resorting to three types of sources: (i) documents issued by governments, governmental agencies and other national political bodies and institutions; (ii) information collected by international organisations (e.g., Eurofound; OECD); and (iii) articles in major national newspapers and other reputable media outlets.

Protecting jobs and incomes in the pandemic

The empirical evidence is presented in three sub-sections, focussing respectively on the Continental regime (France and Germany); the Mediterranean regime (Italy and Spain); and the Liberal regime (the UK). For each of the three regimes, we analyse in turn developments in STW, UI and SA.

The continental regime: France and Germany

At the beginning of the pandemic, both France and Germany had well-established STW schemes to support firms and their employees. In France, the rules were quickly adjusted so that employees received 84% of gross salary for hours not worked instead of 72% normally, with the cost to employers met fully by the state up to a ceiling of 4.5 times the minimum wage (approximately €4800 net per month). Adjustments also allowed various categories of usually ineligible workers (e.g., apprentices, part-timers, home workers) to be covered, and ensured lower-paid employees supported through the scheme received at least the minimum wage (Desmoulières & Bissuel, 2020a). Take-up was comparatively massive: at its peak in April 2020, nearly 35% of French employees were benefiting (Drahokoupil & Müller, 2021, p. 22). In Germany, the STW scheme was swiftly extended to all workers who pay social security contributions, including those on fixed-term contracts and temporary agency workers, while the threshold for companies to claim

STW was lowered. The legislation was passed unanimously by parliament in March 2020 (Bundestag, 2020a). Trade unions complained that allowances were set at a relatively low earnings replacement rate of 60% (67% for workers with children). Despite employer criticism that any increases would be paid for by those not claiming STW, including essential workers, the government in May 2020 increased STW benefits to 70% (77% for workers with children) from 4 months of STW and 80% (87%) from 7 months of STW (BMAS, 2020). At its peak in 2020, 15% of German employees benefitted from STW (Drahokoupil & Müller, 2021, p. 22). This increase in STW was part of a major pandemic social protection package supported by the Grand Coalition of Christian Democrats and Social Democrats with abstention from the opposition parties for varying reasons usually not related to STW – the Liberals were critical of a blanket increase in STW as originally proposed while the Greens criticised that the protection of low-income workers on STW was not sufficient (Bundestag, 2020b). Overall, STW provisions have been strongly reinforced in France and Germany with broad political support, in line with our expectations.

When the pandemic struck, France was in the middle of a major reform of its UI system, with a first series of changes (stricter minimum contribution requirements; graduated reductions in entitlement with increasing unemployment duration) implemented in September 2019, and a second due to take effect from April 2020. Given the health crisis, the unions pressed the government to abandon this reform. Though it stopped short of that, in March implementation of phase 2 was deferred initially until September, and in April some cuts to the value of benefits for higher earners that were implemented in phase 1 were restored (Bissuel, 2020). The duration of benefits was also extended to take account of the lockdown period. Taken together the cost of these measures was estimated at €1.2 billion in 2020 (UNEDIC, 2020). It would ultimately not be until October 2021 that the government was able to fully implement its UI reforms, and then only after watering down key aspects of the pre-pandemic policy (Clegg, 2022). In Germany, as part of a major social protection package adopted in May 2020, unemployment benefits, usually paid for a maximum of 12 months, were automatically prolonged by 3 months for those whose entitlement ended between May and December 2020. Meanwhile parents, including homeworkers and the self-employed, who could not work due to the closure of schools or nurseries were entitled to 10 weeks (20 weeks for single parents) of 67% of income compensation (i.e., set at the rate of unemployment benefits) (BMAS, 2020). In both France and Germany UI was thus considerably strengthened and, in the case of France, liberalising reforms even partially reversed.

Concerning SA, the pandemic led to calls from French academics and anti-poverty associations to increase the basic rate of benefits and extend eligibility to under-25s (Zemmour, 2020), who can normally access social assistance only under exceptional circumstances. However, while even some governing party MPs were reportedly favourable, the executive refused both ideas (Rey-Lefebvre, 2020). The responsible Minister said extending the *Revenu de Solidarité Active* (RSA) to under-25s would be 'defeatist' as 'no young person should grow up with social assistance as their horizon' (cited in Rey-Lefebvre, 2020). The government instead announced an 'exceptional solidarity payment' of €150, plus €100 for every dependent child, for recipients of the RSA and the means-tested unemployment assistance benefit, and a one-off payment of €200 for students and young people receiving housing benefits. Both measures were widely criticised as inadequate, notably due to the low level of payments but also for failing to reach some of the most vulnerable (Corbier, 2020; Desmoulières & Bissuel, 2020b). In Germany, to fill any remaining gaps in social protection, access to the means-tested basic income support scheme as well as the parental allowance was made easier and extended to self-employed and micro-entrepreneurs. A one-off €300 child allowance to all parents eligible for child benefit (this includes higher income groups) was paid. Means-testing (usually setting a threshold of €5000) was temporarily suspended for basic income support claims made between 1 March 2020 and 31 March 2021, activation principles were relaxed and benefit receipt automatically extended by up to a further 12 months. To avoid being forced to use up their pension savings or risking the resuming of business activities after lockdown, solo self-employed workers gained access to basic income grants without the requirement to make any statements on their financial assets and to exhaust these assets for six months. Claimants had to declare, however, that they do not possess 'significant assets' (defined as assets over €60,000 for singles and another €30,000 for every further household member). Existing housing costs were accepted as appropriate housings costs to avoid people being forced to move while claiming basic income support (BMAS, 2020).

Regarding SA, we thus find significant differences between France and Germany. In France the government was against extending SA benefits particularly to young people and only resorted to moderate reinforcement through exceptional one-off payments, avoiding setting a potentially costly precedent that might be difficult to reverse later. In contrast, the general pattern in Germany was one of strong reinforcement by putting relaxations in place for existing claimants as well as significantly extending the pool of claimants.

The Mediterranean regime: Italy and Spain

In Italy, job retention was a central aim of the government's flagship *Heal Italy* and *Relaunch* policy packages (INPS, 2020). To this end, the government deployed two complementary instruments. Firstly, lay-offs were suspended

(Colussi, 2020). Secondly, STW compensation schemes were extended to all firms, including those with less than 5 employees (INPS, 2020). The use of STW was swift and widespread: in March and April 2020, 51% of Italian firms made use of the schemes with workers seeing their working time reduced by 90% and their gross salaries by 27% (Bank of Italy, 2020), denoting the significant efforts channelled through STW to protect worker's incomes, including those of workers who were not previously eligible for STW. The design of these measures was supported by the social partners (CGIL, 2020, pp. 6–7), though unions criticised delays in payments due to the unprecedented volume of applications (Eurofound, 2020; Colussi, 2020). In Spain, the left coalition government (comprising the social-democratic PSOE and leftwing Podemos) acted swiftly to protect existing employees at the beginning of the pandemic. STW schemes (called ERTEs in Spain) were expanded by relaxing the application process and exonerating or reducing employers' social insurance contributions for employees placed on the schemes (Olías, 2020b). In addition, temporary workers and interns were made eligible for STW support. Through these schemes, 70% of previous wages was paid by the state in the form of UI, regardless of prior contribution status (ETUC, 2020). At their peak, the policy covered nearly 20% of Spanish employees (Drahokoupil & Müller, 2021). Employment protection legislation was also strengthened, with companies banned from using the pandemic as a justification for dismissal (Olías, 2020b).

In Italy, given the suspension of lay-offs, pressure on UI was modest (INPS, 2020). Hence reinforcement in this realm was limited and focussed primarily on postponing exit from UI for individuals who would have otherwise run out of entitlements during the lockdown (Ibid). In addition, *Relaunch* granted two extra months of UI payments for those individuals who ran out of their entitlement in March and April 2020. The two extra months were however capped at €600 per month, in line with levels of social assistance payments. UI was therefore only weakly reinforced (e.g., easing some conditions for existing beneficiaries, but doing so with some delay and without expanding the pool of beneficiaries) as the government's overall response relied primarily on STW, as expected given institutional legacies.

In Spain, the government expanded the pool of UI beneficiaries in its first major support package to include self-employed workers who had lost at least 75% of previous income, making available to them special income support calculated at 70% of previous earnings, or a minimum of €661 per month (Olías, 2020a). The government also created exceptional payments to cater for temporary workers whose contracts had expired and domestic workers who had lost income during lockdown (BOE, 2020a). In contrast, the sole measure introduced for those already receiving UI at the beginning of the first lockdown was the automatic approval of remaining entitlement periods (Olías, 2020a). With no action taken to prevent system exit, some

550,000 UI recipients exhausted their entitlements from March to September 2020. Retroactive compensation was not approved until November 2020 and only applied to those whose UI had expired during the first 'state of emergency' (14 March – 30 June). The delay in provision and tighter-than-promised criteria (the benefit was worth €430 for up to three months, with only 260,000 eligible for receipt) saw the scheme criticised by trade union confederations as 'arriving late and poorly' (Ubieto, 2020). In both Italy and Spain, therefore, governments acted on UI through 'weak reinforcement'. Policy adjustments expanded the pool of beneficiaries in Spain and retained claimants in the system in Italy, but entitlements were capped at relatively low levels and, in the case of Spain, only belatedly extended.

Italy entered the pandemic with a weakly institutionalised national SA system, which was first introduced in 2017 (the 'Social Inclusion Income') (Durazzi et al., 2018) and expanded in 2018, when the Social Inclusion Income was integrated into a more encompassing and more generous scheme, the 'Citizenship Income' – introduced by the then Five Star Movement – Northern League coalition government. The Citizenship Income was a highly contested measure within the government in charge during the pandemic: championed by the Five Star Movement, fiercely opposed by a small but vocal coalition partner, Italia Viva (led by former Prime Minister Renzi), while receiving only lukewarm support from the other major coalition partner, the Democratic Party (Rubino, 2020). SA did not feature in the government's first policy package, but the government made explicit in March that a second – and financially larger – set of measures was going to be implemented later in the spring. This triggered an important lobbying effort by civil society organisations who formed a coalition to promote anti-poverty and inclusive measures in the context of the pandemic (Forum DD and Asvis, 2020). Partly as a result of these lobbying efforts, the government introduced an 'Emergency Income', which was only included in the *Relaunch* package (INPS, 2020). This entailed a one-off payment ranging between €400 and €800 per household, depending on socio-economic circumstances. The government framed it as catering for beneficiaries that would otherwise be excluded; while the coalition that campaigned for it pointed out that by departing from some of their proposals (such as regarding the application procedure), the Emergency Income would *de facto* exclude a significant proportion of potential beneficiaries (Gori, 2020a). Indeed, data on the implementation of the Emergency Income show a particularly low uptake, at around 40% of eligible beneficiaries (Gori, 2020b). This has been put down to low publicity given by the government to this measure and overly complex application procedures (Gori, 2020b). A similar one-off payment of €600 – later repeated once – was also introduced for self-employed workers who would not qualify for any form of insurance-based income support. As in the case of the emergency income, the measure attracted controversy: trade unions argued that the measure was 'neither equitable nor proportional' (given the vast size and heterogeneity of the self-employed) and mostly 'symbolic' (CGIL, 2020, p. 10). While political pressure through the civil society coalition thus led to the introduction of new *ad hoc* SA measures, this was a case of under-provision as evident from both low generosity and low take-up rates.

In Spain, the only SA schemes available at the beginning of the pandemic were the regional minimum income policies, which in 2019 supported just 297,000 households nationally (MDSA, 2019). Due to their fragmented and bureaucratic nature these were not a preferred pandemic response instrument, and only an additional 72,000 households received regional SA support over 2020 (Cortés & Cadenas, 2020). Instead, soon after the beginning of the first Covid wave, the Spanish government proposed the creation of a new, national SA benefit: the Minimum Living Income (*Ingreso Mínimo Vital*, IMV). This brought forward a measure from the government's coalition agreement (PSOE, 2019). In this context and amid strong pressure to act during the pandemic, the IMV's legislation (passed in June 2020) was supported by every party in the national parliament with the exception of the far-right Vox, which abstained. In its initial form the IMV guaranteed a minimum household income ranging from €462 to €1015 depending on family type (BOE, 2020b). Nonetheless, Spain's SA response was a case of under-provision, as additional financial support did not become available until well after the first lockdown had ended. This delay can be attributed to both administrative limitations and the weaker power resources of beneficiaries. Regarding the latter factor, in early April 2020 Podemos called for an immediate 'bridging' SA benefit to be provided to low-income groups while a new permanent scheme was designed (RTVE.es, 2020b). However, this demand was rejected by the social security ministry (controlled by the PSOE) out of a concern that time was needed to first design the criteria and administration of a new benefit (Velarde, 2020). Ensuring proper targeting (and cost-control) was thus prioritised to avoid the risk of over-provision, revealing the lower priority accorded to timely support for more marginal social (and electoral) constituencies in an emergency. Subsequently, the initial delivery of the scheme experienced administrative delays and complications (RTVE.es, 2020a).

The United Kingdom

Unlike all our other cases, the UK had no recent STW policy legacy to fall back on when Covid-19 struck. While such schemes were not totally unprecedented in the UK context (Wiggan & Grover, 2022), they had not existed since the early 1980s and were eschewed in the early part of the global financial crisis (Clegg, 2010). As early as 20th March a new STW work scheme – Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) – was however announced by the British government (Fulton, 2021). CJRS compensated 80% of the wages of employees who were unable to work due to Covid-related restrictions, up to a monthly ceiling of £2500. It covered all employees on payroll without distinction, including agency workers and those on zero-hours contracts. Employers only had to make a financial contribution if their usual pension contributions were above a specified limit, though could voluntarily top-up their employees' wages. The design of CJRS privileged accessibility and simplicity, with some success. The scheme was introduced very fast, and of the nearly 9 million employees (close to 30% of the labour force) in receipt of it at the scheme's peak in April 2020, 99.5% had their claims paid within 3 working days (NAO, 2020).

These choices came with costs, however. Unlike STW schemes in most other countries, CJRS made no demands on participating firms to demonstrate adverse economic impacts, and had no requirements such as suspending layoffs or limiting dividends (NAO, 2020; Fulton, 2021). Above all, it was unique in stipulating that to benefit employees had to be laid-off totally for a period of at least three weeks. There was no possibility in the original CJRS for reduction of working hours, partly because reporting working-hours of staff rather than their normal salary would have been more cumbersome for employers and more liable to fraud (Pope et al., 2020). The Chancellor of the Exchequer stated that a STW scheme with more flexibility could have meant the state 'subsidising the wages of almost the entire workforce' and that 'given the time available, we went with a scheme that could be delivered' (Hansard, 2020). But as a paradoxical result, companies in which some activity may have remained viable had little reason not to shut down totally and claim CJRS. This is a likely reason that, in spite of a relatively low salary cap, CJRS was extremely costly. Drahokoupil and Müller (2021, p. 19) assess 2020 expenditure on CJRS at 2% of UK GDP, double the cost of the French STW work scheme that had a higher take-up rate. CJRS can be considered a case of overprovision.

This approach can in part be understood in relation to the weakness of UI in the UK, which entered the pandemic with the lowest replacement rates for the unemployed in the developed world. Among our cases, the UK stands out as the only country – and one of only a few in the OECD – to have made no pandemic-related enhancements at all to UI entitlements (OECD, 2020). As the rate of contributory Jobseekers Allowance was equivalent to the basic rate of SA (Universal Credit, UC) before the pandemic, the uplifting of the latter (see below) in fact created new incentives for some of those eligible for UI to instead claim UC, if they met the eligibility criteria at household level. The total neglect of UI in the Covid-19 response appears as a further step in the progressive side-lining of contributory provision in UK social security. While this attracted some expert comment (Hick, 2020), critics of government policy mainly reacted by calling for easing of the capital limits to UC eligibility so more affluent households are not excluded from social assistance.

Alongside CJRS, strongly reinforcing SA was at the heart of the UK's approach to income protection in the pandemic (Brewer & Handscomb, 2020). In March, a £20 per week increase in the basic rate of UC (and of Working Tax Credit) was announced, alongside an easing of access rules for the self-employed and the suspension of conditionality (Mackley, 2021). The UC uplift was substantial, representing a rise – following a four-year freeze in the value of benefits – of between 24 and 30% in the basic rate for singles, depending on age. Though the reinforcement of UC was explicitly presented as temporary, the rate rise and the easing of access for the self-employed were introduced for a year (until April 2021), which was longer than the (initially) projected duration of the economic disruption arising from the pandemic. Later, this only enhanced the clamour from various sides for these measures to be made permanent (Mackley, 2021, pp. 35–37). After repeated extensions the uplift was eventually removed in October 2021, but almost in parallel the government unveiled increases in UC rates for working claimants for an overall cost of £2 billion per year. Though the government had to accept the only limited reversibility of the pandemic enhancements to UC, in this way it could in part reconcile the increased expenditure to its economic and political priorities.

Discussion and conclusion

The emergency social policy responses to the outbreak of Covid-19 varied in complex ways across countries. Pre-existing policies were bolstered in the face of pandemic-related need, but to different extents and at varying speeds. While new measures were also often implemented, some of these were far more comprehensive than others. It is hard to detect any general patterning of these policy responses. For example, while transfer payments for uninsured labour market outsiders were only modestly and belatedly enhanced in some countries, in others they were swiftly and substantially improved. But neither were policy responses merely reflections of particular, nationally-specific policy legacies, as the number of brand new policies introduced attests.

We have argued that in situations of emergency social policy-making like the Covid-19 pandemic, policy choice should be understood through the *interaction* of particular institutional and general power logics. Operating under substantial time-pressure, policy makers can be expected to turn most readily to the institutional 'cornerstones' of their social protection systems, meaning the reinforcement of existing policies will reflect the institutional and distributive orientation of established welfare states. But where improvements to existing arrangements that policy makers are willing to countenance leave manifest protective gaps, in an emergency like Covid-19 they will also need to supplement them with new, ad hoc measures, even if these are challenging to target. It is at this point that power logics may become more significant, with governments more likely to make ad hoc support quickly available and easily accessible when beneficiaries include more electorally and economically powerful groups.

Overall, the empirical evidence presented above lends support to our theoretical argument. As we demonstrate, cases of strong policy reinforcement during the initial phase of the pandemic – STW and UI in our Continental countries, STW in the Mediterranean countries and SA in liberal Britain – all map closely onto the programmatic features of the respective welfare state models with the highest levels of elite legitimacy. Moreover, we show that where ad hoc new policies were needed to support higher-earners and companies, as with the from-scratch creation of a STW scheme in the UK, they privileged timeliness and reach over fiscal rectitude, while the opposite was true when new programmes targeted those on low incomes, as with the SA schemes in Southern Europe.

There are a few instances where our evidence is out of step with our theoretical expectations. As established programmes that enjoy moderate levels of legitimacy, we anticipated that both SA in Germany and UI in the UK would be weakly reinforced. In fact, in Germany SA was rather strongly reinforced, while in the UK UI was not reinforced at all. In both cases, we think this points less to a weakness of our theoretical framework than to a need to update priors regarding certain welfare state models in the light of their ongoing transformation. There is a continuing debate whether Germany's social insurance state is 'withering away', especially in the wake of the Hartz reforms of the early-mid 2000s (Blank, 2020; Hinrichs, 2010). In line with this claim, its strong reinforcement during the pandemic may well suggest that German political elites – unlike their French counterparts – now see SA as a wholly integral part of the national welfare state architecture. And the British government's refusal to even weakly reinforce UI during Covid-19 is likely an indication that the legitimacy of the already half-hearted insurance approach that is part of the 'Beveridgean' legacy has even further declined.

SA in the Spanish case matches our expectations in terms of under-provision but poses a different theoretical challenge, as we assumed that new measures created during the pandemic would not become permanent, as has happened with IMV. The explanation is that introducing IMV was – as explained above – already part of the left coalition government's agreement, and had received support from some other social and political forces in Spain. This points to a broader issue, namely that pandemic politics is not only about policy makers responding to pandemic-induced needs, as our framework has assumed, but also about pandemic-induced needs impacting pre-existing political agendas (Capano et al., 2022). In the case of IMV, Covid-19 aggravated a problem – gaps in income protection – that became coupled with pre-existing 'politics' and 'policy' streams (cf. Kingdon, 1984), exerting pressure to speed up the adoption of the policy. French UI – which was strongly reinforced, again in line with our expectations – offers a different example of the same phenomenon, as the pandemic resulted in a decoupling of the problem, politics and policy streams, and stopped the liberalising reforms to UI that President Macron was pursuing in their tracks. This example suggests that our approach is generally robust even if domestic political dynamics vary in ways that defy easy theorisation.

What are the wider implications of our argument? Firstly, our account strongly underscores the importance of institutional and policy legacies for crisis policy-making. Even in a major crisis, indeed perhaps especially in a major crisis, policy makers have strong incentives to rely on existing policy infrastructures when they can, particularly because they facilitate timely and efficient government action. And while one might expect major crises to generate support for policy instruments and approaches that typically lack legitimacy in given institutional settings, this is not what we have observed. There has been much emphasis in recent institutional scholarship on how transformational policy change can occur gradually across repeated cycles of normal policy making (Streeck & Thelen, 2005; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). Our analysis suggests a different challenge to classic 'punctuated equilibrium' models, namely that – at least in the short-term – major crises may actually help to reinforce paths of institutional and policy development. An interesting question for future research is how far this has also been true in other policy fields during Covid-19.

We have also shown, however, that path-dependent policy responses to crises do not rule out substantial policy innovation. Indeed, policy legacies are a crucial determinant of policy change in crises, as they structure the space for more ad hoc policy interventions. We have argued that the management of targeting trade-offs between effectiveness and efficiency that characterise all policy design processes is especially problematic for ad hoc crisis policies, and policymakers will often be forced to privilege one to the detriment of the other. This makes distributive choices made in emergencies particularly revealing. More detailed reconstruction of the process behind the design of novel programmes introduced in response to Covid-19, and potentially other crises too, would be helpful in shedding more light on how crisis responses are shaped not only by policy but also by power.

Notes

1. Bruegel distinguishes three categories of fiscal response to the economic effects of Covid-19: immediate fiscal impulse, deferrals and other liquidity guarantees.

2. It should be noted that in their study of initial social policy responses to Covid-19 in Canada and the USA, Béland et al. (2021b) consider partisan factors to have been a significant cause of cross-case variation, but this may be explained by the peculiarities of the Trump Presidency and the irruption of the pandemic at a crucial phase in the US electoral cycle.
3. There is no European country that does not have a UI system of some sort.

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Supplementary material information

Two online appendices accompany this article and they have been submitted as a separate file.

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