

Axe Politiques socio-fiscales

Andrew ZOLA



Postdoctoral Researcher
Chair of Macrosociology
University of Mannheim

Laudine CARBUCCIA



Postdoctoral Researcher
Institute for Research on Poverty
University of Wisconsin–Madison

Ettore RECCHI



Full Professor of Sociology
Center for Research on Social Inequalities
Sciences Po

CAPS (Understanding the Acceptability of Social Policies) examines *what drives public acceptability of social policies from a comparative, interdisciplinary perspective*. It seeks to identify *where, how, for whom, and why policies gain support*, an essential condition for their continuity in a democratic context. It hypothesizes that perceptions of who deserves what kind of assistance depend on the information available to people, and not only on their socioeconomic status and ideological stance. Using *experimental methods in France, Germany, and the United States with representative panel surveys*, the project investigates three factors: (1) policy design features, (2) implicit judgments about recipient groups, and (3) perceptions of the macroeconomic context. A key innovation is its focus on a wide range of beneficiary characteristics, including children.

Background

While prior research highlights the influence of socioeconomic status and political ideology on redistributive preferences, they may be more malleable and responsive to context than previously assumed.

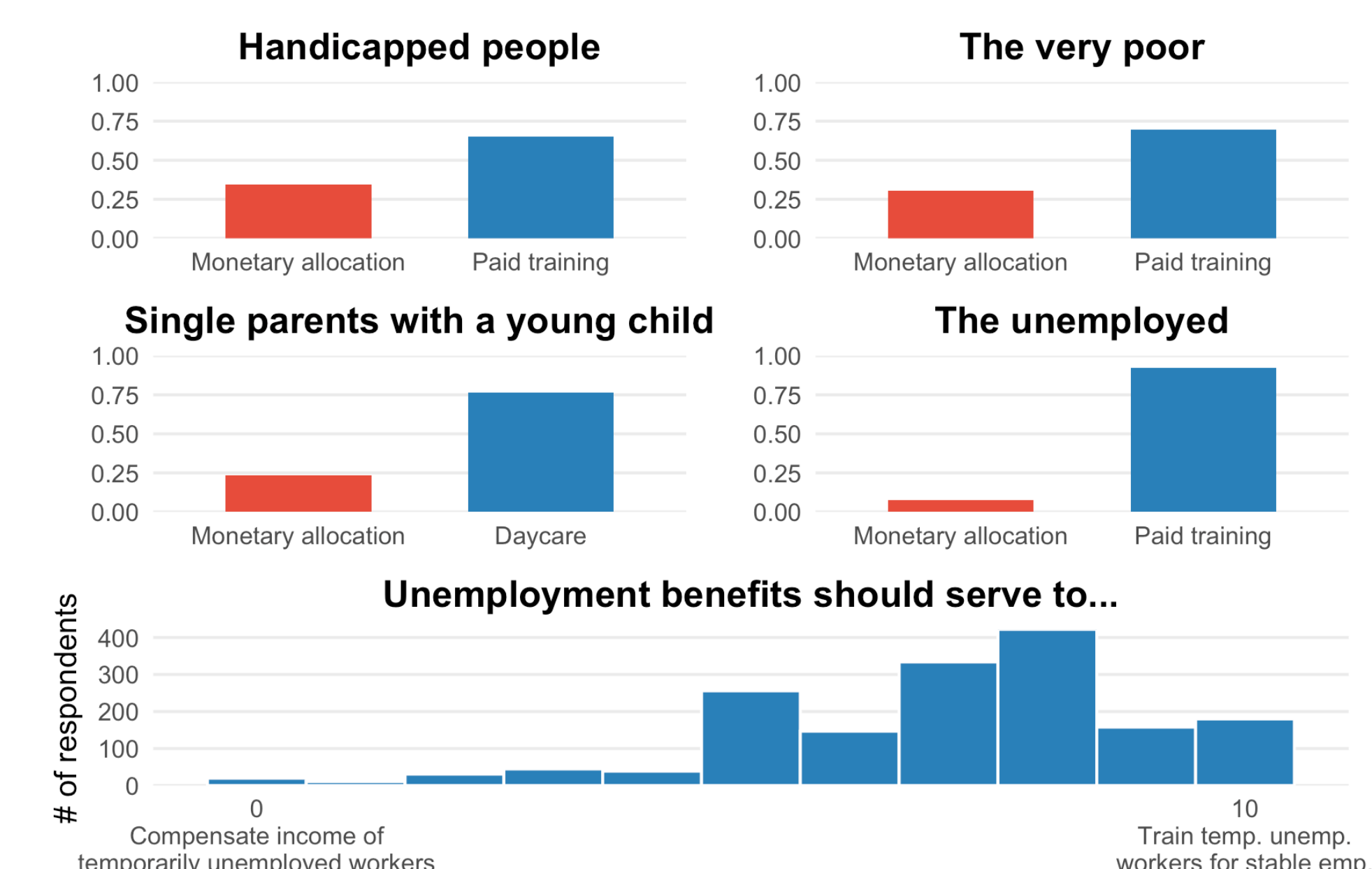
Political economy approaches frame preferences as a cost–benefit calculation, shaped by perceived policy outcomes and macroeconomic conditions such as austerity. Research in **psychology** emphasizes intuitive moral judgments about recipients, like “deservingness,” which rely on cognitive heuristics related to responsibility, work ethic, and control over one’s situation.

Both perspectives converge on the key role of **information**: providing evidence on policy effectiveness or recipient behavior can shift public attitudes. Existing literature remains limited by correlational designs and insufficient attention to mechanisms. Important gaps include the neglect of children as policy targets, limited comparison across policy instruments, and insufficient analysis of contemporary macroeconomic conditions.

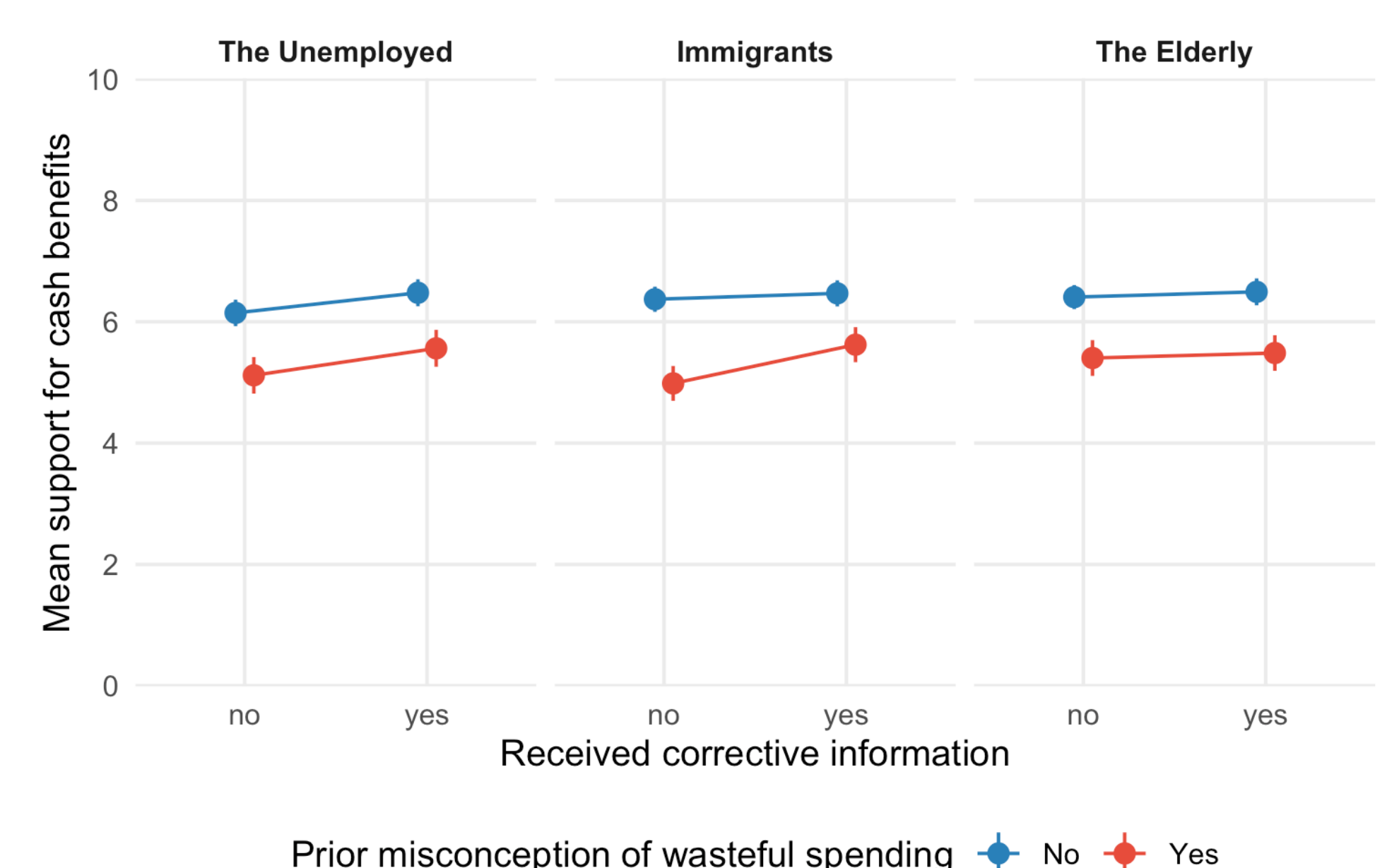
Addressing these gaps requires **experimental** and **comparative** approaches to better understand how policy design, information, and context shape acceptability.

Results (French Sample)

1. High preference for activation vs. compensation across beneficiary groups:



2. Correcting misconceptions of wasteful behavior increases support for groups with lower baseline:



Implications

CAPS integrates political economy and psychology in a unified experimental framework. It demonstrates the malleability of preferences, and how information can shape perceptions of policy acceptability.

CAPS places social acceptability at the core of policy evaluation, alongside effectiveness and equity. It provides comparative evidence on which instruments are preferred for different target groups, based on perceptions of group behavior and macroeconomic constraints. It offers insights into *designing social policies that are politically feasible and sustainable*.

Research Questions

What determines the acceptability of social policies?

To address this overarching question, we investigate how...

- the **design of policies**, such as compensatory versus activation measures
- implicit **judgments** about beneficiary groups, particularly perceptions of deservingness
- perceptions of the **macroeconomic context**, including scarcity and fiscal constraints
- differences in **welfare state structures** across countries

...moderate the acceptability of different social policies for people in France, Germany, and the United States.

Methodology

We construct and administer questionnaires to three probabilistic, representative online panels: the *Étude Longitudinale par Internet pour les Sciences Sociales* (ELIPSS), the *German Internet Panel* (GIP), and the *Understanding America Study*. **ELIPSS data were collected in July 2025; GIP and Understanding America data will be collected in late 2026.**

The questionnaires consist of a three-step, **experimental design to identify causal drivers of policy acceptability**. Respondents are asked to:

- state support for different policy instruments, including **compensation (income replacement) and activation (service provision)**.
- evaluate support for cash transfers to different target groups (elderly, disabled, parents of young children, unemployed, immigrants), with **randomized information correcting misperceptions** about poor people wasting benefits on non-essential goods like alcohol and tobacco.
- update their preferences after being exposed to **information about the macroeconomic context**, including inflation and public deficit.

3. Change in support after inflation and public deficit reminder:

