

**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

# The ideological roots of the activation paradigm: How justice preferences and unemployment attributions shape public support for demanding activation policies

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**Abstract**

Research either focused on self-interest or left–right ideology to explain support for demanding active labour market policies (ALMPs). This article focuses instead on how attitudes towards these policies are rooted in the underlying policy paradigm. We link attitudes towards ALMPs to two pillars of the activation paradigm: distributive justice and unemployment attributions. Structural equational modeling is employed on the Belgian National Election Study data of 2014 ( $N = 1901$ ). Individuals supporting the principles of need and equity and who blame the unemployed are more in favour of demanding activation. These frameworks and hence the policy paradigm thus have substantial predictive power.

**KEYWORDS**

Belgium, jobs/employment/wages/the labor market, quantitative research, secondary data analysis, social and economic justice, social policy/social welfare policy

In the last decades, European welfare states have moved from ‘passive’ social policies to more ‘activating’ measures (Cox, 1998; Graziano, 2012) that aim to increase labour participation among people who are dependent on social security or social assistance benefits (Boland, 2016; Bruttel & Sol, 2006; van Berkel & Borghi, 2008, p. 332). This ‘activation turn’ comprises a variety of policy measures that can be classified into two types of active labour market policies (ALMPs), namely enabling policies, focusing on investments in human capital, and demanding policies, which opt for negative incentives to push people into employment (Bonoli, 2010; Bruttel & Sol, 2006;

Daguerre, 2004; Eichhorst et al., 2008). This article focuses on the latter, as demanding ALMPs have been more frequently adopted and heavily politicized. While this has drawn scholarly attention to their implementation, consequences, and legitimacy (Fossati, 2018; Knotz, 2018), far less is known about the ideological origins of their public support. As ALMPs are amongst the most prominent ‘new’ types of social policies that declare a break with traditional compensation policies and openly call into question deeply entrenched institutions that handle unemployment (Häusermann, 2012; Maron & Helman, 2017, p. 406), understanding their support base is primordial to grasp the

**Abbreviation:** ALMP, active labour market policies.

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legitimacy of contemporary welfare systems and political feasibility of future reforms.

To capture the ideological roots of support for demanding ALMPs, our study investigates how its underlying policy paradigm informs public preferences. We assume that the paradigmatic ideas on the organizing principles and the problems behind a specific policy (Béland, 2005, 2016; Daigneault, 2014; Hall, 1993) are especially relevant to dissect ideological support for ALMPs. The activation debate indeed elicits strong tensions on the specific organization of social welfare, by redefining the fundamental 'goals, rules, and resources of unemployment policies' in order to get people into work who are in control of their situation in need and hence deemed undeserving of welfare support (Maron & Helman, 2017, p. 407). As ALMPs are a contemporary reform with diffuse modalities and consequences that do not coincide with traditional left-right conflicts, it is crucial to gain more insight into these idiosyncratic ideological controversies surrounding the activation debate as well as to unveil the ideological roots of public support for ALMPs. Activation encompasses a new paradigmatic approach characterized by a mutual adoption of elements from both the political left (strong state intervention) and the political right (residual and conditional benefits coupled with more individual responsibility) (Bonoli, 2010; Weishaupt, 2010). It implies a move away from Keynesian welfare politics which were oriented at collective responsibility for welfare and decommodification, to a productivist reinterpretation of social policy that is aimed at (re-) commodification (Dingeldey, 2007; Jessop, 1994).

Indeed, demanding ALMPs are not neutral or traditional policy measures, but entail a break with the traditional vision on the desired organization of unemployment benefit distribution as well as on the causes behind welfare dependency (Romano, 2018). On the one hand, the paradigm redesigns the blueprint of contemporary unemployment benefits by changing their underlying conceptions of social justice (Sachweh, 2016, p. 309). ALMPs are part of a rethought social contract, which shifts the logic from 'all-in-the-same-boat' to 'give back to society' philosophy (Béland & Cox, 2016; Daguerre, 2004; Hacker, 2006, p. 34; Romano, 2018; Sachweh, 2016). This turn implies a shift away from the principle of equality in the provision of unemployment benefits towards equity- or need-based distribution. On the other hand, this paradigm encompasses a particular view on the causes behind social neediness and welfare dependency that emphasizes individual responsibility for dealing with the consequences of social risks and the punishment of groups who fail to comply with welfare requirements (Dwyer, 2000; Romano, 2018). This policy paradigm considers unemployment not as a transitory misfortune or as a result of structural injustice,

but attributes unemployment to the behaviour and morality of the individual (Dwyer, 2000; Webster, 2019, p. 325).

This article investigates to what extent the core ideas of this policy paradigm shape citizens' support for demanding ALMPs and in this way contributes to the literature in important ways. First, analysing policy paradigms from an attitudinal perspective allows us to uncover to what extent the policy paradigms are echoed among the general public. As a result, we can determine the broader 'acceptance and likely embedding of workfare values and principles in the collective psyche' (Deeming, 2015, p. 880). Second, the explanatory power of the policy paradigm approach is tested, which can be construed as an ideological framework that is more suitable to grasp support for contemporary welfare reforms beyond the classic social structural and left-right divides. As ALMPs are being pursued by parties across the ideological spectrum and cut across traditional distributive conflicts between capital and labour (Cronert, 2020; Deeming, 2015; Häusermann, 2012), social positions and more conventional abstract ideological beliefs could be insufficient in themselves to fully grasp the reasons for supporting these policies.

Concretely, this paper addresses two research questions: (1) How are preferences for the distributive justice principles of equality, equity and need linked to support for demanding ALMPs? (2) How do attributions of unemployment (individual blame, individual fate, social blame, and social fate) influence support for demanding ALMPs? To answer both research questions, structural equation modeling (SEM) on the Belgian National Election Study data of 2014 is conducted. The results indicate that support for demanding ALMPs is indeed firmly rooted in both justice preferences and unemployment attributions. Net of a right-wing ideology and authoritarian beliefs, support for the principles of equity and need as well as individual blame as an unemployment attribution are linked to higher support for demanding ALMPs. Before discussing these results in more detail, the theoretical framework is expanded on.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### The policy paradigm behind demanding activation

The recent history of the European welfare states has been characterized by the 'activation turn' (Bonoli, 2010, p. 435) that aims to make citizens economically self-reliant by increasing their labour market participation (van Berkel & Borghi, 2008). Activation of the jobless can take place through two distinct approaches. Enabling ALMPs focus on investments in human capital and hence the employability

of the jobless, whereas demanding ALMPs emphasize coercive elements, such as benefit cuts, obligatory training programs, and sanctions for non-compliance with obligations (Bruttel & Sol, 2006; Daguerre, 2004; Dingeldey, 2007; Eichhorst et al., 2008; Seikel & Spannagel, 2018).

Despite cross-national variations in the use of specific policy instruments, especially the demanding variant of ALMPs have been implemented across European countries (Dingeldey, 2007; Knotz, 2018). These policies are embedded in a specific policy paradigm, that is, an interpretive framework consisting of a set of ideas about the organizing principles behind policies as well as about the nature and causes of the problems they address (Béland, 2005, 2016; Daguerre, 2007; Daigneault, 2014; Hall, 1993). The broader policy paradigm of demanding activation emphasizes paid work and individual accountability (Daguerre, 2007). The two constituting elements are (1) a shift in the balance between universality and conditionality, and (2) a transformation from state to individual responsibility.

Concerning the trade-off between universality and conditionality, the activation turn implies a renewed focus on selective distribution that aims to cut unemployment benefits, or at least match welfare rights with obligations (Seikel & Spannagel, 2018). Demanding ALMPs reinsert the market principle into government policy and promote a re-commodification of labour (Boland, 2016, p. 335). This approach ends the 'something for nothing' welfare state era and calls for welfare distribution only to those recipients that are willing to work (Béland & Cox, 2016; Daguerre, 2004, 2007, p. 12). Although elements of equity, in the form of earnings-related benefits for instance, and of need were already a part of various welfare state structures before the activation turn (Korpi & Palme, 1998; Sachweh, 2016), it does imply a new approach towards reciprocal and residual forms of welfare, especially in relation to unemployment. While the principle of equity for instance has mainly been implemented to achieve status maintenance for those being exposed to job loss, the activation turn alters the organizing policy principles by shifting towards reciprocal or residual forms of unemployment benefits that offer a productivist, neoliberal, and recommodifying interpretation of welfare.

With regard to the responsibility of state vs. individual, the paradigm of demanding activation entails a transformed outlook on the very nature and causes of social risks. The activation turn emphasizes individual responsibility and labels welfare dependency as a 'personal failing' (Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018). Demanding ALMPs strongly problematize the presumed overuse of welfare benefits by attributing poverty and unemployment to individual characteristics, such as a poor work ethic (Daguerre, 2007; Fossati, 2018).

Both of these principles and the 'activation turn' imply a renewed way of understanding social and labour market policies, especially in welfare states based on social insurance or universalist logic. While 'old' and traditional policies focused on compensation, passive transfers, and employment protection, these 'new' policies are oriented at activation, individualized employability, and need-based protection (Häusermann, 2012). This is especially evident in Belgium, the case we study, where unemployment schemes have strongly relied on inclusion, unrestricted access in time, and collective representation (De Deken, 2011). Despite being a welfare state that is built on a social insurance logic and hence the principle of equity, Belgian traditional unemployment policy is based on ideas of equality and external reasons of unemployment. In contrast, ALMPs turn towards equity, need and individualized causes of welfare dependency.

Given this innovative paradigmatic background of demanding ALMPs, this article hypothesizes that people's support for these policies is a function of these specific ideological dispositions. Although these pillars of the policy paradigm are hence conceptualized as ideological beliefs, they occur on a lower level of abstraction that is particularly applicable to the specific context of activation. This answers the call to interpret ideology on a lower level of abstraction than conventional left-right measurements (Bauer et al., 2017), which is also more useful to get to the core of welfare debates (cf., Jo, 2011). In this sense, individuals' preferences for distributive justice principles as well as the causes to which they attribute unemployment, are crucial ideological factors shaping support for demanding forms of activation. Yet, these key dimensions of the activation paradigm have been largely overlooked and it hence remains unclear to what extent this programmatic discourse structures policy preferences towards ALMPs (cf., Deeming, 2015). Instead of building only on classical left-right divides, the activation debate resolves around how to increase labour market participation and distinguish deserving from underserving groups (Deeming, 2015; Gingrich & Häusermann, 2015). Empirical studies have shown that ALMPs are equally being pursued by left-wing parties, albeit often in distinct forms, and that the political space is restructured around these issues (Cronert, 2020; Deeming, 2015; Häusermann, 2012; Maron & Helman, 2017). Indeed, the conflict is not only between left and right parties but between political parties that embrace or reject these new ideas on which the activation discourse is built (Häusermann, 2012). As a result, to understand the conflicts that are at the forefront of the activation debate, we should concentrate on the more specific ideas connected to the underlying policy paradigm.

## Balancing the rights and obligations of the unemployed: The role of distributive justice

Considerations of distributive justice are not only central to the question how social rights and obligations should be balanced, but these principles are also a defining element of policy paradigms (Daguerre, 2007; Daigneault, 2014; Dingeldey, 2007; Romano, 2018). Distributive justice literature generally distinguishes three principles that refer to distinct ways of allocating benefits and services. First, the equality principle (of outcomes) distributes equally to all citizens, irrespective of supplementary criteria. Second, the equity principle makes distribution conditional on past contributions, which implies that benefits are in proportion to previously paid taxes, welfare contributions, and labour market participation. Last, the need principle encompasses a selective model of distribution oriented only towards citizens who are highest in need, which aims to merely provide enough resources to cover basic needs.

The activation turn implies a shift from more equal and universal unemployment benefit distributions to more conditional (cf., equity) or selective (cf., need) welfare provision, boiling down to a fundamental alteration of the underlying conceptions of distributive justice (Buchanan, 1990; Ervik et al., 2015). Demanding ALMPs are rooted in the idea of 'justice as reciprocity', which legitimizes a new type of conditional contract between citizens and the welfare state (Béland & Cox, 2016; Buchanan, 1990; Daguerre, 2004; Dingeldey, 2007; Ervik et al., 2015). This reciprocity-based approach to social rights and quid-pro-quo welfare model is constructed on the logic of equity (Clasen & van Oorschot, 2002). Because equity constitutes a core component of the ideological paradigm of the activation turn, support for demanding activation is anticipated to be especially strong among individuals who endorse the principle of equity. Empirically, this thesis is supported by recent findings (Gielens et al., 2019; Laenen & Meuleman, 2019), where a positive relationship is reported between support for the deservingness criterion of reciprocity and the justification of stricter welfare conditionality. As a result, the first hypothesis expects that support for the principle of equity rather than equality will be related to higher support for demanding ALMPs (Hypothesis 1).

**Hypothesis 1.** Individuals who prefer the principle of equity over equality will express more support for demanding ALMPs.

Besides equity, also the principle of need is closely intertwined with the activation discourse that stresses the importance of returning to forms of informal solidarity and of prioritizing individual rather than governmental responsibility to tackle unemployment risk (Eichhorst et al., 2008; Fossati, 2018; Romano, 2018). The principle of need similarly relies on the notion of self-reliance in the provision of a sufficient living standard (Clasen & van Oorschot, 2002). Moreover, ALMPs aim to cut welfare benefits by increasingly differentiating between deserving and undeserving recipients, of which the former are given access to benefits while the latter are punished for their prolonged neediness (Dwyer, 2000; Romano, 2018). This policy orientation is in line with a need-based distribution that implies more selective and residual welfare state provision (Clasen & van Oorschot, 2002). Consequently, demanding ALMPs are likely to appeal to individuals in favour of need-based allocation of benefits (cf., Gielens et al., 2019). This leads to the formulation of the second hypothesis: Individuals who prefer the principle of need over equality will express more support for demanding ALMPs (Hypothesis 2).

**Hypothesis 2.** Individuals who prefer the principle of need over equality will express more support for demanding ALMPs.

Contrary to equity or need, the principle of equality disregards selective requirements for access to welfare and emphasizes unconditionality. This principle contrasts with ALMPs that are grafted onto a radical departure from universal and unconditional rights in unemployment (Clasen & van Oorschot, 2002; Hibbert, 2007). Making access to a welfare dependent on strict behavioural requirements conflicts with a conception of rights as being absolute and universal (Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018). As a result, a preference for equality-based distribution might co-occur with less support for demanding activation. Those favouring egalitarian distributions prioritize rights to welfare over work obligations, as the latter are affecting the principle of social equality itself (Houtman, 1997).

## Blaming the unemployed? The role of unemployment attributions

According to the activation paradigm, control and individual responsibility are essential criteria to differentiate between categories of benefit claimants (Daguerre, 2007; Dwyer, 2000; Romano, 2018). Since a



policy paradigm not only defines policy goals but also incorporates worldviews that define the very nature and causes of social problems (Daigneault, 2014; Hall, 1993, p. 279), individuals' beliefs regarding the main causes of unemployment may reinforce or temper support for demanding ALMPs. While this in part overlaps with deservingness perceptions on which groups are deserving of welfare state support (especially with the criterion of control), unemployment attributions refer to perceived causes of dependency on which demanding activation is built. In this way, the unemployment attributions do not merely deal with the question of who is deserving of support, but with the more fundamental question of why they need support in the first place.

Based on the literature on attributions of poverty (Feagin, 1972; Lepianka et al., 2009; van Oorschot & Halman, 2000), individuals' explanations of why a person falls into unemployment can be articulated alongside two axes: (1) the individual-social axis, referring to the question whether factors internal or external to the individual cause the condition of unemployment; and (2) the blame-fate axis, attributing unemployment to either controllable versus inevitable events. Combining both axes yields four types of unemployment attributions: Individual blame, individual fate, social blame, and social fate (van Oorschot & Halman, 2000). While the individual blame type attributes unemployment to the laziness and the unwillingness of the unemployed to find a job, individual fate conceives unemployment as personal misfortune. The social blame type finds the cause of unemployment in social injustice and structural social exclusion. Attributions to social fate indicate that unemployment is believed to be caused by unavoidable and uncontrollable societal processes (cf., Lepianka et al., 2009; van Oorschot & Halman, 2000).

According to the paradigm underlying the punitive approach to activation, individual failings and a weak work ethic are the main causes of unemployment (Boland, 2016; Daguerre, 2007), and sanctions and benefit cuts are seen as effective means to force passive welfare dependents back into employment (Dwyer, 2000). Support for demanding ALMPs can thus be understood in terms of a hardening of attitudes towards the unemployed that attributes unemployment to a lack of responsibility and moral hazard (Fossati, 2018). This argument fits with empirical research evidencing that unemployed persons are seen as less deserving when they are believed to be responsible for their own neediness. This higher perceived control and lower deservingness in turn reflect

in higher support for the introduction of benefit obligations (Roosma & Jeene, 2017). The third hypothesis hence expects that blaming unemployment on the individual rather than attributing it to social blame or social fate will be associated with more support for demanding ALMPs (Hypothesis 3).

**Hypothesis 3.** Individuals who blame unemployment on the individual rather than attributing it to social blame or social fate will express more support for demanding ALMPs

Although especially individual blame attribution is expected to incite support for demanding activation, emphasizing individual fate might also go hand in hand with heightened support for work obligations. ALMPs are closely linked to a general shift towards individualism (Ervik & Kildal, 2015), as they assume that individuals are able to actively take up their personal responsibility by re-entering the labour market (Bonvin, 2008). Even though the individual fate type does not blame the unemployed, solutions are still sought in the realm of the individual. As a result, the fourth and last hypothesis is formulated as follows: Those who ascribe unemployment to individual fate will have a stronger preference for demanding activation compared to people who attribute it to social fate or blame, but the difference will be smaller than for individual blame (Hypothesis 4).

**Hypothesis 4.** Individuals who ascribe unemployment to individual fate rather than attributing it to social blame or social fate will express more support for demanding ALMPs.

Attributing unemployment to a lack of jobs (social blame) or to social transformations (social fate) is contrarily harder to reconcile with a preference for demanding ALMPs. Emphasizing high unemployment rates or the insufficient availability of jobs decreases victim-blaming and leads to a higher perceived deservingness of the unemployed (Van Oorschot & Meuleman, 2014). This might in turn reflect in stronger sympathy with the main target group of ALMPs and lower support for welfare conditionality (Dwyer, 2000). Similarly, when risks are considered to be 'an accident of fate', the take-up of collective responsibility tends to be strong (Giddens, 1999), which is in contrast to the turn towards individual responsibility in the activation paradigm (Bonvin, 2008; Ervik & Kildal, 2015). Furthermore, external attribution lowers the legitimacy of inequalities (cf., Schneider & Castillo, 2015) and thus

weakens the legitimacy of policies that imply a turn away from equality.

### **Conventional explanatory mechanisms: Self-interest and political ideology**

Instead of concentrating on the ideological components of the policy paradigm, existing empirical research on support for ALMPs has focused on the role of two theoretical frames that are traditionally argued to shape welfare state attitudes: Self-interest and political ideology (Achterberg et al., 2014; Fossati, 2018; Kootstra & Roosma, 2018). First, self-interest theory postulates that demanding ALMPs are opposed by disadvantaged individuals in precarious economic situations, who are generally beneficiaries of unemployment benefits (Buss, 2019; Fossati, 2018). Following a rational-choice logic that is based on cost–benefit calculations, actual or potential welfare beneficiaries might thus be more negative towards ALMPs that potentially limit benefit access or levels (Achterberg et al., 2014; Carriero & Filandri, 2018; Kootstra & Roosma, 2018). The explanatory framework of ideology, in contrast, assumes that welfare preferences are especially structured by broader values, ideas, and norms. In line with this theory, right-wing-oriented individuals with strong authoritarian values and economically liberal beliefs are found to be more supportive of demanding ALMPs (Fossati, 2018; Kootstra & Roosma, 2018; Laenen & Meuleman, 2019; Roosma & Jeene, 2017). The multidimensionality of ideology is important to consider, as issues related to deservingness, including activation debates, could be increasingly connected to cultural issues instead of only to economic conflicts (Häusermann & Kriesi, 2015).

These traditional ideological beliefs cannot be overlooked in the analysis of support for demanding ALMPs. However, these ideologies are so encompassing and abstract that they struggle to grasp the politicization and ideological contestation specific to the activation debate. This is especially true because discussions on activation mainly resolve around issues of reciprocity as well as the responsibility of benefit claimants, instead of solely being centred around traditional themes and distributive conflicts that characterize the political divide between left and right (Deeming, 2015; Häusermann, 2012; Maron & Helman, 2017). As the ideological pillars of the activation paradigm are likely to be associated with the conventional more abstract ideological dispositions, the analysis of this article will take these traditional mechanisms into account to test the unique role of the pillars of the activation paradigm.

## **DATA AND METHOD**

### **Data and context**

Data of the Belgian National Election Study 2014, collected among Belgians who are eligible to vote, is analysed. The National Register functioned as the sampling frame and two-stage random probability sampling was used. Respondents were interviewed through Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing, which resulted in a sample of 1901 individuals (response rate: 47.5%) was realized. Post-stratification weights on the basis of age, gender, and education are applied.

Despite some peculiarities of its unemployment benefit system, Belgium is a well-suited context to examine support for demanding ALMPs. After a long period of reluctance and fragmented policy momentum (Hemerijck & van Kersbergen, 2019), activation measures have been especially implemented since 2004 with a strong boost from 2012 onwards (van Lancker et al., 2015). If we would find that attitudes towards demanding policies are anchored in the pillars of the activation paradigm even in Belgium, a country characterized as a conservative welfare state regime with a rather recent history in activation policies, this might suggest that the link might be even stronger in countries with a longer tradition of activation policies. However, simultaneously, the data was collected just after the federal and regional elections of 2014 where ALMPs constituted a controversial and important issue, which might have increased the saliency of the activation paradigm. In this sense, the timing of the data collection is ideal to pick up whether these elements of the activation paradigm are internalized by the general public as well.

### **Indicators**

#### **Dependent variable**

Support for demanding ALMPs is operationalized by six Likert-type items (five-point disagree–agree answer scale). These items inquire whether respondents endorse the following series of demanding measures: limiting unemployment benefits to 2 years, imposing obligations to accept any job or to enrol in re-education programs, implementing stricter government control on job-seeking behaviour and harsher punishment if duties are not performed, and obliging people with a minimum income to do community work. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) is conducted to test whether these items measure a single latent construct. An inspection of the modification indices illustrates that an error correlation between the items on stricter government control on job-seeking

**TABLE 1** Factor loadings, questions wordings and percentages of respondents agreeing for each item of demanding active labour market policies ( $N = 1900$ ).

Question wording	% (completely) agree	Factor loadings
Q114_1—Unemployment benefits should be limited to a maximum of 2 years.	45.2	0.555
Q114_2—People with a minimum income should be obliged to do community work.	70.4	0.666
Q114_3—Long-term unemployed should be obliged to accept any job, even if they earn much less than before by doing so.	64.0	0.704
Q114_5—Long-term unemployed should be obliged to re-educate themselves, otherwise they lose their social benefits.	73.8	0.522
Q115_2—The government should control more strictly whether the unemployed sufficiently apply for jobs.	80.3	0.579
Q115_3—Social benefit beneficiaries who do not perform their duties should be punished more harshly.	71.2	0.565
Error correlation between Q115_2 and Q115_3	0.329	

Note: Fit indices of the measurement model for support for demanding ALMPs:  $\chi^2 = 12.731$ ;  $df = 8$ ; CFI = 0.997; TLI = 0.994; RMSEA = 0.018; SRMR = 0.013.

activities and harsher punishment ( $r = 0.33$ ) should be added, which can be explained by the fact that both items refer to the punitive strictness of government. Table 1 displays the percentages of respondents agreeing, the factor loadings and the question wordings for each of the six items. The measurement model shows adequate fit and all items load strongly on the joint latent construct, which testifies to the measurement quality of our scale.

## Independent variables

Distributive justice preferences are operationalized by a question gauging directly how government should organize the allocation of unemployment benefits. The answer categories (see Table 2) refer to preferences for the principles of equality, equity, or need. Originally

**TABLE 2** Wording and percentage of respondents opting for each answer category of unemployment attributions and distributive justice preferences.

Wording	Category	% of respondents
<i>Distributive justice</i>		
A reasonable benefit for all the unemployed, which is equal for everyone	Equality	52.2
A higher unemployment benefit for people who have earned and contributed more	Equity	29.0
A minimal unemployment benefit for the unemployed who are in real need	Need	18.8
<i>Unemployment attributions</i>		
Because they do not try hard enough to find a job	Individual blame	30.0
Because they have bad luck and misfortune in their lives	Individual fate	10.8
Because there is a lack of available jobs	Social blame	35.6
Because, in a modern society, this is simply unavoidable	Social fate	23.7

there was also a fourth answer category, which stated that the government should not provide unemployment benefits. However, this is set as a missing value due to a very small proportion of respondents (0.8%) opting for this answer. In addition, the 'don't know' or 'no answer' option was only chosen by 24 respondents, indicating that most people express a preference for one of the three-justice principles. This measure applies the justice principles to unemployment benefits, which is important as justice preferences can be contingent on the welfare domain (Van Hoetegem et al., 2020). Unemployment attributions are measured by asking respondents what they think the most important reason is that people in our society are unemployed (cf., van Oorschot & Halman, 2000). The answer categories refer to attributions of individual blame, individual fate, social blame or social fate. Table 2 displays the wordings of the answer categories for the distributive justice as well as the unemployment attribution item.

Besides these two dimensions related to the policy paradigm, measurements of ideology are also incorporated that reflect the distinction between economic and cultural leanings. However, first as a general measurement of ideology, political left–right placement is included, which is captured by an 11-point scale (0 = left to 10 = right). Second, authoritarianism, which represents the cultural

dimension, is operationalized by three items mentioning that obedience and respect for authority are important virtues, that laws should become stricter, and that problems can be solved by getting rid of immoral people. Third, economic liberalism is included as an economic dimension of ideology. This is measured by two items that probe whether the government should regulate the market and whether businesses should get more freedom. A CFA model with both scales simultaneously included shows good fit and yields sufficiently large factor loadings (see Table A1 in Appendix for question wordings, factor loadings, fit indices, and percentages of respondents agreeing with each item). These findings evidence the reliability and validity of the authoritarianism and economic liberalism scales. Tables A2–A5 in Appendix show the interrelations between all ideological measurements (including distributive justice preferences and unemployment attributions). It demonstrates that they are evidently interrelated, but rather weakly overlapping (see for instance *R*-squared in Tables A4, A5) and hence far from raising issues of multicollinearity.

The social structural position of individuals is operationalized by their occupational class, income, education, welfare dependency and current unemployment status. Occupational class is divided into five categories on the basis of the Erikson–Goldthrope–Portocarero class scheme (Ganzeboom & Treiman, 1996): service class, blue-collar workers (reference category), white collar workers, the self-employed and the inactive (including students). It is constructed so that pensioners or those who are currently unemployed still get divided into a group based on the previous occupation, which means that the inactive are only those who have never worked. Net equalized household income is used to measure income, which is divided into four quartiles. A missing category for income is added to limit the number of deleted cases due to non-response on this sensitive item. The measurement of education is based on three groups: lower (secondary) education, higher secondary education (reference category), and tertiary education. Welfare dependency is operationalized by self-reported reciprocity of a welfare benefit in their household (such as income support, an unemployment benefit, or a work disability allowance) in the last 2 years. This captures previous dependency and not only the current status, which also is registered for the household as a whole and covers benefits beyond unemployment. As a result, the model also includes a dummy to indicate whether someone is currently personally unemployed. A dummy that measures whether someone is a union member is also included, as this has been shown to influence support for ALMPs (Fossati, 2018). As controls, gender, age, and region (Flanders vs. Francophone Belgium) are

included. The descriptive statistics for all of these independent variables are displayed in Table A6 in Appendix.

## Statistical modeling

To analyse support for demanding ALMPs, we employ SEM, which allows us to assess structural pathways between constructs, while taking random measurement error into account through the use of latent variables. Three stepwise models were estimated: (1) A model only including social structural and control variables; (2) A model adding distributive justice preferences and unemployment attributions; and (3) A model adding the ideological predictors. The fit indices of the final explanation model ( $\chi^2 = 621.209$ ;  $df = 216$ ;  $CFI = 0.914$ ;  $TLI = 0.882$ ;  $RMSEA = 0.031$ ;  $SRMR = 0.023$ ) illustrate that the model fits the data adequately (despite a slightly too low TLI, which is due to model complexity). Mplus version 8.2 was used as the statistical software to conduct the analyses (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). To deal with the limited amount of item non-response, the analysis uses full information maximum likelihood estimation (meaning that only cases with a missing on all items for the dependent variable or a missing on one of the exogenous variables are excluded from the model). The estimates of the parameters are standardized in relation to both the dependent variable and the continuous explanatory variables. The coefficients for the dummy variables are not standardized with regard to the independent variable so these parameters indicate how many standard deviations a particular group differs from the reference category.

## RESULTS

### Descriptive overview

Before discussing the results of the SEM, this article provides a descriptive overview of support for demanding ALMPs, distributive justice preferences, and unemployment attributions. The proportions of respondents agreeing with each item, as displayed in Table 1, reveal that there is a strong degree of public support for demanding activation measures (see also: Carriero & Filandri, 2018; Houtman, 1997; Kootstra & Roosma, 2018). Although agreement is slightly lower for limiting unemployment benefits over time, the other demanding ALMPs measures are supported by half to more than two-thirds of the respondents. Apparently, welfare conditionality towards the unemployed is largely accepted among the respondents in our sample. However, the percentages should be interpreted with caution, as the wording of our items and



the lack of a balanced scale could to some extent steer the proportions agreeing with these items.

The percentages of respondents opting for each category of distributive justice and unemployment attributions are displayed in Table 2. The majority of respondents prefer the equality principle for the allocation of unemployment benefits. The strong support for the principle of equality as well as for demanding ALMPs indicates that rights and obligations for the unemployed are overall both strongly supported, which is in line with previous findings (Houtman, 1997). The other two social justice principles are also preferred by a substantial proportion of respondents. While 29% prefers to distribute benefits in accordance with past contributions, about one fifth of the sample prefers a residual and selective benefit scheme that is solely targeted at those who are most in need. With regard to the unemployment attributions, most respondents identify a general lack of jobs (social blame) as the main cause of unemployment. About a third of the respondents attribute unemployment to individual blame, which illustrates that a relatively large proportion believes that unemployment is caused by being lazy or lacking willpower. The two fate attributions are least popular. These descriptive statistics show considerable variation in the ideological outlooks of the respondents: each of the categories of distributive justice preferences and unemployment attributions is preferred by a considerable proportion of respondents. As support for demanding ALMPs is considerably higher than the popularity of each of the principles of its underlying paradigm, individuals will most likely also favour these policies for other reasons than pure adherence to its underlying ideological principles. Nevertheless, justice preferences and unemployment attributions could be crucial components to, especially ideologically, explain support for demanding ALMPs, which is tested in detail in the next section.

## Determinants of support for demanding activation

Table 3 displays the regression coefficients of the three models. The first model, conform to previous findings (Fossati, 2018; Laenen & Meuleman, 2019), indicates that structural characteristics are significantly related to support for demanding ALMPs. Some results are as predicted by self-interest theory. Persons in higher income quartiles score higher on public support for ALMPs than those in the lowest quartile, which is in line with their more limited interest in unconditional welfare provisions. The lower support of individuals living in Wallonia might be interpreted as a self-interest effect as well, as

unemployment rates are higher among in this region of Belgium (International Monetary Fund, 2019). In addition, the coefficients for unemployment and welfare dependency show that the unemployed and benefit recipients score much lower on support for demanding ALMPs than the employed and those not receiving benefits. Union members are also significantly less in favour of demanding ALMPs, which might be because of their higher sensitivity towards unemployment issues (Fossati, 2018). However, the effects of other social structural predictors are insignificant or have a sign that contradicts self-interest theory. The higher support among women and the lowest support of individuals belonging to the service class, for instance, seems to run counter to what is assumed to be their welfare interest. The finding that those with tertiary education, the service class, and white collar workers are less in favour of ALMPs also indicates that not all groups who experience less risk exposure are more inclined to support benefit cuts or sanctions. Clearly, social structural predictors that reflect self-interest cannot fully explain how support for demanding ALMPs takes shape.

The second model, most importantly, confirms that the two dimensions behind the policy paradigm—namely distributive justice preferences and unemployment attributions—are essential antecedents of support for demanding ALMPs on top of social positions. First, support for demanding ALMPs is 0.28 standard deviations higher among those preferring equity compared to individuals selecting equality as the preferred principle, which is a substantial difference. This illustrates that support for ALMPs is significantly and substantially stronger among individuals who prefer equity-based instead of equality-based distribution (Hypothesis 1), confirming that the principle of equity is a key element in the reciprocal philosophy behind the activation paradigm (Buchanan, 1990; Clasen & van Oorschot, 2002; Ervik et al., 2015; Houtman, 1997). Moreover, also respondents who prefer the need principle favour demanding ALMPs more strongly than those who prefer equality-based distribution (thus confirming Hypothesis 2). The effect parameter for need is considerably and significantly larger than the one for the principle of equity ( $b = 0.28$  vs.  $b = 0.55$ ;  $p$ -value difference test = 0.00). This demonstrates that besides attracting support from those who desire a conditional welfare contract, ALMPs gain also support among those who prefer selective distributions, means-tested policies, and welfare cuts (Clasen & van Oorschot, 2002). This illustrates that support for demanding ALMPs also has roots in beliefs that the undeserving unemployed should be self-reliant (Romano, 2018). In this sense, they receive support across multiple distributive justice segments of the population.

**TABLE 3** Stepwise structural equation models predicting support for demanding active labour market policies ( $N = 1901$ ).

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
<i>Gender</i>			
Woman (ref.)			
Man	-0.133*	-0.139**	-0.062
Age	0.007	0.038	-0.084**
<i>Education</i>			
Lower (secondary)	0.011	-0.009	-0.073
Higher secondary (ref.)			
Tertiary	-0.174**	-0.104	0.115
<i>Income</i>			
Quartile 1 (ref.)			
Quartile 2	0.217**	0.187*	0.127
Quartile 3	0.383***	0.328***	0.342***
Quartile 4	0.309***	0.211***	0.337***
Missing	0.290**	0.174	0.252*
<i>Occupation</i>			
Blue collar (ref.)			
Service class	-0.407***	-0.416***	-0.202**
White collar	-0.165*	-0.164*	-0.036
Self-employed	0.233*	0.153	0.113
Inactive	-0.352**	-0.256**	-0.106
<i>Welfare dependency</i>			
No benefit (ref.)			
Benefit	-0.356***	-0.307***	-0.290
<i>Unemployed</i>			
No (ref.)			
Yes	-0.748***	-0.665***	-0.569***
<i>Union membership</i>			
Not member (ref.)			
Member	-0.220***	-0.173**	-0.188**
<i>Region</i>			
French region (ref.)			
Flanders	0.175**	0.126*	0.269***
<i>Distributive justice in unemployment</i>			
Equity		0.282***	0.225***
Need		0.551***	0.368***
Equality (ref.)			
<i>Unemployment attributions</i>			
Individual blame		0.542***	0.375***
Individual fate		-0.036	-0.046

(Continues)

**TABLE 3** (Continued)

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Social blame		-0.116	-0.124
Social fate (ref.)			
Left-right placement			0.115***
Authoritarianism			0.467***
Economic liberalism			0.004
$R^2$	0.193	0.342	0.491

Note: Fit model 1:  $\chi^2 = 257.998$ ;  $df = 88$ ; CFI = 0.932; TLI = 0.914; RMSEA = 0.032; SRMR = 0.033. Fit model 2:  $\chi^2 = 315.027$ ;  $df = 113$ ; CFI = 0.926; TLI = 0.908; RMSEA = 0.031; SRMR = 0.033. Fit model 3:  $\chi^2 = 621.209$ ;  $df = 216$ ; CFI = 0.914; TLI = 0.882; RMSEA = 0.031; SRMR = 0.023.

\* $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\* $p \leq 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p \leq 0.001$ .

In addition, the results indicate that welfare conditionality relates to public images of the unemployed. Conform to Hypothesis 3, individual blame attribution significantly reinforces preferences for demanding activation: Respondents who see laziness or a lack of motivation as the primary cause of unemployment are more likely to support ALMPs, confirming its close connection with moralizing unemployment and welfare sanctioning as measures to combat laziness and structural dependency (Dwyer, 2000; Fossati, 2018). The parameter is substantial in strength, as those who blame the unemployed score 0.54 standard deviations higher on support for ALMPs than those attributing it to social fate. Contrary to Hypothesis 4, however, respondents who attribute unemployment to the misfortune of individuals (individual fate) do not support ALMPs more than individuals who see social fate or social blame as its primary cause. Individual unemployment attributions thus only induce support for demanding activation when combined with a blaming perspective. Additionally, the social blame and social fate attributions do not differ significantly and connect to relatively low support for ALMPs. When introducing distributive justice preferences and unemployment attributions, 15% extra variance is explained<sup>1</sup> ( $R^2$  model 1 = 0.19;  $R^2$  model 2 = 0.34), pointing to the explanatory importance of these elements of the policy paradigm behind demanding ALMPs. The social structural predictors appear to largely remain intact, although their strength decreases slightly and the educational gradient becomes insignificant.

<sup>1</sup>When adding distributive justice preferences and unemployment attributions to a model that already includes the more abstract conventional ideological predictors, they explain an additional 7%. This unique contribution on top of the other ideological and social structural predictors is substantial.

Last, the third model uncovers that two out of three ideological predictors have a significant net effect. Right-wing individuals are more likely being more supportive of demanding ALMPs. This could be due to their more conditional interpretation of solidarity (van Oorschot, 2006), although it remains largely unclear what this relation with highly generic left–right placement exactly encompasses. Moreover, the coefficient is moderate to rather weak in size ( $b = 0.12$ ), indicating that left–right conflicts are not the most decisive determinant of public opinions on demanding ALMPs. Authoritarianism nevertheless has a very strong impact, with a standardized coefficient of 0.47. Individuals with an authoritarian worldview, representing the cultural dimension of ideology, are more in favour of ALMPs as they support sanctioning underserving individuals. However, economic liberalism, measuring the economic dimension of ideology, does not have a significant influence. All in all, these ideological predictors explain an additional 15% of the variance in support for demanding ALMPs.

These results indicate that left–right conflicts are moderately related to activation discussions, while cultural beliefs do have a profound impact net of the particular ideological pillars of the policy paradigm. Yet, distributive justice preferences and unemployment attributions still have a significant influence, despite a slight reduction in parameter size when these ideological beliefs are introduced. This demonstrates that they offer an important additional insight into what may explain support for demanding ALMPs beyond traditional ideological conflicts. Some structural predictors become insignificant in the third model, as the significant coefficients for gender, welfare dependency, and white-collar workers disappear. This suggests that the different views of certain social groups can be partly explained by their distinct ideological beliefs.

## CONCLUSION

This article expands previous research on public support for demanding ALMPs by scrutinizing the ideological basis of activation support. Instead of focusing exclusively on generic, often-used predictors to explain social policy attitudes—self-interest indicators and general left–right ideology—two pillars of the policy paradigm of demanding activation are crucial to understanding its legitimacy: Distributive justice and unemployment attributions. These frameworks inherently connect to the shift in the balance between universality and conditionality and in the responsibility from the state to the individual in the provision of unemployment benefits.

The results indicate that support for the forced reintegration of the jobless in the labour market is

related to preferences regarding distributive justice and views on the primary causes of unemployment. A preference for equal distribution is linked to reduced support for demanding ALMPs, while a preference for the need- or equity-based distribution brings about higher support. The relationship to the principle of need is even stronger than that of equity, which indicates that a focus on self-help, individual responsibility and minimal welfare distribution are important elements in the justification of the sanctioning of undeserving benefit claimants. Moreover, attitudes towards demanding policies are shown to be strongly connected to the idea that the unemployed are to blame personally for their neediness. Among persons attributing unemployment to individual fate, social fate or social blame, support for demanding ALMPs is considerably lower. The representation of a moral hazard as the primary cause of unemployment is not only a key component of the activation paradigm but also a constituent element of its public support (Fossati, 2018).

Although other reasons also occur for people to support demanding ALMPs, as for instance to some extent self-interest, these findings evidence that the ideological paradigms on which social policies are grounded (Béland, 2005, 2016; Cox, 1998; Daigneault, 2014; Hall, 1993) are important to understand their legitimacy and support base. As evidenced in the descriptive statistics, the support base for activation is even broader than the support basis of the strict policy paradigm. But this does not prevent us from concluding that the policy paradigm is a core ideological starting ground from which support for activation is generated. Instead, it could operate in addition to other mechanisms, which could also explain part of its support.

Claims about causality can nevertheless not be made here, as it is well possible that policymakers appeal to already existing sentiments and feedback effects between institutions and public opinions might exist (Kumlin & Stadelmann-Steffen, 2014). Despite the inability to disentangle the link between policy paradigms and public sentiments, it seems most likely that interpretation effects are at play, whereby policies and political discourses—that is, the demanding activation paradigm—provide the public with ways to interpret the goals and problems of unemployment policies (Pierson, 1993). Indeed, we assume that ideological positions are shaped by policy paradigms and can change throughout interpretations and interactions with the government and policies (Kumlin, 2006). Yet, despite the uncertainty around the mechanisms at play, the results convincingly indicate that policy paradigms are crystalized in the ideological roots of policy support.

The strong connection of support for activation with the principle of need and individual blaming has important implications. As the principle of need justifies the replacement of universal and reciprocal welfare policies with means-tested programs, support for demanding ALMPs seems to be linked to the adherence to a liberal view on the welfare state (Clasen & van Oorschot, 2002). This indicates that the public might not consider demanding ALMPs to be complementary to more universal schemes, but rather as a way of replacing them. In addition, as attributions evoke and reinforce stereotypes about target groups, ALMPs are embedded in stereotypical images of the unemployed as being lazy and dependent. The reliance of both support for ALMPs and the activation paradigm itself (Daguerre, 2007) on these stereotypes may have important repercussions, as policies can restrict the opportunities and resources of stigmatized groups, and worsen stigma-related problems (Link & Hatzenbuehler, 2016).

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#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

#### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

#### ETHICS STATEMENT

The collection of the data was approved by the relevant ethical board.

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## APPENDIX A

TABLE A1 Question wordings, standardized factor loadings and agreement for authoritarianism and economic liberalism ( $N = 1899$ ).

	<b>Authoritar.</b>	<b>Economic liberalism</b>	
	Factor loading	Factor loading	% (completely) agree
Q64_4—Most of our social problems would be solved if we could somehow get rid of the immoral, crooked people.	0.457		66.0
Q64_5—Obedience and respect for authority are the two most important virtues children have to learn.	0.692		75.6
Q64_6—Laws should become stricter because too much freedom is not good for people.	0.656		35.3
Q88_1—Society would be better off if the government intervenes less in the market		0.733	28.3
Q88_4—Businesses should get more freedom. Therefore, regulations for businesses should be reduced.		0.528	24.9
Correlation	0.272		

Note:  $\chi^2 = 9.148$ ;  $df = 4$ ; CFI = 0.995; TLI = 0.988; RMSEA = 0.026; SRMR = 0.013.

TABLE A2 Descriptive statics for the analytical sample.

<b>Column1</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard deviation</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Max</b>
<i>Gender</i>				
Woman (ref.)				
Man	0.485	0.5	0	1
Age	48.956	18.158	18	93
<i>Education</i>				
Lower (secondary)	0.365	0.482	0	1
Higher secondary (ref.)				
Tertiary	0.303	0.459	0	1
<i>Income</i>				
Quartile 1 (ref.)				
Quartile 2	0.222	0.416	0	1
Quartile 3	0.233	0.423	0	1
Quartile 4	0.185	0.389	0	1
Missing	0.109	0.311	0	1
<i>Occupation</i>				
Blue collar (ref.)				
Service class	0.241	0.428	0	1
White collar	0.200	0.400	0	1
Self-employed	0.101	0.302	0	1
Inactive	0.127	0.333	0	1
<i>Welfare dependency</i>				
No benefit (ref.)				
Benefit	0.278	0.448	0	1

(Continues)

TABLE A2 (Continued)

Column1	Mean	Standard deviation	Min	Max
<i>Unemployed</i>				
No (ref.)				
Yes	0.052	0.221	0	1
<i>Union membership</i>				
Not member (ref.)				
Member	0.397	0.489	0	1
<i>Region</i>				
French region (ref.)				
Flanders	0.583	0.493	0	1
Left-right placement	5.082	2.122	0	10

TABLE A3 Cross-tabulation of distributive Justice preferences versus unemployment attributions (percentages–row percentages–column percentages).

	Individual fate	Individual blame	Social blame	Social fate	Total
Need	1.8	8.3	5.3	3.3	
	9.5	44.5	28.3	17.6	
	16.0	28.2	15.0	13.7	18.7
Equity	2.3	9.2	10.0	7.4	
	8.1	31.9	34.5	25.5	
	20.9	31.1	28.2	30.6	28.8
Equality	7.0	12.1	20.1	13.4	
	13.4	23.0	38.2	25.4	
	63.1	40.8	56.8	55.6	52.5
Total	11.1	29.6	35.3	24.0	

Note: Chi-square: 65.52; df = 6;  $p < 0.0001$ .

TABLE A4 Correlations between left-right position, neoliberalism, and authoritarianism.

	Left-right position	Neoliberalism	Authoritarianism
Left-right position	1.00	0.20***	0.10***
Neoliberalism		1.00	0.17***
Authoritarianism			1.00

TABLE A5 Means of left-right position, neoliberalism and authoritarianism per category of unemployment attributions.

	Ind. Fate	Ind. Blame	Social blame	Social fate	Analysis of variance			
					F	Df	p	R-squared
Left-right position	5.18	5.71	4.71	5.00	22.80	3	0.000	0.036
Neoliberalism	2.87	2.97	2.81	2.83	5.03	3	0.002	0.008
Authoritarianism	3.40	3.66	3.47	3.31	10.63	3	0.000	0.029



**TABLE A6** Means of left–right position, neoliberalism, and authoritarianism per category of distributive justice.

	Need	Equity	Equality	Analysis of variance			R-squared
				<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	
Left–right position	5.65	5.16	4.90	15.73	2	0.000	0.017
Neoliberalism	3.00	2.81	2.83	7.25	2	0.001	0.008
Authoritarianism	3.62	3.48	3.42	7.92	2	0.000	0.008