

# Belief in free will predicts criminal punishment support, disapproval of unethical actions

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In countries with transparent governments and low levels of corruption, the belief in free will—that is, believing that people's outcomes are tied to choices and personal responsibility—predicts someone's intolerance of unethical behavior along with a greater desire to see criminals harshly punished for their actions.

For residents of countries with weak governance or corrupt leaders, free will beliefs did not explain people's views on the acceptability of [unethical behavior](#)—yet free will beliefs still predicted wanting to see criminals punished.

"Your country's governance makes a difference in whether your beliefs about free will get applied to your views of unethical [behavior](#)," says Kathleen Vohs, the Distinguished McKnight University Professor and Land O'Lakes Chair in Marketing at the University of Minnesota's Carlson School of Management and co-author of the study.

Researchers at the University of Minnesota, Arizona State University, and Ghent University used data from the World Values Survey to analyze more than 65,000 residents in 46 countries. Their findings provide a comprehensive look at the influence of free will around the world and help explain differing moral attitudes and judgments around the world.

This global analysis suggests that for [belief](#) in free will to influence people's attitudes toward unethical actions, there needs to be an environment of honest and open governance. When people live in countries that do not support individual rights and where public officials are dishonest and self-interested, people's free will beliefs inform their desire to see criminals punished. But when it comes to whether behaving unethically is justifiable, free will beliefs are irrelevant.

"Free Will Beliefs Predict Attitudes toward Unethical Behavior and

Criminal Punishment: A Global Analysis" is authored by Nathan D. Martin, Davide Rigoni, and Kathleen D. Vohs and published in the journal *PNAS*.

**More information:** Nathan D. Martin et al., "Free will beliefs predict attitudes toward unethical behavior and criminal punishment," *PNAS* (2017). [www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1702119114](http://www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1702119114)

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