

Secularism and tolerance of minority groups predicts future prosperity of countries

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The data-driven analysis supports the notion that a ‘good’ society - valuing diversity, tolerance and openness - may also be a ‘productive’ society. Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Secular cultures which are tolerant of minority groups and respectful of individuals' rights tend to have more wealth, education and democracy, a new study by University of Bristol scientists has found.

New research, which surveyed nearly half a million people across 109 countries, shows that changes in culture generally come before any improvements in wealth, [education](#) and democracy, rather than the other way around.

Researchers from the University of Bristol (UK) and University of Tennessee (US) used the global survey data to show how secularism and openness towards minorities can be used to statistically predict future GDP per capita, secondary education enrollment and democratization.

The outcome shows that pre-existing [cultural values](#) predicted future levels of economic growth and prosperity.

One of the policy implications of the study's analysis is that promotion of a country's development must take preexisting cultural values into account. For instance, promoting democracy, whether through economic exchange or regime change, will only succeed if combined with promoting openness and tolerance of [minority groups](#).

The first places to see dramatic increases in wealth, health, education and democracy tended to be Western countries, but the causes are hard to prove. This research shows that—at least in the 20th Century—places which had the greatest improvement also tended to have pre-existing secular and tolerant cultures.

The question posed by the study's researchers was to determine if these cultural values evolved first, or if they emerged because of increased prosperity.

Dr. Daniel Lawson, the study's statistician from the University of Bristol's School of Mathematics, said: "We used careful statistical methods to learn cultural values from [survey data](#), and compared them to historical statistics.

"With access to massive digitized datasets, history is becoming a science. Our data-driven analysis supports the notion that a 'good' society—valuing diversity, tolerance and openness—may also be a 'productive' society, which is a reason to be hopeful about the future."

Damian Ruck, from the University of Tennessee, added: "This study investigates the co-evolution of cultural values with health, wealth, education and [democracy](#) around the world.

"It shows that promoting a culture of secularism, tolerance and openness, along with improved public health, may be the first step on the road to development."

More information: Damian J. Ruck et al. Cultural prerequisites of socioeconomic development, *Royal Society Open Science* (2020). [DOI: 10.1098/rsos.190725](#)

Provided by University of Bristol

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