

# Multi-country survey shows tendency to be altruistic is less common in association with conservative ideologies

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Is the tendency to share with other people linked to political orientation? And in which way? In a new study, researchers from the IMT School for Advanced Studies Lucca, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, and University of Milan Bicocca show that around the world left-leaning people are more inclined to be altruistic, in general and towards the international community. On the other hand, conservative and right-leaning people tend to be more altruistic toward their country. What might sound like the confirmation of a prejudice, is in reality a tendency observed worldwide through a multi-country survey.

For the study, just published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)*, Veronica Pizziol and colleagues analyzed the data collected on more than 46,000 participants in 68 countries, between April and May 2020. The survey was organized by the International Collaboration on the Social and Moral Psychology of COVID-19 (ICSMP COVID-19), which examines [psychological factors](#) underlying the attitudes and behavioral intentions related to COVID-19.

Using the participants' answers, the study aimed to investigate if and how [political ideology](#), which of course captures one's beliefs and values about society, is associated with [generosity](#). To measure political ideology, participants were asked to identify their [political orientation](#) on a scale from 0 (very left-leaning) to 10 (very right-leaning). To measure generosity, researchers used participants' donation decisions in a task with the possibility of donating to a national charity and an international one. The task consisted in answering what percentage of a sum of money people kept for themselves, and how much they gave to a national or

international charity working to protect people from COVID-19.

Hence, three different types of generosity were taken into consideration and analyzed: one oriented toward the native country, having its roots in localism, named national generosity; the second, more universalistic, oriented beyond the national boundaries and toward the [international community](#), called international generosity; the third, the sum of the two, identifying generosity in general.

"Analyzing the answers, we found that more left-leaning individuals are more likely to donate in general and also more likely to be generous internationally. More right-leaning people are more likely instead to donate nationally. These findings are very consistent and have been checked to exclude other factors that might have influenced the answers," explains Veronica Pizziol, Ph.D. student in Economics at the IMT School, and first author of the paper. "For example, since the survey was realized during the COVID-19 pandemic, right-leaning people could have shown to be less generous towards COVID-19 charities just because they were less likely to believe COVID-19 to be a big threat. But this was not the case."

The global coverage of the dataset allowed the researchers to draw general conclusions about the relationship between political ideology and generosity and to use country-level factors to investigate its underlying mechanisms. "We found that a relevant source of cross-country variation is the quality of governance as measured by the Worldwide Governance Indicator provided by the World Bank. We show that the quality of governance moderates the three correlations between political ideology and the various measures of generosity," says Roberto Di Paolo, Assistant Professor at the IMT School. In other words, the tendency to be generous with national and international communities, both among right- and left-wing people, is somehow related to how good the governance of national institutions is.

In particular, in countries with a good quality of the institutions, individuals tend to increase self-interest (with the change being "faster" for right-leaning individuals) and decrease national generosity (with the change being "slower" for right-leaning individuals). Instead, right- and left-leaning individuals adopt opposite behaviors toward an international charity when the quality of governance increases: right-leaning individuals tend to donate less while left-leaning individuals tend to donate more.

"These apparently counterintuitive results suggest that, in countries with high quality of governance, left-leaning people may shift towards different values: they can tend to embrace either universalistic or individualist values that are typically brought forward by countries with high quality of governance. Both these values put little emphasis on local boundaries. On the other hand, in countries with high quality of [governance](#), right-leaning people may react negatively to universalist values through a cultural backlash, and therefore embrace only the individualist values. And this is reflected on the fact that they increase only in their individualism," explains Valerio Capraro, Associate Professor at University of Milan Bicocca, and senior author of the paper.

In sum, in an increasingly globalized world, it is important to understand how generosity becomes able to transcend local boundaries. This paper shows that political ideology plays a relevant role.

**More information:** Pizziol, Veronica, Political ideology and generosity around the globe, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2023). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2219676120](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2219676120).  
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