Political Animals: Layered Moral Agency and the Divergence Between Private and Public Norms

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Abstract

I develop and test a model of *layered moral agency*, in which individuals hold distinct private and public normative orientations. Public orientations evolve endogenously in the *public sphere* – via vertical deliberation with state agents (instituted-norm anchors) and horizontal deliberation with peers – providing the normative foundation for formal rules. The model predicts that deliberative structure alone can generate pluralism, localized divergence, or norm collapse through cascades even with fixed private preferences. Using individual-level, geolocated panel data from Switzerland, I exploit within-individual variation in the normative composition of canton–year environments to show that endorsement of universalism responds systematically to normative exposure, with substitution between state and peer channels and stronger effects among those who privately value universalism. I then examine within-ideology consequences of endorsement, revealing when divergence across layers reflects ethical commitment versus strategic calculation. Finally, I isolate the vertical channel by following bureaucrats who move between private and public posts; within-individual evidence indicates role-based deliberative updating upon entry into public sector, consistent with instituted norm anchoring. Overall, the paper uncovers a richer form of rational agency and identifies the endogenous conditions under which universalism as a social norm persists or unravels.

Keywords: Social norms; Social preferences; Public sphere; Universalism; State legitimacy; Bureaucracy.

"Hence it is evident that the state is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal. And he who by nature and not by mere accident is without a state, is either a bad man or above humanity; he is like the Tribeless, lawless, hearthless one, whom Homer denounces — the natural outcast is forthwith a lover of war; he may be compared to an isolated piece at draughts."

Aristotle, Politics, Book I, translated by Benjamin Jowett

"Subjectivity, as agent of reflection and deliberation (as thought and will) is a social-historical project; its origins, repeated twice with different modalities in Greece and in Western Europe, can be dated and located."

Castoriadis (1991), p. 144

1   Introduction

Universalism – the principle that all individuals are entitled to equal rights regardless of their identity – is both a personal moral norm (Enke et al. (2023)) and a foundational social norm in modern Western societies (Taylor (2004), Henrich (2020)). In economics, the social norm is typically modeled as the aggregation of personal moral preferences. This approach, however, overlooks a longstanding distinction in moral and political philosophy between the private and the public spheres. As emphasized by Arendt (1958) and Habermas (1989), the public sphere is a social space situated between the private realm of the household and the state – where individuals deliberate on matters of common concern and where public opinion is formed[1]. This tradition, tracing back to Aristotle, sees the public realm not as an aggregate of individual views, but as a qualitatively distinct domain, constituted through deliberation and collective meaning-making. Deliberation refers to processes of reflection and argumentation, involving exposure to abstract principles typically framed in terms of collective values, social roles, or civic duties. It differs from interpersonal interaction in that it invites individuals to adopt a broader standpoint – one that transcends immediate personal interest and engages with the common good, with concrete implications in terms of public policies[2]. As Aristotle emphasizes, the *polis* is not simply a coordination device but an expression of the human capacity for moral reasoning and norm creation. Accordingly, universalism may emerge not only from private moral reasoning or interpersonal transmission, but also through participation in the public sphere.

In this paper, I formalize this idea by introducing a layered conception of agency, comprising a private normative orientation – what one endorses for oneself – and a public normative orientation – what one endorses for society. These orientations may diverge, that is, individuals may come to endorse normative principles for society that they do not apply to themselves – or vice versa – reflecting a genuine layering of moral agency[3].

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[1]Habermas (1989) argues that this space emerged in 18th-century bourgeois society, particularly in Europe, through institutions such as coffeehouses and salons, literary journals and newspapers, learned societies and clubs. Within these settings, individuals addressed one another as equals – not according to their aristocratic rank, birthright, or divine sanction, but as rational interlocutors capable of argument and persuasion. This radically new mode of interaction both reflected and reinforced the emerging idea that all persons could participate in shaping the common good.

[2]In Habermas's formulation, the public sphere mediates between private citizens and state authority by generating communicatively grounded norms that justify collective action.

[3]Athias and Ventelou (2025) provide empirical evidence of within-individual normative divergences that vary systematically with socio-demographic characteristics. Specifically, they find that individuals

Crucially, because public normative orientations arise through deliberation in the public sphere, they are not fixed but evolve with changes in an individual's (local) deliberative environment – which includes both peers (horizontal deliberation) and state agents (vertical deliberation). State agents play a distinctive role in the public sphere as anchors of the instituted social norm – a role that follows from the public sphere's function of providing the normative justification for state functionality. The resulting equilibrium structure reflects the steady-state outcomes of these deliberative dynamics, allowing for both convergence and pluralism. The model further highlights that when public endorsement of the social norm erodes, due to weak vertical deliberation and cascading peer divergence, a normative shift is possible, even if formal rules remain unchanged. The model thus captures how deliberation in the public sphere becomes a critical engine for the political stability or transformation of the state.

To empirically test the model, I use data from the Swiss Household Panel Survey (SHPS), a panel survey that annually interviews all members of approximately 5,000 randomly selected households, covering more than 12,000 individuals since 1999. This dataset includes a precise measure of individual support for universalism as a public norm, captured by the question: "Are you in favour of Switzerland offering foreigners the same opportunities as those offered to Swiss citizens, or in favour of Switzerland offering Swiss citizens better opportunities?". The SHPS is geolocated at the municipality level, and includes occupational information, including whether respondents work for the state. This allows me to construct time-varying measures of the normative composition of individuals' deliberative environments. Specifically, I compute the local share of individuals who endorse universalism as a public norm, separately among state agents and peers. This strategy allows me to exploit within-individual variation in the normative composition of the public sphere among non-workers (*i.e.* youth over age 18, the unemployed, and retirees). I proceed in three steps. First, I examine the dynamics of their norm endorsement – whether it responds to changes in the normative composition of their environment – and assess the relative influence of state agents and peers. I then compare these dynamics to those for policy preferences and find, strikingly, no corresponding shifts. Second, building on Enke et al. (2023), I explore heterogeneity by political ideology to assess whether individuals who are more likely to endorse universalism as a personal norm remain susceptible to deliberative influence in the public sphere. Such responsiveness would indicate within-individual divergence across layers of agency, consistent with public deliberation expanding – rather than opposing – private normative commitments. Furthermore, I examine whether endorsement of the norm is associated with shifts in policy preferences *within* ideological groups to unveil the various sources – ethical or strategic – of divergences across normative layers. Third, I assess whether the deliberative influence of state agents stems from their institutional role in upholding the instituted social norm. To do so, I leverage the workplace setting and examine universalism dynamics among (low-level) bureaucrats who exogenously switch between the private and public sectors, further exploiting cultural variation in the social contract that underpins the modern state. Overall, the results provide strong support for the model of layered agency, confirming the hypothesis that universalism as a social norm is a deliberative construct of the public sphere. It is shaped by ongoing horizontal deliberation among peers and vertical deliberation with state agents, who serve as instituted norm anchors. The findings thus reveal both the

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with higher cognitive skills are more likely to endorse universalism as a private preference than as a social norm, whereas men and right-leaning individuals exhibit the opposite pattern, endorsing universalism more likely as a social norm than as a private preference.

fragility of universalism as a social norm and its endogenous mechanisms of reproduction.

This work contributes to both the literature on social norms and on the interplay between culture and institutions by formalizing – and empirically identifying – social norms as collective deliberative constructs that underpin state functionality. Building on the philosophical concept of the public sphere, it challenges the prevailing view in economics that norms function merely as external constraints on behavior, enforced through social image concerns or internal dissonance costs, and that norm change results from belief updating within Bayesian equilibria (Bénabou and Tirole (2003), Bénabou and Tirole (2011), Acemoglu and Jackson (2015), Bursztyn et al. (2020), Tirole (2023)). I instead conceptualize layered moral agency, comprising what one endorses for oneself and what one endorses for society, with the latter shaped by vertical and horizontal deliberation in the public sphere. This distinction parallels the dual channels of cultural transmission in Bisin and Verdier (2001): vertical transmission from one generation to the next, and horizontal transmission through peers. However, in my framework, these channels operate not merely as probabilistic imitation or preference transmission – as in classic evolutionary models of cultural change (Boyd and Richerson (1985)) – but as arenas for reason-giving, contestation, and norm generation. Unlike social capital (Putnam (2000), Putnam and Garrett (2020), Satyanath et al. (2017)), which primarily shapes private values and interpersonal trust, the public sphere shapes – not the private – but the public layer of moral agency through deliberation. This framing assigns a specific role to state agents in the public sphere: they serve as a vertical deliberative channel, linking the instituted norm to public discourse. In the absence of this vertical channel, pluralism – persistent localized normative clusters – can emerge, provided horizontal deliberation remains robust. This resonates with both evolutionary and cultural transmission theory, where dominance of horizontal over vertical transmission can sustain cultural heterogeneity. It also helps explain, for instance, Ostrom (1990)'s findings that communities can self-organize to manage small-scale common resources through informal institutions, precisely because they generate and continuously reshape shared norms within their own public spheres. It may likewise shed light on Bondar and Fuchs-Schündeln (2023)'s finding that East Germans continue to exhibit stronger preferences for redistribution than West Germans decades after reunification. Conversely, the emergence of legitimate centralized institutions is more likely when a society manages to extend a shared normative order throughout the population. This paper theoretically shows that such an equilibrium is more likely to arise when the instituted social norm is actively conveyed by state agents within the public sphere – a mechanism illustrated by Weber (1976). Finally, this paper aligns with Acemoglu and Robinson (2025) in emphasizing that normative orders are not inherently persistent, identifying the public sphere – particularly its horizontal deliberative channel – as a key driver of cultural transformation, with robust horizontal deliberation capable of triggering rapid shifts through deliberative cascades.

Thus, while most of the economics literature has focused on the functional or coercive dimensions of states, this paper draws on this philosophical perspective to offer a fundamental new insight: it identifies states as extensions of normative deliberation in the public sphere, that is, norm-bearing institutions. This view aligns with Ekeh (1975)'s *Two Publics*, which, in the African context, distinguishes between morally grounded local institutions and an amoral civic public associated with colonial and postcolonial state structures. Consequently, in contrast to models of cultural transmission that emphasize the formative role of specific state agents – particularly teachers – as privileged cultural transmitters (Bisin and Verdier (2001), Tilly (1975), Hobsbawm (1990), Blanc and Kubo

(2023), Anderson (1983), Clots-Figueras and Masella (2013)), *all* state agents act as anchors of the instituted norm in the public sphere. This is consistent with Weber (1922)'s model of legal-rational authority, in which legitimacy rests on citizens' belief in the normative validity of institutional rules, thereby conferring status and moral authority upon bureaucrats. Weber's emphasis on bureaucratic professionalism further implies that, in exchange for security of tenure, bureaucrats should serve the mission of their institution rather than political actors or personal interests. Bureaucracy, then, is neither neutral, alienated, nor obedient (Arendt (1963), Bourdieu (1994), Heldring (2020), Heldring (2023)); rather, its role in the public sphere acts as an accelerator of convergence toward the instituted norm. This perspective also has important implications for bureaucratic effectiveness: efficiency gains may arise when state employees are motivated by the normative mission of their institutional role (Besley and Ghatak (2005), Cassar and Meier (2018), Athias and Wicht (2025)). These gains may be further enhanced by combining material incentives with moral messaging anchored in the instituted social norm, thereby leveraging complementarities between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation (Kranton (2019)).

This work further contributes to the literature on social preferences. Layered agency implies that individuals are both private agents and members of a political and social collective. Social preferences across these layers may be aligned – or diverge – through deliberative, and even strategic, reasoning (Athias and Ventelou (2025)). Thus, this paper points to a potential confusion in the existing literature, which often conflates private and public-layer preferences, leading to misinterpretation of the underlying motivations. It also offers a coherent explanation for within-individual variation in private social preferences and behavior (Bénabou and Tirole (2011)), with the public layer dynamically shaping the private layer. Overall, incorporating layered agency into the analysis of social preferences yields a richer conception of the individual as an agent shaped by, yet capable of reflexively engaging with, social norms. In other words, layered agency entails not only rational deliberation over outcomes but also rational engagement with the normative order itself – that is, the capacity to question, evaluate, and even revise the very norms that govern social life.

Finally, this paper contributes to the literature on universalism by challenging the view that universalism is a fixed personal preference (Cappelen et al. (2025), Enke et al. (2022), Tabellini (2008)). Instead, it shows that individuals may *come to endorse* universalism in the private sphere through deliberation over a collectively constructed public norm. While prior work identifies universal morality as a distinctive feature of Western societies, rooted in the Western Church and the Enlightenment (Henrich (2020), Taylor (2004)), this paper emphasizes that its persistence depends on support within the public sphere. Universalism, as a social norm, remains fragile and may be reversed under formalized conditions – specifically, weakened institutional legitimacy and a strong, horizontal public sphere. These conditions closely parallel those associated with the rise of Nazism (Mosse (1964), Kohn (1950), Satyanath et al. (2017)). Finally, since institutions are norm-bearing constructs, this paper suggests that universalism is the normative foundation of inclusive institutions – widely recognized as key drivers of long-run economic prosperity (Acemoglu et al. (2001), Acemoglu et al. (2011), Acemoglu and Robinson (2012)).

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. I introduce a simple framework formalizing layered agency and the public sphere in Section 2. Section 3 contains details on the data. Section 4 discusses the empirical strategies to test whether universalism as a social norm is a deliberative construct of the public sphere and reports results as well as evidence of deliberation as a mechanism. In Section 5, I leverage the workplace setting to

test whether state agents serve as the vertical channel of deliberation within the public sphere. Section 6 concludes.

2 The Model

Formally, I represent the public sphere as the deliberative layer of individuals' moral agency. Each individual $i \in [0,1]$ holds:

- a *private normative orientation* $q(i,t)$, reflecting their personal convictions in the private sphere;

- a *public normative stance* $s(i,t)$, representing the position they endorse in the public sphere.

The two are linked by an institutional support indicator $a(i,t) \in [0,1]$, such that:

$$s(i,t) := a(i,t)\, q(i,t),$$

capturing the idea of *layered agency* – individuals distinguish between private convictions and public stances, while recognizing their interdependence.

2.1 Model Setup

The Instituted Social Norm. The aggregate public norm $Q(t)$ reflects the distribution of public stances across the population:

$$Q(t) = \int_0^1 s(i,t)\, di. \tag{1}$$

In a continuum population, each individual's stance has measure zero and thus no marginal impact on $Q(t)$; individuals therefore treat $Q(t)$ as exogenous, as in standard economic modeling. In contrast with most of this literature, however, the aggregation is over *public* stances, not private preferences, and the resulting norm is *instituted* – providing the normative foundation and legitimacy of formal collective rules (Habermas (1989)).

Within-individual Normative Divergence. The layered structure allows for divergence between private and public orientations: private preferences may not always translate directly into the public sphere. This can reflect normative restraint, strategic calculation, or broader deliberative tensions inherent to political agency. Two configurations of divergence are especially relevant:

1. **Private endorsement, public rejection** $(q(i,t) = Q(t),\, a(i,t) \approx 0)$: The individual privately endorses the prevailing norm but does not support institutionalizing it. This may stem from:

   - *Normative restraint*: a principled refusal to generalize one's own view as a social norm to preserve social cohesion.

   - *Strategic divergence*: a calculated decision to withhold support for instrumental reasons (e.g., expecting material losses if the norm is institutionalized).

2. **Private rejection, civic commitment** $(q(i,t) \neq Q(t), a(i,t) \approx 0)$: The individual refrains from promoting the institutionalization of their own preference, effectively allowing $Q(t)$ to prevail in the public sphere, out of civic commitment, solidaristic goals, or belief in a shared identity that overrides personal preference.

These divergences do not imply irrationality or inconsistency. Rather, they reflect a richer form of rational agency, in which individuals deliberate over two distinct questions: *What do I believe?* and *What should govern us collectively?* In this sense, agents may rationally support a public norm that differs from their private preference, knowing that the social norm will shape future payoffs by guiding formal rules. Table 1 below summarizes all configurations, divergence or not.

Table 1: Typology of Individual Normative Positions Regarding the Instituted Norm $Q(t)$

Case	Private Preference $q(i,t)$	Support for Institutionalizing Private Preference $a(i,t)$	Interpretation
(i)	$q(i,t) = Q(t)$	$a(i,t) \approx 1$	**Normative Harmony**: Full alignment – the individual's private preference matches the public norm, and they support its institutionalization.
(ii)	$q(i,t) = Q(t)$	$a(i,t) \approx 0$	**Normative Restraint / Strategic Divergence**: Private endorsement of $Q(t)$ but rejection of its institutionalization, either for principled or strategic reasons.
(iii)	$q(i,t) \neq Q(t)$	$a(i,t) \approx 1$	**Normative Opposition**: The individual seeks to institutionalize their own preference, which differs from $Q(t)$, thereby rejecting the prevailing public norm.
(iv)	$q(i,t) \neq Q(t)$	$a(i,t) \approx 0$	**Civic Commitment**: The individual refrains from promoting their own private preference, allowing $Q(t)$ to prevail for civic or solidaristic reasons.

Deliberation in the public sphere. Public stances $s(i, t)$ evolve endogenously through two channels:

1. *Vertical deliberation* with state agents, who act as anchors of the instituted public norm due to their institutional role.

2. *Horizontal deliberation* with peers (e.g. friends, neighbours), reflecting social environments.

Formally:
$$\frac{\partial s(i, t)}{\partial t} = \underbrace{\alpha\big(Q(t) - s(i, t)\big)}_{\text{vertical deliberation}} + \underbrace{\beta\big(\bar{s}_{-i}(t) - s(i, t)\big)}_{\text{horizontal deliberation}}, \tag{2}$$

where $\bar{s}_{-i}(t)$ is the average public stance of peers in i's deliberative environment, and $\alpha, \beta > 0$ measure the relative strength of vertical and horizontal channels.

2.2 Analysis

Proposition 1 (Public Normative Stance Steady State). *Let the effective normative stance $s(i, t)$ evolve according to the differential equation*

$$\frac{\partial s(i, t)}{\partial t} = \alpha\big(Q(t) - s(i, t)\big) + \beta\big(\bar{s}_{-i}(t) - s(i, t)\big),$$

where $Q(t)$ is the instituted public norm, $\bar{s}_{-i}(t)$ is the average peer normative stance in individual i's local environment, and $\alpha, \beta > 0$ represent the strengths of vertical and horizontal deliberation, respectively.

Then the individual steady-state stance $s^*(i)$ satisfies:

$$s^*(i) = \frac{\alpha Q + \beta \bar{s}_{-i}}{\alpha + \beta}.$$

Interpretation. At steady state, an individual's effective support for the public norm $s^*(i)$ is a convex combination of the instituted norm Q conveyed by state agents in the public sphere and the average peer stance $\bar{s}_{-i}$, weighted by the relative strength of vertical (α) and horizontal (β) deliberation.

Comparative Statics.

- *Marginal effects:*
  - $\frac{\partial s^*(i)}{\partial Q} = \frac{\alpha}{\alpha+\beta} > 0$: Greater vertical deliberation increases alignment with the instituted norm.
  - $\frac{\partial s^*(i)}{\partial \bar{s}_{-i}} = \frac{\beta}{\alpha+\beta} > 0$: Greater peer deliberation increases alignment with local peer norms.

- *Limit behavior:*
  - As $\alpha \to 0$, $s^*(i) \to \bar{s}_{-i}$: The public stance is entirely deliberatively shaped by peer discourse.
  - As $\beta \to 0$, $s^*(i) \to Q$: The public stance is entirely deliberatively shaped by state agents discourse and fully aligns with the instituted norm.

Deliberative Implications. When horizontal deliberation dominates ($\beta \gg \alpha$), the instituted norm loses traction, and individual normative stances gravitate toward local peer environments. In a heterogeneous society, this leads to **normative pluralism**: persistent local deviations from Q even when formal rules remain stable. If peer environments are homogeneous yet diverge from Q, deliberation can produce *cascades*[4]: as more individuals align with the peer norm, its deliberative weight rises, undermining the perceived legitimacy of Q and accelerating its displacement. These shifts emerge endogenously within the public sphere and can be both rapid and self-reinforcing, even without changes to formal institutions.

Illustration: Norm Collapse in the Late Weimar Republic. The 1932 electoral rise of Hitler exemplifies the model's ($\beta \gg \alpha$) configuration – weak vertical anchoring by state agents, strong horizontal peer deliberation. During the late Weimar Republic, legitimacy crises in state institutions (Bracher (1978)) weakened the vertical deliberative channel (α), leaving public stances primarily shaped by horizontal peer deliberation (β). In this setting, anti-universalist narratives – rooted in Romantic cultural imaginaries (Mosse (1964), Kohn (1950))[5] – spread horizontally. As more peers publicly endorsed these narratives, their deliberative weight rose, triggering a cascade that displaced the instituted universalist norm. This case shows how weak vertical anchoring allows horizontally diffused ideas to rapidly overturn public norms without formal rule change or external shock.

This model shows how layered agency and deliberation jointly shape public norm dynamics, providing a framework to analyze how universalism as a social norm is sustained, contested, or transformed through vertical and horizontal deliberation – even without changes in private preferences.

3   Data and First Evidence

To test the model, I focus on Switzerland – a post-Enlightenment Western European country where universalism is expected to prevail as a public norm (Henrich (2020), Taylor (2004)). Yet its normative rigidity and institutional stability make it a particularly revealing setting for assessing whether universalism operates as a deliberative construct within the public sphere. The data come from the Swiss Household Panel Surveys (SHPS), a unique longitudinal survey conducted annually since 1999. The SHPS interviews all members of a random sample of approximately 5,000 households, covering over 12,000 individuals residing in Switzerland. It collects rich individual-level information on demographic and socio-economic characteristics, along with a broad range of attitudinal and behavioral topics. I use the SHP individual-level panel data from waves I (1999) to V (2003), the only waves that contain all the necessary variables. I restrict the sample to

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[4]This concept parallels threshold and informational cascade models (Granovetter (1978), Bikhchandani et al. (1992)), but applies them to normative deliberation: individuals revise their public stance through social reasoning in light of others' expressed positions, not mere imitation or payoff-based heuristics.

[5]More recent evidence on the persistence and endogeneity of such cultural imaginaries is provided by PewResearchCenter (2011), which finds that about half of Americans (49%) and Germans (47%) agree that "our culture is superior to others". In Spain, 44% of respondents share this view, compared to about a third of British (32%) and 27% of French respondents.

Swiss individuals whose first nationality is Swiss – since the question used to elicit preferences for universalism as a public norm involves a trade-off between Swiss citizens and foreigners – and who are over 18 years old, that is, beyond their formative years. The data are geolocated at the municipality level, corresponding to respondents' commune of residence. My final sample contains 7'125 individuals (22'618 person observations).

The surveys include a precise measure of individuals' preference for universalism as a public norm, based on the following question: "Are you in favour of Switzerland offering foreigners the same opportunities as those offered to Swiss citizens, or in favour of Switzerland offering Swiss citizens better opportunities?". For Swiss respondents, this question presents a clear trade-off between equal treatment of in-group members (Swiss citizens) and socially distant others (foreigners), versus preferential treatment of the in-group. It thereby directly elicits their preference for universalism – as defined by Enke et al. (2022) in terms of private preference[6] – but here applied to a society-wide norm. The three response options are: "in favour of equality of opportunities", "neither", or "in favour of better opportunities for Swiss citizens". I construct the individual-level variable $UNIV$ as a binary indicator coded as 1 for respondents who endorse the universalism social norm, and 0 for those who prefer preferential treatment for Swiss citizens. Respondents selecting the "neither" option are excluded from this baseline measure. This exclusion is justified both empirically and conceptually: the "neither" category comprises less than 10% of the sample and likely captures heterogeneous responses, including ambivalence, measurement error, or social desirability bias, rather than a coherent normative position. Restricting the analysis to a dichotomous measure also facilitates interpretation in subsequent analyses, particularly when examining deliberative effect heterogeneity. Nevertheless, to assess the sensitivity of the results to this coding choice, I also construct a three-category ordinal variable coded –1, 0, and 1 – where 1 corresponds to respondents endorsing the universalism social norm, 0 to those responding "neither", and –1 to those favoring preferential treatment for Swiss citizens.

Over the full period for which the variable $UNIV$ is available (annually from 1999 to 2009, and additionally in 2011, 2014, and 2017), Figure 7 in Appendix A.1 shows that the overall share of individuals endorsing universalism remains relatively stable, though it exhibits a decline following the 2007-2008 financial crisis. In the main estimation sample (1999–2003), 34.3% of individuals do not endorse universalism as a social norm. Interestingly, Figure 1 reveals substantial spatial heterogeneity in support for universalism across cantons – ranging from 51% to 73% – indicating the existence of localized normative clusters. In my model, this pattern is consistent with a high value of β, reflecting a strong role for the horizontal channel of deliberation. Furthermore, Figure 2 plots the within-canton-year standard deviation of individual responses, with a LOESS-smoothed curve tracing the overall temporal trend. The stability of normative dispersion over time suggests that the strength of the deliberative channels – captured by the model parameters α and β in Equation 2 – remained approximately constant throughout the observation period. Finally, Figure 8 in Appendix A.1 reports ordinary least squares estimates of universalism endorsement on individual-level covariates. Endorsement is positively associated with being college-educated, left-leaning, French-speaking, urban,

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[6]Decisions involving trade-offs between in-group members and socially distant others are central to the concept of universalism. Enke et al. (2022) develop a measure of universalism using survey-based money allocation games, in which participants divide a hypothetical sum of $100 between an in-group member and a randomly selected stranger. The defining feature of universalists is not greater morality or generosity per se, but a preference for equal treatment – allocating the budget uniformly across individuals regardless of group affiliation.

married, or high-income, and negatively associated with religiosity, being female, or having more children. Importantly, 33% of individuals (26.2% over 1999–2003) change their public normative stance at least once.

Taken together, the joint stability of both the mean and the dispersion of universalism endorsement – combined with substantial individual-level normative mobility – suggests that the norm is in a state of *dynamic equilibrium*: while aggregate endorsement remains stable, individuals continue to deliberate and revise their public normative positions. In the framework of Equation 2, this pattern implies that the parameters α and β are sufficiently balanced to generate micro-level dynamism without macro-level erosion.

Figure 1: Universalism Norm Endorsement Averaged at the State (Cantonal) Level
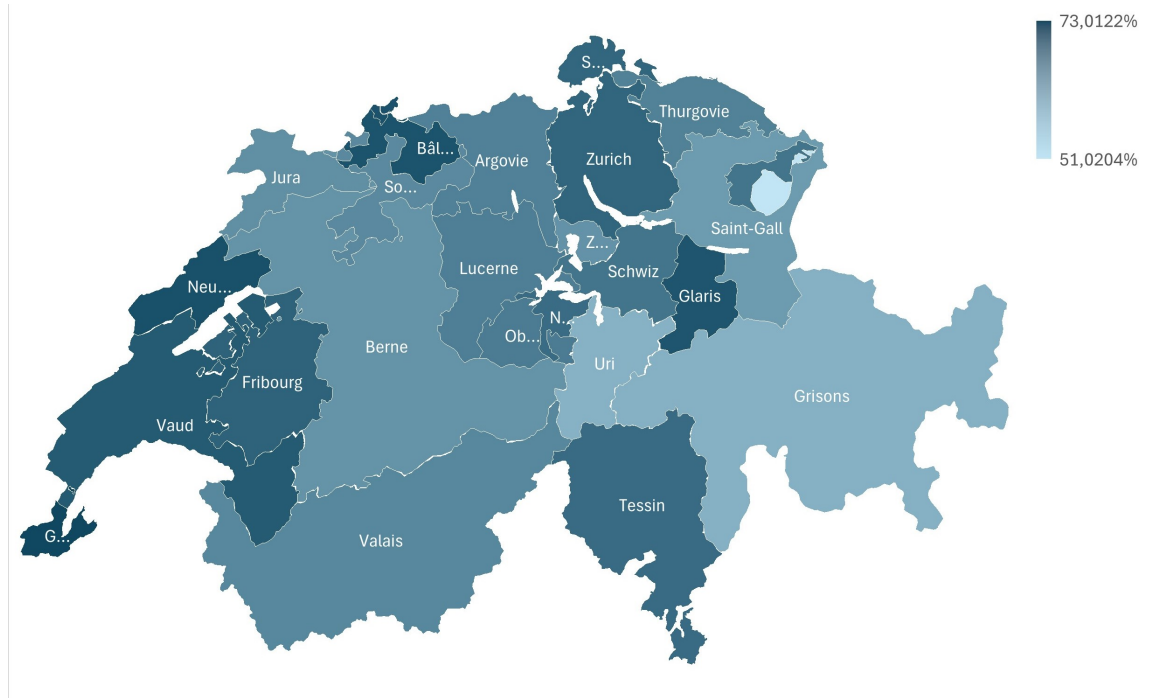

Note: The map displays the average share of Swiss individuals aged 18 and over in each canton who endorse the universalism social norm (binary variable). This corresponds to the cantonal average of the variable $UNIV$ over the period 1999–2017.

I further define individuals' institutional sector based on the following survey question: "Are you employed by a private company or a state organization?". I construct then the binary variable $State$, which equals 1 if the respondent works for the state and 0 if they are employed in the private sector. Respondents are also prompted with a list of options within state organizations: International organization, Confederation/Swiss Railways/Post office, Canton, Commune. Respondents who indicate working for an international organization are excluded, as these are non-governmental entities and not part of the domestic state apparatus. The SHP data also include information about the occupational choice at the service level. Specifically, I use respondents' choice in the nomenclature of economic activities to distinguish workers in public services, defined as health, education and social care in the literature, from the others.

Table 2 shows a pronounced gap in the endorsement of the universalism social norm between institutional sectors: 74% of state employees endorse it, compared to 66% in the private sector. This difference reflects a general institutional effect, indicating that

Figure 2: Normative Dispersion Over Time
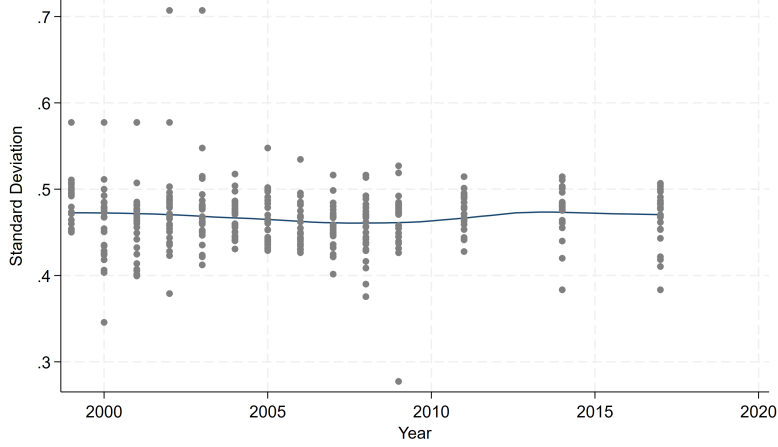
Note: Dots represent the standard deviation of individual responses to the universalism social norm question, computed within each canton and year among Swiss individuals aged 18 and over. The black trend line depicts a LOESS-smoothed curve, capturing the overall temporal trend in normative dispersion.

the association between public sector employment and universalism endorsement is not confined to traditionally mission-oriented fields. When disaggregating by industry, the gap between state and private sector workers persists within both health, education, and social care (HES) industries and non-HES industries, with similar magnitudes. Notably, the standard deviation of universalism endorsement is consistently lower among state employees, suggesting a more homogeneous normative stance within the public sector. These patterns provide preliminary evidence of state agents acting as instituted norm anchors. However, support for the universalism norm is significantly higher among state employees at the cantonal level (78%) than at the federal level (67%), with a lower standard deviation as well (0.414 versus 0.471). This within-state heterogeneity suggests meaningful variation in how state normative legitimacy is embodied across levels of government in Switzerland – a pattern consistent with Ekeh (1975)'s theory of *Two Publics*, whereby local state institutions are more closely aligned with citizens' moral expectations than central ones. In the Swiss context, this may reflect the limited authority of the federal government relative to the cantons, which hold substantial discretion across most policy domains. Compared to many other countries, Switzerland's federal state institutions are weaker than their cantonal counterparts, potentially shaping the locus of normative legitimacy.

In addition, Figure 3 shows that time trends in universalism endorsement differ markedly between public and private sector employees. While both groups exhibit increases around the year 2000, only the trend among public sector workers continues to rise before stabilizing, whereas the private sector trend flattens and slightly declines. This descriptive divergence motivates the empirical separation of $UNIV_{ct}^{State}$ and $UNIV_{ct}^{Peers}$ in equation (3): the two exposures trace distinct normative trajectories and are weakly correlated at the canton-year level ($\rho = 0.32$), allowing joint inclusion and separate identification. Moreover, the fact that non-workers' trajectory closely follows that of state employees suggests that α plays a central role in their deliberative environment. This pattern is

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Table 2: Universalism Endorsement in the Full Sample and by Employment Institutional Sector (1999–2003)

	Full sample			Public sector		Private sector		
	Mean	N	% ever change UNIV	(1) Mean	N	(2) Mean	N	(3) Difference
All individuals	0,657 (0.475)	22,618	26.2%	0.742 (0.438)	4,250	0.657 (0.475)	7,473	0.085*** (0.009)
Within HES industries				0.800 (0.400)	2,112	0.769 (0.421)	924	0.030* (0.016)
Within non-HES industries				0.666 (0.472)	1,569	0.641 (0.480)	5,265	0.026* (0.014)

Note: % ever change UNIV refers to the share of individuals who change their endorsement of the universalism social norm at least once between 1999 and 2003. Sectoral breakdowns only include employed individuals; full sample statistics include all Swiss individuals aged 18+. HES refers to health, education and social care. Non-HES refers to all other industries. Column (3) reports the difference in mean endorsement of the universalism social norm between public and private sectors. Standard deviations are in parentheses below means in Columns (1) and (2); robust standard errors are in parentheses in Column (3). *$p < 0.10$, **$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.01$.

consistent with the model's prediction that individuals who are more frequently exposed to public agents are more responsive to their deliberative influence.

4 Universalism as a Public Norm: a Deliberative Construct of the Public Sphere

In this section, I empirically test the core assumptions and proposition of the theoretical model. I begin by examining whether individuals' endorsement of the universalism norm is shaped by the normative composition of their local environment. I then investigate heterogeneity in these effects to uncover layered moral agency and deliberation as a mechanism.

4.1 The Normative Composition of the Local Environment Shapes Individual Universalism Dynamics

To investigate whether universalism endorsement is shaped by the deliberative environment, I exploit longitudinal variation in the local normative composition, proxied by the canton-year average shares of state employees and private-sector workers who endorse the universalism norm. I estimate:

$$UNIV_{ict} = \alpha \times UNIV_{ct}^{State} + \beta \times UNIV_{ct}^{Peers} + \psi \times Left_{ct} + \delta_t + \lambda_c + \gamma_i + \epsilon_{ict}. \quad (3)$$

The unit of observation is a non-working individual (i) (aged ≥ 18) in canton (c) and year (t). The dependent variable $UNIV_{ict}$ equals 1 if the individual endorses the universalism norm, 0 otherwise. The key exposures $UNIV_{ct}^{State}$ and $UNIV_{ct}^{Peers}$ are the canton–year average endorsement rates among residents who report being state employees and private-sector workers, respectively (by canton of residence). Coefficients α and β capture the effects of deliberation with state agents and with peers. I include individual fixed effects (γ_i), canton fixed effects (λ_c), and year fixed effects (δ_t). I control for

Figure 3: Yearly share of individuals who endorse the universalism social norm, by group

Note: The figure shows the share of Swiss individuals aged 18 and over who endorse the universalism social norm over time, presented as the yearly average of the variable $UNIV$, separately for non workers, state employees, and private sector workers.

contemporaneous cantonal ideology $Left_{ct}$ to absorb the current policy/rhetorical environment, so that the state-agent coefficient reflects deliberation rather than policy. $Left_{ct}$ equals 1 if the weighted average ideology of the cantonal executive lies to the left of the national mean in year t, constructed from Walter and Emmenegger (2019) by mapping parties' cabinet shares onto a left–right scale (1=far left, 4=far right). I estimate a linear probability model with standard errors clustered at the canton–year level. Identification comes from within-individual changes over time after absorbing individual, canton, and year fixed effects[7].

The results in Table 3 indicate that higher exposure to universalist state employees is associated with greater endorsement of the norm among non-workers. In Column (1), a one-unit (100 pp) increase in the share of universalist state employees in a canton–year is associated with a 15.2 pp increase in endorsement; equivalently, a 10 pp increase corresponds to 1.52 pp. Given a mean $UNIV$ of 62.4% among non-workers, this is a modest but meaningful change. The estimate is similar when controlling for cantonal government ideology (Column (2)), suggesting the effect is not simply contemporaneous policy/rhetoric. Column (3) adds exposure to universalist peers. The peer coefficient is positive and statistically significant, while the state coefficient remains positive but is less precisely estimated. Thus, magnitudes are comparable across channels, but only the peer effect is precisely estimated in this specification. Consistency with the short-run peer-effects literature – approximately 1.5–2.0 pp per 10 pp exposure (e.g., Sacerdote (2001), Falk and Ichino (2006), Bursztyn and Jensen (2015)) – is reassuring: my per-channel effects

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[7]As a robustness check, I estimate a random-effects logit with individual random intercepts and canton/year dummies; standard errors are Huber–White and clustered at the individual (panel) level. Signs and statistical significance mirror the baseline (see Table 8 in Appendix A.2). I also re-estimate with the three-category ordinal outcome (−1, 0, 1) while retaining the canton-year exposures computed from the binary classification; results are consistent in sign, magnitude, and significance (see Table 9 in Appendix A.2).

are 1.33 pp (state) and 1.76 pp (peers). Column (4) introduces the state–peer interaction and mean-centers both exposures so that main effects are interpreted at average conditions. The interaction is negative and statistically significant, indicating substitutability: each channel's marginal effect declines as the other strengthens. I view Column (4) as the preferred specification. Column (3) constrains the state effect to be constant across peer exposure; given the significant negative interaction in Column (4), this restriction is violated. The attenuation and imprecision of the state coefficient in Column (3) are therefore consistent with omitted-interaction (heterogeneous-slope) misspecification. The main effects at the mean remain positive. Both marginal effects are positive throughout the observed support (the state effect would reach zero only above 76.5% peer exposure; the peer effect only above 91.5% state exposure), which is consistent with partial, not complete, crowding out. This pattern is hard to reconcile with a single-index exposure model in which only total exposure matters (which would imply a zero interaction term). Overall, these results indicate that what is distinctive is not the magnitude of the effects but the presence of two distinct channels of influence, consistent with a dual-channel deliberation mechanism in the public sphere rather than mere imitation or conformity.

Table 3: Universalism Endorsement among Non-Workers: Effects of Canton–Year Exposure to Universalist State Agents and Peers

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)[†]
		Universalism	Endorsement	
Share UNIV among state employees	0.152*	0.147*	0.133	0.133*
	(0.085)	(0.082)	(0.082)	(0.077)
Left-wing state		0.0144	0.0106	0.0206
		(0.045)	(0.044)	(0.043)
Share UNIV among peers			0.176**	0.244***
			(0.077)	(0.080)
Share UNIV state x Share UNIV peers				-1.475***
				(0.544)
Observations	9,041	9,041	9,041	9,041
Individuals	2,775	2,775	2,775	2,775
Clusters (canton–year)	115	115	115	115

Notes: OLS linear probability models with individual–year observations and individual, canton, and year fixed effects. About 1,800 singleton individual–year observations (individuals observed once) are dropped by the FE estimator. The dependent variable equals 1 if the non-working individual endorses the universalism norm (0 otherwise). *Share UNIV among state employees* and *Share UNIV among peers* are canton–year average endorsement rates among state and private-sector workers (by canton of residence). *Left-wing state* equals 1 if the cantonal executive is left-leaning (see text for coding). Standard errors are clustered at the canton–year level. [†]Column (4) uses mean-centered exposures; main effects there are marginal effects at average exposure. $*p < 0.10$, $**p < 0.05$, $***p < 0.01$.

One potential concern is that the indicator for left-wing cantonal government may not fully capture broader political orientations that shape non-workers' preferences – particularly if this group, often economically or socially vulnerable, is more sensitive to policy shifts and public rhetoric. A second, related concern is that the results might reflect a general responsiveness of non-workers to the local environment rather than a specific responsiveness to universalism as a public norm. For instance, changes in the local normative composition could also shift correlated social preferences (e.g. redistribution, inequality) or attitudes toward political institutions, confounding the interpretation of state-agent and peer coefficients as norm-specific effects. To assess these concerns, I re-estimate the individual fixed-effects specification from Equation (3), replacing the dependent variable with alternative societal preferences: welfare spending (decrease/maintain/increase), redistribution (taxation of high incomes), views on defense and the environment (support

for a strong Swiss army and for environmental protection over economic growth), political ideology (0–10 left–right scale), and confidence in political institutions (trust in the federal government; satisfaction with democracy, both 0–10 scale). These alternative-outcome regressions are designed as specificity checks: to rule out that results reflect a general responsiveness of non-workers to the local environment or broad political orientation. For consistency with the main specification, I include contemporaneous cantonal ideology $Left_{ct}$ in the specificity checks to absorb policy/rhetorical shifts; results are similar when excluding it. Results are reported in Table 4. Across alternative outcomes, coefficients are generally small and statistically indistinguishable from zero; the only clear exception is a negative association between state exposure and trust in the federal government, consistent with previously noted state heterogeneity. The absence of parallel effects on other societal preferences supports a norm-specific interpretation of the universalism results, not a diffuse shift in general ideology.

Table 4: Specificity Checks: Effects of Canton–Year Exposure on Other Societal Preferences

	(1) Welfare	(2) Redistri.	(3) Env.	(4) Army	(5) Ideology	(6) Trust fed. gov.	(7) Sat. democracy
Share UNIV among state employees	-0.004	0.009	-0.009	-0.161*	0.088	-0.584**	-0.055
	(0.100)	(0.113)	(0.118)	(0.095)	(0.256)	(0.258)	(0.362)
Share UNIV among peers	-0.125	-0.042	0.078	0.055	-0.072	0.439	0.598*
	(0.122)	(0.088)	(0.131)	(0.096)	(0.350)	(0.370)	(0.319)
Share UNIV state x Share UNIV peers	0.198	0.330	-0.880	-0.657	0.541	-1.446	-4.641*
	(0.850)	(0.725)	(0.994)	(0.686)	(2.080)	(2.085)	(2.399)
Left-wing state	0.065*	0.066***	0.047*	0.044	-0.164	0.035	-0.043
	(0.036)	(0.018)	(0.028)	(0.053)	(0.191)	(0.118)	(0.073)
Observations	10,265	10,379	10,492	10,517	9,211	10,605	10,567
Individuals	2,997	3,020	3,045	3,035	2,760	3,049	3,047
Clusters (canton-year)	115	115	115	115	115	115	115

Notes: OLS fixed-effects models with individual–year observations and individual, canton, and year fixed effects. Outcome variables correspond to preferences over welfare spending, redistribution, environmental protection over growth, the army, political ideology (0–10), trust in the federal government (0–10), and satisfaction with democracy (0–10). *Share UNIV among state employees* and *Share UNIV among peers* are mean-centered canton–year average endorsement rates among state and private-sector workers (by canton of residence). *Left-wing state* equals 1 if the cantonal executive is left-leaning (see text for coding). Standard errors are clustered at the canton–year level. *$p < 0.10$, **$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.01$.

4.2 Evidence of Mechanism: Layered Agency and Deliberation

The framework posits that exposure to state agents and peers shapes endorsement of universalism through *deliberation in the public sphere*, not passive value transmission or social pressure. The previous results already point to a deliberative, dual-channel process: a negative and significant State × Peer interaction that rejects a single-index exposure model, and scope specificity (null spillovers to other outcomes), both consistent with reason-based updating rather than mere imitation.

To probe this mechanism further, I ask whether exposure shifts the *public* layer even for individuals who already hold universalism *privately*. Building on Enke et al. (2023) – who show that universalism as a private value is a strong predictor of left ideology – I study heterogeneity in exposure effects by political ideology. Under layered agency, effects among the left (i.e., among those with high baseline private universalism) should be at least as large as, and potentially larger than, effects among others; by contrast, a simple

copying story predicts larger effects only where the private value is absent.

To examine heterogeneity without over-saturating the model, I estimate two mirrored specifications: (i) state exposure interacted with ideology categories (centrists omitted), controlling for peer exposure; and (ii) peer exposure interacted with ideology, controlling for state exposure. Both specifications absorb individual, canton, and year fixed effects, and standard errors are clustered at the canton–year level. I focus on within-specification contrasts (e.g., Left–Center). Figure 4 plots the slope differences relative to centrists (Left–Center, Right–Center, Extreme-right–Center) for state and peer exposure. Both deliberative channels are strongest among left-wing individuals, consistent with layered agency and revealing divergence between private and public normative layers.

Figure 4: Ideological Heterogeneity in State and Peer Effects on Universalism Endorsement (Differences vs. Centrists)
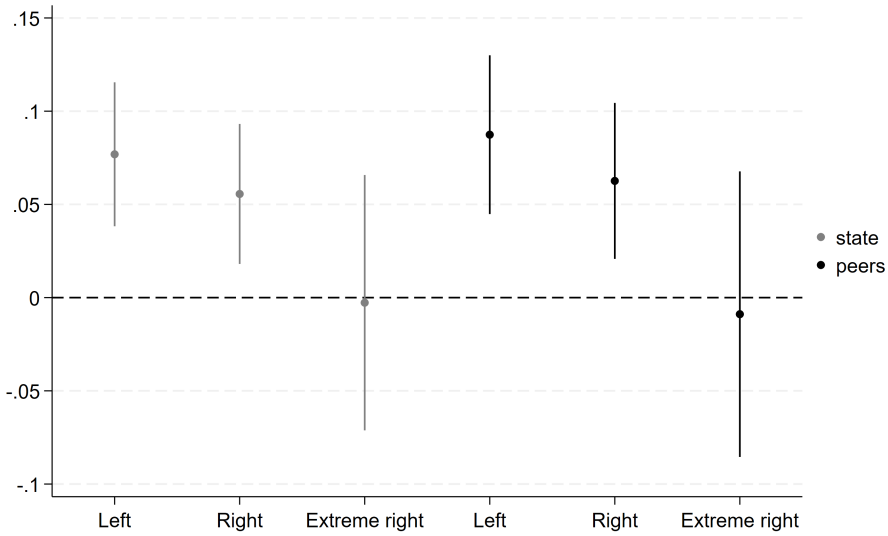
Notes: Points show differences in slopes relative to centrists (Left–Center, Right–Center, Extreme right–Center) for exposure to universalist *state agents* (gray) and *peers* (black); bars are 90% confidence intervals. Baseline centrist slopes are not shown. Estimates come from two separate fixed-effects specifications (based on Equation (3)): (i) state exposure interacted with three ideology categories (Left, Right, Extreme right; centrists omitted) controlling for peer exposure; and (ii) peer exposure interacted with the same three categories (centrists omitted) controlling for state exposure. All models include individual, canton, and year fixed effects; standard errors are clustered at the canton–year level. Ideology is measured on a 0–10 scale and binned as: left (0–4; 32.9% of non-workers), center (5; 36.4%), right (6–8; 26.4%), and extreme right (9–10; 4.4%). The sample consists of non-workers aged 18 and above.

4.3 Which Normative Divergence? Within-Ideology Consequences of Endorsement

To pin down the type of divergence across normative layers, I study how *endorsing universalism* relates to *policy preferences within ideological groups*. For each of the three main ideological groups (left, center, right), I estimate:

$$Outcome_{ict} = \theta\, UNIV_{ict} + \eta_{ct} + \gamma_i + \varepsilon_{ict}, \qquad (4)$$

where the unit of observation is an individual (i) (age ≥ 18) in canton (c) and year (t). $UNIV_{ict}$ indicates endorsement of the universalism norm. γ_i are individual fixed effects

and η_{ct} are canton-by-year fixed effects (absorbing time-varying canton shocks and policy). The dependent variable $Outcome_{ict}$ is each policy preference in turn.

Figure 5 shows that – consistent with Enke et al. (2023) – the left–right divide on redistribution is *conditional on universalism*: among right-leaning individuals, endorsing universalism is associated with a meaningful shift toward greater support for redistribution, whereas among left-wingers and centrists the association is near zero. This pattern is consistent with left-leaning and centrist respondents already holding universalism privately, so endorsement does not further move redistribution for them.

On other outcomes, endorsement relates to *normative restraint*. Among left-wing individuals, endorsing universalism is associated with lower support for a strong army. As Cappelen et al. (2025) (p.5) put it, "A strong military is in some ways an antidote to universalism because it serves to defend boundaries between 'us' and 'them'." For left-wingers, public endorsement appears to extend those boundaries.

Among centrists, the associations are even clearer: endorsement coincides with lower support for a strong military and greater prioritization of environmental protection over economic growth. This suggests a deliberative revision of public-layer policy views – even where such revisions may run against immediate material interests – consistent with strategic divergence across normative layers: centrists may privately endorse universalism yet withhold societal support when institutional implementation seems to threaten their interests (e.g., tighter environmental policy vs. growth). This may also help explain why exposure effects are similarly muted for centrists and the extreme right: while extreme-right individuals may reject universalism both privately and publicly on normative grounds, centrists may do so publicly out of self-interest, yielding comparable reduced-form responsiveness for different underlying reasons.

5 State Agents as a Vertical Channel of Deliberation

The model formalizes that the exposure effect of state agents on universalism endorsement does not arise from their personal universalist values; rather, their institutional role makes them anchors of the instituted norm. The instituted norm grounds their moral legitimacy as representatives of the state. To identify this vertical channel of deliberation, I leverage within-person job switches between the private and public sectors and estimate the effect of working for the state on endorsement. Focusing on switchers sweeps out time-invariant individual traits (including private universalism). I exclude mission-oriented public services (education, health, culture, NGOs) so that effects are not driven by self-selection into vocations with strong pre-existing universalist identities.

5.1 Empirical Strategy

I estimate the following fixed effects regression where the state effect is identified only from individuals who change institutional sector:

$$UNIV_{ict} = \eta \times State_{it} + \psi \times Fed_{it} + \delta_{ct} + \gamma_i + \epsilon_{ict}. \qquad (5)$$

The unit of observation is an individual (i) in canton (c) and year (t). $State_{it} = 1$ if the individual works in the public sector (cantonal/communal or federal), 0 if in the private sector (for-profit or nonprofit). $Fed_{it} = 1$ if the individual works in the federal

Figure 5: Effect of Universalism Endorsement on State-Related Policy Preferences by Ideological Group
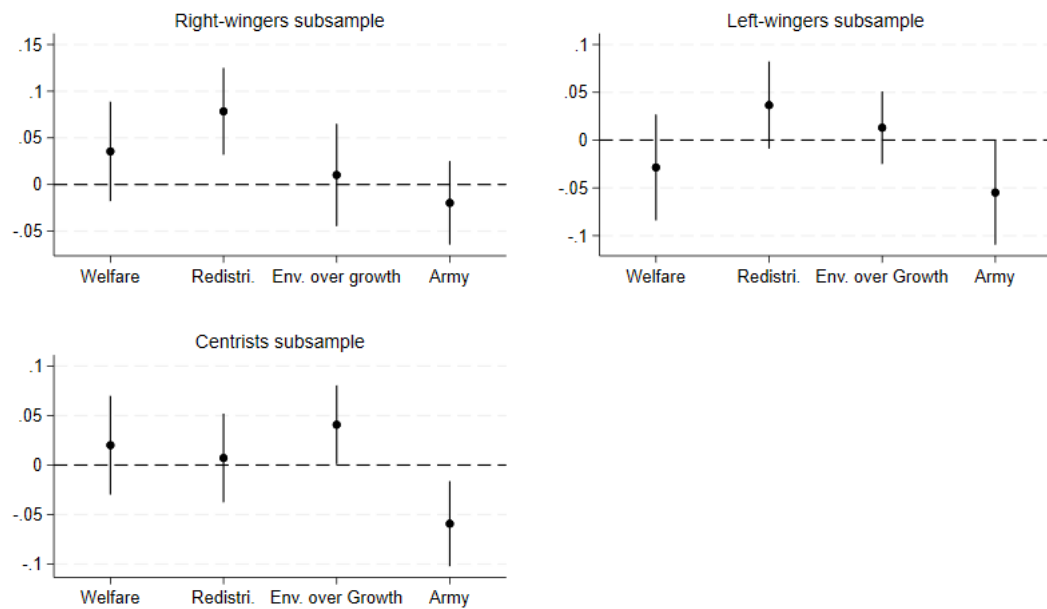
Notes: The figure reports estimates of θ from Equation (4), separately within the three main ideological subsamples (left, center, right); the extreme-right group is omitted due to small cell size. Points are the coefficients on $UNIV_{ict}$ with 90% confidence intervals (standard errors clustered at the individual level). Subsamples follow the same four ideological categories as in Figure 4.

administration, 0 otherwise. Individual fixed effects γ_i absorb time-invariant heterogeneity; δ_{ct} are canton-by-year fixed effects that absorb time-varying canton-level shocks (e.g., local economic conditions). $UNIV_{ict}$ equals 1 if the individual endorses the universalism norm and 0 otherwise. Standard errors are clustered at the individual level.

The within estimator strongly alleviates the selection into occupation concern. However, if workers choose the time spent in an institutional sector as a function of their own dynamics in preferences, then workers who experience a shock to their social norm such that they are aligned with the state's normative legitimacy might switch into the public sector. In the next section, I provide evidence on who the switchers are.

I adopt a within-individual estimation strategy, so identification comes from switchers – workers who move between the private and the public sector. I restrict the sample to Swiss employees aged 20–54 (to focus on voluntary job-to-job mobility; Groot and Verberne (1997)) and exclude the self-employed. The panel covers 1999–2003 and contains 3,777 individuals and 9,849 person-year observations; of these, 2,369 work outside mission-oriented public services. Among the latter, 8.6% switch institutional sector during the window; transitions occur in both directions in roughly equal numbers, and no individual switches more than once[8] Importantly, public jobs offer a wage premium – on average 12%, and up to 29% at the lower end of the pay scale (Portmann et al. (2024)).

The within estimator removes all time-invariant selection (ability, stable values, background). A remaining concern is endogenous timing: workers might switch when their public-layer views shift (e.g., after a shock that aligns them with the instituted norm). I address this below.

5.2 Who are the Switchers?

5.2.1 Addressing the Dynamic Self-selection Concern

Prior work shows that civic-minded agents self-select into caring services (health, education, social care) delivered by both institutional sectors (Francois (2003), Gregg et al. (2011)). This implies any selection on universalism should operate at the service-type, not the institutional level. I test this by comparing pre-switch universalism of future switchers to that of stayers in the same sector/service.

Among workers in the private sector, I regress:

$$UNIV_{ict}^{Private} = \phi \times Switch_i^{State} + \delta_{ct} + Z_{it}'\gamma + u_{it} \tag{6}$$

where the variable $UNIV_{ict}^{Private}$ is equal to 1 if the individual endorses the universalism social norm when he works in the private sector. $Switch_i^{State}$ is an indicator variable equal to one if the individual switches into the public sector (or into specific industries in the public sector) at any point in the future. δ_{ct} are canton-by-year fixed effects. I also include a set of control variables for individual characteristics (gender, number of children, age, religion, culture, college education, marital status, health status, urban) in Z_{it}. Standard errors are clustered at the individual level. The coefficient on the switching indicator therefore captures systematic differences in universalism between those who stay in the

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[8]Switzerland's public employment is highly permeable: recruitment is typically "open" (no competitive exam; Audier and Bacache-Beauvallet (2007)); formal civil-service status was abolished in all but two cantons in the 1990s. . Consequently, worker profiles in the public sector are more heterogeneous. Emery et al. (2014) show that individuals with private sector experience are frequent at all hierarchical levels. Among a sample of 1,045 public-sector top executives, Guido Schilling AG (2023) finds that one-third have private sector experience.

private sector and those who switch out into the public sector at some future point. In addition, to allow for different selection patterns across institutional levels, I run the same regressions while excluding the federal level.

I also consider four binary indicators representing the public and private non-HES sectors and the public and private HES sectors and estimate the following models:

$$UNIV_{ict}^{PrivateNonHES} = \phi \times Switch_i^{StateHES} + \delta_{ct} + Z_{it}'\gamma + u_{ict} \qquad (7)$$

$$UNIV_{ict}^{PrivateHES} = \phi \times Switch_i^{StateNonHES} + \delta_{ct} + Z_{it}'\gamma + u_{ict} \qquad (8)$$

$$UNIV_{ict}^{PrivateHES} = \phi \times Switch_i^{StateHES} + \delta_{ct} + Z_{it}'\gamma + u_{ict} \qquad (9)$$

$$UNIV_{ict}^{PrivateNonHES} = \phi \times Switch_i^{StateNonHES} + \delta_{ct} + Z_{it}'\gamma + u_{ict} \qquad (10)$$

where $StateHES$ stands for occupations in health, education and social care services in the public sector and $StateNonHES$ all other occupations in the public sector (and similarly for the $PrivateHES$ and $PrivateNonHES$ variables in the private sector).

Figure 9 shows that pre-switch differences are confined to service type: future switchers to public HES exhibit higher baseline universalism than private stayers in non-HES, whereas future switchers to public non-HES do not. There is no evidence of institutional-level selection (federal vs. cantonal/communal) within the public sector.

5.2.2 Changing Selection with Switchers

I also examine whether switchers differ systematically from public-sector workers who initially chose similar jobs. Table 10 (Appendix A.3) compares baseline characteristics of workers who start in private non-HES and subsequently move to public non-HES with those who start in public non-HES and remain there. Switchers are younger (by <2 years on average; mean age of 39) and less likely to hold a college degree. While experiences during the "formative years" can shape later-life preferences and views (Roth and Wohlfart (2018), Aneja et al. (2024)), switchers in this sample are well beyond that stage, suggesting that age differences are unlikely to reflect ongoing preference formation.

The education gap aligns with evidence on sorting along mission vs. financial motives among lower-rank talent (Ashraf et al. (2020)). In Switzerland, comparable public jobs pay a premium – on average 12%, and up to 29% at the lower end of the pay scale (Portmann et al. (2024)) – so pecuniary considerations plausibly play a role.

5.3 Working for the State Induces Universalism Norm Endorsement

Table 5 reports estimates of Equation (5) using a fixed-effects linear probability model with individual and cantonyear fixed effects and standard errors clustered at the individual level[9]. Column (1) uses all switches between private and public employment and identifies the effect of working for the state, η. The estimated coefficient is positive and statistically significant, indicating that public employment increases the probability of endorsing the universalism norm. Column (2) restricts to switches that occur *within* the same service type (HES vs. non-HES), addressing occupation-type selection. Column (3) focuses

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[9]Results are robust to using a random-effects logit model (available upon request).

on switches from the private to the public sector, and Column (4) further narrows to private-to-public switches *within non-HES industries*; this serves as the baseline estimate. As the composition becomes tighter across Columns (1)–(4), the estimated effect grows – consistent with diluting selection and composition differences. In Column (4), non-federal public employment increases endorsement by about 10 pp relative to the same individual in a similar private (non-HES) job. Given a 65% private non-HES mean, this is a 15% relative increase. Figure10 (Appendix A.3) shows the effect is not driven by any single canton.

Turning to federal employment, recall the specification includes both $State_{it}$ (any public) and Fed_{it} (federal). The coefficient on Fed_{it}, ψ, is the *increment* of federal over non-federal public. A negative and statistically significant ψ means the federal effect is *weaker* than the non-federal public effect; the net effect of federal vs. private is $\eta + \psi$. I find that the increment ψ offsets much of the non-federal effect, implying a small/zero net effect of federal employment relative to private. This pattern aligns with earlier evidence: cantonal/communal agents endorse universalism more than federal bureaucrats (a 11 pp gap), echoing Ekeh (1975)'s "two publics" distinction (local moral legitimacy vs. a more distant center).

Column (5) presents results for switches from the public to the private sector. The coefficient is negative but imprecisely estimated – sample size is smaller in this direction – so I refrain from strong conclusions about norm erosion in the private sector.

Table 5: Working for the state makes individuals endorse the universalism social norm

UNIV	(1) All switches	(2) All switches within non-HES & HES	(3) Private to public within non-HES & HES	(4) Private to public within non-HES	(5) Public to private within non-HES
State	0.0458**	0.0526**	0.0838**	0.0987**	
	(0.0202)	(0.0266)	(0.0340)	(0.0488)	
State: Federal	-0.0512*	-0.0477	-0.114**	-0.122*	
	(0.0271)	(0.0348)	(0.0549)	(0.0687)	
Private sector					-0.0274
					(0.0427)
Observations	8,672	4,709	6,343	4,531	1,084
Number of individuals	3,590	2,222	2,794	1,960	441

Notes: All regressions include individual fixed effects as well as canton-specific year fixed effects. Robust standard errors are clustered at the individual level. $*p < 0.10$, $**p < 0.05$, $***p < 0.01$.

Spillovers to other preferences. In Table 6, I replicate the specification from Column (4) of Table 5 using the alternative societal preference outcomes from Table 4. Across welfare, redistribution, defense, environment, left–right ideology, and trust in the federal government, the coefficients on public employment are small and statistically indistinguishable from zero. By contrast, public employment is associated with a more critical assessment of the quality of democracy.

5.4 Amplification Through Cultural Variation in State Normative Legitimacy

Public bureaucrats may endorse universalism without fully internalizing it because the public sector's institutional incentives and constraints differ from the private sector. I first ask whether the estimated within-individual effect of working for the state is explained

Table 6: Working for the state does not affect other societal preferences

	(1) Welfare	(2) Redistri.	(3) Environment	(4) Army	(5) Pol. ideology	(6) Trust fed. gov.	(7) Sat. with democracy
State	-0.105	0.0289	-0.0357	-0.0486	-0.0905	-0.300	-0.380*
	(0.107)	(0.122)	(0.0803)	(0.115)	(0.209)	(0.263)	(0.226)
State: Federal	0.167	-0.0518	0.183	0.127	0.117	0.234	0.191
	(0.171)	(0.153)	(0.116)	(0.139)	(0.337)	(0.326)	(0.311)
Observations	4,980	5,036	2,988	5,031	4,451	5,091	5,046
Number of individuals	2,030	2,040	1,559	2,036	1,898	2,052	2,039

Notes: Sample restricted to switches across institutional sectors within non-HES industries. All regressions individual individual fixed effects as well as canton-specific year fixed effects. Robust standard errors are clustered at the individual level. *$p < 0.10$, **$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.01$.

by such institutional factors. Column (1) of Table 7 augments the baseline switcher specification with controls for the public employment bundle (e.g., tenure, pay grade). The state effect becomes slightly larger, and the added coefficients are close to zero. This pattern suggests that the estimated effect is not driven by observable features of public employment, but by the institutional role itself.

Next, I examine heterogeneity in the effect size. Column (2) replicates Column (3) of Table 5, allowing the state effect to differ between caring and non-caring professions (HES vs. non-HES). The difference is small and statistically indistinguishable from zero. This indicates the effect is not a spillover from the organizational culture of mission-oriented jobs; rather, what matters is where individuals work– the public sector as a locus of institutional legitimacy – more than what they do within it. This aligns with the model's assumption that the public sphere confers normative legitimacy on the state at large, not on particular occupations.

In Column (3), I examine whether the effect of state employment is amplified in cultural contexts where the state carries stronger normative legitimacy. French-speaking Swiss are more exposed to the French republican tradition in which the state embodies collective moral purpose (Rousseau's volonté générale)[10], and where civil servants historically act as carriers of the instituted norm in local life (Weber (1976)). This symbolic role is reflected in French constitutional language treating certain activities as public services belonging to society[11]. If the normative legitimacy attaches more strongly to the state in this cultural milieu, then the within-individual effect of taking a state job should be larger for French-speaking workers.

I estimate:

$$UNIV_{ict} = \eta\, State_{it} + \kappa\,(State_{it} \times French_i) + \psi\, Fed_{it} + \delta_{ct} + \gamma_i + \varepsilon_{ict}. \quad (11)$$

where $French_i$ is a time-invariant indicator for French-speaking identity; γ_i are individual fixed effects; δ_{ct} are cantonxyear fixed effects; and standard errors are clustered by

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[10]Rousseau's political philosophy was the dominant intellectual force at the onset of the French Revolution (Bensel (2022)). In his conception of the General Will, the state metaphorically embodies collective moral purpose.

[11]The French Constitution of October 27, 1946, still valid today, asserts in its preamble (paragraph 9): "All property and all enterprises that have or that may acquire the character of a public service or de facto monopoly shall become the property of society".

individual. The coefficient η is the state effect for German-speaking workers; $\eta + \kappa$ is the state effect for French-speaking workers.

Consistent with the prediction, the interaction term is positive and sizable: the estimated state effect for French-speaking workers is roughly double that for German-speaking workers (20 pp vs. 10 pp in the non-HES baseline). These results support the view that working for the state induces endorsement via deliberative recognition of the state's normative legitimacy[12], with greater treatment intensity in cultural contexts where the state is more normatively charged.

Robustness: Is the French-speaking amplification just ideology? Earlier, I showed that exposure effects vary with political ideology. A natural concern is that the larger effect among French speakers simply reflects their more left-leaning composition (cf. Eugster and Parchet (2019)). To rule out this compositional confound, I re-estimate the switcher specification allowing the state effect to vary *simultaneously* by language and by individuals' ideology:

$$UNIV_{ict} = \eta\, State_{it} + \kappa \left(State_{it} \times French_i \right) + \rho \left(State_{it} \times Ideo_i \right) + \psi\, Fed_{it} + \delta_{ct} + \gamma_i + \varepsilon_{ict}, \tag{12}$$

where $French_i$ and $Ideo_i$ (0–10 left-right) are absorbed by γ_i. The French-speaking amplification (κ) remains large and statistically significant once ideology heterogeneity is included, whereas the state effect is *weaker* among left-wing individuals, consistent with higher baseline endorsement (ceiling effects). Thus, the French-speaking result is *not* an artifact of ideology composition; it points to stronger state normative legitimacy in the French-speaking context.

This amplification parallels descriptive evidence of stronger convergence in French-speaking areas: Figure 6 shows lower normative dispersion around the mean – i.e., tighter clustering near the social norm – relative to German-speaking areas, consistent with a stronger vertical deliberative pull. In the model, a larger α (vertical channel) reduces the stationary cross-sectional variance of public norm endorsement at a given mean, yielding tighter clustering. Overall, these results suggest that the state-agent exposure effect estimated in Equation (3) operates as a *vertical deliberation channel*, whereby public employees act as instituted-norm anchors in the public sphere.

6   Conclusion

This paper develops and tests a model of layered moral agency in which individuals hold distinct private and public normative orientations, the latter evolving through deliberation in the public sphere. The public sphere comprises two channels – vertical deliberation with state agents who act as instituted-norm anchors and horizontal deliberation with

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[12]Following Sewell (2005), small shifts in cognitive frames can transform action without altering the material task. Consider a cook who moves from a private cafeteria to a cantonal ministry cafeteria: the tools and production process are identical, but onboarding and everyday deliberation about the institution's mission recast his role from serving a firm to representing the polity. The public-layer stance changes – even if private values do not – so he now endorses the universalism norm as a state agent. This is the role-based, deliberative updating the switcher estimates capture. Classic work on organizational socialization similarly shows that workplaces shape beliefs and role conceptions (Schein (1965), Van Maanen and Schein (1979)).

Table 7: What drives the effect of working for the state?

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
		Universalism Endorsement		
State	0.103*	0.097**	0.067	-0.144**
	(0.056)	(0.045)	(0.055)	(0.059)
State: Federal	-0.133*	-0.127**	-0.144**	-0.167**
	(0.078)	(0.060)	(0.069)	(0.073)
Ln yearly income	0.002			
	(0.025)			
Sat. with colleagues	-0.003			
	(0.006)			
Job Security	0.004			
	(0.011)			
State x HES		-0.020		
		(0.060)		
State x French-Swiss			0.127**	0.150**
			(0.063)	(0.064)
State x Ideology				0.043***
				(0.013)
Observations	3,960	5,338	4,531	3,947
Individuals	1,805	2,316	1,960	1,801

Notes: The sample includes switches only from private non-HES to public non-HES sector in Columns (1) and (3-4). Column (2) considers switches within both non-HES and HES industries. All regressions include individual fixed effects as well as cantonxyear fixed effects. Robust standard errors are clustered at the individual level. *$p < 0.10$, **$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.01$.

Figure 6: Normative Dispersion by Linguistic Region Over Time
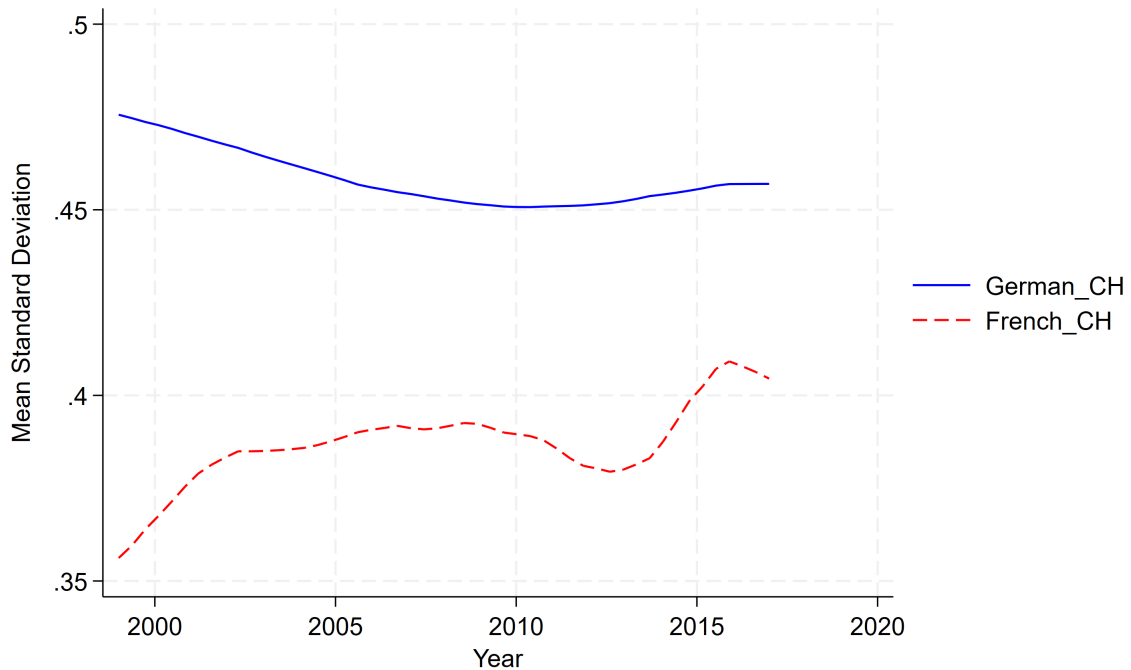
Note: Lines show LOWESS-smoothed series of within-canton dispersion in public norm endorsement (UNIV) by linguistic region (German- and French-speaking cantons; bilingual cantons excluded). For each canton–year, dispersion is the cross-individual *standard deviation* of UNIV; region–year values are the mean of canton–year dispersions. Sample: Swiss residents aged 18 and above.

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peers. The model implies that deliberative structure alone can sustain pluralism, generate localized divergence, or trigger rapid norm cascades even without shifts in private values.

Using geolocated Swiss panel data, I show that endorsement of universalism responds systematically to normative exposure. Per-channel magnitudes align with short-run peer-effects benchmarks, but the key finding is that both state and peer exposures matter, and a negative state-peer interaction indicates partial substitutability rather than a single, undifferentiated exposure effect. Marginal effects remain positive over the observed support, implying crowding-out that is partial, not complete. Mechanism evidence aligns with the model. First, ideological heterogeneity shows that exposure shifts public norm endorsement even among those most likely to value universalism privately, consistent with a layered process. Within-ideology analyses indicate where public endorsement translates into policy views, distinguishing normative grounds from strategic divergence across layers. Second, to isolate the vertical channel, I exploit within-individual switches between private and public employment. Taking a non-federal public job raises the probability of endorsing universalism by roughly 10 percentage points relative to the same person in a comparable private job, while the net federal effect is small – consistent with the instituted norm being anchored locally rather than centrally. The effect is not explained by observable features of public employment or by mission-oriented occupations, and it is amplified in French-speaking regions, consistent with a stronger cultural conception of state normative legitimacy.

Taken together, the findings support a view of the public sphere as an engine of endogenous institutional legitimacy. When vertical and horizontal deliberation reinforce each other, shared norms can scale beyond local clusters; when they substitute too strongly or are unevenly distributed, pluralism and persistent divergence follow. The broader implication is that norms are not only constraints but collective products of deliberation, co-determined with institutions. Accounting for the architecture of the public sphere – who speaks with whom, and with what authority – helps explain when inclusive norms such as universalism diffuse, stall, or unravel.

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A   Appendix: Figures and Tables

A.1   Descriptive statistics

Figure 7: Endorsement of the universalism social norm over time
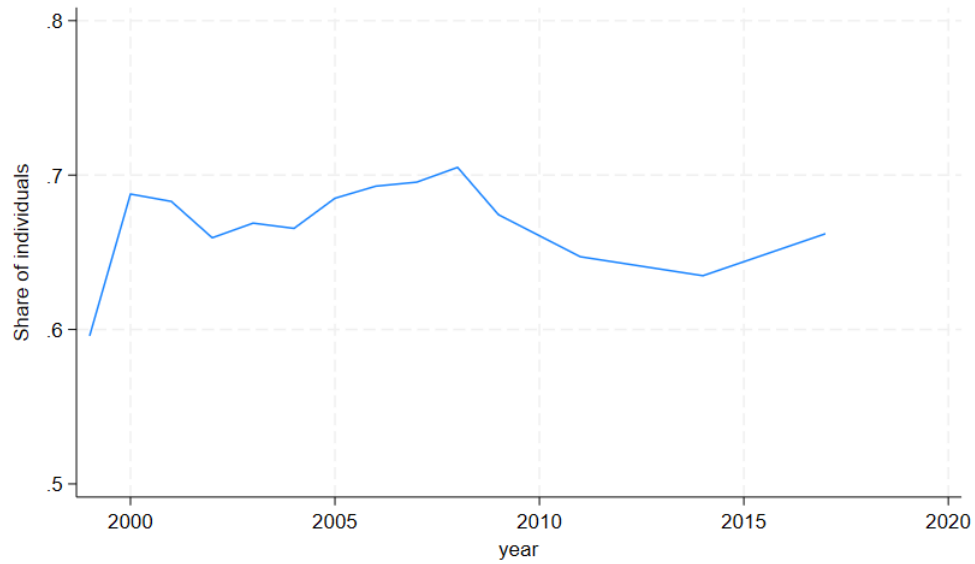
Note: The figure depicts the share of Swiss individuals aged 18 and over who endorse the universalism social norm over the maximal period of time with data availability, corresponding to the yearly average of the variable $UNIV$.

Figure 8: Correlates of endorsement of the universalism social norm
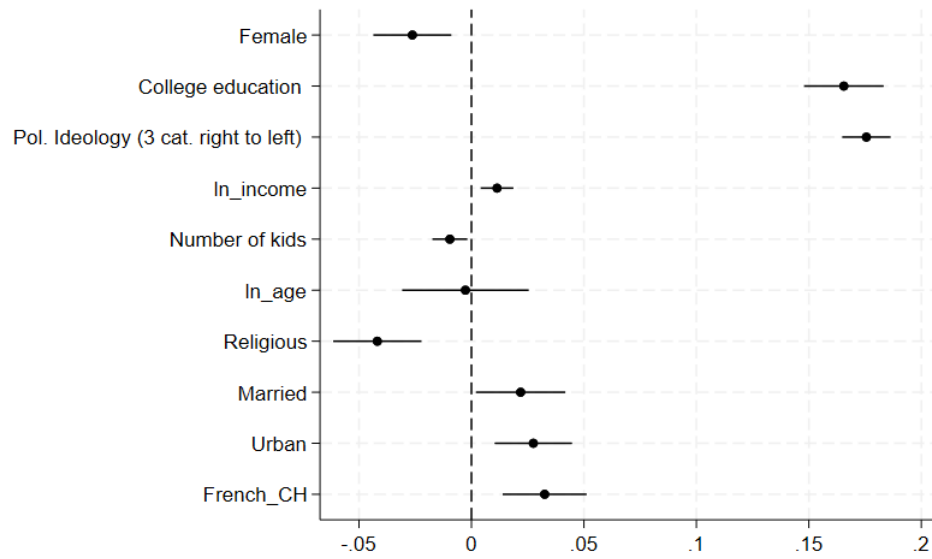
Note: This figure presents OLS Estimates from regressions of the $UNIV$ variable on all sociodemographic correlates, with SE clustered at the individual level, along with 95% confidence intervals.

A.2 Baseline: Robustness Checks

Table 8: Random-effects logit model, Universalism Endorsement among Non-Workers: Effects of Canton–Year Exposure to Universalist State Agents and Peers

	(1)	(3)	(5)
	Individual Universalism Endorsement		
Share UNIV among state employees	1.602**	1.622**	1.515**
	(0.682)	(0.687)	(0.686)
Left-wing state		-0.0636	-0.0881
		(0.234)	(0.235)
Share UNIV among peers			1.274*
			(0.696)
Observations	10,841	10,841	10,841
Number of individuals	4,575	4,575	4,575

Notes: All regressions are estimated using a random-effects logit model and include canton and year fixed effects. The binary dependent variable equals 1 if the non-working individual endorses the universalism social norm, and 0 if they favor preferential treatment for Swiss citizens. *Share UNIV among state employees* and *Share UNIV among peers* refer to canton-year averages of universalism endorsement among state and private sector employees, respectively. *Left-wing state* is a binary indicator equal to 1 if the cantonal executive is left-leaning (see text for coding details). Huber–White standard errors are clustered at the individual level. *$p < 0.10$, **$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.01$.

Table 9: $UNIV$ as a three-point ordinal variable, Universalism Endorsement among Non-Workers: Effects of Canton–Year Exposure to Universalist State Agents and Peers

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Individual Universalism Endorsement		
Share UNIV among state employees	0.286**	0.281**	0.258*
	(0.139)	(0.140)	(0.140)
Left-wing state		0.0135	0.00711
		(0.0481)	(0.0483)
Share UNIV among peers			0.330**
			(0.145)
Observations	12,100	12,100	12,099
Number of individuals	4,779	4,779	4,778

Notes: All regressions are estimated using ordinary least squares (OLS) and include individual fixed effects, as well as canton and year fixed effects. The dependent variable is a three-point ordinal measure coded -1, 0, and 1, capturing the full range of responses. *Share UNIV among state employees* and *Share UNIV among peers* refer to canton-year averages of universalism endorsement among state and private sector employees, respectively. *Left-wing state* is a binary indicator equal to 1 if the cantonal executive is left-leaning (see text for coding details). Standard errors are clustered at the individual level. *$p < 0.10$, **$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.01$.

A.3 Mechanism for state normative effect

Table 10: Switchers to *vs.* stayers in the public non-HES sector

| Variable	(1) Switchers	(2) Stayers	(3) Difference
Share of female	0.429	0.351	0.077
	(0.497)	(0.478)	(0.054)
Share of married	0.623	0.676	-0.053
	(0.487)	(0.469)	(0.053)
Number of children	1.388	1.584	-0.197
	(1.289)	(1.310)	(0.141)
Age	38.714	40.512	-1.798*
	(9.467)	(8.666)	(1.021)
Share of Educ.: college level	0.143	0.242	-0.099**
	(0.352)	(0.428)	(0.040)
Share of living in urban area	0.612	0.574	0.038
	(0.490)	(0.495)	(0.053)
Ln yearly income	10.924	11.051	-0.127*
	(0.612)	(0.602)	(0.070)
State Universalism	0.679	0.729	-0.050
	(0.470)	(0.445)	(0.056)
Ideology	4.273	4.540	-0.268
	(2.263)	(2.107)	(0.258)

Notes: The table displays socio-demographic characteristics of switchers from the private into the public sector and stayers in the public sector within non-HES industries. The last column presents the difference in the mean value of each variable between the two sectors. Columns (1) and (2) standard deviation in parentheses. Columns (3) robust standard errors in parentheses. $*p < 0.10$, $**p < 0.05$, $***p < 0.01$.

Figure 9: Self-selection based on the universalism social norm across industries
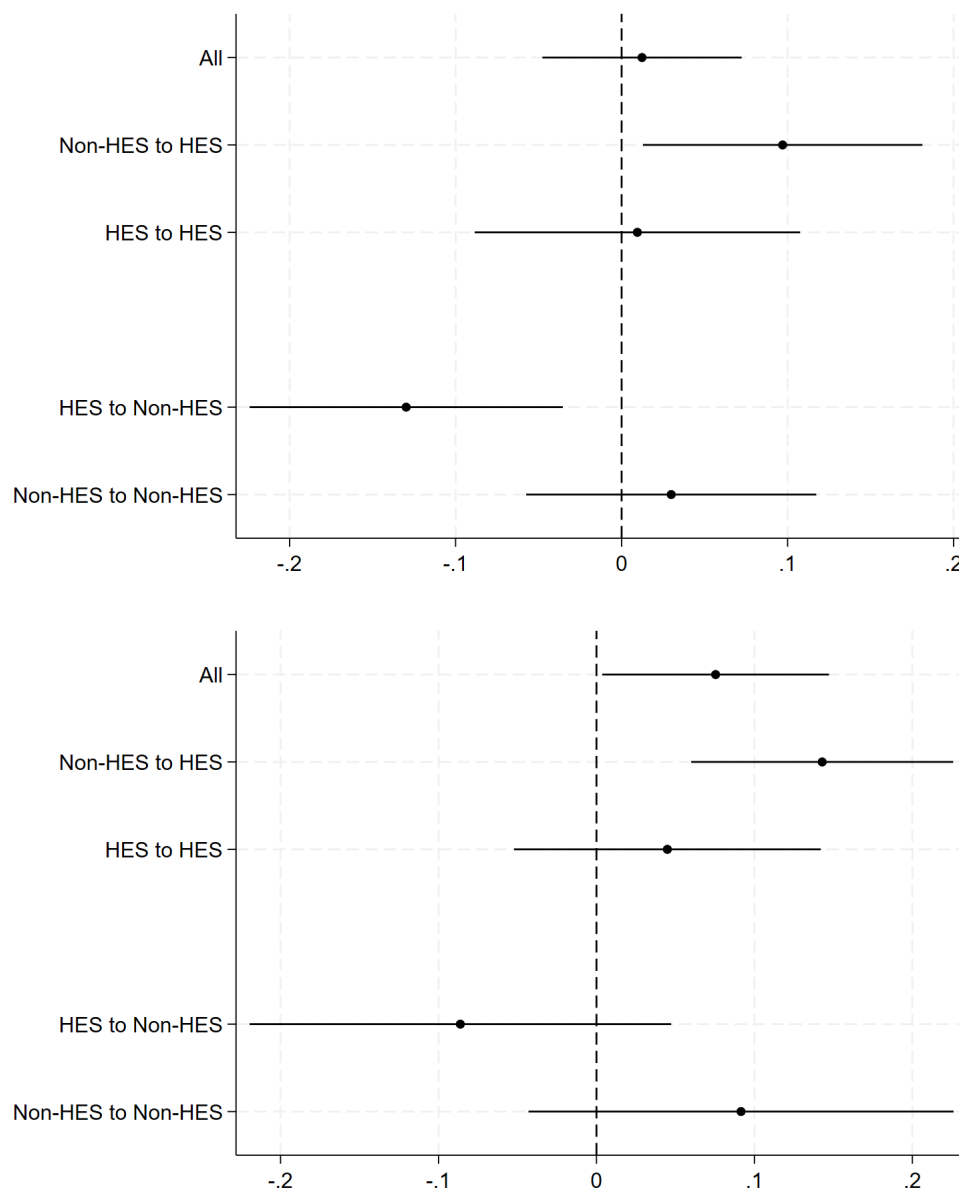
Notes: The figure summarizes regression coefficients of the switching indicators, capturing systematic differences in the universalism social norm between those who stay and those who switch at some future point. The above figure considers all switches while the figure below excludes switches at the federal level. See the text for further details. The 90% confidence intervals are based on standard errors clustered at the individual level.

Figure 10: Universalism social norm – robustness of working for the public non-HES sector, dropping one cantonal bureaucracy at a time
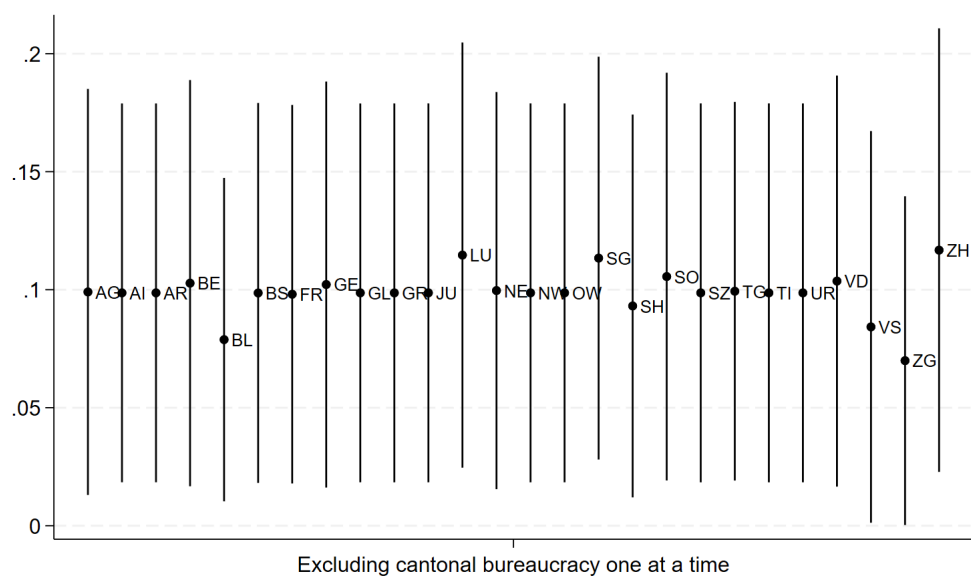
Notes: Figure reports point estimates of the state effect (specification from Column (4) in Table 5), considering switches within non-HES occupations, dropping one state at a time. Reporting 90% confidence intervals. Standard errors clustered at the individual level.