Reason-Based Universalism: Private Giving vs Institutional Provision

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Abstract: Using survey-based games in a representative sample of the French population, we test whether universalist preferences differ across private (personal transfers) and collective (state transfers and public services) allocation channels. We show that universalist preferences are channel-specific: the same individuals allocate up to 10% less to an out-group member in collective than in private channels, especially among respondents with higher cognitive skills. Conditional on private universalism, stronger support for state universalism is associated with lower public-goods contributions, consistent with substitution from voluntary giving to tax-financed redistribution rather than weaker moral concern. Institutional universalism thus does not simply mirror private morality.

Keywords: Universalism; Private giving; Welfare state; Social contract.

JEL codes: D12, D64, D71, H1, Z13

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1. Introduction

Inclusive institutions are widely viewed as key to long-run prosperity, but their emergence is typically traced to the distributional interests of politically powerful groups (Acemoglu et al., 2001, 2002; Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012). In Western countries, a central institutional dimension is the degree of universalism in state-operated social provision (Esping-Andersen 1990). This paper asks to what extent the institutionalization of universalist welfare arrangements reflects not only moral universalism but also individuals' assessment of the costs and distributional incidence of generalized tax-financed policies.

Using a representative sample of the French population, we extend Enke et al. (2022)'s survey-based measure of universalism — originally defined for a private allocation channel — to two collective channels (the state budget and public services) and compare allocations to an out-group member across channels. We find that individuals allocate up to 10% less in collective than in private channels. We then relate within-respondent gaps to covariates including gender, income, education, cognitive skills, political ideology, and trust in government, finding larger gaps for higher–cognitive-skill respondents. Finally, we examine the behavioral implications of collective universalism, conditioning on private universalism. Collective universalism is unrelated to prosociality, negatively associated with public-goods contributions, and as strongly associated with left-wing self-identification as private universalism.

Taken together, three features of our results are consistent with a reason-based view of universalism in collective channels rather than a simple erosion of moral universalism (Athias, 2025; Jetter, 2025). First, universalism is lower in state channels, where allocations are generalized and tax-financed, so a given choice implies a higher fiscal cost. Second, the larger gaps among higher–cognitive-skill respondents are in line with a cost- and incidence-based interpretation. Third, the behavioral evidence — conditional on private universalism — points to a reallocation of willingness to pay for universalist outcomes from targeted, voluntary contributions toward generalized, tax-financed provision among those more supportive of collective universalism. Echoing a social-contract perspective (Besley, 2020), individuals who contribute less directly in public-good games may nevertheless support more redistributive institutions.

2. Data

We replicate Enke et al. (2022)'s unincentivized survey-based measure of universalism in a representative sample of the French population, restricting to respondents with French

nationality (N = 1,017). Respondents were asked how to split 40 euros between two individuals living in France — an in-group member (a French national) and an out-group member (a randomly selected migrant) — under three allocation channels: a personal transfer, a transfer implemented through the general state budget, and a state-implemented healthcare transfer. Allocation decisions to the out-group member are positively correlated across channels (pairwise correlations around 0.7), indicating a stable underlying disposition toward out-group giving while leaving room for channel-specific variation.

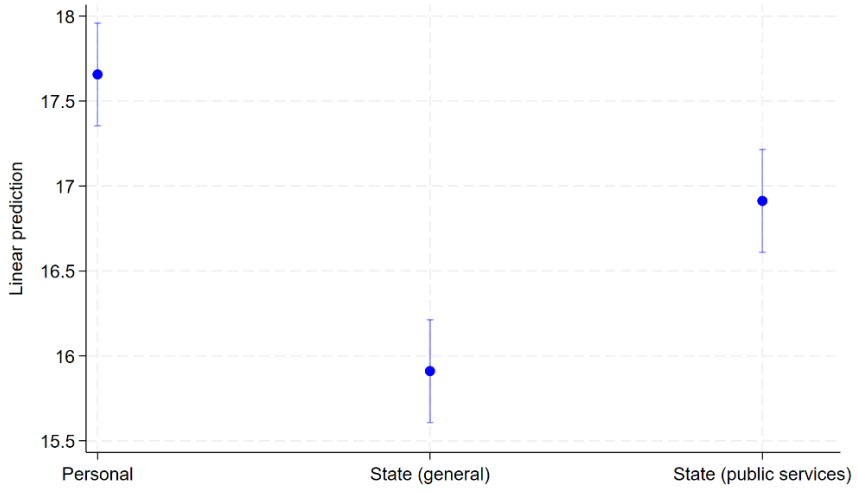
3. Results

3.1. Within-respondent variation in universalism across channels

We first exploit within-respondent variation in allocations to the out-group member across the three channels: personal, general collective (state budget), and public services. We stack all allocation outcomes into a single dependent variable and regress them on respondent fixed effects and channel fixed effects, isolating variation attributable to the channel net of individual-specific propensities to give.

Figure 1 plots the estimated marginal means of out-group allocations by channel. Respondents allocate significantly less — by up to 10% — to the out-group member when the decision is implemented through a collective rather than a personal channel. These within-respondent differences are highly statistically significant, indicating that both the level of the channel (private vs collective) and the type of collective mechanism (general budget vs public services) systematically affect the expression of universalism.

Figure 1: Out-group donations by allocation channel



Notes. The figure reports estimated marginal means of allocations to the out-group member by channel. Estimates come from regressions of allocations on respondent and channel fixed effects, stacking all allocation decisions into a single outcome variable. Vertical bars denote 95% confidence intervals; standard errors are clustered at the respondent level.

3.2. Individual heterogeneity in universalism gaps

We next examine heterogeneity in within-individual universalism gaps to understand divergence across channels. We construct two outcomes: the *Collective_vs_private Universalism Gap (general state budget)* and the *Public service_vs_private Universalism Gap (healthcare)*, defined for each respondent as the difference between out-group allocations in the relevant collective channel and in the private channel. This differenced specification sweeps out respondent fixed effects and allows us to relate channel-specific gaps to observable characteristics, including political ideology and trust in government.

Table 1 reports the results. We find that men expand their universalism in collective relative to private contexts, and right-leaning respondents display a similar pattern, but only for the public-services channel. By contrast, cognitive skills — measured using a three-item reasoning test in the spirit of short IQ modules commonly used in economics (e.g. Enke et al., 2022) — are negatively and significantly associated with both gaps: higher-skill individuals reduce out-group allocations more when the allocation channel is collective, especially for the general state budget. Because this effect holds conditional on income, ideology, trust in government, and college education, it is unlikely to reflect compositional differences and instead points to a cognitive mechanism: more cognitively skilled respondents appear more sensitive to the implications of generalizing and tax-financing universalism.

3.3. Behavioral implications of private and collective universalism

Finally, we study behavioral implications of collective universalism, conditional on private universalism, using two behavioral tasks—a six-item Social Value Orientation (SVO) task (Murphy et al., 2011) and a standard public-goods game (PGG)—and left-wing self-identification as a summary measure of political ideology.

Table 2 reports the results. All universalism measures are standardized (z-scores), and private and general collective universalism are entered separately and jointly to allow direct comparison; we focus on the general collective measure, as the behavioral tasks involve general monetary transfers (results for the healthcare-specific measure are similar). Columns (1)–(3) show that private and collective universalism are each positively and significantly associated with the SVO angle when entered separately. In the joint specification, only private universalism remains

significant, indicating that the component of universalism captured by private allocations is the main predictor of prosociality. Columns (4)-(6) report PGG contributions. Private universalism is positively associated with contributions when included alone and remains strongly positive when collective universalism is added, whereas collective universalism is insignificant on its own but becomes significantly negative once private universalism is controlled for. Conditional on private universalism, individuals with higher collective universalism contribute less to the public good. This negative association is stable: we detect no significant heterogeneity by income, ideology, gender, cognitive skills, or education, consistent with substitution from ad hoc giving to tax-financed provision. Columns (7)–(9) show that both private and collective universalism are strongly associated with more left-wing self-identification when entered separately; in the joint specification, both remain large and highly significant, with collective universalism slightly more strongly associated, suggesting that political ideology is somewhat more tightly linked to preferences over institutional, tax-financed universalism than to purely personal giving.

4. Conclusion

This paper develops a survey-based measure that elicits universalist preferences separately across private and collective channels. Universalism is strongly channel-specific: the same individuals are systematically less universalist when allocations are implemented through the state budget or public services than when they are personal, and gaps are particularly pronounced among higher–cognitive-skill respondents, consistent with sensitivity to the higher fiscal cost of generalized, tax-financed universalism. If such individuals are over-represented among political elites, institutional universalism will reflect their cost-aware calculus – private moral universalism combined with greater concern for the fiscal implications of generalized provision – providing a micro-founded mechanism through which elites' distributional interests shape inclusive institutions.

At the behavioral level, the same reason-based logic appears in how individuals trade off voluntary and institutional provision. Conditional on private universalism, individuals with higher support for universalism in collective channels contribute less to voluntary public goods but are equally prosocial, a pattern consistent with substitution in the mode and scale of provision. This links the cost-based view of institutional universalism to a social-contract perspective, in which individuals who do less in purely voluntary settings may nevertheless support more redistributive institutions. Exploring how these channel-specific universalist preferences and the associated substitution patterns interact with actual tax and spending policies and the dynamics of the social contract is an important avenue for future research.

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Table 1: Individual Heterogeneity in Universalism Gaps

	(1) Private Universalism	(2) Private Universalism	(3) Collective_vs_private Universalism Gap (general state budget)	(4) Collective_vs_private Universalism Gap (general state budget)	(5) PubService_vs_private Universalism Gap (healthcare)	(6) PubService_vs_private Universalism Gap (healthcare)
Male (dummy)	-8.161***	-6.260***	1.895*	1.821*	2.143**	1.851*
	(1.510)	(1.342)	(0.994)	(1.008)	(1.080)	(1.078)
ln(age)	5.244**	3.115	-2.227	-2.055	-0.310	0.133
	(2.204)	(1.966)	(1.558)	(1.589)	(1.763)	(1.773)
Monthly individual	0.211	0.943*	-0.718	-0.730	-0.421	-0.512
Income	(0.00588)	(0.00549)	(0.00461)	(0.00462)	(0.00397)	(0.00401)
College educated	4.882**	1.230	-1.792	-1.628	-2.157	-1.568
(dummy)	(1.992)	(1.828)	(1.491)	(1.509)	(1.487)	(1.498)
Cognitive skills	2.300***	1.140	-1.504***	-1.464***	-1.147*	-0.975*
	(0.834)	(0.761)	(0.546)	(0.540)	(0.587)	(0.589)
Foreign origin (dummy)	-0.133	0.677	-0.593	-0.633	-0.160	-0.296
	(2.216)	(1.989)	(1.545)	(1.547)	(1.664)	(1.650)
Urban (dummy)	1.152	0.515	-0.584	-0.521	-0.496	-0.347
	(1.798)	(1.610)	(1.309)	(1.295)	(1.319)	(1.307)
Political ideology		-4.093***		0.147		0.613**
(left to right)		(0.284)		(0.219)		(0.257)
Trust in Government		3.629***		-0.421		-0.924
		(0.824)		(0.655)		(0.686)
Observations	766	766	766	766	766	766

Notes. All regressions are estimated using Ordinary Least Squares. Sample restricted to respondents with French nationality. *Private universalism* is the difference in allocations between an out-group and an in-group member in the private channel. *Collective_vs_private Universalism Gap* is the difference between out-group allocations in the general state budget and private channels for the same respondent. *PubService_vs_private Universalism Gap* is the analogous difference for the public service (healthcare) channel. Monthly individual income is constructed from income brackets and the respondent's share of household income. Cognitive skills range from 0 to 3 and reflect performance on a three-item reasoning test. Foreign origin = 1 if at least one parent was not born in France. Political ideology is self-reported on a 0-10 left–right scale. Trust in Government ranges from 0 (not at all) to 3 (fully). Robust standard error in parentheses. *$p < 0.10$, **$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.01$.

Table 2: Channel-Specific Universalism and Behavioral/Ideological Outcomes

	(1) SVO angle	(2) SVO angle	(3) SVO angle	(4) PGG	(5) PGG	(6) PGG	(7) Pol. Ideology	(8) Pol. Ideology	(9) Pol. Ideology
Private UNIV	1.960***		1.229**	0.644**		1.258***	-1.002***		-0.555***
	(0.406)		(0.594)	(0.266)		(0.382)	(0.0729)		(0.108)
Collective (general) UNIV		1.882***	0.977		0.106	-0.821**		-1.006***	-0.597***
		(0.419)	(0.613)		(0.265)	(0.379)		(0.0777)	(0.112)
Observations	805	805	805	805	805	805	805	805	805

Notes. All regressions are estimated using Ordinary Least Squares, are restricted to respondents with French nationality, and include individual controls (gender, age, income, college education, cognitive skills, urban, foreign origin). All universalism variables are standardized (z-scores). Definition of *Private UNIV* is as in Table 1; *Collective (general) UNIV* is defined analogously using the state general budget channel. See the text for details on the outcome variables. Heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors are in parentheses. *$p < 0.10$, **$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.01$.