

Holding a Value, Withholding Its Realization: Universalism and the State*

Laure Athias[†], Bruno Ventelou[‡]

September 22, 2026

Abstract

Do individuals want the values they hold to govern the action of the state? We study that step directly, comparing the same individuals' allocations to in-group and out-group recipients when they allocate privately and when the state allocates on their behalf, through the general budget and through healthcare. Using a representative sample of the French population, we find that most respondents do carry their value into state action: among those who allocate equally between an in-group and an out-group recipient in private, roughly three-quarters do so when the state allocates, in each channel. Those who do not move enough to shift the aggregate: out-group allocations fall by about 11% in the budget channel and 4% in healthcare. Conditional on private universalism, two characteristics structure these departures, in both channels. More right-leaning respondents are more likely to allocate less through the state than they do themselves; since the state's allocation is fixed, this concerns whom state action is for. Respondents with higher cognitive skills are distinguished by being less likely to allocate more through the state than they do themselves—consistent with state allocation being evaluated in instrumental terms rather than as the site where values are realized. Carrying the value over, by contrast, is a substantive act: respondents who extend universalism to the state are no less prosocial on a validated measure, yet contribute less to a public good, holding private universalism fixed—as one would expect if the state is, for them, where the value is realized.

*This work was supported by the National Research Agency of France (ANR-17-EURE-0020) and approved by the Ethic Committee of the Aix-Marseille University, Number: 2022-10-20-009. The funding source had no role in study design; in the collection, analysis and interpretation of data; in the writing of the report; and in the decision to submit the article for publication.

[†]University of Lausanne. Corresponding author: laure.athias@unil.ch.

[‡]Aix Marseille University, CNRS.

“In a state which is really articulated rationally all the laws and organizations are nothing but a realization of freedom in its essential characteristics. When this is the case, the individual’s reason finds in these institutions, only the actuality of his own essence, and if he obeys these laws, he coincides, not with something alien to himself, but simply with what is his own.”

*G. W. F. Hegel, Lectures on Fine Art
quoted in Pippin (2008), p. 7*

1 Introduction

Inclusive institutions are widely viewed as key to long-run prosperity (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012), and a substantial literature relates the institutions a society sustains to the values its members hold (see Acemoglu and Robinson, 2025, for a review). That literature is largely dynamic and aggregate, and its evidence runs mainly from institutions to culture. Identifying the reverse direction requires variation in values that is independent of the institutions those values would support, which historical designs rarely provide, whereas exogenous shocks to institutions are comparatively available (Lowes et al., 2017). We approach the question from the other side, at the level of the individual and holding institutions fixed. We compare the same individual’s allocations to in-group and out-group recipients when she allocates privately and when the same allocation is made through the state. What the comparison isolates is the willingness to see the value realized through institutions—whether the respondent accepts that it should govern the state’s action. On the Hegelian account developed in Pippin (2008), the state is central because it is the institutional form through which a value acquires actuality by governing public action, thereby becoming a norm¹.

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 context, to two state-operated channels: redistribution through the general state budget and provision of healthcare. Holding the recipient pair and the amount fixed, the private and budgetary tasks differ only in whether the respondent or the state allocates. The second institutional channel refines this: because the two state channels differ in the domain of state action rather than in whether the state acts, comparing them reveals whether a respondent who withholds universalism from the state withholds it from state action as such, or only from some of it.

Most respondents carry their private allocation into state action unchanged. Among those who allocate equally between the in-group and out-group recipient in private, roughly three-quarters allocate equally in each institutional channel, and movement is largely a property of respondents rather than of channels: 73% do the same thing in both. The aggregate shift is therefore the work of a minority, and it is substantial: out-group allocations are about 10.8% lower in the state-budget channel than in the private channel,

¹The sense of “norm” here differs from the one standard in the literature on social norms (Bicchieri, 2006; Young, 2015; Bursztyn et al., 2020; Bursztyn and Yang, 2022). There, a norm governs individual conduct: it exists where people expect compliance and sanction deviation, and it is self-enforcing. A value can be a norm in that sense—widely held, widely expected, socially enforced—while governing nothing the state does. A norm in the Hegelian sense governs institutional action. As the epigraph states, in a rationally articulated state the laws are themselves the realization of freedom, and the individual finds in these institutions the actuality of his own essence. A value realized in the same way determines the action of the state, and binds independently of whether any particular person continues to assent.

and about 4.4% lower in healthcare. The smaller wedge in healthcare does not reflect fewer withdrawals—the share reducing is similar across channels—but a substantial group who allocate more to the out-group through healthcare than they do themselves.

We then ask who withholds. Because the institutional shortfall is bounded by the private allocation it is measured against, we condition throughout on private universalism, and this changes what the heterogeneity shows. Men exhibit smaller shortfalls only because they are less universalist in private to begin with; conditional on that, gender does not predict the shortfall. Political orientation reverses: more right-leaning respondents display smaller shortfalls unconditionally, but among respondents with the same private universalism they withdraw significantly more, in both channels. Respondents with higher cognitive skills show a larger shortfall in the state-budget channel. Examining whether respondents move at all, and in which direction, shows that the two characteristics move respondents in different directions, and that neither pattern differs significantly between the two channels. Political orientation works chiefly through reduction: more right-leaning respondents are more likely to allocate less to the out-group through the state than they do themselves. Since the state’s allocation is fixed and private universalism is held constant, this is neither a preference for less state action nor a narrower private value, but a view about whom state action is for. Cognitive skills work chiefly through the absence of extension: respondents scoring higher on the reasoning test are less likely to allocate more through the state than they do themselves. To allocate more through the state than one would oneself is to take the state as the site of a universalism beyond one’s own practice; declining to do so is consistent with state allocation being evaluated in instrumental terms rather than as the site where values are realized. The two characteristics thus bear on different questions about the state: whom it is for, and what it is for.

Finally, we ask what carrying a value into state action amounts to. A respondent who allocates identically in the private and institutional channels may be treating the state as the place where her value is realized, or may simply be repeating an allocation without a further judgment. Two behavioral measures and political self-identification distinguish these. Institutional universalism is unrelated to private prosociality once private universalism is controlled for, so it does not simply proxy for moral concern. It is, however, negatively associated with contributions to a public good: holding private universalism fixed, respondents who extend universalism to the institutional channel contribute less voluntarily. The two modes of provision substitute: for those who take the state to be where their value is realized, supplying it themselves is redundant. Political self-identification points the same way: institutional universalism is at least as strongly associated with left-wing placement as private universalism is, which is not what one would expect if extending the value to the state were merely repetition.

The main contribution of this paper is to specify what it takes for values to shape institutions (Tabellini, 2008; Alesina and Giuliano, 2015; Acemoglu and Robinson, 2025). We provide evidence that it depends on a further step the individual takes: treating institutions as the site at which values are realized rather than judging them in instrumental terms, detached from substantive ends. This speaks directly to Athias (2026), where institutional legitimacy is produced rather than conferred—a value is endorsed for institutionalization only when a case for its merit is joined to a case for its realization through the institution that would carry it. Our results supply the individual-level counterpart and show that the two components are separately held: the why alone does not deliver the how. Thus, a society in which universalist values are widely held may nonetheless fail to institutionalize them, not because the values are shallow but because the further judgment

they require is withheld. This relates to a sequence of accounts of how universalism came to characterize Western societies. Henrich (2020) traces impersonal, universalist morality to the weakening of kinship under Church marriage rules; Greif et al. (2025) carry that story forward, showing how weak kinship obliged Europeans to provide public goods through corporate bodies governed by impersonal rules rather than kin obligation, and how emerging state institutions inherited that form. Together they run from the value to an institutional form embodying it, but they do not address whether individuals take that form to be where their own values are realized. Cappelen et al. (2025) show why this matters. They find that what distinguishes Western societies is not universalism itself but its association with views about state action: coefficients are about twice as large in rich Western countries as in rich non-Western ones, and largely absent in low- and middle-income countries—a pattern they document without being able to account for. Our results identify a candidate. The mapping from a private value to a view about state action runs through a judgment that the state is the site at which values are realized, and that judgment need not be made everywhere, or at all times within the same society. Measures of moral universalism therefore capture only one of the two components on which universalistic institutions depend.

The paper also contributes to work on moral boundaries and political ideology (Enke, 2024). Enke et al. (2023) show that moral universalism maps onto left-wing identification. We find that the institutional component is at least as strongly associated with left-wing placement, but separately held, and that it has a dimension the left-right axis does not capture. Political orientation bears on whom state action is for. Respondents with higher cognitive skills differ instead on what it is for: holding their private universalism fixed, they are less likely to allocate more through the state than they would themselves, consistent with assessing state action in instrumental terms rather than as the site where values are realized. This sits in tension with the association between institutional universalism and the left, since the group that assesses state action this way is one Gethin et al. (2022) document as growing within the left’s base, which has shifted toward more educated voters in Western democracies. It also helps make sense of the realignment Kuziemko et al. (2026) document, in which the Democratic Party moved away from predistribution as its base became more educated: a left composed increasingly of voters for whom state allocation is a matter of what it achieves rather than of the values they hold. Our measure is cognitive skill rather than education, and college education predicts neither private universalism nor withholding in our data, so the correspondence is suggestive rather than established.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 introduces the data, and Section 3 presents the results. Section 4 discusses implications and concludes.

2 Data

2.1 Task descriptions

We replicate Enke et al. (2022)’s unincentivized, survey-based measure of universalism in a representative sample of the French population. Recruitment was carried out by Viavoice in August–September 2021 using quota sampling on gender, age, region and socio-professional category, yielding 1,017 French-speaking adults living in France. The questionnaire was implemented on the oTree platform, and participants received a fixed participation payment of approximately 10 euros. We restrict attention to respondents born

in France and drop observations with missing values on the variables used, which leaves 770 respondents in the descriptive analyses. The regression specifications additionally control for urban residence, which is missing for four respondents, and are estimated on 766.

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 stranger)—under three allocation channels: a personal allocation, an allocation implemented through the general state budget, and a state-implemented healthcare allocation. The two institutional tasks were introduced as follows. Respondents first considered the state-budget scenario: “This time, however, it is not you, but the French state, that is provided with 40 euros. Indicate how you would like the state to split this amount of money between the two aforementioned individuals”. They then faced the healthcare scenario: “For this final task, the state is still provided with 40 euros, but this amount must be spent on healthcare (e.g., for a doctor’s visit or medications). Indicate how you would like the state to allocate this healthcare spending between the two aforementioned individuals”. The two channels differ in what the constitutional order settles in advance: healthcare is covered by a person-scoped guarantee extending to foreign residents, whereas budgetary allocation is governed by a principle of equality that permits justified differentiation². Neither channel excludes universalism toward a foreign resident, but the budget channel leaves more to the judgment of those who would have the state act, and is where heterogeneity across respondents should concentrate.

The tasks were presented in a fixed order, with the private allocation first. This was a design requirement. Once a respondent has been asked how the state should allocate, the private question no longer measures private universalism cleanly, since the institutional frame has already been introduced. Because our analysis conditions throughout on private universalism as the baseline against which institutional allocations are measured, randomizing the order would have compromised the variable that everything else is measured against. Fixed order nonetheless raises the concern that the observed differences reflect position in the sequence—fatigue, drift, or accumulating demand effects—rather than the allocation channel. The pattern of results is difficult to reconcile with such explanations. Any account in which position drives responses predicts monotonicity in position: allocations should decline, or rise, across the three tasks. What we observe is non-monotonic in position and ordered by content, with out-group allocations falling sharply in the second task and recovering in the third, so that the largest departure from private giving occurs in the middle of the sequence rather than at its end. Respondents were moreover not informed of the content of subsequent tasks, so no anticipation of the later channels could shape earlier allocations. A contrast effect between the healthcare task and the budget task preceding it cannot be excluded, but allocations in the third task remain about 4% below the private level rather than returning to it, so a shortfall specific to institutional allocation persists.

Two measures are used. The out-group allocation is the amount allocated to the out-group recipient in a given channel, and is the object described in the descriptive

²Paragraph 11 of the Preamble to the 1946 Constitution, which retains constitutional force, provides that the Nation guarantees to all the protection of health, and the Conseil constitutionnel has treated this as extending to foreigners. General budgetary allocation is governed instead by the principle of equality, derived principally from Article 6 of the 1789 Declaration, which applies to foreigners but does not require identical treatment: the legislature may distinguish between nationals and foreigners where they are in different situations, provided the distinction bears a direct relation to the object of the law (Decision 93-325 DC of 13 August 1993).

statistics below and in Figure 1. Universalism in a channel is the difference between the out-group and in-group allocations in that channel, which nets out a respondent’s overall generosity; this is the measure used in Sections 3.2 and 3.3.

2.2 Distribution of allocations

Table 1 reports the distribution of out-group allocations in each channel. Allocations are strongly concentrated on focal values: the amounts 0, 10, 20, 30 and 40 account for between 74% and 78% of allocations depending on the channel, and equal division alone accounts for 41–47%. Allocation behavior is therefore better described as the application of a small number of division rules than as a choice over a continuum.

The mass shifts across channels in ways that the average differences do not convey. Relative to the private channel, the state-budget channel draws respondents away from equal division (45.7% to 41.0%) and toward the lower part of the distribution, with the share allocating nothing to the out-group rising slightly (14.8% to 15.6%) and the shares at 10 and in the 11–19 range increasing substantially. The healthcare channel moves in the opposite direction on both margins: equal division becomes *more* common than in the private channel (47.0%), and the share allocating nothing to the out-group falls (14.8% to 12.1%). The healthcare channel thus does not simply attenuate the withdrawal observed in the budget channel; it draws a portion of respondents toward equal treatment, including some who allocate nothing to the out-group when allocating privately.

2.3 Movement across channels

Table 2 compares each respondent’s out-group allocation across channels. Most respondents do not adjust: 63.6% allocate identically in the private and state-budget channels, and 57.4% do so in the private and healthcare channels. Among those who do adjust, the direction differs by channel. In the state-budget channel, reductions outnumber increases by nearly three to one (26.8% versus 9.6%). In the healthcare channel the two are closer (24.3% versus 18.3%). The smaller average wedge in healthcare therefore does not reflect fewer withdrawals—the share reducing is similar across the two channels—but the presence of a substantial group of respondents who allocate more to the out-group when allocation runs through healthcare than when they allocate themselves.

These figures pool respondents whose private allocations differ widely, including those who allocate nothing to the out-group in the private channel and cannot reduce further. Restricting attention to the 352 respondents who divide the endowment equally in private—the group whose private allocation is universalist—76% allocate equally in the state-budget channel and 79% in the healthcare channel. Most respondents who treat the two recipients equally when allocating themselves do so when the state allocates on their behalf.

Movement is also largely a property of respondents rather than of channels. Table 3 reports the joint distribution of the direction of change in the two institutional channels. Some 73% of respondents do the same thing in both: 49% allocate identically to their private allocation in each, 17% reduce in both, and 7% increase in both. Only 13% move in one channel and not the other, and the two off-diagonal cells are of similar size—56 respondents reduce in the state-budget channel while leaving healthcare unchanged, and 47 do the reverse.

Table 1: Distribution of Out-Group Allocations by Channel

Out-group allocation	Private	State budget	Healthcare
0 (nothing to out-group)	14.81	15.58	12.08
1–9	5.19	7.27	7.01
10	6.49	10.26	8.83
11–19	6.75	11.43	8.83
20 (equal split)	45.71	41.04	47.01
21–29	8.57	6.23	7.66
30	4.16	2.73	2.73
31–39	1.95	1.30	1.82
40 (all to out-group)	6.36	4.16	4.03
Mean allocation	17.63	15.80	16.93
Share on focal values	77.53	73.77	74.68
<i>N</i>	770	770	770

Notes: Cell entries are percentages of respondents. Focal values are 0, 10, 20, 30 and 40.

Table 2: Within-Respondent Movement Across Channels

	Reduce	No change	Increase
State budget vs. private	26.75	63.64	9.61
Healthcare vs. private	24.29	57.40	18.31

Notes: Cell entries are percentages of respondents, comparing each respondent’s out-group allocation in the institutional channel to her own out-group allocation in the private channel.

Table 3: Joint Distribution of Movement Across Institutional Channels

State-budget channel	Healthcare channel			Total
	Reduce	No change	Increase	
Reduce	129	56	21	206
No change	47	378	65	490
Increase	11	8	55	74
Total	187	442	141	770

Notes: Number of respondents by direction of the change in the out-group allocation relative to their own private allocation, in each institutional channel.

3 Results

This section proceeds in three steps. We first estimate the average within-respondent shift across channels. We then ask who moves, and in which direction, relating the magnitude and direction of this shift to respondent characteristics. Finally, we ask what carrying a value into state action amounts to, relating institutional universalism to behaviour in two tasks measuring private prosociality and voluntary contribution to a public good, as well as to political self-placement.

3.1 Within-respondent variation in out-group allocations across channels

We first exploit within-respondent variation in allocations to the out-group recipient across the three channels. We stack the three allocation decisions for each respondent and estimate

$$Y_{ic} = \alpha_i + \delta_c + \varepsilon_{ic}, \quad (1)$$

where Y_{ic} is respondent i 's allocation to the out-group in channel c , α_i are respondent fixed effects, and δ_c are channel fixed effects. This specification differences out stable individual propensities to give and identifies the average within-person shift in out-group allocations across channels.

Figure 1 plots the estimated marginal means. Relative to the private channel, respondents allocate substantially less to the out-group when allocation is implemented through the general state budget—about 10.8% of the mean out-group allocation—while the reduction is smaller in the healthcare channel, at about 4.4%. Both differences are statistically significant (-1.92 , s.e. = 0.31 , and -0.79 , s.e. = 0.33), and the reduction in the state-budget channel is significantly larger than in healthcare ($F = 17.88$, $p < 0.001$). The direction is the same in both channels: whatever the channel, out-group allocations fall when the allocation is made by the state rather than by the respondent herself. What varies is how far.

3.2 Individual heterogeneity in universalism gaps

As the descriptive evidence showed, most respondents carry their allocation over unchanged, so the aggregate shift is the work of a minority; we turn to who they are. We study how the within-respondent channel differences vary with respondent characteristics. For each respondent we construct two outcomes: the state-budget gap and the healthcare gap, each defined as the difference between universalism in the relevant institutional channel and universalism in the private channel. Universalism within a channel is the difference between the out-group and in-group allocations, which nets out a respondent's overall generosity. Negative values therefore indicate lower universalism under the institutional channel.

How far respondents withdraw. The gap measures how far institutional endorsement falls short of what private universalism alone would license. It is therefore bounded by that baseline: a smaller gap may indicate either a more favorable assessment of the institutional channel or simply less private universalism to withdraw. We report each specification with and without private universalism as a control, and read the conditional estimates as capturing the institutional judgment proper.

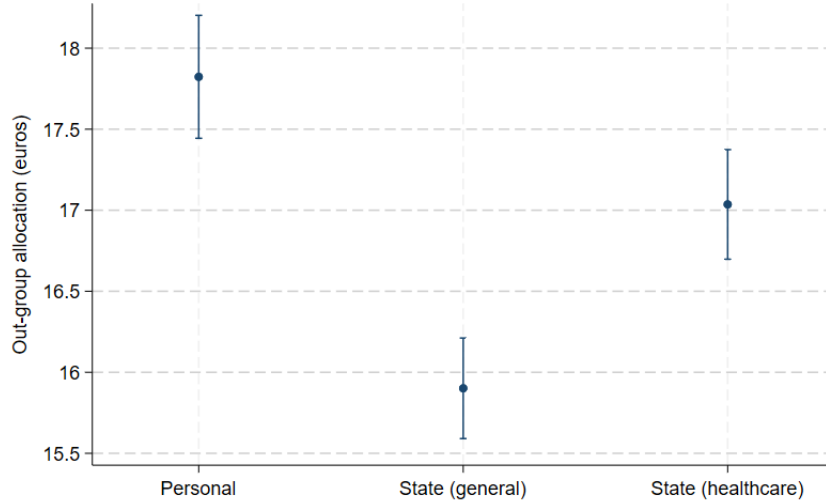


Figure 1: Estimated mean out-group allocation by channel

Notes: The figure reports estimated marginal means of allocations to the out-group recipient by channel from regressions of stacked allocations on respondent and channel fixed effects. Linear predictions are in euros. Vertical bars denote 95% confidence intervals; standard errors are clustered at the respondent level.

Table 4 reports the results, and the distinction matters. Unconditionally, men exhibit smaller gaps in both channels. This is entirely a baseline phenomenon: men are markedly less universalist in the private channel to begin with (column 1), and once private universalism is controlled for, the male coefficient shrinks toward zero and is no longer statistically significant in either channel (columns 3 and 5). Conditional on private universalism, men do not evaluate the institutional channel differently from women.

Political ideology behaves in the opposite way, and the unconditional estimate is actively misleading. More right-leaning respondents display smaller unconditional gaps—significantly so in the healthcare channel—but they are also substantially less universalist in private (column 1), which compresses the room available for any institutional shortfall. Conditioning on private universalism reverses the sign: among respondents with the same private universalism, more right-leaning respondents withdraw significantly more when allocation becomes institutional, in both channels. The institutional judgment is thus ideologically structured in its own right, independently of the private allocation brought to it.

Cognitive skills, measured by a three-item reasoning test, are associated with a larger institutional shortfall, whereas education is not. This distinction is important. Neither cognitive skills nor education predicts private universalism in column 1. Yet cognitive skills are negatively associated with the gap, an association that survives conditioning in the state-budget channel, though not in the healthcare channel.

Whether they withdraw at all. The gap regressions measure the size of the shortfall but not how it arises. To examine this we return to out-group allocations, comparing each respondent’s allocation in an institutional channel to her own private allocation. A given average gap is consistent with many respondents withdrawing slightly, with few withdrawing sharply, or with withdrawals offset by respondents moving in the other direction—and the third possibility is not hypothetical here: in the healthcare channel,

Table 4: Individual Heterogeneity in Institutional–Private Universalism Gaps

	(1) Private universalism	(2) State-budget gap	(3)	(4) Healthcare gap	(5)
Male	−6.260*** (1.342)	1.821* (1.008)	−0.329 (0.936)	1.851* (1.078)	−0.630 (0.983)
Log(age)	3.115 (1.966)	−2.055 (1.589)	−0.985 (1.388)	0.133 (1.773)	1.368 (1.592)
Monthly income	0.0094* (0.0055)	−0.0073 (0.0046)	−0.0041 (0.0041)	−0.0051 (0.0040)	−0.0014 (0.0034)
College educated	1.230 (1.828)	−1.628 (1.509)	−1.206 (1.337)	−1.568 (1.498)	−1.081 (1.320)
Cognitive skills (CRT)	1.140 (0.761)	−1.464*** (0.540)	−1.073** (0.478)	−0.975* (0.589)	−0.523 (0.505)
Foreign origin	0.677 (1.989)	−0.633 (1.547)	−0.401 (1.262)	−0.296 (1.650)	−0.027 (1.383)
Urban	0.515 (1.610)	−0.521 (1.295)	−0.344 (1.196)	−0.347 (1.307)	−0.143 (1.173)
Political orientation (right)	−4.093*** (0.284)	0.147 (0.219)	−1.258*** (0.258)	0.613** (0.257)	−1.009*** (0.282)
Trust in government	3.629*** (0.824)	−0.421 (0.655)	0.825 (0.603)	−0.924 (0.686)	0.515 (0.599)
Private universalism			−0.343*** (0.0388)		−0.396*** (0.0375)
Observations	766	766	766	766	766

Notes: OLS regressions. *Universalism* within a channel is the difference between the out-group and the in-group allocation in that channel. The dependent variable in column (1) is private universalism; in columns (2)–(3) it is the difference between universalism in the state-budget channel and private universalism, and in columns (4)–(5) the corresponding difference for the healthcare channel. Institutional–private gaps are negative on average, so a positive coefficient indicates a smaller institutional shortfall and a negative coefficient a larger one. Columns (3) and (5) additionally control for private universalism. Monthly individual income is constructed from income bands and the respondent’s share of household income. Cognitive skills range from 0 to 3 based on a three-item reasoning test. Foreign origin = 1 if at least one parent was not born in France. Political orientation is self-reported on a 0–10 left–right scale, so higher values indicate more right-wing placement. Trust in Government ranges from 0 to 3. Heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

24.3% of respondents allocate less to the out-group than they do privately while 18.3% allocate more. We therefore examine the extensive margin, estimating a multinomial logit in which the outcome is the direction of the within-respondent change—reduction, no change, or increase—with no change as the omitted category.

Tables 5 and 6 report average marginal effects. In the healthcare channel, the two margins are governed by different characteristics. A one-point move to the right on the political scale raises the probability of reducing the out-group allocation by 2.2 percentage points (column (1), Table 6), against a base rate of 24.3%, but has no association with the probability of increasing it. A one-point increase in the cognitive-skills score lowers the probability of increasing by 4.4 percentage points (column (2)), against a base rate of 18.3%, while leaving the probability of reducing unaffected. Neither characteristic predicts movement on the margin governed by the other.

In the state-budget channel the same two characteristics operate, but on both margins rather than one each. A one-point move to the right raises the probability of reducing by 2.6 percentage points and lowers the probability of increasing by 1.3 points. A one-point increase in cognitive skills lowers the probability of increasing by 4.3 points and raises the probability of reducing by 3.1 points. Both characteristics thus shift the distribution of movement toward withdrawal when allocation runs through the general budget.

The coefficients on private universalism in these specifications should not be read behaviorally. Because the outcome is defined relative to the private allocation, respondents allocating more privately have more scope to reduce and less to increase, which the positive and negative marginal effects reflect. The variable is included to hold the private baseline fixed, as elsewhere in this section.

The two analyses—the size of the institutional shortfall and the direction of within-respondent movement—point the same way, and none of the effects differs significantly across the two institutional channels³. What separates political orientation from cognitive skills is the direction in which each moves respondents. Ideology works chiefly through reduction: more right-leaning respondents are more likely to allocate less through the state than they do privately, in both channels. Because the amount the state allocates is fixed, this is not a preference for less state action but a view about whom state action is for. Holding private universalism fixed, these respondents want the state to favour the national recipient more than they do themselves—consistent with a conception of the state as the agent of a bounded national community, whose obligations run first to its members even where private generosity extends further. The pattern holds in healthcare as well, even though the constitutional guarantee there extends protection to all persons. Cognitive skills work chiefly through the absence of extension: respondents scoring higher on the reasoning test are about four percentage points less likely to allocate more through the state than they do themselves, in each channel. To allocate more through the state than one would oneself is to want the state to treat the out-group recipient more equally than one’s own practice does—to take the state as the site of a universalism beyond the private one. That these respondents are less likely to do so is what an instrumental conception of state allocation implies: the state is evaluated on what its allocation achieves rather than treated as the site where values are realized. On such a view the relevant questions

³Cross-channel differences are tested in a linear probability model stacking the two institutional channels, with all covariates interacted with a channel indicator and standard errors clustered by respondent. For cognitive skills, $p = 0.43$ for reduction and $p = 0.98$ for extension; for political orientation, $p = 0.66$ and $p = 0.17$.

about an allocation are how well it is targeted, what it costs, and whether it is the right instrument. Our design does not observe respondents' reasons, but on this reading the state is not, for these respondents, where the value is given effect. The two characteristics thus bear on different questions about the state: political orientation on whom it is for, cognitive skills on what it is for.

Table 5: Who Reduces and Who Increases: State-Budget Channel

	Reduces (1)	Increases (2)
Male	−0.048 (0.032)	−0.002 (0.023)
Log(age)	0.063 (0.048)	0.013 (0.034)
Monthly income	0.00004 (0.0001)	−0.0001 (0.0001)
College educated	0.039 (0.042)	−0.0003 (0.024)
Cognitive skills (CRT)	0.031* (0.017)	−0.043*** (0.014)
Foreign origin	−0.029 (0.047)	−0.023 (0.034)
Urban	0.054 (0.037)	−0.019 (0.022)
Political orientation (right)	0.026*** (0.007)	−0.013** (0.006)
Trust in government	0.013 (0.018)	0.020* (0.012)
Private universalism	0.007*** (0.0008)	−0.003*** (0.0007)
Observations	766	

Notes: Average marginal effects from a multinomial logit in which the dependent variable is the direction of the within-respondent change in the out-group allocation between the private and the state-budget channel; the omitted category is no change. Entries are the marginal effect on the probability of the indicated outcome. Delta-method standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

3.3 Behavioral correlates of private and institutional universalism

The preceding results identify who withholds universalism from state action and who does not. They leave open what carrying it over amounts to. A respondent who allocates identically in the private and institutional channels may be treating the state as the place where her value is realized, or may simply be repeating an allocation without a further judgment. We therefore relate institutional universalism to two behavioural measures and to political self-placement, conditioning throughout on private universalism.

The first behavioural measure is a six-item Social Value Orientation task following Murphy et al. (2011), in which respondents make dictator-like allocation choices involving personal transfers to a randomly selected recipient; the resulting SVO angle is a validated measure of private prosociality, with higher values indicating greater prosociality. The second is a standard public-goods game. We also use left–right self-identification as a

Table 6: Who Reduces and Who Increases: Healthcare Channel

	Reduces (1)	Increases (2)
Male	−0.023 (0.030)	0.038 (0.029)
Log(age)	−0.018 (0.047)	0.011 (0.044)
Monthly income	0.0001 (0.0001)	−0.00002 (0.0001)
College educated	0.028 (0.040)	0.033 (0.034)
Cognitive skills (CRT)	0.017 (0.016)	−0.044*** (0.016)
Foreign origin	0.001 (0.044)	−0.018 (0.042)
Urban	0.010 (0.035)	−0.030 (0.031)
Political orientation (right)	0.022*** (0.007)	−0.006 (0.007)
Trust in government	0.012 (0.018)	0.023 (0.016)
Private universalism	0.008*** (0.0008)	−0.005*** (0.0008)
Observations	766	

Notes: Average marginal effects from a multinomial logit in which the dependent variable is the direction of the within-respondent change in the out-group allocation between the private and the public-service channel; the omitted category is no change. Entries are the marginal effect on the probability of the indicated outcome. Delta-method standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

summary measure of political ideology. We use the state-budget measure of institutional universalism, as the behavioral tasks involve general monetary transfers; results using the healthcare-based measure are similar. Each specification enters private and institutional universalism separately and then jointly, with both measures standardized.

Table 7 reports the results. Columns (1)–(3) establish what institutional universalism is not. Private and institutional universalism are each positively associated with prosociality when entered alone; entered jointly, only private universalism remains statistically significant, though the two estimates are not sharply distinguished and we do not read the difference between them as informative. Institutional universalism carries no additional association with private prosociality once private universalism is accounted for: it does not simply proxy for moral concern.

The remaining columns bear on the question with which this section opened. Columns (4)–(6) report contributions to the public good. Private universalism is positively associated with contributions whether entered alone or jointly. Institutional universalism is unrelated to contributions on its own, but becomes significantly negative once private universalism is controlled for. In the joint specification, a one-standard-deviation increase in institutional universalism is associated with 0.82 fewer points contributed to the public account, about 8.5% of the mean contribution, while a one-standard-deviation increase in private universalism is associated with 1.26 more points, about 13% of the mean. The two modes of provision substitute: for those who take the state to be where their value is realized, supplying it themselves is redundant.

Columns (7)–(9) report political self-placement. Both measures are strongly associated with more left-wing placement when entered alone, and both remain large and highly significant when entered jointly, with coefficients of comparable magnitude. Preferences over institutional universalism are thus at least as tightly linked to political ideology as universalism expressed in private giving—which is not what one would expect if extending a value to the state were merely the repetition of a private allocation, and not what an account of ideology built on private moral dispositions alone would predict.

4 Conclusion

This paper asks whether individuals want the values they hold to govern the action of the state. Comparing the same respondents’ allocations when they allocate privately and when the state allocates on their behalf, we find that most carry their value into state action: roughly three-quarters of those who divide equally in private do so when the state allocates. The minority who do not move enough to lower out-group allocations in both institutional channels, and their departures are structured by two characteristics bearing on different questions about the state.

Holding private universalism fixed, more right-leaning respondents have the state favor the national recipient more than they do themselves, consistent with a conception of the state as the agent of a bounded national community—a view about whom state action is for. Respondents scoring higher on the reasoning test withdraw too, significantly so in the state-budget channel, but what distinguishes them is the other margin: in neither channel are they as likely as others to have the state allocate more than they would themselves. To have the state treat the out-group recipient more equally than one’s own practice does is to take it as the site of a universalism beyond the private one; declining to do so, while not being less universalist in private, fits an instrumental conception of state allocation,

Table 7: Private vs. Institutional Universalism and Behavioral/Ideological Outcomes

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
	SVO angle			PGG			Political ideology		
Private UNIV	2.074*** (0.409)		1.415** (0.607)	0.667** (0.269)		1.424*** (0.369)	-1.037*** (0.074)		-0.579*** (0.117)
State-budget UNIV		1.918*** (0.426)	0.977 (0.613)		0.074 (0.270)	-0.989*** (0.368)		-1.031*** (0.079)	-0.598*** (0.121)
Observations	766	766	766	766	766	766	766	766	766

Notes. OLS regressions. All specifications include individual controls (gender, age, income, college education, cognitive skills, urban, and foreign origin). *Private UNIV* is the difference between allocations to the out-group and the in-group in the private channel; *State-budget UNIV* is defined analogously in the state-budget channel. Universalism variables are standardized (z -scores). *SVO angle* (Murphy et al., 2011); higher values indicate greater prosociality. *PGG* is the respondent's contribution to the public account in a standard public-goods game (0–20). *Political ideology* is self-reported on a 0–10 left–right scale so that negative coefficients indicate more left-wing placement. Heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors are in parentheses. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

on which the state is evaluated by what its allocation achieves rather than treated as the site where values are realized—a view about what state action is for. For the majority who carry their value into state action, by contrast, doing so is substantive rather than nominal: those who extend universalism to the state contribute less to a public good, holding private universalism fixed. The two modes of provision substitute: for those who take the state to be where their value is realized, supplying it themselves is redundant.

On the account developed in this paper, a value becomes a norm by acquiring institutional form, and the state is the institution through which it does so, because it integrates particular interests into a common legal-political order that family and civil society realize only partially. Most respondents grant their value that form; those who assess state action instrumentally do not. If the latter are over-represented among policymakers, universalistic policy may come to be designed on a conception of the state that most citizens do not share.

Our evidence comes from a single country, and France is a case where the state has long been understood as the site at which collective values, or the general will, are realized—a conception with roots in the republican tradition associated with Rousseauian political thought. The share of respondents who carry their value into state action is therefore plausibly an upper bound: where the state is understood more instrumentally, fewer should grant it that role. This bears on the level rather than on the structure of our results. That carrying a value into state action is a separate judgment does not depend on how often it is made, and a setting less favorable to the republican conception would if anything make the separation easier to observe. It also means that respondents who read state allocation instrumentally here are departing from a strong local default. Future research could measure directly the conception of state action we infer here from behavior, and link it to concrete policy choices.

References

- Acemoglu, Daron and James A. Robinson (2012) *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*, New York: Crown Publishing Group.
- (2025) “Culture, Institutions, and Social Equilibria: A Framework,” *Journal of Economic Literature*, 63 (2), 637–92, 10.1257/jel.20241680.
- Alesina, Alberto and Paola Giuliano (2015) “Culture and Institutions,” *Journal of Economic Literature*, 53 (4), 898–944, 10.1257/jel.53.4.898.
- Athias, Laure (2026) “Why and How: Public-Sphere Persuasion and Institutional Legitimacy,” working paper.
- Bicchieri, Cristina (2006) *The Grammar of Society: The Nature and Dynamics of Social Norms*: Cambridge University Press.
- Bursztyn, Leonardo, Georgy Egorov, and Stefano Fiorin (2020) “From Extreme to Mainstream: The Erosion of Social Norms,” *American Economic Review*, 110 (11), 3522–48, 10.1257/aer.20171175.
- Bursztyn, Leonardo and David Y. Yang (2022) “Misperceptions About Others,” *Annual Review of Economics*, 14 (Volume 14, 2022), 425–452, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-economics-051520-023322>.

- Cappelen, Alexander W., Benjamin Enke, and Bertil Tungodden (2025) “Universalism: Global Evidence,” *American Economic Review*, 115 (1), 43–76, 10.1257/aer.20230038.
- Enke, Benjamin (2024) “Moral Boundaries,” *Annual Review of Economics*, 16 (1), 133–157.
- Enke, Benjamin, Ricardo Rodriguez-Padilla, and Florian Zimmermann (2022) “Moral Universalism: Measurement and Economic Relevance,” *Management Science*, 68 (5), 3175–3973, <https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.2021.4086>.
- (2023) “Moral Universalism and the Structure of Ideology,” *The Review of Economic Studies*, 90 (4), 1934–1962, 10.1093/restud/rdac066.
- Gethin, Amory, Clara Martínez-Toledano, and Thomas Piketty (2022) “Brahmin Left Versus Merchant Right: Changing Political Cleavages in 21 Western Democracies, 1948–2020,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 137 (1), 1–48, 10.1093/qje/qjab036.
- Greif, Avner, Joel Mokyr, and Guido Tabellini (2025) *Two Paths to Prosperity: Culture and Institutions in Europe and China, 1000–2000*: Princeton University Press.
- Henrich, Joseph (2020) *The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous*, New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux.
- Kuziemko, Ilyana, Nicolas Longuet-Marx, and Suresh Naidu (2026) ““Compensate the Losers?” Economic Policy and the Origins of U.S. Partisan Realignment,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 141 (3), 2087–2145, 10.1093/qje/qjag019.
- Lowes, Sara, Nathan Nunn, James A. Robinson, and Jonathan L. Weigel (2017) “The Evolution of Culture and Institutions: Evidence From the Kuba Kingdom,” *Econometrica*, 85 (4), 1065–1091, <https://doi.org/10.3982/ECTA14139>.
- Murphy, Ryan O., Kurt A. Ackermann, and Michel J. J. Handgraaf (2011) “Measuring Social Value Orientation,” *Judgment and Decision Making*, 6 (8), 771–781, 10.1017/S1930297500004204.
- Pippin, Robert B. (2008) *Hegel’s Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tabellini, Guido (2008) “Institutions and Culture,” *Journal of the European Economic Association*, 6 (2-3), 255–294, 10.1162/JEEA.2008.6.2-3.255.
- Young, H. Peyton (2015) “The Evolution of Social Norms,” *Annual Review of Economics*, 7 (1), 359–387.