## **Chapter 6. Cross-Cultural Level**

On voluntary compliance, prosocial behavior,[[1]](#footnote-1) rule of law,[[2]](#footnote-2) values,[[3]](#footnote-3) and culture[[4]](#footnote-4)

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## Introduction

Machiavelli introduced the model of the lion, representing force, and the fox, representing cunning, to illustrate how the discourse on power can be tailored, taking into account the variations in power’s significance within a given culture.[[5]](#footnote-5) Indeed, the role of culture is an important component to examine when determining whether states can allow themselves to relinquish any of their coercive power. Intuitively, many scholars recognize the close association between the topics raised in previous chapters and culture. While in some countries, a positive relationship between the state’s expectations and the public’s voluntary compliance is the norm, in other countries, trust between the government and the public is low, and it would be futile to expect any major cooperation. This chapter aims to examine which factors may predict those cultures in which voluntary compliance is likely to be successful.

The variations between states in terms of how culture relates to predictors of effective voluntary compliance are dramatic.[[6]](#footnote-6) This chapter will explore and compare the impact of culture in countries with varying levels of voluntary compliance, whether high, moderate, or low. It will analyze how this cultural impact is related to other predictors of voluntary compliance and various measures of trust,[[7]](#footnote-7) as well as how it affects the perception of the rule of law in these countries. Finally, we will compile and compare possible predictors across some prominent cultures. This should enable us to determine the true impact of culture on voluntary compliance.

## The importance of culture in explaining voluntariness

A common factor that is analyzed in all contexts is the variation between countries across various domains, including trust, legitimacy, and specific policy behaviors, such as taxation and environment. For example, in a well-known cross-cultural study on punishment and cooperation, it was found that in a series of public goods games, social norms related to the rule of law in a country were associated with the level of cooperation. This was attributable to the impact of the rule of law on antisocial punishment—that is, punishing those who cooperate or contribute to the greater public good, —which masked the effect of social punishment—that is, punishing those who do not cooperate or contribute to the greater public good.[[8]](#footnote-8) The study further found that cultural differences may contribute to dishonesty among students, and concluded that cultural initiatives, encompassing mentoring, language, and transitioning programs, should enhance the likelihood of positive academic and social outcomes for overseas students, improving their understanding and commitment to academic integrity.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In addition to the role of culture, we must also address whether policymakers can foster a shift in culture towards greater cooperation through softer regulatory approaches.

## Can we change culture?

In a country where the culture does not foster trust in its people, the most crucial aspect of a policymaker’s consideration in implementing trust-based regulations is the potential for policy to influence a cultural shift. Is it possible to change that culture if the regulator takes a more trusting approach and implements a different set of policies? Indeed, if evolutionary, and environmental factors account for the different mechanisms responsible for such changes, how likely are they to occur and under what conditions?[[10]](#footnote-10)

The scholarship on this issue presents a mixed perspective, with some studies supporting the ability to change culture and others concluding the opposite. Notably, in our discussions below on the “Nordic Miracle,” we will explore research that highlights the potential for cultural change. In contrast, we will also delve into studies supporting the idea that cultural norms may be traced back hundreds and even thousands of years in history. As a result, the ability to change them is far more limited.

## How likely is it that we can change culture through trust-enhancing mechanisms?

The main cross-cultural scholar advocating for the stability of cultural effects over time is the well-known Dutch scholar Geert Hofstede. He is highly regarded for conducting one of the most comprehensive studies on how workplace values are influenced by culture. For him, culture refers to “the collective programming of the mind distinguishing the members of one group or category of people from others.” Taking a somewhat deterministic approach to culture, he argues that “one cannot escape culture.”

Hofstede, in collaboration with Michael Minkov and their research teams, developed one of the earliest and most popular frameworks for measuring cultural differences between countries. This framework encompasses six dimensions: Power Distance, Individualism, Uncertainty Avoidance, Masculinity, Long-Term Orientation, and Indulgence vs. Restraint.

Hofstede’s framework, utilized in both academic and professional management settings throughout the world, represents what he terms “the software of the mind.” Through it, he seeks to explain how culture affects behavior, particularly the way in which people are “partially predetermined by [their] mental programs.” Analyzing Hosfstede’s cultural dimensions across Europe, Anneli Kaasa (2013)[[11]](#footnote-12) found that European countries in which Romance languages (Italian, Spanish, and French) were spoken had scored significantly higher on Uncertainty Avoidance than did countries in which Germanic languages (German Dutch, and English) were spoken countries. It could be argued that the enduring influence of the Roman Empire’s strict legal system led to a greater tendency among citizens many centuries later to avoid uncertainty. In addition, Romance-language-speaking countries scored higher on Power Distance compared to Germanic-language-speaking ones, suggesting greater acceptance of hierarchy and centralized authority among citizens of these countries. Both sets of results suggest a greater preference for command and control compliance than for intrinsically motivated voluntary compliance in countries speaking Romance languages. The World Values Survey measures additional sets of dimensions related to the work of Hofstede and of Ronald Inglehart. According to this survey, Romance-language-speaking countries tend to favor Traditional and Survival values while Germanic-language-speaking countries lean more toward the Secular-Rational and Self-Expression values.[[12]](#footnote-13) For example, Romance-language-speaking France, Italy, and Spain are located in the Catholic Europe cluster, which emphasizes traditional values, while Germanic-language-speaking Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden are in the Protestant Europe cluster, characterized by secular-rational and self-expression-oriented values. This distinction also appears to have relevance regarding voluntary compliance, but of course, further research is required on these factors. What is important here is how long ago such cultural norms were formed and how

When examining research on culture, one of the most significant findings is that many of the characteristics that differ between countries are nearly impossible to change. Indeed, as mentioned above, some of Hofstede’s research[[13]](#footnote-14) implies the continuing influence of some of Europe’s Roman Empire ancestry.[[14]](#footnote-15) If this is the case, what actions can be taken under the law to effect change?

Other scholars provide a different point of view, suggesting that the idea of trust can be influenced by more flexible elements, such as effective governance, population homogeneity, and equal income distribution. The presence of these factors helps explain the high trust levels in Nordic countries.[[15]](#footnote-16) This perspective is consistent with research suggesting that the high levels of interpersonal trust observed in Scandinavian countries is a relatively recent phenomenon, emerging over the last 30–40 years, as these characteristics have become more prominent in these countries.[[16]](#footnote-17)

## Creation of a trust culture in the Nordic countries

As research and surveys indicate, the Nordic countries serve as a dynamic model for building trust, offering an optimistic message regarding the efficacy of trust-enhancing approaches. Nordic countries are characterized by a “virtue” cycle in which various key institutional and cultural indicators of a good society mutually reinforce each other. These include a well-functioning democracy, generosity, effective social welfare benefits, low levels of crime and corruption, and satisfied citizens who feel free and who trust each other and their governmental institutions.[[17]](#footnote-18) It has been suggested that the historical fact that the Nordic countries did not have an underclass of slaves or cheap labor imported from colonies may have played a role in shaping the development of their welfare societies.[[18]](#footnote-19)

In addition, Nicholas Charron and Bo Rothstein’s research suggests that the impact of ethnic diversity on social trust diminishes significantly when factors related to the quality of government are taken into account. This indicates that in countries with high-quality institutions, like the Nordic countries, ethnic diversity may not affect social trust.[[19]](#footnote-20) It has also been found that trust in state institutions has a corresponding positive impact on social trust, although the evidence for a reverse relationship is limited. A study conducted in Denmark determined that one of the factors contributing to increased trust in the country was an increase in citizens; trust in institutions.[[20]](#footnote-21)

## Other studies show that cultural traditions evolve in response to new laws and policies, suggesting that by trusting their citizens more in their regulatory and compliance approaches, governments might spearhead cultural change. For example, a recent influential work concluded that the terms of pension plans may alter certain customs.[[21]](#footnote-22) Another important study summarizing over half a century of cross-cultural research has shown differences at a group level in psychological and behavioral phenomena such as values, attention, and neural responses. Cultures are not static and often undergo specific changes in their cultural products, practices, and values, all of which have been documented over time. How and why do societies change? To answer this question, we juxtapose theory and insights from cultural evolution and social ecology.[[22]](#footnote-23)

## High-Power Distance vs. Small-Power-Distance countries and voluntary compliance

A very relevant factor influencing the likelihood of voluntary compliance within a culture is the level of what is termed “Power Distance” in each country. High-power-distance countries are often associated with authoritarian values. In contrast, Low-Power-Distance countries are less likely to emphasize obedience, thereby creating opportunities for other factors to play a role in compliance.[[23]](#footnote-24) Although obedience is typically associated with positive attributes, such as honesty and civility, the relationship between obedience and these qualities is not always straightforward. This adds complexity to predicting voluntary compliance, as these factors may not necessarily be negatively correlated with obedience.[[24]](#footnote-25)

The Power Distance dimension is a crucial aspect of a culture that reflects the extent to which less powerful members of a society accept and anticipate an unequal distribution of power. The main issue is how a society deals with inequalities among its population. When evaluating the probability of voluntary adherence within a culture, various factors, including the Power Distance dimension in a given country, must be taken into account. It appears that in countries with high degrees of Power Distance, hierarchical relationships may be easier to justify, making it easier to convince people to comply. However, in countries with low Power Distance, people are less likely to accept a hierarchical order without justification from their governments.

In societies with a significant degree of Power Distance, people tend to accept a hierarchical order without questioning the need for further justification. Every individual is expected to have a designated place within the hierarchy. In societies with low Power Distance, people strive to distribute power equally and question any unequal distribution of power. This is the reason why people feel the need to express their concerns about the legitimacy of the power dynamic as a way to reach an agreement to behave like others. This aspect of Power Distance implies that people’s willingness to comply voluntarily may depend heavily on their demand to be treated equally and with respect. This demand is crucial to their likelihood of engaging in voluntary compliance.

## Individualist vs. collectivist cultures and the likelihood of voluntary compliance

Power Distance might work in tandem with another important cultural factor, collectivism vs. individualism, to influence decisions regarding actions to be taken collectively, such as COVID-19 preventive measures, for example.[[25]](#footnote-26)

Research suggests that in cultures with an individualistic orientation, people may prioritize personal convenience or preference over collective welfare, potentially leading to a reduced willingness to comply for the public good, such as wearing face masks during the pandemic.[[26]](#footnote-27) However, individuals can still exhibit prosocial behavior through their commitment to personal values and fulfilling individual responsibilities.[[27]](#footnote-28) Additionally, studies suggest that there is a correlation between individualism and both charitable donations and volunteer activity.[[28]](#footnote-29) Similarly, it has been found that people with an independent self-concept displayed a higher willingness to wear face masks.[[29]](#footnote-30)

In the context of voluntary compliance with COVID-19 measures,[[30]](#footnote-31) some of the behaviors required, such as social distancing and hygiene practices, are inherently collective. They rely on the willingness of individuals to adopt strict behaviors while also considering the broader community impact. Individuals in a collectivist society will be better able to undertake collective action, as the society places a high value on unity and strong interpersonal connections within the wider community.[[31]](#footnote-32) Furthermore, collectivists are also more receptive to actions that involve a greater level of personal sacrifice, if it improves the well-being of the greater society.[[32]](#footnote-33)

## Masculine vs. feminine cultures and voluntary compliance

Gender identity appears to be an additional cultural dimension strongly associated with the likelihood of voluntary compliance in a country

It is frequently claimed that men and women tend to perceive their environment differently. Women often view themselves as part of a wider network of social relationships and feel a moral obligation to contribute to the well-being of this network. In contrast, it is often said that men tend to prioritize the rights of the individual over those of the group and to view their environment as a system of hierarchical relationships.[[33]](#footnote-34) In general, women tend to have a greater interest in cooperation and working with others, especially in countries where there is a high likelihood of voluntary cooperation.

Viewing the issue more broadly, Hofstede distinguishes between national cultures based on masculinity, which reflects the overall “toughness” and competitiveness of a society, and “feminine cultures,” which tend to be less aggressive and more modest in their ambitions. In masculine cultures, competition is viewed from a distributive perspective where the world is seen as consisting of winners and losers. In masculine cultures, cooperative alliances are typically formed under the guise of a win-win situation.[[34]](#footnote-35) Interestingly, research indicates that entrepreneurs from more masculine and individualistic societies exhibit a lower appreciation for cooperative strategies compared to entrepreneurs from feminine and collectivist societies.[[35]](#footnote-36)

**Table 1: Data About Different Countries**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Prosocial behavior | Voluntary environmental code of conduct perception (by citizens) | Trust | Social Cohesion | Stringency level handling Covid (April– May 21) | International tax evasion(billion euro) | Environmental regulatory regime  |
| Netherlands | 55% | 50% | 0.30 | 7.15 |  | 1.9  | 1.747 |
| Denmark | 46% | 57% |  | 7.08 |  | 0.2  | 1.384 |
| Austria | 43% | 53% | 0.15 | 6.35 |  | 0.9  | 1.641 |
| Israel | 42% |  | -0.5 | 4.29 |  |  | 0.021 |
| Italy | 27% | 44% | -0.7 | 6.55 |  | 3.1  | 0.498 |
| Greece | 13% | 59% | -0.35 | 5.39 |  | 1.2  | -0.619 |
| China | 20% |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Germany | 44% |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| The United Kingdom | 57% |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| The United States | 60% |  |  |  |  |  |  |

***Prosocial behavior***

*High rates of prosocial behavior*

The United States exhibited the highest rate of prosocial behavior, with a score of 60% (the OECD average is 39%), The United Kingdom is second, with a score of 57%, followed by the Netherlands, with a score of 55%. The other top-rated countries were Denmark (46%), Germany (44%), Austria (43%), and Israel (42%). The lowest rates of prosocial behavior (compared to the OECD average) were found in Italy (27%), China (20%), and Greece (13%).[[36]](#footnote-37)

***Opinions about a voluntary environmental “code of conduct”***

Opinions on a voluntary environmental code of conduct “code of conduct” vary significantly among countries, as reflected in the rates of positive opinions ranging from high to low. Greece emerges as the leading nation, with 59% of its population holding a positive opinion. Following closely is Denmark, where 57% of the population expresses a positive opinion, followed by Austria with a 53% approval rate. The Netherlands also demonstrates significant support, as 50% of the respondents endorse this code of conduct. Italy, while still supportive, ranks lower, with 44% of its population expressing positive opinions towards voluntary environmental standards.

Table 2: xxxxx

| **Country** | **Prosocial Behavior Rate (%)** | **Positive Opinion on Voluntary Environmental Code of Conduct (%)** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| The Netherlands | 55 | - |
| Denmark | 46 | 57 |
| Austria | 43 | 53 |
| Israel | 42 | 50 |
| Italy | 27 | 44 |
| Greece | 13 | 59 |

[Data on pro- and anti-social behavior from the Gallup World Poll](https://www.oecd.org/berlin/47570337.pdf)

Examining both tables, it is apparent that there are diverse attitudes towards prosocial behavior and environmental awareness. For example, the Netherlands has a high prosocial behavior rate (55%) but lacks environmental awareness across different countries. Denmark and Austria both demonstrate strong prosocial behavior (46% and 43%) and support for environmental codes (57% and 53%). In contrast, Greece has the lowest prosocial rate (13%) but the highest approval for environmental codes (59%), indicating that prosocial behavior does not necessarily predict environmental attitudes.

***Trust***

*Examining comparative data*

Returning to Table 1, we can see high rates of trust in Denmark, the Netherlands (0.30), and Austria (0.15). On the other hand, Israel (-0.5), Italy (-0.7) and Greece (-0.35) were found to have low levels of trust.

At one end of the spectrum, in nations such as Norway and Sweden, over 60% of those examined in the World Values Survey concur with the assertion that “most people can be trusted.” On the opposite end, in countries such as Colombia, Brazil, Ecuador, and Peru, fewer than 10% of respondents share this belief.[[37]](#footnote-38) Data from European nations indicates that people generally have a higher level of trust in the police compared to the political and legal systems. With the exception of Switzerland, trust in the political system is exceptionally low across all countries—significantly beneath the level of interpersonal trust. On the other hand, there is a remarkably high level of confidence in the police, with the majority of European countries exhibiting greater trust in law enforcement than in fellow citizens.[[38]](#footnote-39)

Data from the United States[[39]](#footnote-40) suggests that people have less trust in each other now than they did 40 years ago. This decline in interpersonal trust in the United States has been accompanied by a long-term reduction in public trust in government.[[40]](#footnote-41)

***Social Cohesion***

High rates of Social Cohesion were shown in several countries, with Canada achieving the highest score (9.42), followed by the United States (8.34), the Netherlands (7.15), Denmark (7.08), Germany (7.0), Italy (6.55), and Austria (6.35). However, low rates of Social Cohesion were shown in Israel (4.29), and China (5.52), and the lowest score was given to Greece (5.39).[[41]](#footnote-42)

***Stringency level in handling COVID-19 (April–May 21)***

*High Stringency level*

Italy and the Netherlands had the strictest Covid protocols in April–May 2021, while Israel and Denmark took a more lenient approach.

Taken From:<https://covidtracker.bsg.ox.ac.uk/stringency-scatter>

<https://ourworldindata.org/covid-stringency-index> . See also <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-stringency-index>

## Culture dynamics

As mentioned previously, Hofstede’s theory suggests that culture may have deep historical roots, which can limit its capacity for change. However, some economists and political scientists believe that institutional design can influence the level of trust in a country. Perhaps the most well-known example is the change in the Scandinavian countries in the twentieth century.[[42]](#footnote-43) This change accompanied the enactment of their famous welfare systems and the ensuing reduction in inequality. Following these institutional changes, these countries soon vaulted to the top levels in many of the values related to solidarity and trust.

##  Other demographic predictors of Honesty and Cooperation

In addition to culture, various other factors that have been described in the literature influence behaviors associated with voluntary compliance. For example, Joshua Bourdage and colleagues (2018) suggested that age might affect honesty.[[43]](#footnote-44) According to their findings, older individuals may be less inclined to lie in job interviews because they possess more job knowledge and are perceived as more competent in their jobs. Allen Huffcutt and colleagues (2011) have argued that education is also relevant regarding honesty.[[44]](#footnote-45) Again studying job applicants, they found that well-educated applicants are more likely to prioritize honesty in the context of demonstrating that they meet the job requirements. Moreover, demographic factors, such as income, education, and age may help predict the extent to which people believe it is necessary to dissemble in an interview and their confidence about their ability to dissemble in order to achieve better interview evaluations.[[45]](#footnote-46) In general, studies indicate that trust and cooperation vary with sex, schooling, age, household size, quality of living, and placement on a psychological cooperation scale. Additionally, we have observed a correlation between behavior and several factors, such as home ownership, community homogeneity, past participation in community projects, the relationship between individuals and their neighbors, and community leadership.[[46]](#footnote-47)

Cultural variations within a nation can result from different communal identities or geographic factors. For example, studies have indicated that foreign shoppers tend to be more likely to engage in fraudulent behavior in grocery stores located in urban centers compared to those located in other neighborhoods. This pattern may be attributed to the perception that there is a lower chance of encountering the same individuals again in urban centers, highlighting how environmental context can influence ethical decisions.[[47]](#footnote-48)



Research supports the view that an individuals’ responses to voluntary compliance are a function of their cultural background.[[48]](#footnote-49)According to Coleman and Freeman, understanding and integrating cultural nuances and values, such as attitudes toward taxes, perceptions of fairness, and peer influences, can enhance voluntary compliance programs. For example, professionals view tax minimization as a strategic game, while blue-collar workers see it as a necessity for survival. Additionally, taking into account cultural factors, such as holding the system accountable and increasing transparency about spending, can improve the outcomes of compliance efforts.[[49]](#footnote-50) Studies suggest that interpersonal trust, reflecting an individual’s positive expectation of others for overall well-being, plays a pivotal role in shaping behavioral tendencies.[[50]](#footnote-51) Interpersonal trust fosters cooperation by reducing the individuals’ fear of being exploited by others.[[51]](#footnote-52) Evidence suggests that the individuals’ cultural context can moderate the relationship between interpersonal trust and willingness to comply voluntarily, as in the case of COVID-19 regulations, for example.[[52]](#footnote-53) It was found that interpersonal trust served as a mediator between risk perception and self-restraint during the pandemic.[[53]](#footnote-54) Tight cultures, characterized by strong norms, adherence to regulations, and a low tolerance for deviant behavior, have been associated with lower mortality rates during the pandemic.[[54]](#footnote-55) However, it remains less clear whether a tight culture inherently fosters a sense of voluntary compliance. Drawing on the work of scholars like Simon Gachter who have explored social punishment, we can anticipate that when regulators allow for flexibility, individuals are less likely to shirk their responsibilities due to the high probability of social enforcement. Recent research has investigated how cultural factors influenced people’s willingly to voluntarily comply with COVID-19 regulations, exploring when and under what cultural conditions certain voluntary components are accepted and implemented.[[55]](#footnote-56) For example, in individualistic cultures, the association between interpersonal trust and COVID-19 compliance efficiency was modulated.

In the context of taxation, studies have suggested that a taxpayer's willingness to comply with regulations is linked to their trust in the government and their belief that the authorities have the right to monitor them. When there is a high level of trust in the authorities, taxpayers are more likely to have the intention to voluntarily pay taxes. Voluntary compliance arises from the taxpayer’s willingness to cooperate effectively and fulfill both their moral and their civil obligations to contribute to the “public good.”[[56]](#footnote-57)

In summary, cultural background and interpersonal trust appear to play a significant role in encouraging voluntary compliance. Understanding cultural attitudes towards governance and the subtleties of trust can help with compliance efforts.

## How culture affects the likelihood of punishment

Important work carried out by Daniel Balliet and Paul Van Lange examines the relationship between society’s cultural trust and punishment. They show that punishment encourages people to contribute to public goods, but its effectiveness varies across different societies. The variation has been thought to depend on the levels of trust within these societies and how punishment, as a means of enforcing social norms, encourages cooperative behavior. Some theories suggest that punishment is more likely to encourage cooperation in low-trust societies, where people might contribute to public goods only if they face significant incentives or consequences. Conversely, others have argued that punishment is more effective in high-trust societies, where people tend to cooperate and support public interests while being willing to punish those who do not. This raises an important question: Is punishment more effective in fostering cooperation in societies with high trust or low trust? To tackle this issue, a comprehensive review of 83 studies, including 7,361 participants from 18 different societies examining the impact of punishment on public goods dilemmas was conducted.

Although it may seem more logical to assume that punishment is more successful in countries with low trust levels, some meta-analyses indicate the opposite: In societies where trust is high, punishment is more common. This is likely because high-trust societies tend to view norm enforcement actions positively. In these societies, people often see punishment as a necessary step towards the common good, rather than a personal attack. This openness to punishment can increase its effectiveness in promoting adherence to social norms and promoting collective well-being, which can encourage further cooperative behavior. In contrast, in low-trust societies, punitive measures might be viewed with skepticism or hostility, reducing their ability to encourage cooperation. The importance of societal trust is emphasized in this research, as it acts as a foundational element that affects the effectiveness of norm enforcement mechanisms, such as punishment. This helps to cultivate public cooperation. The findings clearly show that punishment significantly enhances cooperation in high-trust societies more than in low-trust ones. [[57]](#footnote-58)

## Voluntarism vs. voluntary compliance

It is possible to expect that there would be a correlation between people who voluntarily comply with laws and their willingness to do things for others that are not required. Generally, there are different varieties of prosocial behaviors.[[58]](#footnote-59) Usually, prosocial behavior is measured by three aspects: volunteering for organizations, donating to charities, and helping strangers.[[59]](#footnote-60) It appears that people with higher social and economic statutes tend to volunteer more.[[60]](#footnote-61) Religious participation is also assumed to enhance prosocial behaviors.[[61]](#footnote-62) Other explanations that have been advanced for prosocial behavior include trust, altruism, age, family structure, norms, solicitation, response to disaster or crisis, and more.[[62]](#footnote-63) Contrary to what might be intuitively expected, it has been found that individualistic societies tend to trigger higher levels of prosocial behaviors rather than collectivist societies.[[63]](#footnote-64) The study suggests that individualistic societies may encourage prosocial behavior because such behavior can align with personal values and choices. This supports the idea that young people do not just adopt new forms of civic engagement, but instead, they combine traditional and new forms of prosocial behavior in complex ways, which expands their civic repertoire. This study shows that cultural dimensions are interrelated and together affect the likelihood of prosocial actions within a society.[[64]](#footnote-65)

Research in cross-cultural psychology suggests that a significant part of human behavior is not only influenced by legal frameworks but also by community norms of pro-social behavior, as discussed earlier. Norms develop in different countries and can play a vital role in cultivating a culture that promotes voluntary actions, extending beyond legal obligations.

The cultural aspect of voluntary compliance shares similarities with a broader and well-known argument regarding the role of civic society in the U.S. democracy. Studies have shown that citizens’ active involvement in family, school, work, voluntary associations, and religion has a notable impact on their participation as voters and protesters.[[65]](#footnote-66)

Robert D. Putnam’s study on the decline of social capital in the United States since the 1950s provides valuable insights into the changing nature of civic engagement and its impact on democracy. In his 1995 essay “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital” and subsequent book, Putnam explores the concept of social capital, which encompasses networks, trust, and norms that facilitate effective collaboration among individuals. Putnam’s comprehensive analysis reveals a significant decrease in face-to-face social interactions, which have been essential for constructing and sustaining the social fabric of American society. He contends that this decline has had a profound impact on active participation in civic life, a vital component of a thriving democracy and citizen engagement.

The consequences of this decline are evident in various aspects of civic life, such as reduced voter turnout, lower attendance at public meetings, decreased participation in committees, and diminished political cooperation. Furthermore, Putnam highlights a growing public distrust towards the government, suggesting that while some of this may be attributed to political changes since the 1960s, there are more profound, systemic issues at play.

## Comparing different countries’ prosocial behavior

As discussed, it is widely acknowledged that culture exerts an influence on individuals’ behavior.[[66]](#footnote-67) Some studies show that the impact of national culture on behavior is greater than any organizational or environmental factor.[[67]](#footnote-68) Researchers often use five measuring tools to conduct a societal culture study: Individualism (IND); Power Distance (PD); Uncertainty Avoidance (UA); Masculinity versus Femininity (MF); and Future Orientation (FO).[[68]](#footnote-69) Generally, studies show that there has been a systematic decline in civic engagement among America’s younger generations compared to previous ones. This decrease in social and political involvement is attributed to a combination of technological, social, and economic changes, such as increased media consumption, changing family structures, and greater economic pressures.[[69]](#footnote-70) However, a Belgian study has shown that watching informative programs on television could actually enhance social and political involvement.[[70]](#footnote-71) It has also been observed that over the last few decades, Americans’ distrust in their government has steadily increased.[[71]](#footnote-72) One study has suggested that the decline of trust in government and lack of confidence in leaders and institutions among the American people reflects a growing skepticism towards many forms of power.[[72]](#footnote-73)

An OECD questionnaire that collected [data from 140 countries on prosocial and antisocial behavior](https://www.oecd.org/berlin/47570337.pdf) around the world[[73]](#footnote-74) found the highest levels of prosocial behavior in five Anglophone countries (the United States, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom). In contrast, Chile and Mexico stood out as having high levels of antisocial behavior. Surprisingly, the Nordic countries, often considered leaders in various social indicators, showed comparatively average performance in this area. On the other hand, Mediterranean and Eastern European countries, including Israel, typically had lower levels of prosocial behavior.

However, it appears that there is no correlation between countries with high levels of prosocial behavior and low levels of antisocial behavior, or vice versa. It was also found that countries with higher income levels exhibited more prosocial behavior. However, it was found that the positive correlation between income inequality and antisocial behavior is weak.

Social norms were found to have an impact on prosocial behavior. To comprehend the workings of law “outside of sanction or direct coercion,” one must recognize that it typically does not affect individual conduct in isolation from the social environment. For example, one study found that targeting all relevant beliefs that influence people’s attitudes and subjective norms regarding seatbelt use is a more effective strategy for encouraging seatbelt use than solely raising awareness about the risks associated with driving.[[74]](#footnote-75) A study conducted in Turkey explored the reasons why a significant number of car passengers do not use seat belts despite their proven effectiveness in reducing injury severity during road traffic accidents. The study confirmed that attitudes and subjective norms have a positive correlation with the intention of using seat belts.[[75]](#footnote-76) According to the study:

Contrary to the instrumental view, which assumes law operates on autonomous individuals through incentives, the social groups view suggests that an individual’s attitudes and behaviors regarding legal demands are primarily shaped by the interaction of law, social influence, and motivational goals influenced by their commitment to specific in-groups. In this perspective, law operates expressively, not merely by molding independent individual attitudes, but by shaping group values and norms, which subsequently impact individual attitudes. In essence, the interaction between people and the law is mediated by the dynamics of group life.[[76]](#footnote-77)

In summation, cultural dimensions appear to play a crucial role in influencing prosocial and antisocial behaviors across various nations. An individual's cultural background significantly shapes their personal and collective reactions to societal norms and legal requirements. By acknowledging the significance of culture in this context, policymakers can create more efficient public strategies and legal policies that take into account the varied cultural backgrounds of the populations they serve.

## Cross-cultural heterogeneity in compliance

Research on driver behavior has also indicated that there are some cross-cultural factors that affect compliance. A study exploring methods to reduce parking violations examined the effectiveness of various strategies, including signage, warnings, volunteer patrols, fines, and increased enforcement by police. The findings suggest that vertical signs, particularly those warning of severe financial consequences for illegal parking, can lower the violation rate. However, low enforcement rates continue to be an issue.[[77]](#footnote-78) Furthermore, a survey of 3,360 drivers’ parking habits revealed that the frequency of illegal parking decreased after fines were introduced. Notably, males and young drivers have consistently demonstrated a higher likelihood of illegally parking in spaces reserved for people with disabilities.[[78]](#footnote-79)

A study conducted in Sweden examined how reduced enforcement affects the extent to which regulated actors comply with government regulations. It unexpectedly found that removing an unenforced law had a negative impact on the employers’ vacancy posting behavior. This finding contradicts the emphasis placed on the role of effective punishment in standard deterrence models of regulatory compliance, highlighting instead the significance of organizational factors such as culture and norms.[[79]](#footnote-80)

The cultural perspective on voluntary compliance also extends to how a law-abiding culture can shape the norms within an organization. Analyses of heterogeneity suggest that local government employees, who are characterized by a more law-abiding organizational culture, were more likely to comply with unenforced regulations compared to central government employees. This is particularly noticeable in the context of advertising job vacancies.[[80]](#footnote-81) Further analyses have shown that local governments characterized by a more law‐abiding organizational culture and stronger commitment to social responsibility were more likely to comply with regulations that are not enforced.[[81]](#footnote-82)

In conclusion, by examining cross-cultural differences in compliance, we can uncover various influences on voluntary adherence to rules, ranging from environmental behaviors to compliance with pandemic measures. Factors such as cultural norms, societal values, and organizational cultures appear to play a significant role.

\* \* \*

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[data on pro- and anti-social behavior from the Gallup World Poll](https://www.oecd.org/berlin/47570337.pdf)





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