



The effect of culture on fiscal redistribution: Evidence based on genetic, epidemiological and linguistic data



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We investigate the effect of individualism/collectivism on fiscal redistribution.
- We instrument this cultural dimension by a set of genetic, epidemiological and linguistic data.
- Our analysis suggests that less collectivistic societies redistribute more.

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ABSTRACT

Using a set of innovative instruments qualified by the literature, we investigate the effect of individualist culture on fiscal redistribution. Our analysis suggests that societies characterized by less collectivistic culture present higher levels of fiscal redistribution, as proxied by government subsidies and transfers as well as health and education expenses.

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1. Introduction

Numerous theoretical and empirical studies suggest that culture affects economic outcomes and institutions within countries (see e.g., Spolaore and Wacziarg, 2013). However, contemporaneous culture might be endogenous to economic outcomes and institutions. In a highly influential paper Gorodnichenko and Roland (forthcoming) employ a set of innovative instruments to address endogeneity concerns and, thus, establish a convincing relationship between individualistic culture and growth.

Following the identification strategy of Gorodnichenko and Roland (forthcoming), this work examines one dimension of culture that can be seen as relevant to welfare policies: *individualism*

versus *collectivism*.¹ Fiscal redistribution is proxied by government subsidies and transfers, as well as health and education expenses that entail a dimension of redistribution (Desmet et al., 2009). To deal with the usual identification concerns, we instrument culture

¹ To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study that investigates directly the relationship between *individualism/collectivism* and fiscal redistribution. However, there are two parallel strands of the literature closely related to our analysis. The first concentrates on the relationship between family structure and implemented welfare policies (e.g., Esping-Andersen, 1999), whereas the second investigates the potential relationship between generalized trust (that is trust in “out-group” relationships) and welfare state (e.g., Berg and Bjørnskov, 2011). Both strands chime with a negative relationship between collectivistic norms and welfare state. More precisely, Esping-Andersen (1999) suggest that close family ties provide a social security net to the individuals that otherwise would be provided by the formal state. Similarly, Berg and Bjørnskov (2011) argue that a higher level of generalized trust – which is a basic characteristic of more individualistic societies – mitigates the temptation of free riding and allows for the universal provision of public goods, transfers and services.

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by a set of genetic, epidemiological and linguistic data that have been linked empirically to this cultural dimension (see [Kashima and Kashima, 1998](#); [Murray and Schaller, 2010](#); [Way and Lieberman, 2010](#)). Our analysis suggests that countries characterized by higher levels of *individualism* present higher levels of redistributive spending.

2. Data and theoretical considerations

Our data covers a wide cross-section of countries. The dependent variables in our analysis are fiscal spending accounts, which are used as proxies for redistribution by the relevant literature. (e.g., [Desmet et al., 2009](#)). Specifically, we employ as dependent variable interchangeably: (i) government subsidies and transfers (% GDP) and (ii) health and education expenses (% GDP) from 1980 to 2004.²

The key explanatory variable in our analysis is culture. In particular, we focus on one dimension of culture: *individualism* versus *collectivism*. *Individualism* is a cultural trait that emphasizes personal freedom and achievement and awards social status to personal accomplishments that make an individual stand out. On the other hand, *collectivism* emphasizes the embeddedness of individuals in larger groups and encourages conformity to “in-group” relationships (see [Triandis, 1995](#)). As a main proxy for individualistic/collectivistic culture, we employ the measure developed by [Hofstede \(2001\)](#) with higher values indicating more individualistic societies (denoted as *individualism*).

The theoretical relationship between this dimension of culture and fiscal redistribution is *a priori* ambiguous. This is because, on the one hand, welfare state is a formal risk sharing institution that provides a safety net to “unlucky” individuals, whereas collectivistic norms – such as strong family ties – serve as informal risk sharing agreements that also protect individuals against risk (see [Esping-Andersen, 1999](#)). According to this argument, collectivism and welfare policies operate as substitutes and, thus, we should expect a negative association between the two—or a positive one between more *individualism* and redistribution. The reason is that, in the absence of formal risk sharing institutions (i.e. before the formation of welfare state), societies facing increased risks, such as climate variability or a higher prevalence of lethal diseases, developed informal insurance contracts (i.e. extended networks of “in group” relationships) to tackle the issue of uncertainty (see e.g. [Murray and Schaller, 2010](#)). For this reason, more collectivistic (individualistic) societies were in lower (higher) need of protection from the state when welfare policies were put in place. On the other hand, preferences for redistribution are endogenous to formal institutions. Therefore, a larger (narrower) welfare state may lead to collectivistic (individualistic) norms and hence increased (decreased) demand for fiscal redistribution (see e.g., [Alesina and Fuchs-Schuendeln, 2007](#)). If this is the case, collectivism and redistributive policies will function as complements rather than substitutes. Being theoretically ambiguous, an empirical investigation will shed more light on the sign of the association between *individualism* and welfare policies.

3. Identification strategy

Our analysis relies on contemporaneous measures of culture which might be endogenous to the implemented economic policy. To address the usual endogeneity concerns, we employ a battery of alternative instruments that have been linked empirically to this cultural dimension. Following [Gorodnichenko and Roland \(forthcoming\)](#), our basic instrument is the Mahalanobis distance between the frequency of blood types in a given country and

the UK, which is the second most individualistic country in our sample. Genetic markers are probably the cleanest instruments by not being correlated to fiscal redistribution through any other channel other than culture, thus satisfying the exclusion restriction. We denote this as *blood distance from the UK*. Employing this instrument has two major advantages. First, *blood distance from the UK* is a neutral genetic marker that allows us to rule out reverse causality concerns. This is because different blood types are not expected to affect intelligence and output. Second, the frequency of alleles determining blood types is a widely available genetic information that ensures a large number of cross-country observations. [Fig. 1](#) plots government transfers along with health and educational expenses against *blood distance from the UK*. As can be seen, reduced-form relationships indicate that countries further away in terms of *blood distance from the UK* present a lower level of redistributive spending. It must be stressed that the use of genetic data does not surmise any causal effect between genetic and cultural distance. Genetic markers are used exclusively as a proxy for transmission of cultural traits from parents to offspring. In other words, our analysis seeks to exploit the stylized fact that culture is transmitted from parents to offspring (similarly to the genes) and takes the advantage of this correlation between cultural and genetic transmission to investigate the cultural distances that cannot be proxied in a more direct way (see also [Gorodnichenko and Roland, forthcoming](#)). Likewise, we also employ the G allele in polymorphism A118G in the μ -opioid receptor gene that leads to higher stress in case of social rejection (denoted as A118G). According to [Way and Lieberman \(2010\)](#) A118G is strongly correlated to the collectivistic traits that provide psychological protection from social rejection. Unfortunately, cross-country coverage for this variable is limited, which qualifies *blood distance from the UK* as our main instrument.

We also use the epidemiological data on pathogen prevalence put together by [Murray and Schaller \(2010\)](#)—denoted as *pathogen prevalence*. The rationale behind the use of epidemiological data is that stronger pathogen prevalence pushed communities to follow collectivist traits that emphasize the embeddedness of individuals to “in-group” relationships and set limits to openness towards foreigners (e.g., [Murray and Schaller, 2010](#)).

Apart from the genetic and epidemiological data, we employ the linguistic variable on pronoun drop developed by [Davis and Abdurazokzoda \(2016\)](#) as an instrument for cultural emphasis on autonomy rather than on in-group embeddedness. According to [Kashima and Kashima \(1998\)](#), the requirement to use pronouns in a language or the license to drop them is linked to the degree of psychological differentiation between the speaker and the social context of speech, including the conversation partner. Therefore, the linguistic practice of “*pronoun drop*” reveals a cultural dimension of central interest, namely the relationship between the individual and the group. Cultures with pronoun drop languages tend to be less individualistic. In turn, we employ the linguistic variable *language* developed by [Tabellini \(2008\)](#) that accounts both for the *pronoun drop* and *2nd person differentiation* (the so-called “*T–V distinction*”). Linguists point out that this T–V distinction is associated with cultures that pay close attention to the hierarchy of interpersonal relations. Therefore, cultures with T–V distinction languages tend to be less individualistic (see [Kashima and Kashima, 1998](#)).³

4. Results

[Table 1](#) presents the OLS and IV estimates for the effect of *individualism* on fiscal redistribution when the latter is proxied

³ The remaining reduced-form scatter plots between our instruments and redistributive spending are available at the end of the Appendix.

² Data are obtained from the World Bank's *World Development Indicators (WDI)*.

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