

# Does welfare state universality promote social trust?★

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## ABSTRACT

Do welfare state institutions explain the high social trust in the Nordic countries? Previous research suggests that welfare state universality promotes trust by signalling fairness and impartiality. We test this hypothesis using individual data from a survey of Swedish expatriates in countries with different types of welfare states. We find that trust is higher among expatriates in universal welfare states compared with those in liberal or Christian democratic welfare states, but the estimated difference is small, uncertain and does not increase with longer exposure. Although welfare states may promote trust by reducing economic inequality, their universality as such cannot explain the high levels of social trust in the Nordic countries.

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## 1. Introduction

When it comes to social trust – the attitude that most people can be trusted – people in the five Nordic countries are among the most trusting in the world. Why? A popular explanation based on institutional characteristics has been put forward by Bo Rothstein together with several co-authors starting from the observation that all of the Nordic countries have welfare states characterized by universality. The argument is that universal welfare state institutions promote trust by treating people in equal situations equally. In contrast, welfare states characterized by selectivity and means-testing (i.e. non-universal welfare states) rely largely on welfare programs in which each case is tried individually. While aiming to help those most in need, selective programs might also give rise to suspicions of arbitrariness, discrimination and lack of procedural justice. Selective welfare programs, therefore, risk-reducing trust in the welfare state, its institutions and employees, and (in the final step of the argument) also in people generally. The argument thus rests on the inherent tension between needs-testing and bureaucratic discretionary power in non-universal welfare states and principles of procedural justice. Simply put, impartial welfare state institutions generate social trust (Rothstein & Stolle 2003, 2008; Kumlin & Rothstein 2005; Rothstein & Uslaner 2005).

In this paper, we test the above institutional explanations and examine the link between universal welfare state institutions and social trust. In particular, we investigate whether such a relationship is preserved when controlling for income inequality. We do so by studying people who have migrated from Sweden to countries with different types of welfare states, relying on a survey of a representative sample of 2,668 Swedish expatriates. Following the approach developed by Bergh & Öhrvall (2018), we group destination countries according to their type of welfare state and examine whether those who have migrated to liberal or Christian democratic welfare states differ in social trust compared to those who migrated to universal welfare states (controlling for a large set of individual characteristics). Welfare states regimes are taken from Bradley et al. (2003), a grouping which is similar to the classic categorization in Esping-Andersen (1990) and also similar to the three categories used by Lee (2013). According to this classification, the universal welfare states in our sample are Denmark, Finland and Norway (with Sweden excluded as the “sending” country in our data),

the liberal welfare states are Australia, Canada, UK and USA, and the Christian democratic welfare states are Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Germany.<sup>1</sup>

Our data set allows for improvements compared to previous studies, that have either studied differences in trust between people in the same country who have been in contact with different welfare state programs (Kumlin & Rothstein 2005), or between people in countries with different institutions (van Oorschot & Arts 2005). These studies suffer from two main drawbacks. First, people who have more contacts with selective welfare state institutions (including those who “are on welfare”) might differ from other people in ways that are also related to social trust. Second, welfare state institutions might be endogenous to social trust (Bergh & Bjørnskov 2011). While the allocation of Swedish migrants to destination countries with different types of welfare states is certainly not random, the main reasons for migrating from Sweden are job offers or spouse job offers in other countries, which are plausibly unrelated to the type of welfare state in the new country. Compared to the previous empirical evidence, our approach reduces the problems of comparability and endogeneity.

Using variation in time spent in the new country, we examine if exposure to different welfare state regimes is associated with social trust. Under the assumptions that the cohorts in our cross-section are comparable (conditional on age and other controls), the estimated effects of non-universal welfare regimes on social trust should increase in the time spent in the destination country. If those who have lived more than 30 years in a non-universal welfare state regime are just as trusting as those who have spent the same number of years in a universal welfare state, large negative effects of non-universality on social trust can be ruled out.

We find that trust is slightly higher among Swedish expatriates in universal welfare states than among expatriates in liberal or Christian democratic welfare states, but that the difference is unrelated to the length of exposure and all but disappears when we control for income inequality. Consequently, if welfare state universality affects trust, it seems to do so by reducing inequality and not by the impartiality mechanism suggested by Rothstein and co-authors. But since income inequality also has other determinants, it remains uncertain whether and to what extent welfare state universality promotes trust.

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<sup>1</sup> While the labelling of regimes vary a lot, the different labels are used to refer to roughly the same thing – see Bergh (2004).

## **2. Previous studies linking welfare state regimes and social trust**

The literature contains three different hypotheses regarding the origins of social trust: civic engagement (Putnam 1993; Putnam 2000), culture and intergenerational transmission (Inglehart 1999; Uslaner 2002, 2008; Ljunge 2014a, b), institutions (Knack & Zak 2003; Kumlin & Rothstein 2005; Berggren & Jordahl 2006). The three channels are not mutually exclusive, and they all arguably matter to some degree. That being said, the civic engagement hypothesis has not fared well empirically as the association between civic engagement and social trust at the individual level seems to be primarily driven by self-selection (Mayer 2003; Wollebæk & Selle 2003). There is more evidence in favor of institutions and culture influencing trust. The institutional approach contends that the quality of institutional arrangements influences trust. For example, when public institutions are effectively functioning as a “fair rule-setter or rule-imposer” (Cook et al. 2005), individuals will be assured that other actors are not likely to be engaged in opportunistic behaviors, and this assurance means more people will agree that most people can be trusted. Also supporting institutional explanations, Mishler & Rose (2001) find that individual evaluations of political institutions and economic performance have a substantial effect on trust in political institutions in post-communist countries.

Several studies have used immigration from low-trust countries to high-trust countries to provide evidence in favor of both institutions and culture as determinants of social trust, with varying results regarding the relative importance of institutions vs culture (Dinesen 2012, 2013; Nannestad et al. 2014; Ljunge 2014a; Ljunge 2014b; Dinesen & Sønderskov 2016).

The particular argument that universal welfare state institutions promote trust has been tested in several papers. Rotstein & Stolle (2003) and Kumlin & Rothstein (2005) report that Swedes who have had several contacts with selective welfare state institutions are less trusting than those with fewer or no such contacts at all. The obvious problem with this approach – which is fully acknowledged in the cited papers – is that the people most exposed to selective welfare state institutions might differ from others in ways that are related to trust. Sønderskov & Dinesen (2016) reduces this problem by using panel data. They come to the same conclusion that selective welfare state programs reduce trust, but since they study people in Denmark, they have no variation between welfare state regimes – the variation that is supposed to exert a causal influence on trust. With national data, it is also unclear how the

trust difference between people who are more or less exposed to selective welfare state institutions translate to generalized trust in the entire population. Another test of the universality hypothesis is conducted by Rothstein & Uslaner (2005), but as noted by Lee (2013), they use income inequality as a proxy for universality. The proxy is, however, less than ideal since inequality might have a confounding effect on trust; the links from welfare state universality to trust may operate through inequality. The negative association between inequality and trust is very strong (Bjørnskov 2007; Jordahl 2009) and large universal welfare states have been shown to compress the income distribution (Korpi & Palme 1998; Bradley et al. 2003; Bergh 2005). Finally, van Oorschot & Arts (2005) compare several measures of trust and social capital measures in 23 European countries and find small differences but that, if anything, that Scandinavian welfare states have higher trust levels than countries with other welfare state regimes.

Trust among Swedish expats was first studied by Dinesen (2016) and Dinesen & Sønderskov (2016), who showed that expats are more trusting than the domestic Swedish population and this is due to a combination of positive self-selection and experiences in the new country. Bergh & Öhrvall (2018) showed that individual trust decreases with the length of stay in countries with strong corruption and weak rule of law. The effect is small and driven by expatriates who were 30 years or younger when arriving in their new country.

### **3. Data and method**

Using the tax register of Swedish expatriates as a frame, the SOM Institute in Sweden conducted a representative survey of Swedish expats in 2014. The survey covered Swedish citizens aged 18–75 years, who deregistered from the Swedish Tax Agency population register due to a move abroad. Those in the sample were contacted by postal mail and invited to fill out a web-based questionnaire that was open from September 2014 to January 2015.

The survey consisted of a wide range of questions, including questions on social trust and a number of individual characteristics.<sup>2</sup> 2,668 expats participated in the survey, which corresponds to a response rate of 27 percent. Since expatriates are hard to reach with addresses that are likely to be outdated, a low response rate was expected. The age and gender

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<sup>2</sup> See Vernersdotter (2016) for methodological details about the survey. The data are available through Swedish National Data Service.

distributions of respondents are, however, representative (Vernersdotter, 2016). Still, unless stated otherwise, the estimates presented here are calculated using weights that account for inclusion probability and nonresponses within country groups.

Swedish expatriates make up a suitable group to study since they have similar backgrounds and by definition cannot have influenced the welfare state institutions in their destination countries. Our sample includes respondents who have resided in more than one country, provided that more than half of the total time abroad has been in the country in which they are currently residing. We also restrict our sample to observations of expatriates in countries having one of the three welfare state regimes specified by Bradley et al. (2003), viz. Christian democratic, Liberal and Social democratic (the reference category capturing universal regimes). This gives us a sample with 1,192 respondents.

There are many different reasons for migrating from Sweden, the most common three being work in another country, moving to a spouse or family and accompanying a spouse or family members who have moved. Selection of expats to different countries is an obvious problem, but it can be handled as long as such selection effects have been constant over time. Under that assumption, we can estimate the effect on trust from living in a country with certain welfare state regime by comparing those with many years of exposure to more recent arrivals (controlling for age and other relevant factors).

Descriptive statistics for all observations we use in our analysis are presented in Table 1, and in Table 2 descriptive statistics are presented by type of welfare regime. The dependent variable Social trust measured on a 0–10 scale, where 10 means that respondent fully agrees that “most people can be trusted”, the phrase used in most international surveys.

As can be seen from the descriptive statistics in Table 2, there are no large differences between Swedish expatriates in countries with the three different welfare state regimes. Those who migrated to Christian democratic welfare states are less likely to be employed (and more likely to be retired), and those who moved to liberal welfare states are more likely to have a non-European parent. Social trust is somewhat lower in Christian democratic and liberal welfare states, in line with the universality hypothesis.

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Obs.</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Max</b>
<i>Country characteristics</i>					
Gini	12	29.90	4.430	22.64	37.20
<i>Individual characteristics</i>					
Age	1,192	47.27	14.62	18	75
Female	1,192	0.574		0	1
Non-European parent	1,081	0.053		0	1
High education	1,110	0.706		0	1
Migrated for job	1,192	0.407		0	1
Religious	1,069	0.388		0	1
Married	1,114	0.808		0	1
Employed	1,097	0.691		0	1
Unemployed	1,097	0.032		0	1
Retired	1,097	0.183		0	1
Health status (subjective)	1,115	8.248	1.699	0	10
Social trust	1,120	7.434	1.920	0	10

Comment: Unweighted estimates. The sample is restricted to those expatriates who currently reside in a country that belongs to one of the three welfare state regimes specified by Bradley et al. (2003), and who have spent more than half of their total time abroad in the country in which they are currently residing. For additional information about the variables, see Table 3. Information on country Gini is retrieved from Luxembourg income study and refers to the most recent year.

**Table 2. Descriptive statistics, by welfare regime**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Social democratic</b>		<b>Christian democratic</b>		<b>Liberal</b>	
	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
<i>Country characteristics</i>						
Gini	24.80	1.892	29.48	2.845	34.26	2.674
<i>Individual characteristics</i>						
Age	45.01	14.76	50.17	15.14	46.51	13.62
Female	0.567		0.592		0.563	
Non-European parent	0.031		0.031		0.090	
High education	0.684		0.690		0.740	
Migrated for job	0.466		0.390		0.374	
Religious	0.332		0.453		0.377	
Married	0.769		0.806		0.841	
Employed	0.756		0.601		0.720	
Unemployed	0.021		0.035		0.038	
Retired	0.145		0.266		0.139	
Health status (subjective)	8.129	1.834	8.243	1.750	8.350	1.527
Social trust	7.721	1.824	7.387	1.947	7.246	1.948

Comment: Unweighted estimates. The sample and variables are the same as in Table 1, but here presented by type of welfare regime. Number of observations range between 325 and 356 for Social democratic, 351 and 392 for Christian democratic, and 393 and 44 for Liberal welfare regimes.

#### 4. Results

From the descriptive statistics in section 3, we saw that unconditional social trust is somewhat lower in Christian democratic and liberal welfare states, compared to Social democratic welfare states. Next, we move on to regression analysis to check if these differences remain when holding individual and country level control variables constant, and whether they grow with increased exposure to non-universal welfare state institutions.

Table 3 presents results from OLS regressions of individual trust (on the 0–10 scale) on individual and country level characteristics including welfare state regime dummies interacted with the length of stay in the new country. Column A includes individual characteristics and shows that expatriates who are older or who are in good health are more trusting than others, whereas expatriates with a non-European parent are less trusting. In column B we add the dummy variables for welfare state regimes and their interaction with time in the new country. We find that upon arrival expatriates in Liberal welfare states have on average a trust score 0.7 points below expatriates in the reference category of Social democratic (i.e. universal) welfare states, corresponding to about a quarter of a standard deviation of Social trust at the individual level, whereas expatriates in Christian democratic welfare states have on average a trust score that is 0.3 points below the reference category. Column C finally adds the Gini coefficient of income inequality (from the Luxembourg income study), which has a sizeable negative coefficient. The inclusion of income inequality also substantially reduces what is left of the negative effects of non-universal welfare states.

The time pattern of the trust effect of Christian democratic and Liberal welfare state regimes (based on columns B and C) is depicted in figure 1 and 2 (with and without control for inequality). The figures illustrate that the variation in welfare state regimes experienced by Swedish expatriates does not lend support to the hypothesis that universal welfare state regimes promote social trust. If universal welfare states promote trust, they seem to do so by reducing income inequality.



**Table 3. Trust in countries with different welfare state regimes**

VARIABLES	A	B	C
Welfare state regime: Christian democratic		-0.291	-0.032
		(0.206)	(0.324)
Welfare state regime: Liberal		-0.672***	0.010
		(0.076)	(0.404)
Christian democratic x Years in new country (10s)		-0.105	-0.104
		(0.073)	(0.074)
Liberal x Years in new country (10s)		0.040	0.013
		(0.035)	(0.028)
Years in new country (10s)		0.020	0.023
		(0.030)	(0.026)
Age (10s)	1.046**	1.183***	1.140***
	(0.355)	(0.255)	(0.245)
Age squared	-0.001**	-0.001***	-0.001***
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Female	0.218*	0.215	0.177
	(0.119)	(0.132)	(0.137)
Non-European Parent	-0.957**	-0.848**	-0.851**
	(0.372)	(0.371)	(0.371)
High education	0.157	0.192	0.209
	(0.213)	(0.214)	(0.220)
Religious	-0.010	0.004	0.020
	(0.101)	(0.096)	(0.097)
Married	-0.188	-0.138	-0.137
	(0.120)	(0.109)	(0.116)
Employed	-0.350**	-0.407**	-0.446**
	(0.132)	(0.155)	(0.156)
Unemployed	-0.595	-0.578	-0.608
	(0.399)	(0.407)	(0.421)
Retired	-0.285	-0.226	-0.246
	(0.160)	(0.153)	(0.152)
Health status	0.253***	0.257***	0.261***
	(0.036)	(0.037)	(0.038)
Migrated for job	-0.069	-0.118	-0.140
	(0.124)	(0.102)	(0.107)
Gini (Lis)			-0.056
			(0.032)
Constant	2.851***	2.786***	4.237***
	(0.823)	(0.591)	(0.710)

Observations	998	998	969
R-squared	0.103	0.124	0.125

Comments: OLS regression models. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1, robust standard errors in parentheses (clustered within countries). The individual characteristics are based on survey responses among Swedish expatriates in the SOM Institute's Swedish Expatriate Survey 2014, restricted to those who have lived at least half of their time abroad in the country where they currently are residing and to countries having one of the three welfare regimes specified by Bradley et al. (2003). The dependent variable is Trust measured on a 0–10 scale, where higher values refer to higher trust. 'Non-European parent' is based on a survey question on whether the respondent had at least one parent who grew up somewhere outside of Europe. Married includes cohabitants. Health status is measured on a 0–10 scale, where higher values indicate better health. The welfare regimes of the countries are coded in accordance with Bradley et al. (2003), and 'Social democratic' is the reference category. Information on country Gini is retrieved from Luxembourg income study and calculated as an average over the years the respondent has lived in the country (if no data is available for early years, it has been imputed with the first available year).

**Figure 1. Trust and length of stay in countries with different welfare state regimes (without control for inequality)**

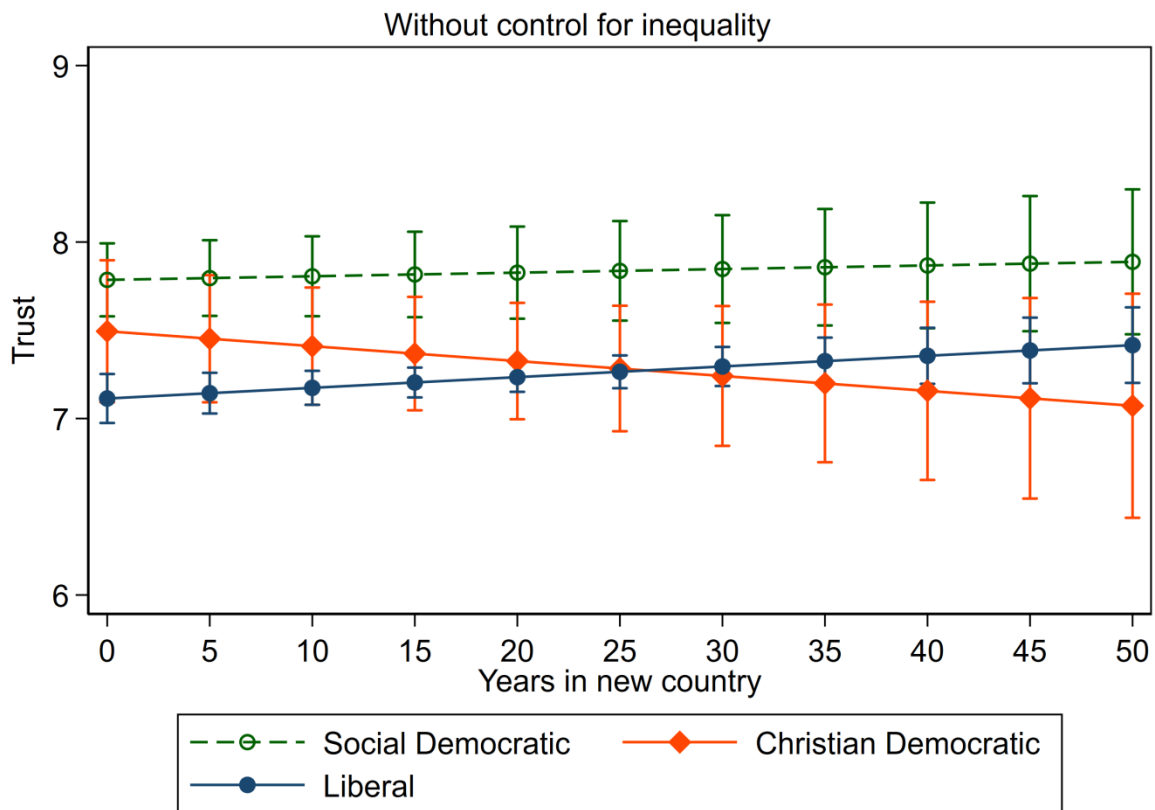
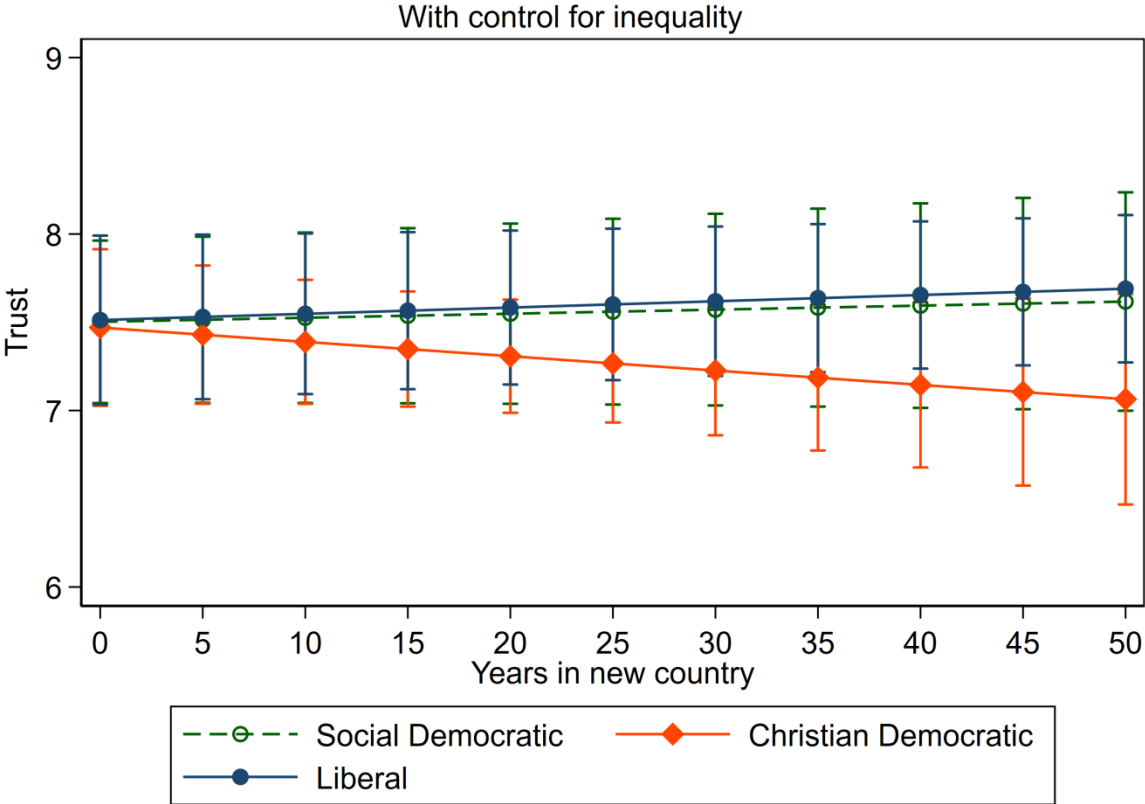


Figure 2. Trust and length of stay in countries with different welfare state regimes (with control for inequality)



## **5. Concluding remarks**

Comparing Swedish expatriates in countries with different welfare state regimes, we have rejected the hypothesis that universal welfare state institutions promote social trust, as put forward by Rothstein and co-authors. The evidence does not support the explanations in Rothstein & Stolle (2003) and Kumlin & Rothstein (2005), that universality keeps down impressions of arbitrariness, discrimination and cheating, thereby preventing trust from eroding.

Still, as argued by Rothstein & Uslaner (2005), it could be the case that universal welfare state institutions promote social trust by increasing economic equality and equality of opportunity. Our findings are hard to reconcile with such an explanation. Inequality has other determinants than welfare state regimes, and it is unclear how it is affected by universality. These complications aside, just from our point estimates, the effect of universality is too small to explain the high levels of trust in the Nordic countries.

However, we should emphasize that our data set is not ideally suited to isolate the causal link from welfare state regimes to economic inequality. We cannot rule out that welfare state universality has a modest effect on trust that operates through reduced inequality. Although such an effect does not seem to be a primary force in the Nordic countries, more research is needed to fully understand the nexus of welfare state universality, economic inequality, and social trust.

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