

What do Norwegians think? Values and attitudes in a wealthy social democracy

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Thinking about Norway's success, economic resources, and political structures and institutions are obviously extremely important. But there is also an argument to be made that the welfare state system results in part from the cultural evolution of social norms and values. The European Values Study (EVS) has representative data on Norway's population from 1981, 1990 and 2008. This dataset allows a comparison of values in Norway to those of other Western European countries and enables us to examine change over time.

According to Wilkinson and Pickett (2010), economic equality can explain the high living standards in societies in Scandinavia as compared to other rich countries. Norwegians generally do *not* place the abstract value of equality above freedom. Inglehart and Welzel (2005) have shown that modernisation is associated with secularisation and individualisation, and Norway is part of this trend. Since the 1980s, there has been a significant increase in the value placed on personal autonomy, particularly on issues like sexuality and abortion. However, there is evidence of higher support for more state responsibility and state ownership than in most other countries in Western Europe. There is not much change over time on attitudes toward equality and the role of the state; if anything, support for state control has grown since the 1990s. If we look at the standard deviation, we see that there is a closer political consensus between Norwegians than in most other countries. All these results reflect satisfaction with liberal economy as well as a strong state.

Norway is a country with high taxation and public spending, where one would assume that confidence in the state must be correspondingly high. In the EVS from 2008, 66.5% of Norwegians have confidence in Parliament, which is very high compared to other countries – twice as much as in Italy to take one example. Similarly, 79% have confidence in the justice system. However, confidence in government is only 50%. This is higher than average, but considerably lower than for example in Switzerland and Luxembourg. As Norwegians are used to being governed by coalitions and minority governments, this may simply reflect a healthy scepticism that all the parties can deliver on their promises. It could also be that Norwegians have very high expectations. In any case, it is interesting to see this more moderate confidence in government compared to the very high confidence in Parliament and the Justice system. One could argue that a successful democracy requires trust in the *system* combined with distrust of the particular people in power (Sejersted 2011: 437). Norwegians are also highly trusting of each other. In Scandinavia and the Netherlands, interpersonal trust is very high and has grown since the 1980s, while it is stable or declining everywhere else in Europe.

Norwegian national identity and pride is relatively high, and it is legitimised by a history of foreign occupation rather than imperialism and the relatively recent independence (1814 and 1905). This is evident in the protectionism and resistance to EU membership.

About 60 % of Norwegians are “very proud of their nationality” as opposed to quite proud, not very proud, or not proud at all. The oldest cohorts born in the 1920s and 30s are the most likely to feel national pride. In general however, the whole population has become a little bit more proud of their country since the 1980s, no matter when they were born. Norway is also the only western European country to have almost 90% say yes to the question whether they are willing to fight for their country when the question was asked in 1990. However, this patriotic attitude does not necessarily mean hostility to non-Norwegians. Norwegians are neither particularly tolerant nor particularly intolerant towards immigrants and ethnic minorities compared to other European countries. Ideals of protectionism and conformity seem to be offset by a strong ideology of personal liberty, equality and human rights, high financial and job security, as well as high education levels.

Like other Scandinavian countries, Norway has an established church with high membership but relatively low rates of religious belief and practice. Only 13% attend religious services at least once a month. However, 80% of Norwegians belong to a religion, most of them the Lutheran state church. There is evidence to suggest that this support for the State Church and popularity of church rites of passage is part of a national identity. Demerath (2000) calls this phenomenon “Cultural Religion,” where people keep their religious identity for nostalgic cultural reasons without believing or practicing. Only Iceland and Denmark have a more prominent gap between religious identity and practice. This illustrates again that the individualism is combined with a communitarian belonging that is founded upon strong support for national institutions.

In summary, there is some evidence of “egalitarian individualism” (Eriksen 1993) in Norway. The individualism that is advocated is for *all* individuals, and any individuality which compromises someone else’s autonomy must be checked. Strong community and personal autonomy are both highly valued. Confidence in parliamentary democracy and respect for the state is combined with moderate scepticism of government and politicians. There is high and increasing national pride, high and increasing interpersonal trust, strong local and regional identities, and identification with the State Church, combined with low levels of religious practice. All this boils down to a sense of collective identity, which could stem from the small population, ethnic and cultural homogeneity, and perhaps most importantly – socioeconomic equality. Equality and trust also contribute to a sense of security, which allows for greater individual appreciation of delayed payoffs and such, as investment in the oil fund. It is also encouraging to note that on most issues, Norwegian values and attitudes are not very different from those of other countries with comparative levels of economic development, as this suggests that there could be democratic support for adopting similar economic models in other countries.