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When Culture Matters: Essays on Voting, Identity and Norms

Iker Arregui Alegria

Lund
Economic
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Number 248



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When Culture Matters:
Essays on Voting, Identity and Norms

When Culture Matters: Essays on Voting, Identity and Norms

by Iker Arregui Alegria



LUND
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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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Faculty opponent: Irma Clots-Figueras, University of Kent

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Abstract <p>This thesis consists of three self-contained papers that study the role of culture in economics by examining how culture shapes responses to policies, how public interventions influence cultural identity, and how cultural persistence affects economic behavior and policy outcomes.</p> <p>The first chapter examines the political consequences of symbolic changes to public space in Spain, focusing on the renaming of streets honoring figures from the Franco dictatorship. Using three complementary empirical strategies and combining observational and survey evidence, I show that the removal of Francoist street names leads to a significant increase in support for far-right parties in affected areas, particularly when the names had high symbolic salience. Evidence from a novel individual-level survey indicates that this backlash is driven by identity-based concerns rather than practical objections.</p> <p>The second chapter asks whether language policy can reshape cultural identity. We study a 1986 reform in Navarre, Spain, that assigned the Basque language three different legal statuses across municipalities. Using a difference-in-differences design across birth cohorts, we find that while the reform increased Basque proficiency, its effects on identity depend on segregation: learning Basque raises one's Basque identification, but aggregate-level identity strengthens only when segregation is low and weakens when linguistic sorting is high.</p> <p>The third chapter studies the causal effect of public discourse in one or both sides of the market on overall market socially responsible behavior. In a laboratory setting, we vary whether firms and/or consumers participate in a public discussion before trading begins. When both sides take part, the share of socially responsible trades increases slightly; however, when only one side participates, market social responsibility does not improve relative to a no-discourse control. These findings suggest that campaigns aiming to foster socially responsible conduct must engage all sides of the market to achieve meaningful impact. We also provide evidence that the effectiveness of public discourse will be limited when participants prioritize profits over norm adherence.</p>			
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Dedicated to my family

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Abstract

This thesis consists of three self-contained papers that study the role of culture in economics by examining how culture shapes responses to policies, how public interventions influence cultural identity, and how cultural persistence affects economic behavior and policy outcomes.

The first chapter examines the political consequences of symbolic changes to public space in Spain, focusing on the renaming of streets honoring figures from the Franco dictatorship. Using three complementary empirical strategies and combining observational and survey evidence, I show that the removal of Francoist street names leads to a significant increase in support for far-right parties in affected areas, particularly when the names had high symbolic salience. Evidence from a novel individual-level survey indicates that this backlash is driven by identity-based concerns rather than practical objections.

The second chapter asks whether language policy can reshape cultural identity. We study a 1986 reform in Navarre, Spain, that assigned the Basque language three different legal statuses across municipalities. Using a difference-in-differences design across birth cohorts, we find that while the reform increased Basque proficiency, its effects on identity depend on segregation: learning Basque raises one's Basque identification, but aggregate-level identity strengthens only when segregation is low and weakens when linguistic sorting is high.

The third chapter studies the causal effect of public discourse in one or both sides of the market on overall market socially responsible behavior. In a laboratory setting, we vary whether firms and/or consumers participate in a public discussion before trading begins. When both sides take part, the share of socially responsible trades increases slightly; however, when only one side participates, market social responsibility does not improve relative to a no-discourse

control. These findings suggest that campaigns aiming to foster socially responsible conduct must engage all sides of the market to achieve meaningful impact. We also provide evidence that the effectiveness of public discourse will be limited when participants prioritize profits over norm adherence.

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My *Amiñe*¹ used to say that in life you always need to keep going, without looking back at what you leave behind. While she used to say this as a reminder not to linger on the past, I think it is sometimes important to take a moment and look back the path one has followed. At least to gain perspective on what one has achieved. When I do that now, I cannot help but see the people without whom I would not have been able to make it. This is for them.

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¹This is the word for grandma in the Basque dialect of my town.

doubts, concerns, or discouragement, and you were there to help and listen, or to talk for 5 minutes non-stop about some random story that contained a motivational message at the end.

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²Not to be confused with Juan Magán, a famous Spanish singer.

³In Basque Culture, a *kuadrila* is the group of friends you make growing up and remain bounded with for the rest of your life. In my case, there are about 35 of us, so I will not list everyone.

never made it to visit me during my eight years in Sweden. Also, big thanks to Ane L. and Itziar, for more hangouts in San Fermin, and to Cara, Dani, and Leire S.

The path that I followed during my PhD had the guidance of my supervisors, and the company of my friends and colleagues. But the shoes that allowed me to walk this path came from my family. To them I owe this entire journey. Ama and Aita, thanks for always taking care of me: either by listening to my complaints, providing me endless supply of food, or making sure that I am doing fine. I have always admired your constant willingness to help others and the genuine care you show every time you do. You have inspired and shaped the way I try to treat others. I would also like to thank my brothers, Asier and Jon. The three of us could not be more different, and that is exactly what makes every moment together so much fun. Finally, I also want to thank the reminder of my family. You have always supported what I chose to do and helped me in every way you could, even when that meant having me far away from home. Thinking about this, I am reminded of the poem *Txoria txori* by Joxean Artze, which says that loving someone means not caging them, but letting them be free, even if that means they might fly away. In many ways, this reflects my life, and it is why I am forever grateful to them.

Lund, May 2026
Iker

Introduction



Introduction

Why do people who face similar economic conditions often make different choices? Economics has traditionally explained individual behavior by focusing on factors such as income, prices, and institutions (Marshall; 1890; von Neumann and Morgenstern; 1944; Samuelson; 1947; Walras; 1954). These elements are clearly important in shaping how people make decisions. Yet even when these conditions are very similar, individuals and societies often display strikingly different patterns in how they work, save, invest in education, or cooperate with others (Henrich et al.; 2001; Guiso et al.; 2006; Tabellini; 2010; Alesina and Giuliano; 2015). This suggests that economic behavior cannot be fully understood by material incentives alone. The beliefs, values, and social norms that people grow up with also influence how they view the world and make decisions (Schulz et al.; 2019; Weber et al.; 2023; Molho et al.; 2025). For this reason, economists have increasingly turned their attention to the role of culture in shaping individual choices and economic outcomes.

Culture is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that evolves over long periods of time. In the economics literature, culture is commonly understood as the set of shared beliefs, values, and social norms that are transmitted across generations and shape individual behavior (Guiso et al.; 2006). These cultural traits often reflect the accumulation of historical experiences that leave lasting imprints on attitudes and behavior within societies. Cultural norms are also shaped by deeper evolutionary processes that have helped human groups coordinate behavior and sustain cooperation over time (Henrich; 2015). As a result, culture emerges from the interaction of history, social organization, and the environment, and continues to influence how individuals perceive and respond to economic and social incentives.

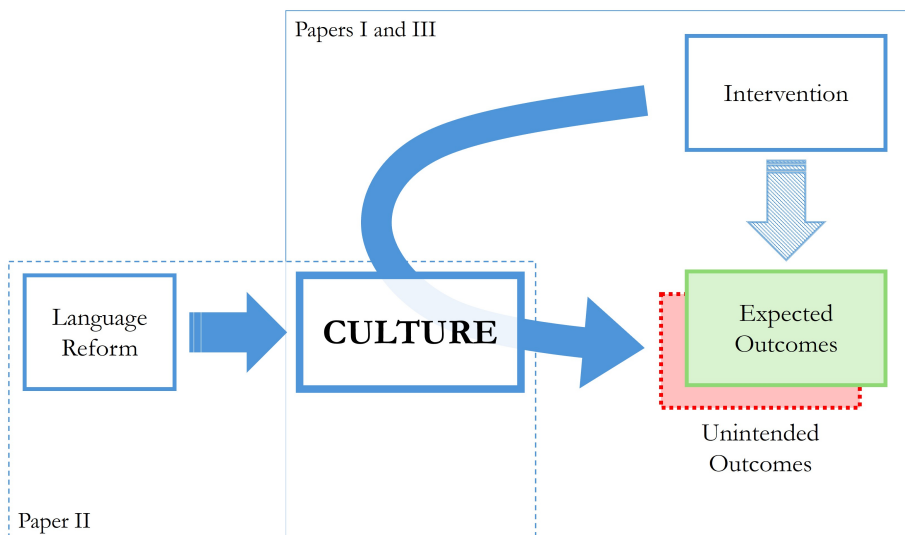
Given these deep and persistent roots, culture can strongly influence how individuals respond to economic incentives and public policies. The same policy or institutional change may therefore produce different outcomes depending on the cultural context in which it operates. Understanding this interaction between culture and policy is therefore crucial for explaining variation in economic behavior and for designing effective interventions.

This thesis studies this interaction between economics and culture through three empirical chapters. As illustrated in Figure 1, the first chapter examines the political consequences of intervening in culturally meaningful domains, focusing on symbolic policies that alter the public representation of historical identities. It shows that such interventions can generate unintended political reactions when they conflict with existing cultural attachments. The second chapter turns to the possibility of shaping culture, studying how language policy can influence identity formation and a sense of belonging. The third chapter focuses on the persistence of culture by analyzing whether interventions attempting to promote socially responsible behavior in markets are constrained by individuals' priorities and norms. Taken together, the chapters highlight that culture can both shape how individuals respond to policies and be shaped by them, making it an essential component for understanding economic behavior and policy outcomes.

Measuring culture is not straightforward. Culture is often ambiguous and difficult to quantify directly, and its diffuse nature also makes it challenging to establish causal relationships between cultural factors and economic behavior. For this reason, the chapters of this thesis study culture through different empirical settings, combining several methodological approaches to identify its role and consequences. In particular, I rely on both applied microeconomic methods and experimental evidence to capture cultural influences and to provide credible causal analysis.

The first chapter examines the consequences of policies that intervene in culturally meaningful domains. Public symbols such as monuments, statues, or street names often embody historical narratives and collective identities, and changes to them can therefore be perceived as challenges to the values or identities they represent. I study this question in the context of Spain, where democratic governments have removed street names honoring figures from the Franco dictatorship. Using neighborhood-level electoral data together with survey evidence, I

Figure 1: Thesis overview illustration



show that the removal of these symbols generates electoral backlash in affected areas, increasing support for far-right parties. The evidence suggests that this reaction is driven by identity-based concerns, as individuals who identify with the historical legacy perceive the policy as a symbolic attack on their group identity. More broadly, the chapter highlights how policies that attempt to reshape public symbols and historical narratives can provoke unintended political responses when they conflict with existing cultural attachments.

The second chapter focuses on the possibility of shaping culture. In particular, it studies whether language policies can influence identity formation and contribute to nation building. We examine a language reform in Navarre, Spain, where municipalities were divided into three linguistic zones that granted the Basque language different legal statuses. This institutional setting allows us to identify how language exposure interacts with social segregation in shaping identity. The results show that language policies can have very different effects depending on how they are implemented. When Basque instruction is widespread and segregation is limited, language policy strengthens Basque identification. However, when language policy allows for greater sorting across schools, the reform leads to increased segregation and weaker aggregate identity formation. These findings illustrate how policies can shape cultural identities,

but also how institutional design can influence whether such policies foster cohesion or polarization.

The third chapter studies the persistence of culture and the limits it may impose on efforts to promote socially responsible behavior. In many contexts, public discourse and awareness campaigns are used to encourage individuals and firms to adopt more socially responsible practices, such as reducing environmental harm. This chapter examines whether such attempts to shape behavior through normative appeals can effectively influence market outcomes. Using a large laboratory market experiment, we study whether encouraging discussion about third party harms among only consumers or only producers can change trading behavior. The results show that discourse affects behavior only when both sides of the market participate in the conversation. When communication is limited to only one side, responsible behavior does not increase. These findings suggest that attempts to promote socially responsible conduct through public discourse face important cultural constraints, particularly when individuals prioritize profits over norm adherence. More broadly, the chapter highlights how existing norms and priorities can limit the effectiveness of policies or campaigns designed to change economic behavior.

Summary and Contributions of the Thesis

This section provides detailed summaries of the chapters contained in this thesis and their respective contributions.

Paper I: Renaming the Past: Identity, Memory, and Electoral Backlash in Spain

Public spaces are increasingly at the center of debates over collective identity, as communities revisit which figures deserve commemoration (Oto-Peralías; 2018; Caballero-Cordero et al.; 2025). Examples include the recent removal of Confederate monuments in the United States and colonial-era statues across the Americas. These removals are often framed as a step toward reckoning with history (Aguilar et al.; 2011; Gensburger and Wüstenberg; 2023). Yet for those who identify with the legacy these symbols represent, such changes

can feel like an erasure of their group’s place in the national narrative and a rejection of their values. When symbolic policies are perceived in this way, they may provoke social backlash (Villamil and Balcells; 2021; Rozenas and Vlasenko; 2022; Zabolotskiy; 2022; Taylor; 2025). This paper examines the political consequences of such symbolic changes in Spain and investigates the underlying identity-based motives driving political backlash.

Spain provides a particularly salient setting for this analysis. Governed by a right-wing military dictatorship under General Franco from 1939 to 1975, the country retains visible symbolic remnants of this period, including street names honoring regime figures. For individuals who identify with this legacy, the removal of such names in the democratic period may be perceived not as an administrative adjustment but as a symbolic repudiation of political and historical identity.

This paper uses the removal of Francoist street names as a proxy for perceived identity threat and studies its causal effect on electoral outcomes using three complementary empirical approaches. First, I analyze neighborhood-level electoral data across Spain from 2001 to 2021, exploiting variation in the timing and location of street renamings. I complement this national analysis with a focused study of Madrid, where centralized records and a one-time, citywide renaming campaign in 2017 allow for more precise measurement of exposure. Both analyses show that neighborhoods in which at least one Francoist street was renamed experienced an increase in far-right vote share of approximately 5–8% of the mean. Second, I conduct an online survey in Madrid to examine individual-level attitudes and perceived motivations, finding that respondents are more likely to report shifting their support toward far-right parties as a consequence of the renamings, consistent with the electoral results.

To identify the mechanisms behind the political response to symbolic policies, I distinguish identity-based reactions from alternative explanations such as administrative inconvenience or dissatisfaction with policy priorities. Focusing on Madrid, I present three pieces of evidence pointing to identity concerns as the primary driver. First, adjacent but untreated neighborhoods with similar socioeconomic and political characteristics exhibit comparable voting shifts, ruling out practical inconveniences as a key mechanism. Second, electoral responses are concentrated in areas where highly salient Francoist figures—such as General Franco—were removed, with no effects for less recogniz-

able names, indicating that backlash depends on symbolic salience rather than renaming itself. Third, survey evidence shows that while both practical and identity-related concerns correlate with Francoist attachment, only identity-based motives are consistently associated with negative emotional reactions and self-reported shifts toward far-right parties. I further rule out alternative explanations by showing that effects do not vary with street prominence and are unrelated to the perceived controversy of replacement names, reinforcing the interpretation of identity threat as the central mechanism.

This paper contributes to the literature on identity and public symbols by providing causal evidence that symbolic policies targeting collective identity can generate political backlash. While existing work shows that monuments and commemorative symbols preserve historical identities and activate latent attitudes when they become politically salient (Ochsner and Roesel; 2024; Zabolotskiy; 2022; Taylor; 2025), I show that their removal can itself trigger identity-based reactions and increase support for far-right parties. The findings imply that symbolic policies aimed at reckoning with the past can have unintended political consequences by activating identity-based backlash.

Paper II: Basque: Language, Segregation, and Identity

Political polarization has intensified across many democracies, leading to sharper political conflict between groups. Increasingly, these conflicts align with social identities such as culture, language, or ethnicity, making divisions more persistent and harder to bridge (Iyengar et al.; 2019). A large literature shows that shared identities can instead reduce conflict, foster cooperation, and strengthen state capacity (Bazzi et al.; 2019; Alesina et al.; 2021). Understanding how these shared identities emerge is therefore central to explaining social cohesion in diverse societies. Language is often viewed as a key mechanism in this process: a common language can facilitate communication and interaction across groups, potentially strengthening shared identity (Boisjoly et al.; 2006; Clots-Figueras and Masella; 2013; Dahl et al.; 2021; Lowe; 2021; Corno et al.; 2022; Bursztyń et al.; 2024; Blanc and Kubo; 2025). Yet we know little about how language policies shape identity formation, particularly when language expansion occurs in institutional settings that may encourage social sorting.

This study addresses this gap in the context of the Basque language in Nav-

arre, a region in northern Spain. In 1986, a language reform divided Navarre into three linguistic zones—Basque-speaking, Mixed, and non-Basque-speaking—each granting Basque a different legal and educational status while keeping curricula and other public institutions largely uniform. The reform simultaneously expanded access to Basque-language education and altered opportunities for school sorting. In the Basque-speaking area, Basque instruction became compulsory, while in the Mixed area families could choose between Basque- and Spanish-medium tracks. In the non-Basque-speaking area, Basque had minimal presence in education. This design generated variation in both language exposure and potential for linguistic segregation within the same institutional setting.

Using census data and sociolinguistic surveys from 1986 to 2021, we implement a cohort difference-in-differences design comparing cohorts differentially exposed to the reform across linguistic zones. The reform significantly increased Basque-language proficiency, particularly in the Basque-speaking and Mixed areas. However, these linguistic gains translated into stronger Basque identification only in the Basque-speaking area. In contrast, the Mixed area experienced a decline in self-reported Basque identity despite rising language proficiency, revealing a divergence between linguistic and identity outcomes.

We investigate the mechanisms behind this divergence by examining how the reform reshaped patterns of social interaction. In principle, learning a common language could strengthen shared identity. However, the Mixed area allowed families to sort across multiple instructional models, facilitating linguistic segregation between Basque- and Spanish-speaking students. This sorting reduced daily interaction across groups, limiting opportunities for identity convergence. By contrast, in the Basque-speaking area most students converged to Basque-medium education, maintaining regular cross-group contact.

Survey evidence supports this mechanism. Students educated in Basque-medium schools report predominantly Basque-speaking friendship networks and interact mainly in Basque on social media, while those in Spanish-medium tracks report few Basque-speaking contacts. Both having Basque-speaking friends and engaging with social media in Basque are strongly associated with stronger Basque identification, suggesting that reduced cross-group contact mediates the divergent identity effects of the reform.

This paper contributes to the literature on nation building and identity form-

ation by showing that language acquisition alone does not necessarily produce shared identity. A large body of work documents how language policies, education, and state institutions shape national identity and social cohesion (Anderson; 1983; Aspachs-Bracons et al.; 2008; Cantoni et al.; 2017; Cinnirella and Schueler; 2018; Fouka; 2020; Alesina et al.; 2021; Blanc and Kubo; 2025). We show that the effects of language policy depend critically on whether institutions foster interaction or segregation across groups. When language reforms allow individuals to sort into separate tracks, increased language proficiency may coexist with weaker shared identity and greater social division. This result complements a growing literature emphasizing the role of intergroup contact in shaping attitudes and identities (Boisjoly et al.; 2006; Voigtländer and Voth; 2015; Dahl et al.; 2021; Lowe; 2021; Corno et al.; 2022; Bagues and Roth; 2023; Bursztyn et al.; 2024). Together, these findings highlight the importance of institutional design in shaping how language policies influence social cohesion.

Paper III: Public Discourse, Norm Adherence, and Socially Responsible Behavior

Consumers, firms, and public agencies increasingly incorporate social considerations into market decisions. Shoppers pay premiums for local or sustainable products, firms adopt costlier but greener production practices, and public campaigns encourage discussion of the harms associated with standard market behavior. While evidence shows that discourse involving all market participants can foster more responsible conduct (?), it is unclear whether similar changes arise when conversation is limited to only one side of a transaction. In this paper, co-authored with Gunes Gokmen and Roel van Veldhuizen, we ask whether encouraging only consumers or only producers to debate environmental harms can nonetheless induce greener transactions in the market as a whole. To address this question, we study one-sided public discourse in a large laboratory market experiment and examine whether targeted dialogue spills over to affect trading behavior and perceived social norms.

We study this question in a controlled laboratory market with repeated interaction between buyers and sellers. Sellers choose between a low cost harmful product that reduces a common donation fund and imposes a monetary loss on an uninvolved charity, and a higher cost responsible alternative that leaves the fund intact. Buyers then decide whether, and from whom, to purchase. Before

trading begins, we vary who can participate in a short public chat: no one, sellers only, buyers only, or both sides. By embedding discourse in a setting where responsible trade requires foregoing private earnings to reduce an external cost, the design allows us to test whether targeted public discourse can propagate beyond its immediate audience and reshape marketwide behavior and social norms.

Our results show that public discourse affects market behavior only when both sides of the market are involved. When buyers and sellers jointly participate in the discussion, responsible trade increases, consistent with earlier evidence, though the effect is much smaller than previously reported. In contrast, limiting discourse to only buyers or only sellers does not lead to meaningful changes in trading behavior or in perceived social norms. Further analysis indicates that, although participants discuss similar issues as in prior studies, they place relatively greater weight on profits than on norm compliance, helping to explain why the impact of discourse is muted in our setting.

This paper adds to the experimental literature on market externalities by clarifying which market actors must be exposed to normative appeals for discourse to influence market outcomes (Rode et al.; 2008; Bénabou and Tirole; 2010; Dufwenberg et al.; 2011, 2022; Bartling et al.; 2015, 2019; ?). By replicating and extending ?, we further show that the impact of public discourse depends on the underlying population, particularly on how strongly individuals value norm adherence relative to profits. More broadly, our results qualify earlier evidence that communication promotes cooperation (Dawes et al.; 1977; Charness and Dufwenberg; 2006; Bochet et al.; 2006) by showing that such effects weaken when responsible behavior is privately costly and communication is asymmetric (Andreoni and Rao; 2011; Agranov and Tergiman; 2014). Taken together, these findings suggest that discourse effects may not generalize to highly competitive settings and that campaigns targeting only consumers or only firms might be unlikely to be sufficient without broader engagement or complementary policy tools.

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