



## Social norms offer explanation for inconsistent effects of incentives on prosocial behaviour

Caroline Graf, VU Amsterdam & Sanquin Research | Bianca Suanet, VU Amsterdam | Pamala Wiepking, VU Amsterdam & Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis | Eva-Maria Merz, VU Amsterdam & Sanquin Research

This research paper explores the determinants of prosocial behaviour and the role of incentives and social norms for individuals' willingness to contribute to public goods. Traditional economic theories suggest that offering incentives can effectively motivate prosocial actions. However, empirical studies reveal a paradoxical pattern where incentives sometimes fail to influence or even diminish prosocial behaviour.

The paper introduces a novel approach to understanding these inconsistent effects of incentives by integrating social norms into a formal model of prosocial behaviour. The authors propose a comprehensive model that retains the signalling aspects of image-based theories while accounting for contextual variation in behaviour.

The study addresses the longstanding puzzle of inconsistent incentive effects on prosocial behaviour, shedding light on the role of social norms. By exploring the dynamics of blood donation behaviour, the research provides valuable insights for understanding the factors underlying prosocial actions and how incentives could be used to motivate such actions.

[#SocialNorms](#) [#Incentives](#) [#ProsocialBehavior](#) [#DonorBehaviour](#)  
[#IntrinsicMotivation](#) [#ExtrinsicMotivation](#) [#PublicHealthCampaigns](#)

### Background & Context



- **This research addresses the inconsistency of incentive effects on prosocial behaviour** and highlights the importance of social norms in understanding people's motivations to engage in prosocial actions.
- According to traditional economic theory, **offering incentives should encourage prosocial behaviour** (e.g., blood donation). However, in practice it is often more complex: **Incentives sometimes don't work or even backfire.**
- New approach: **This study integrates social norms into the model**, recognizing their key role for prosocial behaviour.
- In this study, the authors **combine image-based models (focusing on reputation) with social norms models (emphasizing societal expectations)**. To test the model, they **use real-world evidence**, by analysing actual blood donation data from 28 European countries, revealing diverse incentive policies and social norms.

# ERNOP Research Note

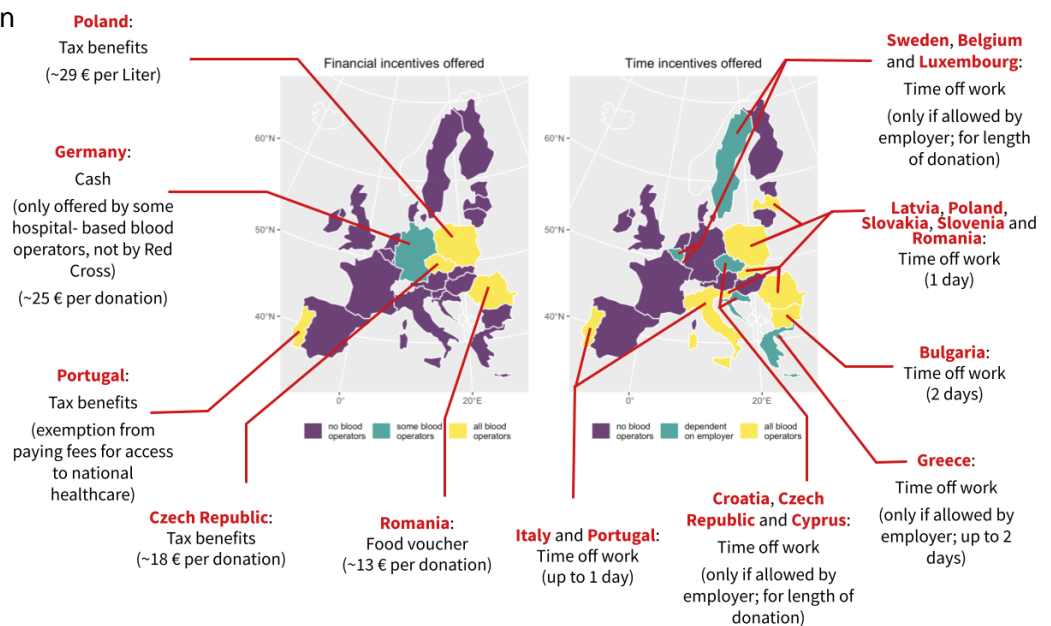
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## Takeaways & Learnings



- **Social norms vary across countries and incentive types:** People have mostly negative views towards financial incentives, but in some countries there are actually positive views towards time off work as an incentive, **depending on the context.**
  - **Norms predict behaviour:** Positive norms linked to higher donation rates in countries offering incentives, suggesting that context, especially social norms, matter.
- **Reputational costs:** Vary across context, challenging traditional models that claim fixed reputational effects of incentives.
- **Other factors:** Intrinsic motivation, personal costs, living in a rural area all play a role.
- **Key finding:** When incentives are offered, **positive social norms about incentives are linked to increased blood donation.**
  - **Policy implications:** Consider social context and existing norms when designing incentive programs.
  - **Public health:** Frame incentives positively to enhance impact.
  - **Future research:** Test other types of prosocial behaviour and incentives, refine social norm measurement, explore motivations further.
- **Overall message:** Contextual understanding is crucial to designing effective interventions for prosocial behaviour.

**Figure 1:** Visualization of blood donor incentives in Europe.



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