

The Scandinavian Difference  
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## INTRODUCTION

Scandinavia is a unique place among the global community. They consistently rank in the top of many international rankings including the UN’s World Happiness Report, life expectancy, and top 15 countries for GDP per capita. These admirable attributes make Scandinavia worth examining and perhaps imitating. There are many parts of Scandinavian life responsible for this. Their educational system is one, particularly Finland’s with its high performance and unorthodox methods. They also are very healthy people with a culture centered on fitness and health. They have an economy based on free market capitalism but with many social programs that redistribute wealth in a unique blend termed “Compassionate Capitalism”. Then there is gender equality, in which Scandinavia has excelled from the days of the Vikings to today. These all have admirable and imitable qualities that are worth examining in detail.

Before diving into how Scandinavia operates, it is important to know what countries Scandinavia is comprised of. The official countries of Scandinavia are Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Because of common history, heritage, and geographical proximity as well as cultural and political similarity, Finland and Iceland are often considered a part of Scandinavia as well.

## EDUCATION

Scandinavia has a relatively good education system, especially Finland. When comparing educational proficiency across countries, scholars often use the PISA test. The PISA test is an international exam among 79 participating countries that allows their educational systems to be compared. PISA tests 15-year-old students’ proficiency in math, reading, and science. Table 1 shows how Scandinavia compares on the PISA rankings.

### **PISA Rankings**

<b>COUNTRY</b>	<b>READING</b>	<b>MATHEMATICS</b>	<b>SCIENCE</b>	<b>OVERALL RANKING</b>
<b>DENMARK</b>	18	13	25	18
<b>FINLAND</b>	7	16	6	7
<b>ICELAND</b>	35	26	35	35
<b>NORWAY</b>	19	19	27	19
<b>SWEDEN</b>	11	17	19	11

Table 1<sup>1</sup>

Scandinavia compares fairly with other developed countries with the exception of Finland and Sweden. Sweden produces better results and Finland outstanding ones. For secondary

education, most of the countries spend close to 8% of their GDP<sup>ii</sup> and spend an average of close to \$12,000 per student<sup>iii</sup> The notable exception is Finland which only spends 6.4% of their GDP and \$10,200 per student. Finland produces the most exceptional results while spending the least of all Scandinavian countries.

The Scandinavian secondary and higher education system is free and paid for by the state. While parents may send their children to school at no additional cost, they may also opt to pay tuition for a private school. Generally, school is mandatory from around the ages of 6-17.<sup>iv</sup> Sweden edges out most of the other countries by having a decentralized education system. Individual municipalities are allowed to set their own curricula and are given more freedom in how they run their schools.<sup>v</sup> Another commonality among the Scandinavians is free university education. With little exception, a student can attend university without paying direct tuition, sometimes even foreign students can take advantage of this.<sup>vi</sup> All 5 Scandinavian countries also generously support research, and they rank in the top 7 for Number of Researchers per million inhabitants by country.<sup>vii</sup>

The most outstanding of the Scandinavian education systems is Finland's. Finland outranks every country in every category in table 1 and many other developed countries as well. They do this while spending the least money out of their Scandinavian neighbors. This shows that their success has more to do with their methods and system rather than expenditure. Like many of the other Scandinavian countries, Finland has free education and is mandatory for 9 years. One area in which they differ from the globe is the amount of time they spend in the classroom. The typical school day for a Finnish student starts around 9:00 am and wraps up around 2:00 pm with many breaks in between. They also only take about 3 or 4 classes per day.<sup>viii</sup> Shane Snow points the difference between the amount of time Finnish students spend in class in his book *Smartcuts*. He states, "Teachers in Finland spent about half as much time each school year in the classroom, 600 hours to American teachers' 1,100."<sup>ix</sup> Along with the short amount of time spent in the classroom, Finland also has a "no homework" policy<sup>x</sup> although students often study voluntarily at home. It is worth pointing out that Finland is spending less on education and less time in the classroom than other Western countries and yet achieves spectacular results.

Another feature that makes Finnish education unique is that they have no tests in the entirety of secondary school. This is because they value the processes by which students learn more than metrics like standardized test results. Teachers are able to do this because they often have the same students for long periods of time (typically 6 years). This enables them to give marks to students based on personally assessing the student on an individual level.<sup>xi</sup> Finnish schools also have higher standards for their teachers. Teachers are required to have a master's degree unlike many Western countries including the US. Finland encourages innovation in education; allowing teachers to experiment with different methods and giving them much discretion in how they run their classrooms.<sup>xii</sup> Finland's stellar results from such small investment is an example to countries that want to reform their education system.

## HEALTH

One aspect of Scandinavia that sets them apart Scandinavia apart is healthy population and high life expectancy. In a ranking of 191 countries for average life expectancy, the lowest

ranking of the Nordic countries is Denmark at 32 with a life expectancy of 81. This is rather high when compared with the world average of 73 and the US average of 79.<sup>xiii</sup> Table 2 compares the health of Scandinavian countries along 3 metrics: health grade from the Bloomberg Health Index, average life expectancy, and obesity rate.

### Health Comparison

COUNTRY	HEALTH GRADE	AVERAGE LIFE EXPECTANCY	OBESITY RATE
DENMARK	82.69	81.40	19.7
FINLAND	85.89	82.48	22.2
ICELAND	91.44	83.52	21.9
NORWAY	89.09	82.94	23.1
SWEDEN	90.24	83.33	20.6

Table 2<sup>xiv</sup>

Healthcare is a part of what makes a population healthy so it would make sense to examine Scandinavia's. Healthcare looks about the same across all Scandinavian countries. Healthcare is free and is paid for and run by the state. Private care and insurance are also allowed for Scandinavians who want or need to bypass the waiting lists for faster, better care. In fact, there has been a significant trend toward the privatization of healthcare in Scandinavia.<sup>xv</sup> While this is much different than the privatized American system, these features are not that different from other, less healthy Western countries' healthcare. Scandinavian's are healthier than other countries with similar healthcare systems so what makes the difference? The answer lies in the typical Scandinavian's healthy lifestyle.

There are three major characteristics of the Scandinavian lifestyle that account for their healthy people: diet, exercise, and mental hygiene. The Scandinavian diet largely consists of fatty fish, nuts, organic berries and vegetables, and rye bread.<sup>xvi</sup> In addition to the fact that this is a very healthy diet, much of their food is locally sourced, organic, and cooked at home. Cooking at home is a large part of Scandinavian culture. This makes eating fast food a rare occasion rather than a habit as in many Western countries. Another part of their healthy diet is their moderation in alcohol. According to *Reader's Digest* "Norwegians drink the least amount of alcohol than people in many other countries, including the U.S., and U.K." The next big reason for Scandinavian health is the culture they have built around exercise. In Copenhagen, 50% of employees bicycle to work with a significant portion of the rest walking. There is also a large social component to gyms and sports clubs. Being in a sports club or gym is the best way to become a part of their group and develop a sense of belongingness. Businesses also often pay for employee gym memberships or have their own workout equipment on site.<sup>xvii</sup> This combination of diet and exercise account for lower obesity rates in Scandinavia. In OECD countries, around 1 in 4 are obese whereas in Scandinavia it is closer to 1 in 5.<sup>xviii</sup> The 3<sup>rd</sup> factor in Scandinavian health is their mental hygiene.

Scandinavia has a surprisingly low rates of depression despite their long dark winters. Out of all of them, Sweden has the highest rate of depression and ranks only 91<sup>st</sup> out of 232

countries. Iceland ranks 180<sup>th</sup> while the rest range between 115 and 120.<sup>xix</sup> Scandinavia is also well known for consistently remaining at the top of the UN's World Happiness Report.<sup>xx</sup> Part of these results come from the diet and exercise which benefit mental health. Another component though, is a concept called "lagom". Lagom is hard to translate but it essentially means balance and moderation; just enough but not too much. While it is often attributed to Sweden or Norway, lagom is practiced across Scandinavia.<sup>xxi</sup> The concept of lagom applies to their diet, but it also applies to their work life balance. It relaxes life and makes it more fulfilling. It also protects the culture against the gluttony of consumerism and materialism.

All of these aspects of Scandinavian lifestyle are worth imitating for any country looking to improve the health of its citizens. They are some of the healthiest and happiest people in the world. They stand as a testament to the old saying "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure". Scandinavians have access to good healthcare which contributes to their health. A more important factor though, is the healthy lifestyle. Any country can see massive improvements in their health if they incorporate a culture of health like that of the Nordic countries. The solution to health problems lies primarily in lifestyle.

### ECONOMY

The Scandinavian economy is unique, interesting, and, most importantly, successful. It is interesting to see what the economies are based on and how they compare. Their economy is also the subject of much discussion because it is upheld by many American political figures as an example of the virtues of socialism, but do they really have a socialistic economy? While the answer is ostensibly no, the Scandinavian economy does resemble certain aspects of a socialist state. The Scandinavian economy is based on free market principles, but with wealth redistribution policies. The economy is also based heavily on the concept of creative destruction.

Here are how the Scandinavian countries compare in size of GDP and GDP per capita in 2018.

#### Economic Comparison

COUNTRY	GDP (NOMINAL)	GDP PER CAPITA (NOMINAL)
DENMARK	\$362.150	\$62,041
FINLAND	\$282.010	\$50,879
ICELAND	\$20.284	\$79,270
NORWAY	\$448.460	\$82,773
SWEDEN	\$563.240	\$54,135

*Table 3<sup>xxii</sup>*

Scandinavia have successful economies considering their average GDP per capita is almost \$3,000 more than America's.<sup>xxiii</sup> These economies vary in what they are made up of. For instance Denmark and Sweden's economy is based largely on services and manufacturing, Finland's is service and information technology oriented, Iceland's is mainly fishing, and Norway's is oil.<sup>iv</sup>

One of the most interesting features of the Scandinavian economy is their affinity for small businesses. Entrepreneurship is thriving in Scandinavia, and there are many reasons for it. One important one is that the government does not mandate a minimum wage which helps small businesses and those just starting out.<sup>xxiv</sup> Another reason is that the social programs provide a safety net that allows people to take risks without having to worry about surviving in the future.<sup>xxv</sup> This has some downsides because people will take overly risky chances and that can end very expensively for the state, but it still encourages more entrepreneurship all the same. Another big reason is the constant and widespread creative destruction that constantly restructures and renews the Scandinavian economy.<sup>xxiv</sup> Creative destruction is the process of new organizations and industries replacing bigger and older organizations and industries. This promotes constant progress and keeps the economy, technology, and people up to date and on top of things.

Scandinavia is often held up as a bastion of socialism and all of its benefits for its people. Socialism is defined as the public (state) ownership of the means of production. While there are some state-owned industries and monopolies, Scandinavia’s economy is based largely on private industry and free enterprise. The reason Scandinavia is often viewed as socialist is because they redistribute the wealth through taxes and social programs. This is termed by many scholars as “Compassionate Capitalism”. While some argue that this system is responsible for Nordic Success, David Bruining from the Foundation for Economic Education argues that they are successful in spite of, not because of, the welfare state. He reasons that when these programs were introduced and taxes raised in the 1970s, the Scandinavian economy tanked, and it wasn’t until they privatized some industries, cut taxes, and moved toward a more economic free market basis that they recovered.<sup>xxiv</sup> The point could be further argued through the fact that Scandinavian Americans are more successful than Scandinavian citizens with a median household income that is well over 20% higher in 2013.<sup>xxvi</sup> This controls for the effect that culture might have in Scandinavia that makes its particular system appear successful. One benefit pointed out by proponents of compassionate capitalism is the decrease in wealth disparity. While the welfare state redistributes income and helps to decrease the gap between the rich and poor, is that really a good end in and of itself? There is certainly a problem if the poor really are getting poorer as the rich get richer, but it seems that income of the poor does increase, just not at the same rate as the rich.<sup>xxvii</sup> While the wealth gap can incur envy between the classes, in reality it is not necessarily evil in and of itself and does not provide justification for policies that are overall harmful to the economy.

As stated before, the Nordic countries have a large welfare state that provides many free services that is supported by large taxes shown in table 4 below.

#### **Personal Income Tax Rate Comparison**

<b>COUNTRY</b>	<b>RATE</b>	<b>INTERNATIONAL RANKING</b>
<b>DENMARK</b>	55.8	5
<b>FINLAND</b>	56.95	3
<b>ICELAND</b>	46.24	14
<b>NORWAY</b>	38.2	37
<b>SWEDEN</b>	57.2	2

Table 4<sup>xxviii</sup>

It is only with taxes this high that the numerous social programs can be supported, and it has a noticeable effect on the economy. It is important to note that the two countries in this list with the least taxes happen to have the highest GDP per capita. While the Scandinavian economy is successful, it could be more so without the large tax burden.

One of the ways that the Scandinavian economy is successful despite the high taxes is through its culture of trust and low level of corruption. In a report entitled *Trust- the Nordic Gold*, the author uses the European Social Survey from 2014 to show the massive amount of social trust in Scandinavia. Likewise, the Corruption Perceptions Index from 2019 further confirms this by showing an extremely low level of corruption in the Nordic states. Table 5 shows the data from both of these sources.

### Trust Comparison

COUNTRY	SOCIAL TRUST RANKING	CPI RANKING
DENMARK	1	1
FINLAND	2	3
ICELAND	4	11
NORWAY	3	7
SWEDEN	4	4

Table 5<sup>xxix</sup>

All of the Nordic countries occupy the highest position on the scale of social trust and also rank very low as far as corruption is concerned. *Trust- the Nordic Gold* further points out the economic benefits of societal trust. It shows that trust between people reduces conflicts and the need for checks against abuse. It reduces the cost to do business and, in effect, lubricates the economy. This is the true secret to Scandinavian economic success. It should serve as a lesson to other countries how important instilling and maintaining societal trust is in how it can even overcome the negative economic effects of high taxation.

Scandinavia is among the most successful economies across the globe and has a highly developed economy largely based on service and information. They promote entrepreneurship and small business by decreasing the costs for them to operate and reducing the risks of starting them. The creative destruction that ensues keeps the economy successful, adaptable, and technologically advanced. While often oversimplified as a socialistic economy, the Nordic countries' economies are actually based on free markets and capitalism with a redistribution of wealth through high taxes and numerous social programs. The taxes are high in Scandinavia, and have the predictable negative effect on their economy, but they are still successful. They do this by maintaining an enormous level of trust in their institutions and between individuals. This is the real lesson from the Scandinavian economy, a culture of trust brings prosperity and wealth that can overcome many obstacles.

## GENDER EQUALITY

Before discussing gender equality in Scandinavia, it is important to distinguish between 2 types of equality: equality of opportunity and equality of outcome. Equality of outcome is often misused as the measure of equality between groups of people. Equality of outcome does not take into account factors like differences in personal choice, personality, or culture. To quote Margaret Thatcher “the pursuit of equality itself is a mirage. What's more desirable and more practicable than the pursuit of equality is the pursuit of equality of opportunity. And opportunity means nothing unless it includes the right to be unequal and the freedom to be different.”<sup>xxx</sup> Equality of opportunity should be prioritized over equality of outcome.

Scandinavia is widely known for their egalitarianism in regard to gender. They have deep historical and cultural roots in equality between men and women. The old Sagas depict women as being valued for their wisdom and strength as opposed to being sex objects and maids. Norse mythology is full of strong female characters. Beyond lore and fiction, Scandinavia has also historically been ahead of the times. In the time of the Vikings, women could be warriors and own and inherit property. At that time these rights were unheard of in most other cultures.<sup>xxxi</sup> We can also see a highly egalitarian mindset in Scandinavia today. When the World Values Survey stated “When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women” 93% of Swedes disagreed.<sup>xxxii</sup>

For the Nordic country, egalitarianism goes beyond culture; it is enshrined into law as well. Every Scandinavian country has laws against discrimination and provide women and minorities with equal opportunities. Sweden goes the furthest making women eligible for the draft.<sup>xxxiii</sup> This gives women equal rights as well as equal responsibilities. Scandinavia also has paid paternity leave.<sup>xxxiv</sup> This is compared to America which has none.<sup>xxxv</sup> Paid paternity leave puts fathers on a more equal footing with mothers and abolishes the economic disincentive to hire women because they might become pregnant. The upbringing of children in Scandinavia is also done with a large focus on gender neutrality and treating boys and girls alike. There are even special gender-neutral schools that parents can send their children to.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

Scandinavia’s singular practice of egalitarianism has brought to light an interesting phenomenon called the Nordic gender equality paradox. As Scandinavian society becomes more egalitarian, the personality differences between men and women increase. This runs counter to what was generally expected and was thus called a paradox. Professor of psychology Dr. Jordan Peterson describes in part 1 of his article “The Gender Scandal” how this effects outcomes

Given that differences in temperament and interest help determine occupational choice, and that difference in occupational choice drives variability in such things as income, it follows that political doctrines that promote equality of opportunity also drive inequality of outcome.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

The differences in outcome create an illusion of gender inequality but it must not be viewed as such because there is a high degree of equality of opportunity.

## CONCLUSIONS

For countries wanting to improve themselves, the best way is to look at examples of success in other countries. Scandinavia distinguishes itself from the rest of the world in many ways and is very successful. If countries want to attain the success of Scandinavia there are four aspects of Scandinavia that they will want to emulate:

- The education system- Finland is an example of how education systems around the world could be improved. Highly qualified teachers are given much flexibility in the way they teach. Minimal time is spent inside the classroom and there is a no homework policy. Teachers and students are able to make this work through maintaining long-term relationships in schools. These combine to make students who learn and enjoy school.
- The healthy culture- Countries that want healthier people should work on creating a culture like Scandinavia's. Scandinavians exercise often and eat moderately. They also have a culture of moderation that makes them mentally healthier as well as physically.
- The well-organized and balanced economy- The Nordic countries have good economies based on free markets in which entrepreneurship is thriving with a generous social support system. They maintain this by encouraging small business and maintaining high levels of trust.
- The equality between genders- Scandinavia has historically been at the forefront in regard to equal rights for men and women. Both culturally and legally, Scandinavia has one of the most egalitarian societies.

All of these factors combine together to create a society that has a high quality of life and a high degree of equality of opportunity. Scandinavia should be held as a standard to all freedom loving people and countries looking to attain the same results.

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