



# Are conservatives happier than liberals? Not always and not everywhere



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## ABSTRACT

Prior research has shown that conservatives report higher levels of subjective well-being than liberals (*happiness gap*). We investigate to what extent this phenomenon exists in different time periods within the United States (Study 1,  $N = 40,000$ ) and in different countries (Study 2,  $N = 230,000$ ). Consistent with our hypotheses grounded in the “shared reality” and person-culture fit literature, conservatives were happier and more satisfied with their lives than liberals to the extent that the conservative political ideology prevailed in their socio-cultural context, be it a specific time period in the U.S. or a specific country. These results show that the happiness gap between conservatives and liberals is less universal than previously assumed.

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## 1. Introduction

In early psychological work, conservatives were painted as fearful, vulnerable and easily threatened by uncertainty (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950). Contrary to this grim picture, however, recent empirical studies increasingly revealed that conservatives actually report higher levels of subjective well-being than their liberal counterparts – a phenomenon referred to as ideological gap in happiness (Bixter, 2015; Jetten, Haslam, & Barlow, 2013; Napier & Jost, 2008; Schlenker, Chambers, & Le, 2012). For example, a recent meta-analysis of nine studies (Onraet, Van Hiel, & Dhont, 2013) reported a small but significant positive association ( $r = 0.12$ ) between political conservatism on the one hand and happiness or life satisfaction on the other.

One central limitation of this research field, however, is that these studies were overwhelmingly based on data collected in the United States – a country marked by relatively conservative ideology – in a time period (1990s to mid 2000s) when the conservative edge over liberals was even greater than it currently is (Saad, 2015). In the present paper, we examine to what extent the “happiness gap” between conservatives and liberals existed in different time periods in the United States, including the most recent years (Study 1), as well as in 92 countries around the world

(Study 2). In addition, we test a novel explanation of the ideological gap in happiness, grounded in the person-culture fit literature (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005) and the “shared reality” (Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Jost, Ledgerwood, & Hardin, 2008). Our study thus advances our understanding of the mechanisms that drive the positive association between conservative ideology and happiness.

Existing research has offered several explanations for the ideological gap in happiness. First, some researchers suggested that adherence to a conservative ideology is positively associated with subjective well-being because it is linked to a number of socio-demographic and personality factors such as neuroticism, religiosity, income or self-esteem which in turn promote positive adjustment (Burton, Plaks, & Peterson, 2015; Jetten et al., 2013; Schlenker et al., 2012). Another stream of research sees the psychological benefits of conservative ideology in its adherence to system justification rhetoric (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Napier & Jost, 2008). This belief system – reflected in the maxim “people get what they deserve” – serves as a buffer against societal inequalities and thus protects conservatives’ happiness from social threats. Indeed, the rising social inequality in the U.S. within the last 30 years (as reflected in the Gini index) had particularly negative consequences for liberals’ happiness, whereas conservative individuals, equipped with ideological justification of disparities, were less affected by it (Napier & Jost, 2008; Schlenker et al., 2012).

The association between political ideology and happiness has been shown to vary not only across temporal but also geographic contexts. In a meta-analysis, Onraet et al. (2013) categorized studies by geographic location and found that the association between

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political ideology and life satisfaction was on average 0.09 ( $p < 0.001$ ) in studies conducted in North America ( $k = 13$ ,  $n = 5,615$ ), 0.11 (*n.s.*) in studies from Europe ( $k = 5$ ,  $n = 865$ ) and  $-0.02$  (*n.s.*) in studies from Australia/New Zealand ( $k = 6$ ,  $n = 1,455$ ). However, the authors did not examine what specific contextual characteristic could account for these differences.

In the present research, drawing on theories on person-culture fit (Higgins, 2005; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005) and “shared reality” (Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Jost et al., 2008) we undertake a systematic examination of temporal and cross-cultural variations in the association between political ideology and happiness. According to the person-culture fit perspective, individuals show higher satisfaction and psychological adjustment when their personal attributes match the attributes of their environment (Fulmer et al., 2010; Stavrova, Schlösser, & Fetchenhauer, 2013). “Culture” in the “person-culture fit” literature can be conceptualized at different levels, including professional groups, neighborhoods, countries, and – as culture is subject to change – different time periods within one country. For example, in organizational context, individuals whose values and personalities are congruent with those of their team members enjoy a number of positive job-related outcomes, such as a higher job commitment and job satisfaction (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Values such as power and achievement, even when unrelated to happiness on their own, can promote a feeling of well-being in professional cultures in which these values dominate (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2000). Fitting into one’s national culture in terms of personality or religious beliefs is associated with higher levels of life satisfaction and self-esteem, with a better social integration, and even with better physical health and longevity (Fulmer et al., 2010; Gebauer, Sedikides, & Neberich, 2012; Stavrova, 2015; Stavrova, Fetchenhauer, & Schlösser, 2013). The fit hypothesis implies that individuals’ attributes aggregated at a context level (be it an organization, a region or a country) capture the degree to which these attributes are shared and socially valued within this context. Prior research using this method has shown that such aggregated scores of individuals’ attributes correlate with other objective indicators of “commonness” of these attributes (Stavrova & Fetchenhauer, 2015a, 2015b).

Which mechanisms account for the positive consequences of person-culture fit? Being around other people who share one’s personality, values, or ideology can provide individuals with a sense of a “shared reality” (Hardin & Higgins, 1996) and thus help establish and maintain social bonds (Hardin & Conley, 2001; Sinclair, Lowery, Hardin, & Colangelo, 2005). In fact, there is ample evidence that ideological choices are driven by the desire to affiliate with particular social groups (Greene, 1999; Stangor, Sechrist, & Jost, 2001). In this sense, endorsing a particular political ideology can satisfy relational needs (Jost et al., 2008) which are, in turn, associated with higher happiness. For example, one recent study has shown that perceiving one’s ideological views as being at odds with the dominant ideology in one’s community was related to a decreased sense of belonging (Motyl, Iyer, Oishi, Trawalter, & Nosek, 2014).

In addition, research on knowledge formation suggests that individuals tend to accept new information as true to the extent that it is shared by their social group (Kruglanski & Orehek, 2012). A group-shared view of ideological questions appears particularly important as such questions typically do not have objectively correct answers. Ideological beliefs provide different individuals with “the same ‘lenses’ through which to view the world” (Jost et al., 2008, p. 5) and thus ensure the sense of certainty and rightness of the views one holds. Both conservative and liberal ideological beliefs can contribute to the sense of “shared reality” to the extent that they are dominant in the social environment. Based on this reasoning, we hypothesize that living around other people who share one’s ideology is more likely to promote happiness and

life satisfaction, compared to living in a social context with disparate views.

## 2. Overview of studies

In Study 1, we used the General Social Survey (GSS; Smith, Hout, & Marsden, 2016) time series covering the last 40 years and examined whether annual fluctuations in the average political ideology in the U.S. are related to how strongly conservative ideology is associated with happiness in a particular year. The GSS has been used before to examine the relationship between political ideology and happiness (Napier & Jost, 2008; Schlenker et al., 2012); however, no previous study has considered the prevalence of conservative political ideology as a factor driving its positive association with subjective well-being.

In Study 2, we tested whether the ideological gap in happiness as well as person-culture fit can be replicated outside of the U.S., using nationally representative samples from 92 countries (World Values Survey, 1980–2014). Finally, as prior research has suggested that the degree of social inequality is related to the correlation between political ideology and happiness (Napier & Jost, 2008; Schlenker et al., 2012), we considered contextual differences in the Gini index as another potential explanation of cross-time (Study 1) and cross-country (Study 2) variations in the magnitude of the ideological gap in happiness.

## 3. Study 1

### 3.1. Method

The GSS is a nationally representative cross-sectional survey on Americans’ values and attitudes that has been conducted nearly annually since 1972. The present analysis is based on 28 waves from 1974 (when the question about political ideology was first included in the survey) to 2014. For the main analysis, we excluded all participants with missing values on political ideology and happiness, resulting in the final sample of 48,000 individuals (we also deleted the oversamples of subgroups in 1982 and 1987, see Appendix A of the GSS codebook). Analyses that included socio-demographic covariates were based on 43,137 individuals.

Happiness was measured with the following item: “Taken all together, how would you say things are these days. Would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy or not too happy?”. Responses were coded such that higher values indicate higher happiness.

Conservative political ideology was measured with a 7-point bipolar item ranging from 1 (“extremely liberal”) to 7 (“extremely conservative”).

Contextual political ideology was measured by averaging individuals’ political ideology within each wave. The average political ideology over the last 40 years fluctuated around 4 (which is slightly more conservative than liberal), with significant variations across years ( $\text{var} = 0.003$ ,  $\chi^2(27) = 0.9457$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). To validate this measure, we correlated these scores with the results of Congressional elections (which are conducted biannually as opposed to presidential elections which are conducted every four years). The more conservative the national political ideology was the year preceding the elections, the higher was the number of Republican seats in the Senate ( $r(28) = 0.70$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and in the House of Representatives ( $r(28) = 0.38$ ,  $p = 0.044$ ) in the subsequent congressional term, suggesting that the average political ideology is reflected in the national elections results and thus has a good external validity.

In additional analyses, we controlled for age, gender, race, region of residence (9 Census regions), education (college degree

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