

GUEST ESSAY

Conservatives Are Happier Than Liberals. Discuss.

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**By Thomas B. Edsall**

Mr. Edsall contributes a weekly column from Washington, D.C., on politics, demographics and inequality.

Do liberals or conservatives experience higher levels of satisfaction, happiness or meaning in life? Is the left or the right more inclined to intolerance, bigotry or conspiratorial thinking? Are Democrats or Republicans more loyal to family and friends?

A wide range of scholars in a variety of disciplines are asking these questions and taking them seriously. Ultimately, though, this line of inquiry raises an even broader question: whether liberals and conservatives function on fundamentally different moral planes.

Two similarly titled papers with markedly disparate conclusions illustrate the range of disagreement on this subject. “Why Are Conservatives Happier Than Liberals?” by Jaime Napier of N.Y.U. in Abu Dhabi and John Jost of N.Y.U., and “Conservatives Are Happier Than Liberals, but Why?” by Barry R. Schlenker and John Chambers, both of the University of Florida, and Bonnie Le of the University of Rochester.

Using nationally representative samples from the United States and nine other countries, Napier and Jost note that they

consistently found conservatives (or right-wingers) are happier than liberals (or left-wingers). This ideological gap in happiness is not accounted for by demographic differences or by differences in cognitive style. We did find, however, that the rationalization of inequality — a core component of conservative ideology — helps to explain why conservatives are, on average, happier than liberals.

Napier and Jost contend that their determinations are “consistent with system justification theory, which posits that viewing the status quo (with its attendant degree of inequality) as fair and legitimate serves a palliative function.”

One of Napier and Jost’s studies “suggests that conservatism provides an emotional buffer against the negative hedonic impact of inequality in society.”

In addition, they argue that rising levels of inequality have “exacerbated the happiness gap between liberals and conservatives, apparently because conservatives (more than liberals) possess an ideological buffer.”

A very different view of conservatives and the political right emerges in Schlenker, Chambers and Le’s paper:

Conservatives score higher than liberals on personality and attitude measures that are traditionally associated with positive adjustment and mental health, including personal agency, positive outlook, transcendent moral beliefs, and generalized belief in fairness. These constructs, in turn, can account for why conservatives are happier than liberals and have declined less in happiness in recent decades.

In contrast to Napier and Jost’s “view that conservatives are generally fearful, low in self-esteem, and rationalize away social inequality,” Schlenker, Chambers and Le argue:

Conservatives are more satisfied with their lives, in general and in specific domains (e.g., marriage, job, residence), report better mental health and fewer mental and emotional problems, and view social justice in ways that are consistent with binding moral foundations, such as by emphasizing personal agency and equity.

Liberals, Schlenker and his co-authors agree,

have become less happy over the last several decades, but this decline is associated with increasingly secular attitudes and actions (e.g., less religiosity, less likelihood of being married, and perhaps lessened belief in personal agency).

They go on:

Conservatives generally score higher on internal control as well as the Protestant Work Ethic, which emphasizes the inherent meaningfulness and value of work and the strong linkage between one’s efforts and outcomes, and is positively associated with achievement. Liberals, on the other hand, are more likely to see outcomes as due to factors beyond one’s personal control, including luck and properties of the social system.

These differences have consequences:

Perceptions of internal control, self-efficacy, and the engagement in meaningful work are strongly related to life satisfaction. These differences in personal agency could, in and of themselves, explain much of the happiness gap.

So too, in their view, does the liberal inclination to view morality in relative, as opposed to absolutist, terms, have consequences:

A relativist moral code more readily permits people to excuse or justify failures to do the “right” thing. When moral codes lack clarity and promote flexibility, people may come to feel a sense of normlessness — a lack of purpose in life — and alienation. Further, if people believe there are acceptable excuses and justifications for morally questionable acts, they are more likely to engage in those acts, which in turn can create problems and unhappiness.

Perhaps most significant, Schlenker, Chambers and Le found that while both liberals and conservatives place a high value on fairness, they have diverging definitions of the concept:

Liberals define fairness more in terms of equality (equal outcomes regardless of contributions) and turn to government as the vehicle for enforcing social justice and helping those in need. Conservatives define fairness more in terms of equity (outcomes should be proportional to contributions), rely on free markets to distribute outcomes, and prefer individuals and private organizations, not government, to contribute to the care and protection of those in need.

In “A Neurology of the Conservative-Liberal Dimension of Political Ideology,” Dr. Mario F. Mendez, a professor of neurology at U.C.L.A., argues:

High political conservatism is associated with preferences for stability, conformity, tradition, and order and structure. High political liberalism, in contrast, is associated with preferences for creativity, curiosity, novelty-seeking, and new experiences. Highly politically conservative people eschew ambiguity and disorganization and prefer closure and limited shades of gray (“hard categorizers”). Highly politically liberal people tolerate ambiguity and disorganization and favor flexibility and taking on cognitive conflicts.

When comparing conservatives with liberals, Mendez continues, “investigators report greater disgust sensitivity, especially for contamination disgust and violations of the sense of purity.”

“Inducing disgust,” Mendez adds, “can heighten the sense of moral violations and shift moral judgments to the conservative side.”

Political conservatism, he writes, is

specifically correlated with negativity bias in remembering more negative than positive information or scenes. In addition to negativity bias, high conservatism is associated with a sense of threat or a perception of danger. Those with politically conservative versus politically liberal views perceive ambiguous faces as more threatening, respond to threatening stimuli with more aggression, and have greater blink startle responses and skin conduction responses to unexpected or potentially threatening images.

The debate over happiness touches on a host of subjects relevant to politics, including the almost universal goal of finding meaning in life.

A 2018 paper, “Conservatives Report Greater Meaning in Life Than Liberals,” by David B. Newman of the University of California-San Francisco, Norbert Schwarz and Arthur Stone of the University of Southern California, and Jesse Graham of the University of Utah, contends that across five studies

conservatives reported more meaning and purpose in life than liberals at each reporting period. This finding remained significant after adjusting for religiosity and was usually stronger than the relationships involving other well-being measures.

In an email, Newman provided some explanation: “Conservatism on social issues (e.g., abortion and same-sex marriage) was a stronger predictor of meaning in life, whereas conservatism on economic issues (e.g., free markets) was a stronger predictor of life satisfaction.”

A reason for this, Newman continued, is that

one of the key ingredients to a meaningful life is a sense of coherence. If you can make sense of life’s events and if they seem to hang together in a consistent manner, you’ll find more meaning and purpose in life. Conservatives’ value for stability and their resistance to change could contribute to the coherence that provides them with meaning in life.

Newman argued that since “family ties and a strong sense of community and connectedness are key ingredients for a meaningful life,” it is possible that “if liberal agendas and ideologies inhibit social bonds and connections, it could lower people’s sense of meaning and purpose.”

It’s hardly surprising that there are scholars who disagree with the idea that conservatives experience a more satisfying sense of life’s meaning than liberals.

In “Liberal and Conservative Political Ideologies: Different Routes to Happiness?” Becky Choma, Michael Busseri and Stanley Sadava argue that both strong liberals and strong conservatives achieve high levels of life satisfaction:

The direction and magnitude of the predictive effects of political conservatism and liberalism on life satisfaction were identical. A strong liberal or conservative orientation is predictive of high life satisfaction. These findings converge on the possibility that life satisfaction is influenced by having a strongly held political ideological belief system to explain one's world, irrespective of the specific orientation of that framework.

Emma Onraet, Alain Van Hiel and Kristof Dhont concluded in their paper “The Relationship Between Right-Wing Ideological Attitudes and Psychological Well-Being” that a comprehensive examination — a meta-analysis — of previous studies involving 97 samples with 69,221 participants shows “that right-wing attitudes are only weakly related to psychological well-being” and that “our results thus do not support previous theories that claim that right-wing attitudes yield substantial relationships with psychological well-being.”

The Onraet study did find, however, that “Among the elderly, adhering to right-wing attitudes is associated with higher levels of self-esteem, intrinsic goal pursuit and (a trend toward higher) life satisfaction.”

Why? Onraet, Van Hiel and Dhont provide a speculative answer:

Because the elderly focus on accepting their past life and integrating personal experiences and memories, they have a strong sense of being part of their culture and tradition and believe that it should be preserved in the future. As a result, right-wing attitudes seem to be comforting for older people and may, therefore, contribute to psychological well-being. Moreover, right-wing elderly might experience greater well-being because of their increased level of religiosity. Indeed, some studies revealed that religiosity mediates the relationship between conservatism and psychological well-being as religiosity becomes more important as a source of happiness and well-being in old age.

Are conservatives or liberals more inclined to intolerance, prejudice and authoritarianism?

Our study offers clear evidence that both political liberalism and conservatism predict intolerance of politically opposing targets and that such intolerance is explained by perceived threat from these targets.

Jarret Crawford, a professor of psychology at the College of New Jersey and the lead author of “The Balanced Ideological Antipathy Model: Explaining the Effects of Ideological Attitudes on Inter-Group Antipathy Across the Political Spectrum,” observed in an email that prejudice and intolerance can be found on both sides of the aisle:

The role of authoritarianism is a special type of political hostility we refer to as “political intolerance.” Political intolerance goes beyond simple dislike or negative emotions toward a group, and involves the belief that certain groups should be barred from access to political life. There is a core component of authoritarianism that is related to opposition to people's political rights, regardless of whether those target people are on the political left or right.

When it comes to denying political rights to specific groups, Crawford continued,

we see pretty consistently that conservatives and liberals are intolerant of their political opponents (e.g., a liberal will oppose a pro-life group on campus to the same degree a conservative will oppose a pro-choice group on campus).

But, Crawford stressed,

where we do see pretty consistent ideological differences is in abstract democratic principles (endorsing things like freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, voting rights, etc.). I think this is to say that there is a stronger anti-democratic impulse on the right than on the left, less of a commitment to democracy. And, of course, I think we're seeing that play out in national and local politics right now.

Looking at these issues from a different angle, Michael Steger, a professor of psychology at Colorado State University, described in an email his views on meaning:

What we feel confident in is that when people have a strong purpose that they care about and take steps to manifest, they say life is more meaningful and that they are happier, more helpful, and more resilient as well. We also see research showing that when people have important goals that they are blocked from achieving, they suffer more than if they have trivial goals they do not care so much about.

Because of this, Steger continued,

it seems very likely that to the extent that liberals have personalized equality, equity, fairness, environmental stewardship, or other issues associated with liberalism, the more susceptible they are to distress as progress toward the satisfaction of those goals is blocked. The same general idea would pertain to conservatives who have personalized conservative political goals that are seen as blocked. So, one idea here is, the stronger the purpose the greater the benefit when you are making progress and the greater the anguish when you are not.

In terms of subjective feelings of satisfaction and accomplishment, conservatism has some built-in advantages over liberalism, Steger argued:

The higher level of meaning we see among conservatives is tied to ideas around certainty and consistency. This shows up somewhat convincingly in religious commitment, which is higher among conservatives and is related to more meaning in life.

In terms of the search for meaning, Steger wrote,

consistency is good. It helps us feel that we have made sense of our experience, which is a critical dimension of meaning in life. Having a worldview that works and never needs to change would be beneficial from the perspective of meaning in life.

Conversely, for liberals, more open-mindedness and less certainty are

more of a challenge because all the new information one encounters, and all the unanswerable questions one asks, must be integrated into our mental map. Liberals appear to place higher value on being open-minded and questioning, as well as on being future-oriented. This can leave them vulnerable to uncertainty and to having less solidity at the core of their worldviews.

Steger said that he has studied those engaged “in the search for meaning” as opposed to those who already have a strong sense of meaning. Generally, he writes,

in the United States, searching for meaning is associated with more distress. Never truly knowing if you have the right answer to lives’ grandest questions. Conservatives, especially religiously committed people, score very low on “search for meaning,” implying that they have their meaning and do not need to look any further.

What, then, can be drawn from these conflicting analyses?

First, be wary of the conclusion that conservatives are happier than liberals and that they find greater meaning in life.

In “Are Conservatives Really Happier Than Liberals?,” Tom Jacobs points out that

researchers report that conservatives are more likely to proclaim they are happy. But liberals are more likely to provide clues indicating they’re experiencing actual joy, including the words they choose to use, and the genuineness of their smiles.

Jacobs cites the work of Sean Wojcik, a senior data scientist at Axios, and Peter Ditto of the University of California, Irvine, who find in their paper “Conservative Self-Enhancement” that political conservatives have “a strengthened tendency to evaluate the self in an overly positive way.”

Based on that research, Wojcik, Ditto and four colleagues argue in “Conservatives Report, but Liberals Display, Greater Happiness” that “research suggesting that political conservatives are happier than political liberals is fully mediated by conservatives’ self-enhancing style of self-report.”

Using what they call “behavioral measures,” the authors found that

relative to conservatives, liberals more frequently used positive emotional language in their speech and smiled more intensely and genuinely in photographs. Our results were consistent across large samples of online survey takers, U.S. politicians, Twitter users, and Linked-In users.

Perhaps the most thought-provoking statement on these issues comes from Viktor Frankl in “Man’s Search for Meaning,” published in 1946, a year after Frankl’s liberation from a concentration camp.

Frankl contended that meaning in life comes through work, love and suffering, and that all these involve the subordination of self:

Man is originally characterized by his “search for meaning” rather than his “search for himself.” The more he forgets himself — giving himself to a cause or another person — the more human he is. And the more he is immersed and absorbed in something or someone other than himself the more he really becomes himself.

The implication favors liberals.

Friedrich Hayek, the author of “The Road to Serfdom,” had his own perspective on the difference between liberals and conservatives:

One of the fundamental traits of the conservative attitude is a fear of change, a timid distrust of the new as such, while the liberal position is based on courage and confidence, on a preparedness to let change run its course even if we cannot predict where it will lead.

In “Why Liberalism Works,” Paul Starr, a professor of sociology and public affairs at Princeton, puts the case for contemporary liberalism this way (and I am going to give him the last word):

Historically, liberalism has been defined by a shared, albeit evolving, body of political principles rather than by agreement on the ultimate grounds on which those principles rest. One of those shared political principles is an equal right to freedom, where freedom has been successively understood during the past three centuries in a more expansive way: first, as a right to civil liberty and freedom from arbitrary power; then, as a right to political liberty and a share in the government; and finally, as a right to basic requirements of human development and security necessary to assure equal opportunity and personal dignity.

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