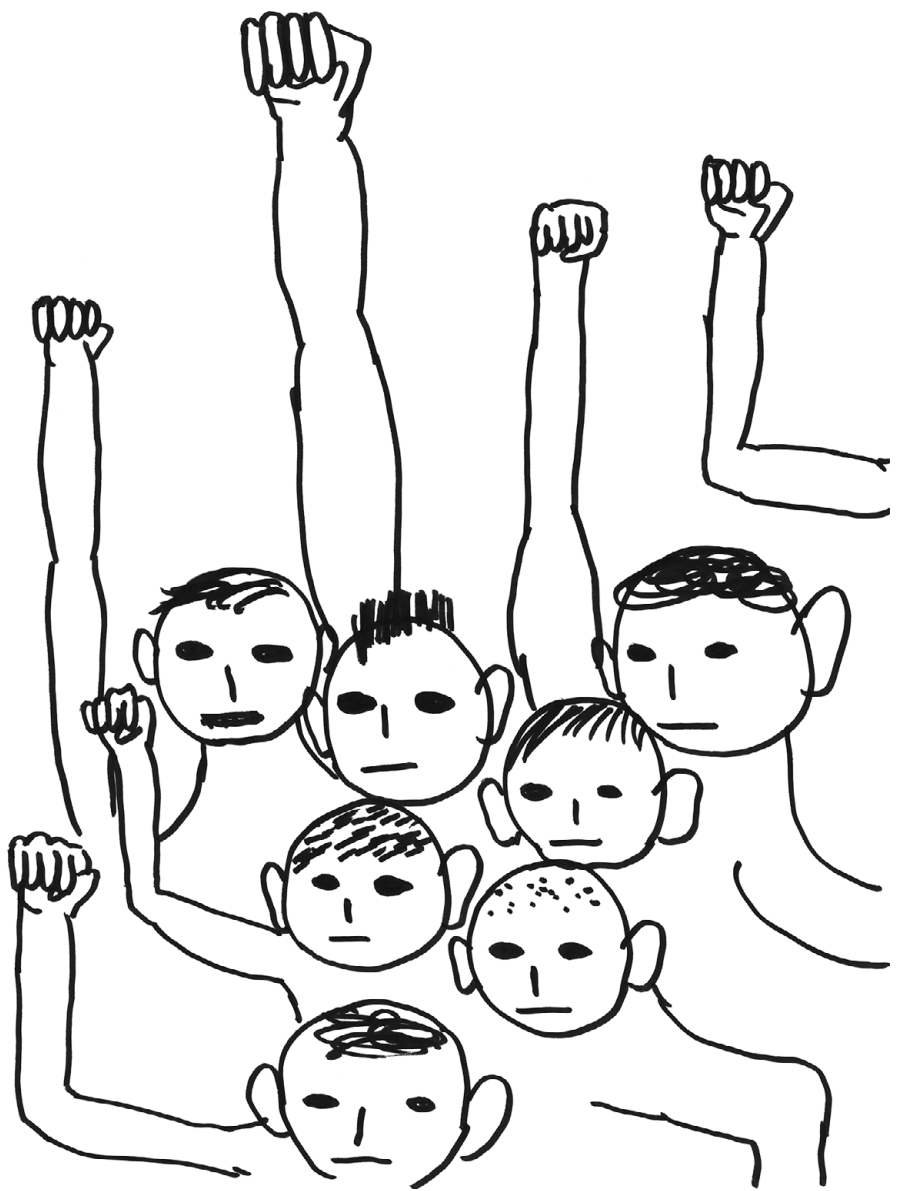


FIGHT THE NONSENSE



17 How Wellbeing Affects Voting

It's the economy, stupid.

Aide to Bill Clinton

Introduction

Thus far, most of the discussion in this textbook has focused on the determinants of wellbeing. We have focused on what makes us happy and what could make us happier. As a result, we have largely considered wellbeing as an output (a dependent variable). Yet we can also flip this equation around and consider wellbeing an input (an independent variable). In doing so, we can ask what sorts of behaviours flow downstream from wellbeing. This will be our perspective for this chapter. In particular, we will consider the extent to which (un)happiness can help explain political behaviour, voter preferences and the rise of populism. While we will focus primarily on evaluative measures of wellbeing, we will also briefly comment on the role of negative emotions in determining political actions and outcomes.

Does Wellbeing Shape Political Behaviour and Voter Preferences?¹

The first question we can ask is whether or not happy people are more likely to be politically engaged. Intuitions may cut in different directions. On the one hand, it is possible to imagine that as people become more satisfied with their lives, they would also become less politically engaged. Some commentators have even worried that too much happiness could lead to an 'emptying of democracy'.² On the other hand, research suggests that those with higher levels of wellbeing are also more socially engaged in their communities. Happy people are, for example, more likely to volunteer and donate to charity.³ As a result, they may also be more likely participate in national elections or political movements.

¹ This chapter relies largely on Ward (2019). ² Veenhoven (1988). ³ De Neve et al. (2013).

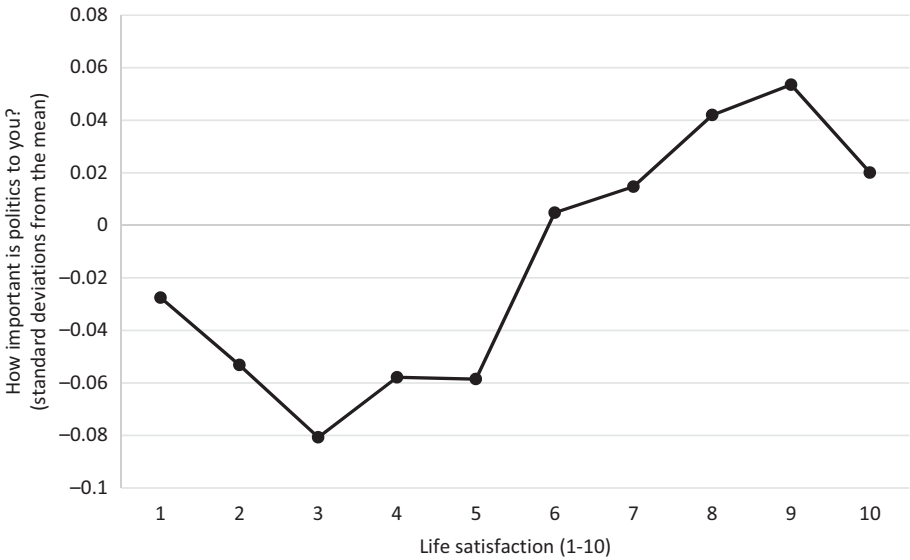


Figure 17.1 Relationship between the importance of politics and life satisfaction

Source: World Values Survey

Note: Average importance of politics depending on life satisfaction. Importance of politics measured on an individual level using a 4-point scale from ‘not at all important’ to ‘very important’. Sample includes 392,757 respondents in 104 countries from 1989–2020.

The effect of *unhappiness* on political participation is also not immediately obvious. If unhappiness is taken to be indicative of anger or fear, it’s possible to imagine that unhappiness would be highly predictive of political engagement. Inasmuch as they hold the state responsible for their circumstances, the least well-off members of any given society may be the most motivated to change it. On the other hand, if unhappiness is indicative of depression or lethargy, the opposite could be true. Some studies have indeed shown that both loneliness⁴ and depression⁵ predict lower levels of voter turnout.

To begin parsing these dynamics, we can first look at the relationship between life satisfaction and political interest on a global scale. In Figure 17.1, using World Values Survey data on roughly 393,000 respondents from 1981 to 2020, we plot the raw association between both variables. In fact, we can see some preliminary evidence for all of the intuitions above. The most important takeaway from this graph is that happier people seem to be more interested in politics overall. Even the most satisfied people in the world are more engaged than the least satisfied. However, at the tail ends of the distribution, there may be motivational tipping points where satisfaction turns into disengagement and dissatisfaction turns into political action. The happiest people in the world (those reporting 10 out of 10 life satisfaction) seem less politically

⁴ Langenkamp (2021). ⁵ Ojeda (2015).

engaged than slightly less satisfied people. At the other end of the spectrum, the least satisfied respondents are more interested in politics than those slightly less happy than they are.

These relationships are of course just correlations, although a growing body of research is beginning to provide causal support for them. One of the first such large-scale analyses in the United States looked at the 2000 wave of the American National Election Study (ANES), which contained indicators of life satisfaction, political engagement and voter turnout.⁶ Relative to those who considered their lives to be ‘very unsatisfying’, respondents who were ‘completely satisfied’ were 7 percentage points more likely to have voted in the last election, an effect roughly on par with the difference between high school and college graduates. This result also held after controlling for personal characteristics including age, gender, race, partisanship, trust and more. Happier people were also more likely to engage in a variety of other political behaviours including working for a political campaign, contributing funds to political candidates and attending political meetings or rallies.

However, due to data limitations, this study only considered one year of observations. Other studies since have taken a longer-term perspective. One in particular used longitudinal panel data in the United Kingdom and found that life satisfaction significantly increased the propensity to vote but only in some specifications.⁷ The relationship became much weaker once control variables for party affiliation and past voting behaviour were included. Another analysis using three years of panel data in Germany found that life satisfaction was not significantly related to broad measures of political participation.⁸ A related study in Switzerland using fixed effects analysis of panel data found that neither life satisfaction, nor positive affect, nor negative affect was significantly predictive of voting behaviour. On the other hand, another analysis of large-scale data in Latin America found a strong and significant relationship between life satisfaction and voting behaviour.⁹ These authors concluded the significant association between both variables was most likely explained in terms of happiness driving people to vote and not the other way around. Other research has found evidence of a link between happiness and voting in local elections in China.¹⁰

Overall, the existing evidence does not offer conclusive evidence in either direction. Some evidence is broadly suggestive that happier people are more likely to vote in local and national elections, although these results have not been replicated across contexts or in more robust methodologies. As we will see in the final section of this chapter, counterevidence of negative affect and low wellbeing driving voting behaviour has also been observed, which may further complicate the story.

⁶ Flavin and Keane (2012). ⁷ Dolan et al. (2008). ⁸ Pirralha (2018).

⁹ The researchers also found that voting did not seem to make people happier later on, regardless of party affiliation or electoral outcomes (Weitz-Shapiro and Winters [2011]).

¹⁰ Zhong and Chen (2002).

Before moving on, it is worth considering one more form of political participation: protest. In this case, the intuition seems more straightforward. Almost by definition, protest movements are presumed to be driven by dissatisfaction. It may therefore be reasonable to expect that low levels of wellbeing would be highly predictive of participation in political protest. However, at the same time, if protesting is accompanied by feelings of social support, solidarity and purpose, it could also have positive impacts on wellbeing.

In this case too, existing studies point in different directions, particularly when affective and evaluative measures of wellbeing are considered separately. In the United States, the relationship between life satisfaction and protest was found to be insignificant in ANES data.¹¹ Dissatisfied adults were not more or less likely to engage in political protest than happier counterparts. In Switzerland, after carefully considering a number of possible causal pathways, it was negative emotions, not low life satisfaction, that were found to significantly increase protest intentions.¹² This could suggest that the affective dimension of wellbeing is a more important predictor of protest behaviour than evaluative wellbeing. However, in another study of employed young people, lower life satisfaction was associated with protest behaviour, while the reverse was true for unemployed young people.¹³

These relationships can also depend on the regional context. An emerging body of work has begun to examine the causes and effects of protest movements and peaceful uprisings across the Arab world in the early 2010s, commonly known as the Arab Spring. The results suggest a powerful and important role of declining wellbeing as an impetus to protest. In three separate studies using data from the Gallup World Poll, low levels of wellbeing proved to be significant predictors of protest movements and demonstrations, in some cases even more so than standard economic and political indicators.¹⁴ Two studies found that worsening levels of life satisfaction in some countries in the years preceding the Arab spring significantly predicted more frequent protests later on and that declines in life satisfaction were largely explained by dissatisfaction with living standards.¹⁵

One other study focusing specifically on the case of Syria noted that life satisfaction, as well as affective wellbeing indicators including hope, negative affect and positive affect worsened significantly in the years leading up to the civil war.¹⁶ These results are all the more striking, as many related indicators of economic development were trending upwards in the Arab world around the same time. These dynamics are presented for Egypt and Syria in Figure 17.2. In both countries, life satisfaction began to sharply decline as early as three years before the start of the uprisings, while GDP per capita continued to increase.¹⁷

¹¹ Flavin and Keane (2012). ¹² Lindholm (2020). ¹³ Lorenzini (2015).

¹⁴ Arampatzi et al. (2018); Witte et al. (2019); Cheung et al. (2020).

¹⁵ Arampatzi et al. (2018); Witte et al. (2019). ¹⁶ Cheung et al. (2020).

¹⁷ In the time since the Arab Spring uprisings, wellbeing levels have stagnated or even continued to decline in many Arab countries. As of 2015 in Syria, the most recent year data was collected, average life satisfaction levels stood at 3.5 out of 10, down from 5.4 in 2008. In Egypt, average life satisfaction was 4.3 in 2019, down from 5.2 in 2007.

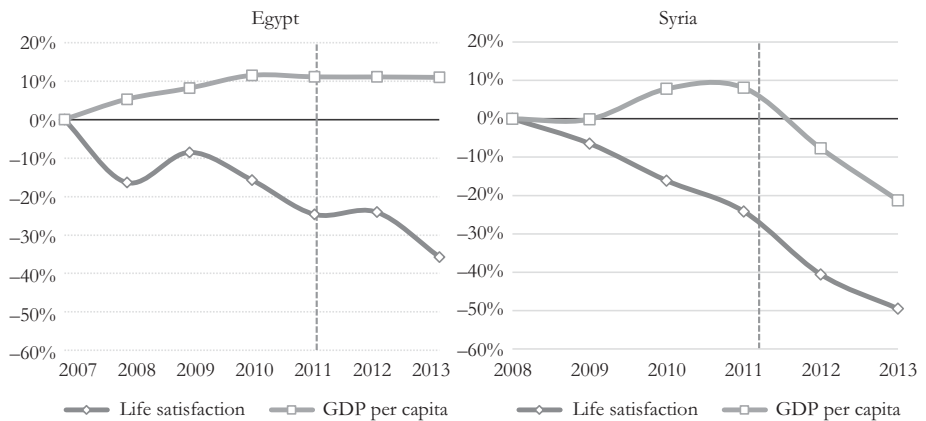


Figure 17.2 Change in life satisfaction and GDP leading up to the Arab Spring

Source: Gallup World Poll

Note: Changes in life satisfaction (measured using the Cantril ladder) and GDP per capita shown are normalised to a baseline level in 2007. Vertical lines indicate the start of the Egyptian revolution (15 January 2011) and Syrian civil war (15 March 2011).

More recent developments in Hong Kong are also reflective of this general story. Beginning on 15 March 2019, protests erupted in response to a proposed bill in the Hong Kong legislature that would allow for the extradition of fugitives to mainland China. The initial government sit-in evolved into months of heated conflict between protesters – primarily young people and university students – and Hong Kong police. This period of civil unrest represented the greatest political crisis the city had faced in decades. However, to someone looking only at economic indicators in the time leading up to the protests, this would have come as quite a shock. From 2010 to 2019, GDP per capita in Hong Kong had increased by a staggering 50%. Nevertheless, indicators of young people's wellbeing tell quite a different story. Over the same period, young people's satisfaction with life and expected satisfaction with life in five years' time had been in consistent decline. These trends are represented in Figure 17.3 using data from the Gallup World Poll. In the years leading up to the protests, both indicators steeply declined. Future life satisfaction in particular declined by 0.68 points on a scale from 0 to 10, an effect roughly on a par with becoming unemployed.¹⁸

Overall, the results of this section are somewhat mixed. Wellbeing appears to be predictive of political engagement, voting behaviour and political protests in some countries but not others. These relationships appear to be complex and context-dependent, which may help to explain the variety of results. Isolating the causal effect of happiness on political behaviour also requires careful analytical designs and high-frequency data, which is often difficult or unavailable at large-scales. Natural experiments and quasi-experimental designs may help shed light on these dynamics in the years to come. For now though, let's turn our attention to voter preferences.

¹⁸ See Chapter 11.

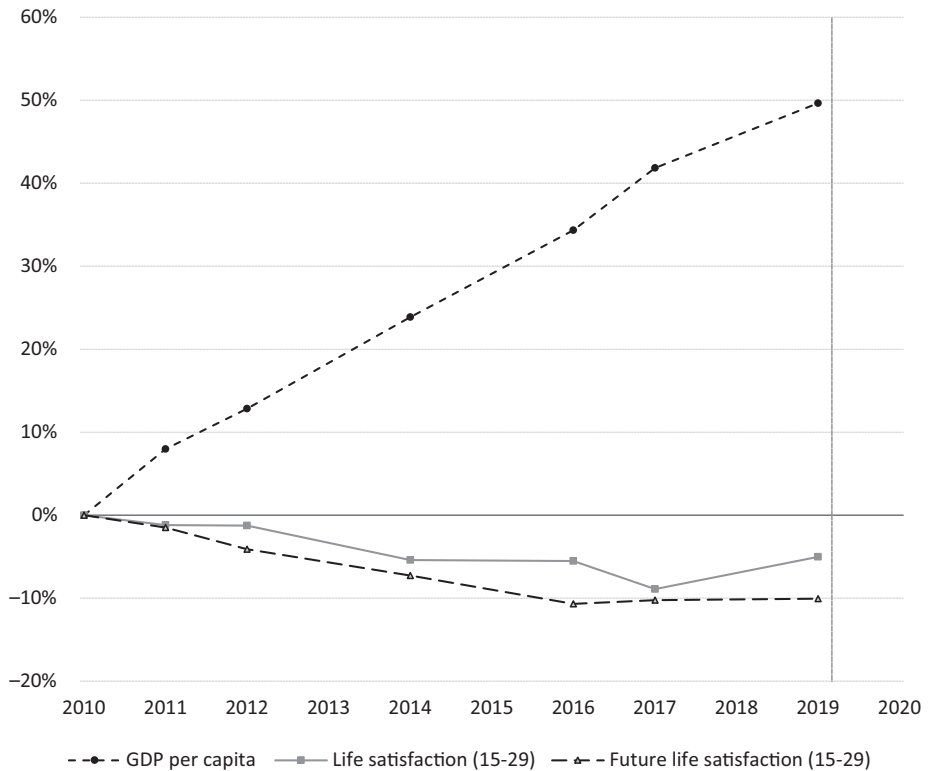


Figure 17.3 Changes in GDP per capita and young people's wellbeing in Hong Kong before the protests

Source: Gallup World Poll

Note: Changes in young people's life satisfaction (measured using the Cantril ladder), expected future life satisfaction in five years and GDP per capita shown and normalised to a baseline level in 2010. Vertical line indicates the start of the Hong Kong protests on March 15, 2019.

Voter preferences

In this section, we move from political participation to voter preferences. Our discussion will centre around the following question: does wellbeing play a role in determining how people vote? Before tackling this question head-on, it is worth underscoring its importance. Throughout this textbook, we have highlighted the limitations of relying on economic indicators as proxies for wellbeing. Even the inventor of GDP, Simon Kuznets, himself once remarked: 'The welfare of a nation can scarcely be inferred from a measurement of national income.'¹⁹ Yet in democratic countries, sceptics could argue that the prime goal of politicians is not necessarily to make people happy but to get (re)elected. If, as a democratic strategist for Bill Clinton famously noted, the most important predictor of political success is 'the economy,

¹⁹ Kuznets (1934).

stupid' after all, perhaps politicians could be justified, or at least excused for focusing primarily on economics. Several theories of voter behaviour in political science do suggest that voters support or oppose politicians in accordance with their rational economic self-interest, and these theories have been supported by a considerable degree of evidence.²⁰ Overall, governing parties tend to have greater electoral success when the economy is doing well. As a result, while there may very well be strong moral reasons to care about wellbeing, if wellbeing does not affect voting, there may not be as strong political reasons to do so. Fortunately for our purposes, this is precisely the kind of question that lends itself to empirical analysis.

In the literature, this relationship is generally framed in terms of the vote share of the incumbent government. The intuition here is that successful governments would raise wellbeing and therefore be rewarded at the polls. On the other hand, if governments are performing badly and wellbeing is low, incumbents would be more likely to lose elections. These assumptions underlie a number of theoretical models of political behaviour, although relatively few consider the direct influence of wellbeing.²¹

One of the largest studies of these dynamics to date looked at Eurobarometer data covering 139 elections in 15 **European countries** from 1973 to 2014.²² In the first set of analyses, the study considered whether national life satisfaction data collected at the time of the Eurobarometer surveys explained outcomes in the next national election.²³ The main results are presented in Figure 17.4. Overall, national happiness levels explained roughly 9% of the variance of the incumbent vote share in the European countries surveyed, while leading economic indicators including the GDP growth rate and unemployment rate explained 7% and 4%, respectively. Voters who were most satisfied with their lives (on a 4-point scale) were also found to be roughly 50% more likely to say they would vote for the governing party in the next election than those who were least satisfied.

From a political perspective, these results alone provide strong reasons for elected officials to care about the wellbeing of their constituents. For our purposes though, it is worth pressing on. While these results are at least suggestive of causal dynamics – in that pre-existing happiness levels are used to predict future election outcomes – there may still be a number of confounding variables at play. In later specifications, the study also controlled for societal-level variables including incumbent party seat share and party system fractionalisation, as well as individual-level variables including past voting behaviour and personal finances. Even after accounting for all of these effects, wellbeing levels continued to emerge as meaningful and significant predictors of both incumbent vote shares at the national level and voter preferences at the individual level. In one analysis in particular, an increase in national wellbeing of one standard deviation predicted an increase in the incumbent vote share of 6 percentage points in

²⁰ For reviews, see Lewis-Beck and Nadeau (2011); Healy and Malhotra (2013); Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier (2018).

²¹ These are typically called 'political agency' models. For standard examples and reviews, see Ferejohn (1986); Besley and Burgess (2002); Persson and Tabellini (2002).

²² Ward (2020). ²³ Elections occurred, on average, four months after surveys were administered.

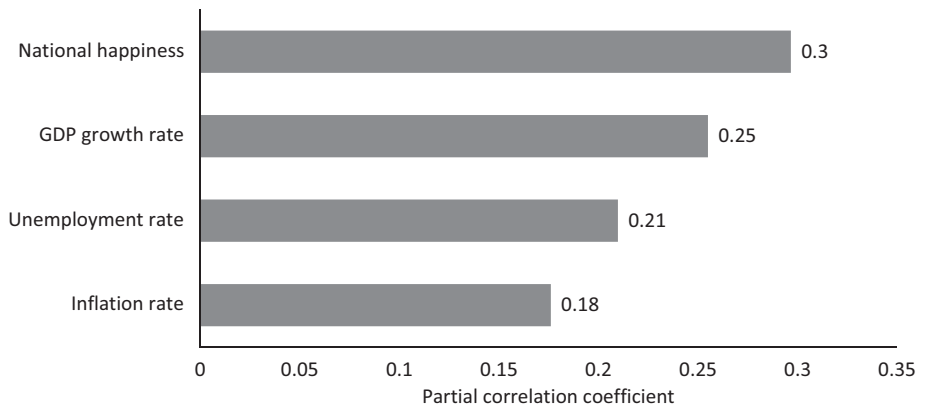


Figure 17.4 Predictors of government vote share in Europe

Source: Adapted from Ward (2020)

Note: Each bar represents the correlation coefficient for four indicators, estimated in separate bivariate regressions with cabinet vote share as the dependent variable using Eurobarometer data. Country fixed effects were also included as controls. National happiness is the average country life satisfaction at the closest year prior to the election. Macroeconomic variables are drawn from the OECD and refer to the country-year of each election. The sample is 139 elections in 15 European countries, 1973–2014.

the next election, while the same increase in the economic growth rate predicted an increase of 3 percentage points. Taken together, these results strongly suggest that wellbeing plays an important role in determining election outcomes.

An analysis in the **United Kingdom** provides additional evidence of this relationship.²⁴ The authors in this case relied on 18 years of panel data from 1991 to 2008 collected by the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), a period covering four national elections. The dataset also contained yearly information on respondents' voting intentions 'if the general election were held tomorrow'. Because the same respondents are interviewed every year, the authors are able to control for time-invariant individual fixed effects. Overall, being more than averagely satisfied with life predicted an increase in incumbent party support of 1.6%. This effect held even after controlling for personal financial situation – widely considered to be a fundamental driver of voting behaviour. For comparison, a 10% increase in family income predicted an increase in incumbent support of only 0.18%.

However, these results may be at least partially attributable to **reverse causation**. As discussed earlier, voters tend to be happier when the party they support is in power.²⁵ The positive effect of wellbeing on voter preferences may therefore simply be a side-effect of political partisanship. In other words, even if happier voters are more likely to support the incumbent party, they may also be happier because the party they support is in power in the first place. In this case it wouldn't necessarily be

²⁴ Liberini et al. (2017a).

²⁵ Di Tella and MacCulloch (2005); Tavits (2008).

wellbeing that drives voter preferences but rather voter preferences that drive wellbeing.

To account for this potential bias, the UK study ran two additional empirical tests. In the first, the authors limited their sample to swing voters, defined as (a) those declaring that they do not favour one particular political party over the other or (b) those who consistently voted for different parties in various elections. Even within these groups, wellbeing still proved to be a significant predictor of incumbent support. In fact, this effect among swing voters was even stronger than it was in the full sample.²⁶ In the second test, the authors split their sample not in terms of partisanship but in terms of exogenous shocks to wellbeing. They first selected out respondents who recently became **widowed**, and then used **propensity score matching** techniques to compare the voting preferences of these respondents to those who are similar to them in all other relevant respects, except for the fact that they did not recently become widowed. This approach is intended to resemble a randomised control trial, though in this case the treated and control groups are divided by (presumably random) variation in the recent death of a spouse and not by random assignment on the part of researchers. Using this procedure, ‘treated’ respondents who recently became widowed were 8% less likely to support the incumbent party than controls.

A third analysis related to the **United States**. It used county-level data from the Gallup Daily Poll and found that wellbeing levels were significantly predictive of incumbent party support in the 2012 and 2016 US elections.²⁷ In 2016, low life satisfaction today and low expected life satisfaction in five years explained 28% and 61% of the variation in Donald Trump’s vote share, respectively. The effect of the latter proved to be larger than any other variable under consideration, including race, age, racial animus, education or population density. In subsequent regressions, a one standard deviation increase in life satisfaction was associated with a 7-percentage-point reduction in Trump voter support in 2016, while a similar increase in expected future life satisfaction was associated with a 12-percentage-point decrease. The authors also found similar results for the 2012 election, in which present and expected future life satisfaction scores predicted decreases in support for Mitt Romney, the Republican challenger to Barack Obama, of 6 and 10 percentage points respectively.

A handful of other analyses have used other forms of exogenous shocks to wellbeing to explain voting outcomes. In one of the most entertaining tests of this sort, election outcomes in counties across the United States were linked to the outcome of local sports games.²⁸ The authors found that counties in which local college football teams had won games in the ten days leading up to the election were 1.6 percentage points more likely to support incumbent parties in Senate, gubernatorial and national elections. The authors suggested that this result was likely explainable in terms of

²⁶ Among swing voters, high life satisfaction increased support for incumbent parties by 2.4%, relative to 1.6% in the full sample.

²⁷ Ward et al. (2020). ²⁸ Healy et al. (2010).

higher levels of wellbeing in counties with victorious teams, although the analysis did not contain a direct measure of wellbeing.

Overall, the results of this section imply a strong link between happiness levels and incumbent party support. While all of these results are representative of effects in high-income countries, some analyses have also found wellbeing to be a significant predictor of incumbent party support in Latin America²⁹ and in Malaysia.³⁰ While this literature is still very much in its infancy, these findings underscore the important role that voter wellbeing can play in determining election outcomes. In this section, we have focused on the role of wellbeing and incumbent support, though there are of course many more lenses through which this relationship could be analysed. In the next and final section of this chapter, we will consider one more of those perspectives in particular: the association between wellbeing and populism.

Populism

In the previous section, we introduced evidence indicating that US voters with lower wellbeing were more likely to vote for Donald Trump in the 2016 election. These results are largely in line with related evidence showing dissatisfaction as a predictor of non-incumbent party support. Yet they may also be indicative of another phenomenon: the rise of **populism**. While populist political parties are nothing new,³¹ in recent years, many of them have gained traction in Western countries. In Europe, populist parties have more than doubled their share of the vote in national elections since 1960, from 5% to 13%, while their share of parliamentary seats has tripled.³² A number of explanations have been put forward to explain these developments, though perhaps the most common narrative in popular discourse has been the rise of ‘discontent’.³³ In this section, we will look at the empirical evidence for this relationship in greater detail. Specifically, we will consider whether or not low wellbeing predicts support for populism.

Populist movements have sprung out of both left-wing and right-wing political movements, making them somewhat difficult to classify. Settling on a universally agreed-upon definition can be challenging. Nevertheless, most researchers generally agree on certain key shared features between all populist movements. Three in particular are: (1) valuing ‘the people’ in opposition to ‘the elite’, (2) opposition to the political establishment and (3) support for popular sovereignty.³⁴ Using these characteristics as a starting point, several classifications of European political parties have been developed to rate their degree of populist rhetoric, platforms and policies.³⁵ Armed with these data, some researchers have begun examining the extent to which wellbeing is predictive of populist party support.

In one recent analysis of roughly 180,000 **European adults** across 29 countries, lower levels of wellbeing were significantly associated with higher levels of populist

²⁹ Bravo (2016). ³⁰ Ng et al. (2017). ³¹ Von Beyme (1985). ³² Inglehart and Norris (2016).

³³ For example, see Sorkin (2016). ³⁴ Mudde (2007); Inglehart and Norris (2016, 2017).

³⁵ Van Kessel (2015); Inglehart and Norris (2016).

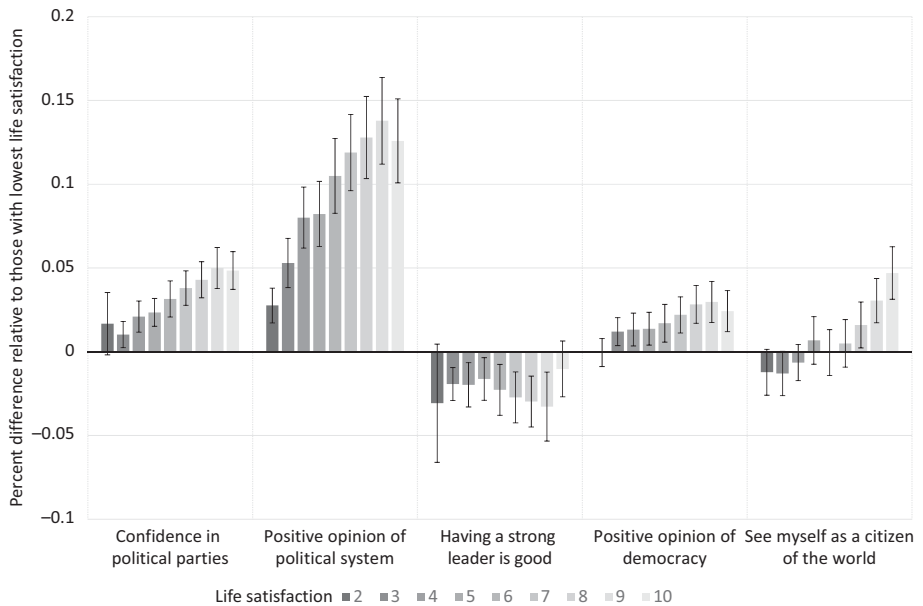


Figure 17.5 Difference in political attitudes depending on life satisfaction

Source: World Values Survey

Note: Based on results from Ward (2019). Bars represent percent differences in political opinion from those with the lowest life satisfaction level Estimated using OLS linear regressions controlling for household income (quintiles), education level, marital status, gender, age and its square; 95% confidence intervals displayed.

support.³⁶ After controlling for a number of personal characteristics including age, gender, race, education, employment status, income, residential area and other related variables, respondents who were the most satisfied with their lives were 3.7 percentage points less likely to have voted for a populist party in the previous election than those who were least satisfied with their lives. To put this figure into context, it was larger than the effect of anti-immigrant sentiment on populist support.³⁷

Another approach is to consider populist support not in terms of voting preferences but in terms of political attitudes. An analysis of this sort used representative data on more than 350,000 respondents in **100 countries** and estimated the extent to which life satisfaction is predictive of political attitudes associated with populism, after controlling for age, gender, income, education, marital status and country fixed effects.³⁸ The results are presented in Figure 17.5. Overall, wellbeing proves to be highly related to political attitudes across the board. Happier voters are more likely to have confidence in political parties, faith in the political system, maintain a positive opinion of democracy and consider themselves to be citizens of the world. They are

³⁶ Nowakowski (2021).

³⁷ This was measured as opposition to immigration from outside the European Union specifically.

³⁸ Ward (2019).

also less likely to view having a strong leader as a good thing for their country. The starkest differences relate to political institutions. Compared with the least satisfied respondents, those reporting a 10 out of 10 on a life satisfaction scale are roughly 5% more likely to have confidence in the political parties and 13% more likely to have a positive opinion of the political system.

Both of the analyses thus far suggest that the rise of populism in Western countries is at least partly related to unhappiness. A separate strand of literature has sought to address this issue by closely examining notable **political successes for populists** in recent years, including the 2017 national elections in France, the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, and Donald Trump's presidential victory in the United States. Here, the results tend to be less straightforward.

In France, Marine Le Pen's populist National Front party outperformed traditional left- and right-wing political rivals to reach the final round of the runoff national election in 2017 against Emmanuel Macron. Macron eventually won by a comfortable margin, but the stark rise and success of Le Pen's party platform, which was partially fuelled by populist anti-establishment and elite-opposition sentiment, warrants further attention. One study sought to examine the drivers of French populist support using a unique dataset of roughly 17,000 surveys of voters in the lead-up to the election.³⁹ The authors found that lower levels of life satisfaction were strongly predictive of votes in favour of Marine Le Pen. Her voters were less satisfied with their lives than supporters of any other candidate. Even after controlling for income, education, ethnicity and other sociodemographic variables, low life satisfaction remained significantly predictive of populist support, while high life satisfaction predicted support for the eventual winner Emmanuel Macron. At the same time, Le Pen voters were also less trusting of others (including their family and neighbours) and less optimistic about their future than any other group across the political spectrum.

While Marine Le Pen did not win the French national election in 2017, populist movements for Brexit in the United Kingdom and Donald Trump's presidential candidacy in the United States proved successful. However, in both cases, the evidence seems to be somewhat mixed. In the United Kingdom, two studies in particular have examined the link between support for leaving the European Union and dissatisfaction. While both studies find dissatisfaction with income in particular to be strongly predictive of Brexit support – in fact, even more predictive than the actual level of income itself – life satisfaction was found to have a much smaller and largely insignificant effect.⁴⁰

One study in the United States also looked at county-level data on wellbeing and voting patterns for Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders in the Republican and Democratic primaries.⁴¹ Because both candidates promoted populist messages and policies, we might expect that dissatisfaction would be predictive of support for both. The authors do in fact observe this to be the case. In two separate regressions controlling for income, employment status, religion, economic growth, residential

³⁹ Algan et al. (2018).

⁴⁰ Liberini et al. (2017b); Alabrese et al. (2019).

⁴¹ Ward et al. (2020).

area population density, and region fixed effects, Republican voters with low life satisfaction today or low expectations for future life satisfaction in five years were more likely to vote for Donald Trump in the primary, while Democratic voters with the same characteristics were more likely to vote for Bernie Sanders.

A related study also relied on high-frequency Gallup data to examine the extent to which changes in wellbeing from 2012 to 2016 could explain electoral swings in favour of Donald Trump.⁴² The authors compiled information on life satisfaction, future predicted life satisfaction and affective wellbeing⁴³ for roughly 177,000 US respondents in 2012 and 353,000 respondents in 2016. The study found that counties that swung from supporting Barack Obama in 2012 to supporting Donald Trump in 2016 were significantly more likely to have experienced average declines in wellbeing over the same period. Specifically, in counties in which the vote share from Democrats to Republicans swung by at least 10%, the rate of respondents reporting severely low life satisfaction (1 to 4) had more than doubled from 3.4% to 7.1%, while the rate of respondents reporting high life satisfaction (7 to 10) had declined from 73% to 61%. Similar trends were observed for future expected life satisfaction and satisfaction with the area in which the respondent lived. Residents of these counties were also significantly more likely to report feeling sadness and less likely to report feelings of happiness and enjoyment. For comparison, changes in income over the same time were not significantly predictive of vote shifts.

Finally, another study found that, controlling for other factors, both feelings of worry and racial animus significantly predict higher levels of Trump support. However, once a measure of relatedness (social connection to others) was introduced, the effect of worry becomes significantly weaker, while the effect of racial animus becomes insignificant. The authors interpreted this result as an indication that Trump support in the 2016 election was driven primarily by a desire for in-group affiliation to buffer against the economic and cultural anxieties that had led to unhappiness. In other words, voters who felt disconnected from their communities channelled their anxieties towards Trump support. These dynamics echo those observed among Marine Le Pen's supporters in France.

All of these studies provide suggestive evidence that dissatisfaction and disconnectedness precede and predict populist victories. Taken together, they underscore the role of social connection and general wellbeing in explaining the recent resurgence of populism in Western countries. However, it is also important to recognise the limitations of these results. While the longitudinal dynamics observed in these latter studies are suggestive that unhappiness drives populist support, the issue does not easily lend itself to causal inference. As of yet, no studies to our knowledge have sought to run randomised controlled experiments in which treated respondents are induced to feel more or less happy and then asked about their level of populist support. Exploiting natural experiments or quasi-experimental designs in the future to predict populist party vote shares may prove fruitful.

⁴² Herrin (2018).

⁴³ Measures of affect include feeling happy, stress, enjoyment, worry, smile, sadness, anger.

However, overall time series cast some doubt on the interpretation that the rise of populism can be entirely explained by declining wellbeing. As discussed in previous chapters, in many countries around the world, including those in Europe and North America, average levels of life satisfaction have remained remarkably flat.⁴⁴ Given the dramatic increase in populist party support over recent years, one might expect similarly dramatic declines in life satisfaction. This does not appear to be the case. At the same time, in many countries, social isolation and negative affect (a sense of ‘worry’ in particular) have been on the rise.⁴⁵ Inasmuch as this phenomenon reflects growing disconnectedness and anxieties about the future, it could help to explain populists’ appeal to voters. These issues remain open to future research.

Overall, the results of this section call out for further research and experimentation. Despite a handful of recent electoral defeats in both Europe and the United States, populist political parties on both the left and right of the political spectrum retain considerable influence in mainstream politics. Understanding the primary drivers of their support, and in particular the role of wellbeing in explaining them, will remain a central and urgent challenge for social scientists in the years to come.

Conclusions

- Happier voters are generally more likely to be politically engaged than less happy voters.
- Despite these broad correlations, causal studies on the relationship between wellbeing and political participation have produced mixed results. Happier voters are found to be more engaged in some contexts but not in others.
- In the Arab world, lower wellbeing was a strong precedent and predictor of future uprisings. This relationship appears to be slightly weaker in Western countries.
- Overall, there is strong evidence that happiness predicts higher levels of support for the incumbent political party. This effect has been found in a number of countries and using a variety of different analytic methodologies, including propensity score matching techniques and natural experiments. In many cases, this effect is even stronger than standard economic models of voter preferences.
- Around the world, unhappier voters are also more likely to vote for populist parties and identify with populist ideologies. However, studies performed on elections in France, the United Kingdom and the United States have found mostly mixed results regarding the extent to which life satisfaction in particular is predictive of populist electoral victories.
- Nevertheless, dissatisfaction with income, and social disconnectedness in particular, proved to be strong predictors of Marine Le Pen’s support in France,

⁴⁴ See Chapter 13.

⁴⁵ For negative affect, see Helliwell et al. (2021). For loneliness and social isolation, see Ortiz-Ospina and Roser (2020).

votes to leave the European Union in the United Kingdom and Donald Trump's presidential victory in the United States.

Questions for discussion

- (1) Research has shown that wellbeing predicts incumbent party support. If you were advising an elected official, how would you make use of this knowledge?
- (2) So far, there has been limited experimental research to examine whether or not low wellbeing leads to populist support. Can you think of an experimental design (either in the lab or in the real world) to test this assumption? What are the main benefits and drawbacks of your approach?

Further Reading

- Arampatzi, E., Burger, M., Ianchovichina, E., Röhricht, T., and Veenhoven, R. (2018). Unhappy development: Dissatisfaction with life on the eve of the Arab Spring. *Review of Income and Wealth*, 64, S80–S113.
- Liberini, F., Redoano, M., and Proto, E. (2017a). Happy voters. *Journal of Public Economics*, 146, 41–57.
- Ward, G. (2020). Happiness and voting: Evidence from four decades of elections in Europe. *American Journal of Political Science*, 64(3), 504–518.
- Ward, G., De Neve, J. E., Ungar, L. H., and Eichstaedt, J. C. (2020). (Un) happiness and voting in US presidential elections. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 120(2), 370–383.