

## Research Article

# Why Are Conservatives Happier Than Liberals?

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**ABSTRACT**—*In this research, we drew on system-justification theory and the notion that conservative ideology serves a palliative function to explain why conservatives are happier than liberals. Specifically, in three studies using nationally representative data from the United States and nine additional countries, we found that right-wing (vs. left-wing) orientation is indeed associated with greater subjective well-being and that the relation between political orientation and subjective well-being is mediated by the rationalization of inequality. In our third study, we found that increasing economic inequality (as measured by the Gini index) from 1974 to 2004 has exacerbated the happiness gap between liberals and conservatives, apparently because conservatives (more than liberals) possess an ideological buffer against the negative hedonic effects of economic inequality.*

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In 2006, a public-opinion survey addressing the relation between political orientation and happiness inspired headlines and editorials around the world. Specifically, according to the Pew Research Center, 47% of conservative Republicans in the United States described themselves as “very happy,” as compared with only 28% of liberal Democrats (Taylor, Funk, & Craighill, 2006, p. 16). The conservative columnist George Will relished these statistics, writing that “liberalism is a complicated and exacting, not to say grim and scolding, creed. And not one conducive to happiness” (Will, 2006).

There are several reasons why conservatives might be happier than liberals, and only a few of these were considered by the Pew researchers. The least interesting of these, from a psychological perspective, involve demographic differences between liberals and conservatives with respect to income, age, education, sex, religiosity, and marital status. The results of the Pew survey suggest that the happiness gap associated with ideology is not entirely due to demographic factors, although religiosity does seem to play

a significant role (Haidt, 2006). Nevertheless, at least two psychologically intriguing possibilities remain.

First, there is a sizable research literature documenting robust differences between liberals and conservatives in terms of cognitive styles and motivation (e.g., Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). To the extent that liberals tend to enjoy thinking more and to prolong cognitive closure, whereas conservatives tend to prefer relatively simple, unambiguous answers to life’s questions (Kruglanski, Pierro, Mannetti, & De Grada, 2006), liberals might become less satisfied with their current situation because of the deleterious effects of rumination and introspection (e.g., Wilson, Kraft, & Dunn, 1989). If this is the case, then one would expect that ideological differences in the *need for cognition* (Petty & Jarvis, 1996) would account for the gap in subjective well-being.

A second possibility arises from system-justification theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994). Research shows that political conservatism is a system-justifying ideology in that it is associated with the endorsement of a fairly wide range of rationalizations of current social, economic, and political institutions and arrangements (Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008). Previous work reveals that the endorsement of system-justifying beliefs is generally associated with high personal satisfaction, as well as increased positive affect and decreased negative affect (Lerner, 1980; Major, 1994; Wakslak, Jost, Tyler, & Chen, 2007); this is referred to as the *palliative function* of system-justifying ideology (Jost & Hunyady, 2002).

It follows from this line of reasoning that system-justification tendencies could provide a kind of ideological buffer against the negative hedonic consequences of social and economic inequality. Given that equality—at least with respect to opportunities, if not always outcomes—is something of a cultural ideal and that most people (especially liberals) view equality as desirable and just (Rawls, 1971/1999), the presence of inequality poses a potential threat to the legitimacy of the status quo (Jost & Hunyady, 2002). Accordingly, Alesina, Di Tella, and MacCulloch (2004) found that there is a general tendency (stronger among Europeans than among Americans) for people to report less happiness as economic inequality in society increases. To the

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extent that political conservatives are more likely than liberals and moderates to accept and justify the existence of unequal outcomes and to see them as fair and legitimate (Jost, Glaser, et al., 2003), it follows that they should be less adversely affected by inequality. Conversely, liberals may be less happy than conservatives because they are less ideologically prepared to rationalize (or explain away) the degree of inequality in society.

It is well known by economists that the degree of inequality in the United States and other industrialized societies has been increasing over the past three decades (Milanovic, 2002; Saez & Piketty, 2006). If conservative ideology, as we have argued, serves a palliative function and buffers its adherents from discontent arising from societal inequality, then as inequality has grown, the gap in subjective well-being between liberals and conservatives should also have grown. In other words, the negative hedonic consequences of increasing inequality should have been felt more strongly by liberals, who lack ideological justifications for disparities, than by conservatives.

To investigate why conservatives are happier than liberals (if indeed they are), we conducted three studies in which we examined potential mediators of the relation between ideology and subjective well-being. In Study 1, we investigated all three explanations mentioned in this introduction—demographic factors, differences in need for cognition, and the rationalization of inequality—using a nationally representative sample from the United States. In Study 2, we took a cross-national approach, analyzing data on both life satisfaction and self-reported happiness from 10 different countries included in the World Values Survey. In Study 3, we used macroeconomic data (i.e., the Gini index) to gauge the actual degree of inequality in the United States over a 31-year period and to determine whether, as hypothesized, the happiness gap between liberals and conservatives tended to widen as inequality grew.

## STUDY 1

### Method

For this study, we used data from the 2000 American National Election Study (NES; National Election Studies, n.d.). Participants in the 2000 NES were selected and interviewed 1 to 2 months prior to the 2000 presidential election (Time 1) using a dual-frame sample, with some participants selected by probability area sampling and interviewed in person and others selected through random digit dialing and interviewed by telephone. All participants were reinterviewed by telephone 2 to 3 months after the election (Time 2). Complete data were available for 1,142 respondents.

Political orientation was assessed at Time 1 by taking the mean of responses to two items, one concerning ideology (liberal vs. conservative) and the other concerning party affiliation (Democrat vs. Republican). Responses were given on scales ranging from 1

(*strong liberal/Democrat*) to 7 (*strong conservative/Republican*) and were centered at the scale's midpoint. The two items were highly intercorrelated ( $r = .46, p < .001$ ).

Need for cognition (Bizer et al., 2002) was assessed at Time 1 by taking the mean of responses to two items. The first was preference for difficult (vs. simple) problems, a dichotomous variable. The second was liking responsibility for thinking, which was rated on a 5-point scale ranging from *dislike a lot* to *like a lot*, but rescaled to range from 0 to 1. These two items formed a reliable measure ( $r = .49, p < .001$ ).

Rationalization of inequality was assessed at Time 2 by taking the mean of responses to the six antiegalitarianism items included in the NES ( $\alpha = .66$ ; e.g., "It is not really that big a problem if some people have more of a chance in life than others," and "This country would be better off if we worried less about how equal people are").

Life satisfaction was measured at Time 2, with participants indicating how satisfying their life was on a 3-point scale ranging from 0 (*not at all satisfying*) to 2 (*completely satisfying*).

In addition to examining these variables of primary theoretical interest, we adjusted for demographic variables that could affect happiness: sex (0 = male, 1 = female), marital status (0 = unmarried, 1 = married), church attendance (on a 6-point scale ranging from *never* to *more than once a week*), employment status (0 = employed or not looking for work, 1 = unemployed), age (6 intervals), education (7 intervals), and income (22 intervals). We also included the square of the centered age variable to account for the quadratic effect of age on happiness (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004). We used NES-recommended weights to adjust for nonresponse, within-household selection, poststratification of age and education, and attrition from Time 1 to Time 2.

### Results

We constructed a five-step linear regression model predicting life satisfaction with political orientation in the first step; demographic variables in the second step; church attendance in the third step; and the explanatory variables, need for cognition and rationalization of inequality, entered in the fourth and fifth steps, respectively. Because the dependent variable contained only three response categories, we used robust standard errors to correct for nonnormality of the residuals. As Table 1 shows, there was a significant positive relation between political orientation and life satisfaction, replicating the results of the Pew survey. In Step 2, we found that this relation persisted even after we adjusted for demographic variables. Furthermore, adjusting for church attendance in Step 3 and need for cognition in Step 4 brought about no change in the relation between conservatism and happiness. After adjusting for rationalization of inequality in Step 5, however, we found that the effect of conservatism on life satisfaction was no longer reliable.

To test for the hypothesized role of rationalization of inequality as a mediator, we ran a regression model with liberalism-con-

**TABLE 1**  
*Unstandardized Coefficients From Linear Regression Analyses of Self-Reported Life Satisfaction in the 2000 American National Election Study*

Predictor	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5
Political conservatism	0.25 (0.06)***	0.19 (0.06)**	0.15 (0.06)*	0.15 (0.06)*	0.09 (0.07)
Income		0.13 (0.11)	0.15 (0.11)	0.15 (0.11)	0.15 (0.11)
Education		0.19 (0.08)**	0.16 (0.08)*	0.15 (0.08) <sup>+</sup>	0.18 (0.08)*
Sex		-0.00 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.03)
Age		0.08 (0.06)	0.04 (0.06)	0.04 (0.06)	0.02 (0.06)
Age squared		0.21 (0.05)***	0.20 (0.05)***	0.20 (0.05)***	0.21 (0.05)***
Marital status		0.14 (0.04)***	0.12 (0.04)**	0.13 (0.04)**	0.12 (0.04)**
Employment status		-0.28 (0.12)*	-0.27 (0.12)*	-0.27 (0.12)*	-0.27 (0.12)*
Church attendance			0.20 (0.05)***	0.20 (0.05)***	0.19 (0.05)***
Need for cognition				0.04 (0.06)	0.03 (0.06)
Rationalization of inequality					0.23 (0.10)*

**Note.** Robust standard errors are given in parentheses. This analysis is based on a sample size of 1,142.

<sup>+</sup> $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

servatism predicting rationalization of inequality. After adjusting for other variables in the model, we found that conservatism was significantly associated with rationalization of inequality,  $b = 0.29$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ,  $p < .001$ . A Sobel test (Baron & Kenny, 1986) confirmed that, as hypothesized, rationalizing inequality significantly accounted for increased life satisfaction among conservatives, Sobel statistic = 2.22,  $p < .03$ .

### Discussion

The results from Study 1 offered initial support for our predictions using a nationally representative sample of American voters. Above and beyond the effects of church attendance, income, marital status, and other demographic variables, there was a significant effect of political orientation on life satisfaction; the difference between conservatives' and liberals' satisfaction with life was explained at least in part by conservatives' stronger tendencies to rationalize economic inequality. However, we obtained no evidence that differences in cognitive style (as measured by need for cognition) accounted for differences in life satisfaction.

There were some clear limitations to Study 1. First, we used a fairly broad measure of the tendency to accept and rationalize inequality. According to system-justification theory, however, people (and especially conservatives) not only accept inequality in society, but also are motivated to see inequality as being caused by fair procedures and legitimate systems, such as meritocracy (e.g., Jost & Hunyady, 2002; Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003; Major, 1994). Second, it is at least conceivable that conservatives' greater satisfaction in the 2000 NES was due to the fact that the Republican party had recently won the presidency. Third, Study 1 examined the palliative effect of conservative ideology in a single cultural context. We could not know whether the same effect would be found in other cultural contexts, and whether the relation between ideology and well-

being would be more pronounced in countries with greater economic hardships. In Study 2, we addressed these issues using data from the World Values Survey.

### STUDY 2

We conducted two sets of statistical analyses for Study 2. First, we used nationally representative survey data from American citizens to further explore the relation between political orientation and subjective well-being, thereby replicating Study 1 with new measures of system justification and subjective well-being. Second, we expanded the cultural and geographic scope of this research by analyzing data from 10 countries using multilevel modeling. Specifically, we hypothesized that endorsing a meritocratic belief system (Kluegel & Smith, 1986), which is one very common means of rationalizing economic inequality, would account for the relation between political conservatism (or right-wing orientation) and subjective well-being. Furthermore, we expected that we would observe this pattern not only in the United States, but around the world, and that the palliative effects of ideology would be particularly strong in countries with a relatively low standard of living.

### Method

Our sample came from the third wave of the World Values Survey (2006), which was administered from 1994 to 1999. The U.S. data were collected in 1995, during a Democratic presidency, and there were 1,176 U.S. respondents with complete data available. For the multicountry analyses, complete data were available for all of the person- and nation-level variables (described later in this section) for respondents in 10 countries. Thus, the multilevel analyses included respondents from the following countries, in addition to the United States: Czech Republic (1998;  $n = 819$ ), Finland (1996;  $n = 794$ ), Germany

(1997;  $n = 1,511$ ), New Zealand (1998;  $n = 699$ ), Norway (1996;  $n = 1,019$ ), Slovakia (1998;  $n = 804$ ), Spain (1995;  $n = 634$ ), Sweden (1996;  $n = 880$ ), and Switzerland (1996;  $n = 715$ ).

#### Person-Level Measures

Participants were asked to rate how personally satisfied they were with their lives, using a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all satisfied*) to 10 (*very satisfied*). In addition, they were asked how happy they felt, on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all happy*) to 4 (*very happy*). A final measure of subjective well-being was obtained by taking the mean of the life-satisfaction and happiness ratings after both were rescaled to range from 1 to 10 (mean  $\alpha = .66$ , range = .53–.73).

Political orientation was assessed using a single ideological self-placement item: Participants located themselves on a scale ranging from 1 (*left-wing*) to 10 (*right-wing*). Previous research shows that this item possesses good test-retest reliability and strong predictive validity (see Jost, 2006). Endorsement of meritocracy was measured with a single item; participants rated their beliefs on a scale ranging from 1 (*hard work doesn't generally bring success—it's more a matter of luck*) to 10 (*in the long run, hard work usually brings a better life*).

We adjusted for several demographic characteristics: sex (0 = male, 1 = female), marital status (0 = unmarried, 1 = married), church attendance (on an 8-point scale ranging from *never to more than once a week*), employment status (0 = employed or not looking for work, 1 = unemployed), income (three intervals), age (three intervals), age squared, and education (three intervals). All individual-level variables in the model were rescaled to range from 0 to 1.

#### Nation-Level Predictors

In a multilevel model involving respondents from the 10 countries, we adjusted for several macroeconomic indicators that relate to national happiness levels, including inflation and unemployment rates (Di Tella, MacCulloch, & Oswald, 2001) and real gross domestic product (GDP) per capita (Diener & Oishi, 2000). Inflation and unemployment rates from the year of the survey were obtained from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (n.d.) database. GDP data from 1999 were obtained from the Penn World Table (Heston, Summers, & Aten, 2002); because GDPs are not normally distributed, the natural log of the GDP was used in the analyses (e.g., Diener & Tov, 2007). We used the United Nations Development Programme's (1995) human development index (HDI) as a quality-of-life indicator. Nation-level predictor variables were centered at their grand means.

## Results

#### Subjective Well-Being Among Left- and Right-Wingers in the United States

We first constructed a stepwise linear regression model to predict subjective well-being in the United States. Political orientation

was entered in the first step, adjustment variables were entered in the second and third steps, and endorsement of meritocracy was entered in the fourth step. As Table 2 shows, political orientation was again a significant predictor of subjective well-being in Steps 1 and 2, even after we adjusted for demographic variables.<sup>1</sup> It remained significant in Step 3, after adjusting for church attendance. In Step 4, we found that the endorsement of meritocratic beliefs was, as hypothesized, positively related to subjective well-being. More important, adding this variable reduced the effect of right-wing orientation on well-being to the point of marginal significance. A mediational analysis revealed that right-wing orientation predicted endorsement of meritocratic beliefs,  $b = 0.12$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p < .001$ , and that this endorsement accounted significantly for the relation between right-wing orientation and subjective well-being, Sobel statistic = 2.49,  $p < .02$ .

#### Subjective Well-Being Among Left- and Right-Wingers in All 10 Countries

We also constructed a multilevel model, adjusting the intercept of each nation for GDP, unemployment rate, inflation rate, and the HDI. The results for Model 1 in Table 3 show that right-wing orientation was positively and significantly related to well-being after we adjusted for country-level variations in economic and other circumstances. Furthermore, in Model 2, meritocratic beliefs were significantly and positively associated with subjective well-being. A mediational analysis revealed that right-wing orientation predicted endorsement of meritocratic beliefs,  $b = 0.13$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ,  $p < .001$ , and that this endorsement mediated the relation between ideology and well-being, Sobel statistic = 5.82,  $p < .001$ .<sup>2</sup>

In Models 3 and 4, we also examined interactions between ideological variables and quality of life (as measured by the HDI). As Table 3 shows, there was a marginally significant interaction between right-wing orientation and HDI, but no interaction between meritocratic ideology and HDI. Simple slopes analysis revealed that political orientation had a somewhat stronger effect on well-being in low-HDI countries,  $b = 0.13$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $p < .001$ , than in high-HDI countries,  $b = 0.04$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ,  $p < .02$ , but that the effect of political orientation on well-being was significant in high-HDI countries as well.

## Discussion

In Study 2, we addressed several limitations of Study 1 and obtained strong additional support for the hypothesis that ra-

<sup>1</sup>We also examined the notion that the palliative effect of ideology is strongest for those persons who are most disadvantaged. In Study 2, we observed a significant interactive effect of ideology and income on well-being in the U.S. sample,  $b = -0.12$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $p < .05$ ; conservatives were relatively happy regardless of income level, whereas poor liberals were significantly less happy than wealthy liberals. However, this interaction was not replicated for the other countries examined in Study 2, nor did it attain significance in Study 1 or Study 2.

<sup>2</sup>There was no significant random variation in the slope of the regression of subjective well-being on meritocratic beliefs ( $\sigma^2 = 0.00$ ,  $p > .40$ ), so we fixed the variance of this slope to zero in order to test for mediation (e.g., Kenny, Korchmaros, & Bolger, 2003).

**TABLE 2**  
*Unstandardized Coefficients From Linear Regression Analyses of Subjective Well-Being in the World Values Survey: United States*

Predictor	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
Constant	0.78 (0.01)***	0.70 (0.02)***	0.68 (0.02)***	0.64 (0.02)***
Right-wing orientation	0.07 (0.02)***	0.06 (0.02)*	0.05 (0.02)*	0.04 (0.02) <sup>+</sup>
Income		0.05 (0.02)***	0.05 (0.02)***	0.05 (0.01)***
Education		0.02 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Sex		0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Age		-0.00 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)
Age squared		0.04 (0.01)***	0.04 (0.01)***	0.04 (0.01)***
Marital status		0.08 (0.01)***	0.08 (0.01)***	0.07 (0.01)***
Employment status		-0.05 (0.02)*	-0.04 (0.02)*	-0.04 (0.02) <sup>+</sup>
Church attendance			0.04 (0.02)*	0.03 (0.02)*
Meritocratic beliefs				0.07 (0.02)***

**Note.** Robust standard errors are given in parentheses. This analysis is based on a sample size of 1,176.

<sup>+</sup> $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

tionalizing inequality—for example, by seeing it as emerging from a fair, legitimate, and meritocratic system—serves a palliative function not only in the United States, but in nine other countries as well. That is, right-wingers report greater happiness and satisfaction than left-wingers around the world, and most especially in countries where the overall quality of life is relatively low. The endorsement of meritocratic beliefs is also associated with subjective well-being in these countries. Furthermore, meritocratic

beliefs account for the association between political orientation and subjective well-being to a significant degree. In Study 3, we used data from the General Social Survey and the U.S. Census to test the hypothesis that as economic inequality in society has increased in recent decades, self-reported happiness has decreased, especially among liberals. We expected that conservatives' ideological beliefs have provided an emotional buffer against the negative hedonic consequences of inequality in society.

**TABLE 3**  
*Unstandardized Coefficients From Multilevel Linear Regression Analyses of Subjective Well-Being in the World Values Survey: 10 Countries*

Predictor	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Nation-level variables				
Intercept	0.66 (0.01)***	0.66 (0.01)***	0.66 (0.01)***	0.66 (0.01)***
Unemployment	-0.01 (0.00)*	-0.01 (0.00)*	-0.01 (0.00)*	-0.01 (0.00)*
Inflation	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00) <sup>+</sup>
Gross domestic product	-0.04 (0.04)	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.04 (0.04)	-0.05 (0.03)
HDI	1.81 (0.38)**	1.88 (0.38)***	1.89 (0.37)***	1.93 (0.34)***
Person-level variables				
Sex	0.01 (0.00)**	0.02 (0.00)**	0.01 (0.00)**	0.02 (0.00)**
Age	-0.04 (0.01)**	-0.04 (0.01)***	-0.04 (0.01)**	-0.04 (0.01)***
Age squared	0.03 (0.01)**	0.02 (0.01)**	0.03 (0.01)***	0.02 (0.01)**
Marital status	0.06 (0.01)***	0.06 (0.01)***	0.06 (0.01)***	0.06 (0.01)***
Income	0.05 (0.01)***	0.04 (0.01)***	0.05 (0.01)***	0.04 (0.01)***
Education	0.02 (0.01)*	0.02 (0.01)*	0.02 (0.01)*	0.02 (0.01)*
Employment status	-0.08 (0.02)**	-0.08 (0.02)**	-0.08 (0.02)***	-0.08 (0.02)**
Church attendance	0.04 (0.01)***	0.03 (0.01)***	0.04 (0.01)***	0.03 (0.01)***
Right-wing orientation	0.07 (0.01)***	0.06 (0.01)**	0.07 (0.01)***	0.06 (0.01)***
Right-Wing Orientation × HDI			-0.66 (0.32) <sup>+</sup>	-0.68 (0.32) <sup>+</sup>
Meritocratic beliefs		0.07 (0.01)***		0.07 (0.01)***
Meritocratic Beliefs × HDI				-0.09 (0.23)

**Note.** Robust standard errors are given in parentheses. HDI = human development index.

<sup>+</sup> $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## STUDY 3

After decades of relative economic stability following World War II, the gap between rich and poor in the United States has increased sharply since the 1970s (Saez & Piketty, 2006). In a period of rapidly growing inequality, conservatives should find it easier than liberals to be happy, insofar as their attitudes about inequality provide a psychological buffer against discontent with the system.

## Method

Individual-level variables were available for 20 of the 31 years of the General Social Survey (GSS) from 1974 through 2004 (Davis, Smith, & Marsden, 2005). Sample sizes ranged from 695 to 2,536. Data were weighted to reflect national distributions.

Survey respondents indicated their own level of happiness on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all happy*) to 3 (*very happy*).

The individual-level predictor variables included political orientation, which was measured by self-placement on a scale ranging from 1 (*strong liberal*) to 7 (*strong conservative*). We also adjusted for the following demographic characteristics: sex (0 = male, 1 = female), marital status (0 = unmarried, 1 = married), employment status (0 = employed or not looking for work, 1 = unemployed), age (nine intervals), age squared, income (three intervals), health status (four intervals), and education (five intervals). These variables were rescaled to range from 0 to 1.

Year-level predictor variables—unemployment, inflation, and levels of income inequality—were obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau (2005). A dummy variable indicated whether the president was Republican (vs. Democrat). Our measure of income inequality was the Gini index, which ranged from .395 in 1974 to .466 in 2004. All year-level variables except for the party-in-power dummy code were centered at their grand means.

## Results

We constructed a two-level model using robust standard errors to predict individual-level happiness. On the year level, the intercept was adjusted for unemployment, inflation, party in power, and the Gini index. At the individual level, we used political orientation and demographic adjustment variables to predict happiness. We also allowed political orientation to interact with the Gini index and with the party-in-power variable.

As Table 4 shows, with the notable exception of the Gini coefficient, the year-level variables had relatively slight influence on happiness scores. We found that happiness was inversely related to economic inequality; thus, increased inequality was indeed associated with decreased subjective well-being. There was again a significant effect of political orientation on happiness, indicating that conservatives tended to be happier than liberals, even after we adjusted for other variables. This effect was qualified by a two-way interaction between political orientation and the degree of economic inequality,  $b = 1.52$ ,  $SE =$

TABLE 4

*Unstandardized Coefficients From a Multilevel Linear Regression Analysis of Self-Reported Happiness in the General Social Surveys, 1974–2004*

Predictor	Coefficient
Year-level variables	
Intercept	2.07 (0.01)***
Unemployment	−0.01 (0.00)***
Inflation	−0.00 (0.00) <sup>+</sup>
Republican president	−0.01 (0.01)
Gini index	−1.82 (0.72)*
Individual-level variables	
Marital status	0.23 (0.02)***
Education	0.08 (0.01)***
Sex	0.04 (0.01)**
Income	0.10 (0.01)***
Employment status	−0.19 (0.03)***
Age	0.20 (0.03)***
Age squared	0.13 (0.01)***
Health status	0.44 (0.04)***
Political conservatism	0.06 (0.02)*
Political Conservatism × Republican President	−0.01 (0.02)
Political Conservatism × Gini Index	1.52 (0.36)***

Note. Robust standard errors are given in parentheses.

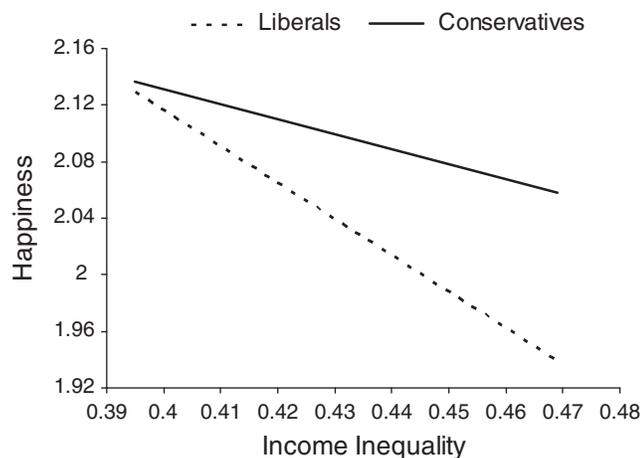
<sup>+</sup> $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

0.36,  $p < .001$ . As Figure 1 illustrates, inequality exacerbated the happiness gap between liberals and conservatives. That is, increasing inequality was associated with a steeper decrease in happiness among liberals than among conservatives.<sup>3</sup> Analyses of simple slopes (Preacher, Curran, & Bauer, 2006) revealed that for liberals, happiness was significantly related to increasing inequality,  $b = -2.57$ ,  $SE = 0.79$ ,  $p < .01$ , whereas for conservatives, it was not,  $b = -1.06$ ,  $SE = 0.69$ , n.s.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

In three studies, using nationally representative samples from the United States and nine additional countries, we consistently found that 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 (as measured by the need for cognition in Study 1). We did find, however, that the rationalization of inequality—a core component of conservative ideology (Jost, Glaser, et al., 2003)—helps to explain why conservatives are, on average, happier than liberals. These findings are consistent with system-

<sup>3</sup>We also investigated additional measures of macroeconomic inequality, including the household-income-distribution ratio of the 90th to the 10th percentile, the household-income-distribution ratio of the 80th to the 20th percentile, the Theil entropy measure, and the mean logarithmic deviation of income (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). The same pattern of results was observed for all of these measures.



**Fig. 1.** The relation between political orientation and self-reported happiness as a function of the Gini index, 1974 through 2004 (Study 3).

justification theory, which posits that viewing the status quo (with its attendant degree of inequality) as fair and legitimate serves a palliative function (Jost & Hunyady, 2002). Study 3, in particular, suggests that conservatism provides an emotional buffer against the negative hedonic impact of inequality in society.

These findings contribute to the research literatures on the economic and psychological determinants of nation-level happiness. Our finding that worsening inequality is associated with decreased overall happiness levels is broadly consistent with previous findings that indicators of liberal development, including social capital, democratic governance, human rights, and peace, predict increased happiness at the national level (Diener & Seligman, 2004; Diener & Tov, 2007).

However, our research suggests that inequality takes a greater psychological toll on liberals than on conservatives, apparently because liberals lack ideological rationalizations that would help them frame inequality in a positive (or at least neutral) light. This could explain, in part, why conservative governments tend to increase inequality more than liberal governments (Bartels, 2004). In addition, our work offers a theoretical framework that could help to explain why the negative relation between inequality and happiness is stronger in Europe than it is in the United States. Alesina et al. (2004) proposed that the American emphasis on meritocratic ideology renders economic inequality less aversive to Americans than to Europeans (see also Hartz, 1955). Our studies provide support for the notion that ideological differences can, in fact, explain certain effects of inequality on happiness.

There is no reason to think that the effects we have identified here are unique to economic forms of inequality. Research suggests that highly egalitarian women are less happy in their marriages compared with their more traditional counterparts (Wilcox & Nock, 2006), apparently because they are more troubled by disparities in domestic labor (Coltrane, 2000). System-justification theory provides a powerful means of analyzing and appreciating the palliative effects of rationalizing various forms

of inequality in social relations, as well as the costs of failing to do so.

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