

Big government—or good neighbors—can improve people's health

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The nation's left-leaning citizens might be pleased by the findings of a new University of Nebraska study that finds those who live in liberal states tend to be healthier.

But conservatives could also take satisfaction in the same study's conclusion that strong communities also foster better [health](#).

"Some people might like the argument that liberal government automatically leads to healthier people, because it supports their worldview," said Mitchel Herian, a faculty fellow with the university's Public Policy Center and lead researcher on the new study. "But in the absence of a liberal government, you also see better levels of health if you have a strong community."

The study, published in the March issue of the journal *Social Science and Medicine*, combined data from the 2010 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System to measure health, a 2009 Gallup Healthways Survey to measure levels of [social trust](#) and a 2010 index that rates liberalism in state government. In all, the study involved data collected from more than 450,000 people from across the country.

It found that states with high levels of liberalism and those with high levels of social trust have higher levels of health and well-being.

The two factors – liberalism and social trust – are not interchangeable. People who live in a California city might have liberal political beliefs

but mistrust their neighbors, Herian said, while those who live in a small Texas town might mistrust government but count on their neighbors.

To measure a state's social capital, Herian and his colleagues used data from a survey that asked "If you lost a wallet or purse that contained \$200 and it was found by a neighbor, do you think it would be returned with the money in it or not?"

To assess states' political profiles, the study used an index that scores each of the 50 states on their relative liberalism vs. conservatism. The index is based upon factors such as interest group ratings of congressional members, voting records and election results in congressional races. It is designed not only to assess partisanship, but the extent to which politicians favor liberal social policy.

Health and well-being were measured with questions from the behavior risk survey that asked respondents to rate their health and to report how frequently poor physical or mental health prevents them from carrying out daily activities. The researchers also took smoking habits and body mass index into consideration.

Herian authored the study with psychologists Louis Tay of Purdue University, Ed Diener of the University of Illinois and UNL graduate student Joseph A. Hamm.

"Liberals argue for government programs and conservatives argue for individual responsibility," Diener said. "When government programs are in place, people tend to be healthier. But when government programs are weaker, a person with lots of close ties and social capital can still be healthy. Their wife can get them to exercise, their friends can help them not drink too much, and their support for each other may directly affect their health. Loneliness is bad for health."

The researchers said the study has implications for health policy at the state and local levels. Herian, who has studied how social trust influences public policy, said he expects to do more research on how to measure social trust.

Tay said the study shows two pathways to improving people's health: Strong communities can provide good health outcomes, but government social programs also have a strong connection to good health and could be necessary to serve more fragmented and isolated communities.

Diener said the research demonstrates that [good health](#) is not just a matter of individuals "doing the right thing" like quitting smoking, exercising more and losing excess weight.

"Social factors have an influence, too," he said. "It might be [government programs](#), or it might be '[social capital](#)' – having supportive others around us – that can influence our health beyond just each of us doing the right things."

Provided by University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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