

Political liberals display greater happiness, study finds

March 12 2015



Credit: Bill Kuffrey/public domain

What does it mean to be happy? Is it how happy you say you are, or is it how happy you act? Previous research has found that political conservatives report being happier than political liberals. But UC Irvine psychologists have discovered that those on the left exhibit happier speech patterns and facial expressions.

"The so-called '[happiness](#) gap' between liberals and conservatives is more complicated than we thought," said Sean Wojcik, a [doctoral student](#) in psychology & [social behavior](#) at UCI and lead author of the study, which appears this month in *Science*.

Prior findings that political conservatives are happier than political liberals have been based on self-reports of happiness. But claims about one's happiness - just like claims about one's intelligence or morality - can be inflated by the desire to see oneself in a positive light.

"If you want to know how happy someone is, one way to do it is to just ask them, and this logic has been relied upon heavily in research on subjective well-being," said Peter Ditto, UCI professor of psychology & social [behavior](#) and co-author of the paper. "But another way to think about it is that happy is as happy does, and looking at happiness-related behavior avoids the issue of someone striving to present him- or herself as a happy person."

To assess differences in happiness-related behavior, Wojcik and his colleagues turned to "big data" sources: online survey takers, American politicians, and Twitter and LinkedIn users with ties to companies or organizations associated with either liberal (Planned Parenthood, for example) or conservative (Fox News) viewpoints.

Specifically, the psychologists analyzed millions of words from Congressional Record transcripts and the photographs of every member of Congress, as well as 47,000 tweets and nearly 500 photos from LinkedIn. They found that contrary to the pattern of greater conservative happiness found in self-report questionnaires, liberals more frequently employed positive language in their speech and writing and smiled more intensely and genuinely in photographs.

"We were surprised by how consistently happiness-related behavior was

predicted by having a liberal political ideology," Wojcik said. "We saw similar patterns of emotional language and smiling behavior among Congress members, Twitter users and LinkedIn users."

These results belie the self-reports of greater happiness among those who lean to the political right, and Wojcik has an explanation. "People tend to report all kinds of traits and abilities in an overly favorable way," he said. "If you ask people to rate themselves across almost any set of positive traits - intelligence, social skills, even driving ability - most will rate themselves above average. We observed that effect to be stronger among conservatives than liberals."

But this isn't necessarily a bad thing. "There's research saying that self-enhancement is related to improved social relations, productive and creative work, and other beneficial outcomes," Wojcik noted.

The study was also co-authored by Arpine Hovasapian of UC Irvine, Jesse Graham of the University of Southern California, and Matt Motyl of the University of Illinois at Chicago.

More information: Conservatives report, but liberals display, greater happiness, *Science*, www.sciencemag.org/lookup/doi/10.1126/science.1260817

Provided by University of California, Irvine

Citation: Political liberals display greater happiness, study finds (2015, March 12) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-03-political-liberals-greater-happiness.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private

study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.