

A conservative environment makes conservatives happier

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Past studies have found that conservatives are happier than liberals. Dr. Olga Stavrova from the Institute of Sociology and Social Psychology (ISS) and Junior Professor Maïke Luhmann from the Psychology Department at the University of Cologne were able to show in two studies that the positive effect of a conservative ideology on people also depends on the ideological orientation of their social surroundings.

If the dominant ideology in society is rather conservative, adherents of a conservative ideology tend to be happier than liberals. With decreasing social conservatism, the conservatives tended to forfeit their "satisfaction advantage." In the studies, the scientists used the data of 200,000 survey respondents from the USA and 92 countries around the world. The results of the studies will be published in the *Journal of Research in Personality* (Volume 63, August 2016, Pages 29-35).

In recent years, psychologists have scrutinized the [correlation](#) between people's political attitudes and their life satisfaction. Studies on the influence of the political mainstream on the life satisfaction of conservatives or liberals found out that, all in all, conservatives are happier. "The influence of ideological convictions on life satisfaction is not quite as high as, for example, personality or social relations. But it does matter," says Stavrova.

However, most studies have been based on data from the United States. "That is why it makes sense to check whether this small correlation between conservatism and life satisfaction also exists in Europe." The

two researchers believe a prevailing conservative mood in society to have a positive effect on the life satisfaction of conservatives.

In order to verify or disprove this thesis, in their first study Stavrova and Luhmann relied on the data of the General Social Survey (GSS) from the past forty years. The GSS is a recognized survey of the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago and conducted biennially. It serves as the basis of various scientific studies. For their research, Stavrova and Luhmann used the data of more than 40 000 respondents.

"At the individual level, we looked at the correlation between individual political attitude and life satisfaction," Stavrova explains. "At the level of time, we looked at the general political climate." They first determined the overall number of people with a conservative attitude. If they were the largest absolute group, all in all the year was rather conservative. "Then we checked whether the correlation between personal life satisfaction and political attitude could be explained by the overall political climate."

In their second study, Stavrova and Luhmann added the data of more than 150 000 respondents from 92 countries from the World Values Survey to the data from the United States. The World Values Survey is compiled by an international network of political and social scientists. For the United States, the researchers concluded that the correlation between a person's individual political attitude and happiness is stronger in those years in which this political attitude is broadly accepted and widespread - conservative Americans were at their happiest when the overall political climate was rather conservative. In those years in which a more liberal climate prevailed, they were not generally happier than liberals. This explains the fluctuations that can be observed for the United States over the past 40 years. "In 2004, when the climate was decidedly conservative, there was a particularly strong

correlation. In that year, life satisfaction was very high among conservatives," says Stavrova. Similar phenomena can be observed around the world. Generally, conservatives are happier than non-conservatives. However, "that is mostly the case in conservative countries. In liberal countries, they do not have any advantage." In Germany, there is hardly any correlation between political ideology and life satisfaction.

It is mostly conservatives who are influenced by their environment. No such correlation was discernible in for people with a liberal attitude. In this context, the researchers noted that all the characteristics facilitating [life satisfaction](#), for example religiosity or personality, help an individual attain popularity and respect in society." In this regard, conservatives feel better. They have better relationships with others, feel understood and validated in their views."

Scientists call this the "person-culture fit"—the individual "fits" into his or her environment. "We believe this to be at the heart of our results. It is nothing intrinsic to the conservative ideology," Stavrova argues. "For conservatives, social belonging seems to matter a great deal. Liberals are more autonomous."

More information: Olga Stavrova et al, Are conservatives happier than liberals? Not always and not everywhere, *Journal of Research in Personality* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jrp.2016.04.011](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2016.04.011)

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