

# Q&A: Are liberals truly more depressed than conservatives?

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Do self-identified liberals suffer from higher levels of depression than their conservative counterparts? [Research suggests so](#), which has a [small circle of commentators](#) and academics humming with theories to explain the gap.

In one study, a team of epidemiologists surveyed more than 86,000 twelfth-graders over a 13-year period and found rates of depression have been rising among all students, but much higher with progressive students.

One theory, offered by the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, [suggests that social media and a culture of "victimization"](#) may be to blame, particularly among younger demographics. Another theory focuses on a ["catastrophizing" mentality](#) among most liberals. The chatter comes after the U.S. surgeon general [warned against the harms](#) of [social media](#) usage on teens' [mental health](#).

Nick Beauchamp, associate professor of political science at Northeastern, spoke with Northeastern Global News about the issue. Among other things, he addressed some of the pitfalls of drawing causal connections between a person's politics, and measures of [happiness](#) or mental health distress.

The conversation has been edited for brevity and clarity.

## **What do you make of the claims some prominent academics and commentators are making about the happiness or unhappiness of liberals and conservatives?**

The short version is: this is very complicated. You've got to measure ideology, which is a compound feature made up of made up of a bunch

of different features, and which is influenced by socioeconomic demographics, personality, life history, beliefs and more. It's like this bundle of stuff, and then you've got to measure mental health or happiness, which is at least as complicated as ideology—and with as many factors. Finding causal connections between the two is very difficult. Finding associations, on the other hand—well, associations are easy to come by.

**Some of the commentary seems to be coming from prominent opinion writers, such as the *New York Times*' Ross Douthat and David Brooks, who have put forward theories to explain these differences in reported levels of happiness. Do you think that politics might also be motivating how these data are interpreted?**

I think so. In a sense it's kind of analogous to what sometimes happens on the left with psychological theories of right-wing authoritarianism, which is this attempt to explain conservatism in terms of more fundamental underlying personality traits—most of which are negative traits. Both sides are doing this; but this [drawing connections between ideology and mental health] is an example of where it's being mostly pushed by the right.

What's interesting about this is that mental health issues are much more stigmatized on the right than on the left. There's all sorts of studies showing this.

When you get into the actual social science, one of the big criticisms or issues with these studies, particularly the ones driven by polls that rely on self-reported data, is that because there is this stigma on the right, you would expect ... much less reporting of it in a poll than the truth of the matter. It's hard to distinguish in these polls how much of this is due to actual differences in mental health, and how much of it is a result of this stigma issue, or simply differences in the underlying demographics of

liberals versus conservatives.

**Methodologically, if someone was going to give you \$1 million to conduct the most comprehensive study on the link between political ideology and mental health, how would you go about doing that?**

There are arguments that say there are genes that actually cause increased anxiety or neuroticism among liberals, and that in turn both makes them liberal and less happy—and, therefore, more likely to have [mental health issues](#). If you want to test that, you've got to do very complicated gene tests.

They have purportedly found genes, or at least physical evidence of gene correlation with personality traits. Personality traits in turn are correlated with mental health and ideology. Would that count as an effect between ideology and happiness or mental health, or should we just say that there's a lot of things going on and some of them affect both of these things?

One experiment would be to say that we really care about the beliefs themselves. The strongest version of this would be something like, "believing liberalism makes you less happy and makes you more mentally unwell." In that case, if you had a million dollars, you'd try to take a small number of people and persuade some of them to be more liberal and others to be more conservative, then survey them over the next five years in terms of happiness and mental health. Assuming you could actually persuade them, which might just be impossible.

**How about looking at the issues that both sides care about, and what those issues might mean for their**

**own lives? For example, liberals' concern about climate change and its link to mental health. Similarly, a conservative person's propensity for religious belief. How might these convictions play into a person's happiness?**

That might be a more promising direction to take this whole question. We know that there is this collection of things that are somewhere between personality and just attitudes. Like attitudes toward personal commitment, moral commitment, national strength, traditional religious belief, self-esteem, for example. There are all of these things that are kind of in between personality traits and policy beliefs. And it's certainly plausible to think that these things are associated with both ideology, which is a very coarse thing, and happiness or mental health.

Maybe the better way to say it is that there are two interpretations going on among the right about why the left might be, in their view, less happy.

One of them is this genetic story; but the other one is focused on the ideas themselves, which says that conservative ideas are "pro-happiness" in the sense that they feel that the world is justified, that it has strong moral guidelines that keep you from becoming too anxious, that there's meaning in the world, etc. If you read some of this research, a lot of it will echo this sentiment—that beliefs provide the structure and support that makes people happier.

They don't really present any evidence for that, though. I mean, all they show is that there is a correlation at best between these kinds of beliefs and happiness or mental health.

For the few papers that aren't coming out of the right, they assert that maybe there's, and I'm quoting from one now, a possible "bidirectional

association between concern for economic inequality and anxiety disorder symptoms." So they're being careful to say [they] don't know which way the causation is, but there may be some causation from concern ... to anxiety—not just that more dispositionally anxious people are more likely to express concern.

In some way, that's a story that both sides might be able to get behind. The conservatives could say that "ours provides structure and thereby happiness," and the liberals could say "ours provides concern and thereby unhappiness, but that's not a bad thing if the world needs concern." That story, in a way, might keep these theories afloat.

Provided by Northeastern University

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