

Science: Conservatives Are Happier Than Liberals (and extremists are happier than moderates)

Are conservatives happier than liberals?

Yes, according to Arthur C. Brooks, author of *Gross National Happiness* and president of the American Enterprise Institute. [Writing for the New York Times](#) he notes:

“Scholars on both the left and right have studied this question extensively, and have reached a consensus that it is conservatives who possess the happiness edge. Many data sets show this. For example, the Pew Research Center in 2006 [reported](#) that conservative Republicans were 68 percent more likely than liberal Democrats to say they were ‘very happy’ about their lives. This pattern has persisted for decades. The question isn’t whether this is true, but why.”

That may come as a surprise to many. “After all,” as Brooks also notes, “there is an entire academic literature in the social sciences dedicated to showing conservatives as naturally authoritarian, dogmatic, intolerant of ambiguity, fearful of threat and loss, low in self-esteem and uncomfortable with complex modes of thinking.” And this year’s theme of “angry” Republican voters going *en masse* for Donald Trump could be seen as confirming that.

So what’s behind the apparent disparity?

Religion and marriage, that’s what. It is undisputed in the social sciences that religious people, on average, are happier than irreligious people and married people, on average, are

happier than single people. And the stats Brooks cites show that conservatives are more likely to be married and/or religious than liberals.

But that leaves open the question: Are conservatives more likely to be married and/or religious because they are simpler-minded, more optimistic, and more complacent than liberals? If so, one might conclude that said personality traits, which tend to make for happier people, are also what make conservatives more likely to maintain marital and religious commitments. But of course it might work the other way, i.e., that being religious and/or married tends to make for a sunnier outlook on life. We know the correlations, but we don't know the direction of causation.

One fact that might aid explanation here is that people at the farther ends of the political spectrum seem to be much happier than moderates. Brooks speculates: "One possibility is that extremists have the whole world figured out, and sorted into good guys and bad guys. They have the security of knowing what's wrong, and whom to fight. They are the happy warriors." Long-term marriage and/or religious commitment might have something like that effect on many spouses and believers: You know your spouse and/or co-religionists are among the good guys, and you're in close with them.

If that's true, however, it doesn't necessarily mean that *happier* people are *better* people. Some happy people are surely happy for the wrong reasons; some quite admirable people are unhappy with the state of the world and devote their lives to doing something about it. But whatever explanations, the facts Brooks cites are worth pondering, and the explanations he rejects are worth rejecting.