



The Serious Business of Happiness

In four recent Wall Street Journal articles, AEI visiting scholar Arthur Brooks used social science data to explore questions about life satisfaction. In a May article, he noted that hardcore liberals and their conservative counterparts are some of our happiest citizens, and then mused about the likely effect of their zeal on the 2008 campaign. In June, he compared data on the correlation between work and happiness in Europe and the United States, concluding that the American formula of hard work appears to function well in producing a happy population. In an article in early July he speculated on the reasons that women feel freer than men, and in an article in mid-July he contemplated the relationship between opportunity and happiness.

By Arthur C. Brooks

The Politics of Happiness

At the outset of his presidential run of 1968, Democrat Hubert H. Humphrey called his ill-fated campaign “the politics of happiness, the politics of purpose, and the politics of joy.”

What exactly does the “politics of happiness” mean? You might be tempted to dismiss it as nothing more than utopian flabdoodle from a doomed Democratic candidate, or maybe a contrast inspired by the unlovable Richard Nixon. But might there be something more to the idea—a better, higher approach to politics, and one to which we can aspire, regardless of our ideology? Perhaps if our politics were “happier,” we could enjoy a climate of mutual respect and understanding; maybe even genial compromise between the parties? Heading into a presidential election year in our current climate of ideological acrimony, the “politics of happiness” might sound attractive to you.

When it comes to politics, the standard intuition is that anger and happiness are incompatible. For example, today’s foam-flecked, furious liberals appear to advertise their own misery with their catchphrase, “If you’re not outraged, you’re not paying attention.” (This, by the way, is now official Democratic policy: the Democratic National

Committee’s website asserts that “outrage must be taken to the ballot box.”) If we had a politics of happiness, we could have a constructive dialogue about our differences. In short, a thousand political flowers would bloom, right?

Political Disdain, Life Happiness

Wrong. The strange fact of the matter is that the hard-core liberals and conservatives in America are actually some of our happiest citizens. According to the National Opinion Research Center in 2004, in spite of all their bile, 35 percent of people who said they are “extremely liberal” also reported being “very happy” with their lives—versus 22 percent of people who were just “liberal” and 28 percent of moderates. At the same time, a whopping 48 percent of people who were “extremely conservative” were very happy (compared with 43 percent of non-extreme conservatives).

As much as you might prefer not to believe it, the politics of happiness is actually the politics of intolerance, nasty sloganeering, and the screaming pundits on cable television. Think this is hyperbole? Consider data from the University of

Michigan's National Election Studies, which asks respondents to rate other people on a zero-to-100 scale, with zero being worst and 100 being best. These "feeling thermometers" are useful for revealing intolerance and bigotry because they measure feelings about other groups of people, not just about ideas or institutions.

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In 2004, "extremely liberal" folks gave lumpen "conservatives" a freezing average temperature of twenty-three; "extremely conservative" people, in turn, gave liberals an average score of twenty-seven. The temperature for these groups from the non-extreme populations was sixty-one and fifty-six, respectively. To put this into perspective, note that North Korea and Iran—avowed enemies of the United States—receive similar temperatures to those which extremists give their fellow citizens who just happen to disagree with them politically.

Not surprisingly, there is also evidence that people with extreme views are less empathetic and compassionate than others. They are less loving toward family members and less charitable with their money. They are even less honest in everyday transactions.

So how on earth could these people be happier than the rest of us? Perhaps the intensity of their political views animates them in some positive way, giving them a sense of purpose. Or maybe there is something else about the life of the average extremist that brings lots of joy. In either case, what we see is that the anger we associate with the far left and far right is apparently compatible with their happiness. The trouble is that, while radicals may be happy, they undoubtedly lower the happiness of the rest of us through their intolerance and antisocial ways—spewing out what economists call "externalities" with every insulting bumper sticker and obnoxious street demonstration. Political nastiness is something akin to pollution.

As 2008 approaches, we can expect to endure plenty of this pollution if, as generally happens, politicians tailor their primary rhetoric to the extremes. I am unhappy to predict that we appear to be in for a year of the politics of happiness.

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Happy for the Work

It is vacation season once again, giving occasion for the usual homilies about how Europeans are having a much better and healthier time of it than we are when it comes to work. You have heard it a thousand times: Americans "live to work," while Europeans "work to live."

By almost every measure, Europeans work less and relax more than Americans. According to data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Americans work 25 percent more hours each year than the Norwegians or the Dutch. The average retirement age for European men is 60.5, and it is even lower for European women. Our vacations are pathetically short by comparison: the average U.S. worker takes sixteen days of vacation each year, less than half of that typically taken by the Germans (thirty-five days), the French (thirty-seven days), or the Italians (forty-two days).

Why these differences? There are two standard explanations, neither of which casts Americans in a particularly good light. First, we are emotionally stunted. According to *Time* magazine, "In the puritanical version of Christianity that has always appealed to Americans, religion comes packaged with the stern message that hard work is good for the soul. Modern Europe has avoided so melancholy a lesson."

Second, we are under the yoke of hard-bitten capitalism. London's *Daily Telegraph* reports that the heavy U.S. work effort does not result from a special affinity Americans have for work; rather, it is because we are "terrified of losing [our] jobs" in a labor environment in which workers have few of the protections Europeans enjoy.

According to either explanation of the high American work effort, we would be a lot happier if we could somehow throw off our chains—both emotionally and

legally—and demand shorter work weeks, longer vacations, and bulletproof tenure until our early retirements. A tidy hypothesis, to be sure—until we look at the facts.

More Work, More Happiness

The truth is that most Americans do not feel particularly shackled. To begin with, an amazingly high percentage of us like our jobs. Among adults who worked ten hours a week or more in 2002, the General Social Survey (GSS) found that 89 percent said they were very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with their jobs. Only 11 percent said they were not too satisfied or not at all satisfied.

Of course, some would argue this statistic must be hiding big differences between people with “good” jobs and those with “bad” jobs. Presidential candidate John Edwards, in an argument fit for the French, tells us that we are two nations: “One America that does the work, another America that reaps the reward.”

No doubt there is great job dissatisfaction among people with low incomes and little education—the folks working in factories and on farms and the people who sell you socks and serve you lunch—right? Wrong. There is no difference at all between those with above- and below-average incomes: nine in ten are satisfied, as are people without college degrees. Eighty-seven percent of people who call themselves “working class” are satisfied.

But even if we are satisfied with our jobs, might we still be happier at the beach? Imagine asking people something like this: “If you were to get enough money to live as comfortably as you would like for the rest of your life, would you continue to work or would you stop working?” Certainly a high percentage would answer in

the affirmative, right? Wrong again. In 2002, the GSS found that number to be less than a third of all workers. There is also no difference between those at different levels of income or education. Sixty-nine percent of working-class folks say they would keep working even if they did not have to.

For most Americans, work is a rock-solid source of life happiness. Happy people work more hours each week than unhappy people, and work more in their free time as well. Even more tellingly, people with more hours per day to relax outside their jobs are not any happier than those who have less non-work time. In short, the idea that our heavy workloads are lowering our happiness is twaddle.

Obviously, there is a point beyond which work is excessive and lowers life quality. But within reasonable bounds, if happiness is our goal, the American formula of hard work appears to function well.

This may be one reason why Americans tend to score better than Europeans on most happiness surveys. For example, according to the 2002 International Social Survey Programme across thirty-five countries, 56 percent of Americans are “completely happy” or “very happy” with their lives, versus 44 percent of Danes (often cited in surveys as the happiest Europeans), 35 percent of the French, and 31 percent of Germans. Those sweet five-week vacations and thirty-five-hour workweeks do not seem to be stimulating all that much *félicité*. A good, old-fashioned fifty-hour week might be a better option.

The bottom line is that this year, I will not flinch at any mocking European glance as I write e-mails from the beach—or skip the beach entirely. For I am happy.

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The Political Gender Gap

Despite a full fifteen months left before the next presidential election, we already have an oppressively clear picture of the candidates, and are constantly subjected to the political themes they hope will resonate. For the Democratic frontrunners, the votes of women are crucial. The fact that women tilted only slightly for John F. Kerry in 2004—erasing huge majorities over the preceding three presidential elections—proved fatal.

The angle Democratic candidates are taking is that women lack freedom. According to John Edwards, “Today, too many women are separated from the opportunities of our country because of their gender.” Hillary Clinton declares that the current Bush “administration has acted to deny freedom to women around the world.” The Democratic Party’s website asserts that “George W. Bush has said many times that he stands for ‘freedom for

all Americans' yet his policies and the policies of the Republican Party deny equal rights to women."

The examples we hear usually involve the workplace (women earn seventy-seven cents for every dollar earned by men) or reproductive rights (Democrats will protect the freedom to have an abortion on demand at any point in a pregnancy, while the Republicans will not). These are mild versions of the more radical arguments, which claim that most of our social institutions—from families to churches—are designed to keep women shackled, and only a radical reordering of American society will set women free.

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freedom in America today.

Freedom is important because of its relationship to happiness and quality of life. According to the 2000 GSS, people who personally feel "complete freedom" or "a great deal of freedom" are three times as likely to say they are very happy than those who say they do not feel free. Freedom over the important elements in our lives provides the control we need to thrive. And this, of course, should translate into votes.

Women's Freedom: Uncovering the Truth

How much less free are women than men? Debates between reasonable people rage on this topic, but we seldom stop to ask women how free they actually feel. When we do so, we get a surprise: it is women, not men, who feel the most freedom in America today.

Imagine a man and a woman who are identical in income, education, race, religion, politics, marital status, and number of children. According to the GSS, the man will be about 10 percentage points less likely to say he feels personally free than the woman. He will also be 13 points less likely to say that Americans in general are very free.

But there are more surprises. Intuitively, we would assume that the women who say they feel the most

freedom should be the ones least encumbered by restrictive social institutions like traditional religion, marriage, and family. The survey data indicate otherwise. Thirty-two percent of women who never attend a house of worship feel less than a great deal of freedom, versus 18 percent of women who attend every week. And while women with kids feel slightly less free than those without, married women are 10 percentage points more likely to say they feel free than single women.

Outside the Democratic base, the message of oppression appears to have little resonance. Republican women are 7 percentage points likelier than Democratic women to say they feel free. The mixture of gender and politics makes the freedom difference explode: Democratic men are two-thirds likelier than Republican women (29 percent to 17 percent) to say they do not have a great deal of freedom.

Religious faith might explain part of the freedom gap between men and women. Women are a third likelier than men to practice their faith regularly, and when asked about the experiences in their lives that make them feel freest, are nearly twice as likely as men to mention spiritual or religious experiences. Many ordinary women define freedom in a very personal, transcendental way—and not with respect to the glass ceilings and abortion rights favored by politicians. In essence, more women than men believe they hold the keys to their own freedom.

We could abandon evidence and take refuge in theory, as is the academic fashion. Perhaps, to apply the Marxist concept, American women suffer from "false consciousness," having been fooled into thinking they are freer than they really are by the material and institutional processes of capitalism. A similar argument is often used to explain why working people do not rise up against the rich folks in a country with increasing income inequality.

Readers can decide for themselves whether women feel freer than men because of their superior spiritual enlightenment, a false consciousness, or something else. But no matter what, it appears most American women still have not received the Democrats' memo that they are not free.

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The Left's "Inequality" Obsession

The United States is a rich nation getting richer. According to Census figures, the average inflation-adjusted income in the top quintile of American earners increased 22 percent between 1993 and 2003. Incomes in the middle quintile rose 17 percent on average, while incomes in the bottom quintile increased 13 percent. Over the thirty years prior to 2003, top-quintile earners saw their real incomes increase by two-thirds, versus a quarter for those in the middle quintile and a fifth among the bottom earners.

What the Egalitarians Tell Us

Reason to celebrate? Not according to those worried that the rich are getting richer faster than the poor are getting richer. The National Opinion Research Center's General Social Survey (GSS) indicates that in 1973, the average top-quintile family earned about ten times what the average bottom-quintile family earned. Today that difference has grown to almost fifteen times greater. Thus, Senator Barack Obama (D-Ill.) complains that "the average CEO now earns more in one day than an average worker earns in an entire year." John Edwards has famously spoken of the "two Americas," while Senator Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.) characterizes today's economy as "trickle-down economics without the trickle." She declares that a progressive era is at hand because of "rising inequality and rising pessimism in our work force."

The general view among liberals is that economic inequality is socially undesirable because it makes people miserable; they propose to solve the problem through redistributive policies such as higher income taxes. As a scholar working in the field of public policy, I have long witnessed egalitarian hand-wringing about the alleged connection between inequality and unhappiness. What first made me doubt this prevailing view was that when I questioned actual human beings about it, few expressed any shock and outrage at the enormous incomes of software moguls and CEOs. They tended rather to hope that their kids might become the next Bill Gates.

What Is Wrong with Income Equalization?

Evidence reveals that it is not economic inequality that frustrates Americans. Rather, it is a perceived lack of opportunity. To focus our policies on inequality instead

of opportunity is to make a serious error—one that will worsen the very problem we seek to solve and make us generally unhappier.

The egalitarian argument against inequality starts with the claim that income is all relative. Above a basic subsistence level, they say, we care more about our financial position relative to others than about our absolute income. Experimental studies are often cited that appear to bear this idea out.

In one such study, two-thirds of subjects said they would be happier at a company where they earned \$33,000 while their colleagues earned \$30,000 than at one where they earned \$35,000 while their colleagues earned \$38,000. In another experiment, 56 percent of participants chose a hypothetical job paying \$50,000 per year while everyone else earned \$25,000 rather than a job paying \$100,000 per year while others made \$200,000. Thus, the thinking goes, the very fact that some people have less than others leads to unhappiness, even without deprivation.

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Moreover, the redistribution of income taxed at higher and higher levels, according to egalitarians, does not really hurt the rich, because they tend to use their "excess" incomes to purchase what they do not "need," such as luxury cars and outlandishly large houses. Some go even further, arguing that we should tax the economically successful explicitly to discourage them from working, since their work will only make them richer and thus sadden the less successful. Says British economist Richard Layard, "If we make taxes commensurate to the damage that an individual does to others when he earns more"—the damage to others' happiness, that is—"then he will only work harder if there is a true net benefit to society as a whole. It is efficient to discourage work effort that makes society worse off."

But the egalitarians misinterpret the experimental evidence. The studies cited above do not necessarily tell us that people would be happier in a world of total equality. Rather, they indicate that if there is no apparent prospect

for getting ahead themselves (as there indeed was not in the experiment), people will focus instead on having more than others—even to the point of neglecting their financial interests.

There is a fundamental reason to doubt the link between economic inequality and unhappiness. If the egalitarians are right, then average happiness levels should be falling. But they are not.

The GSS shows that in 1972, 30 percent of the population said they were “very happy” with their lives; in 1982, 31 percent; in 1993, 32 percent; and in 2004, 31 percent. In other words, no significant change in reported happiness occurred, even as income inequality has increased significantly.

Mobility over Equality

The data tell us that economic mobility, not equality, is associated with happiness. The GSS asked respondents, “The way things are in America, people like me and my family have a good chance of improving our standard of living—do you agree or disagree?” The two-thirds of the population who agreed were 44 percent more likely than the others to say they were “very happy,” 40 percent less likely to say they felt “no good at all” at times, and 20 percent less likely to say they felt like failures. In other words, those who do not believe in economic mobility—for themselves or for others—are not as happy as those who do.

Perhaps in a world where there is no opportunity for advancement, an important concern is how one’s income measures up to others’. In the real world where people believe there is opportunity, however, one’s own income potential matters a great deal more than what others are earning. Some studies even find that the happiness of workers rises as the incomes of others climb relative to their own, because they see the incomes of others as evidence of what they themselves can achieve.

Believing in mobility, then, helps make people happy. Is this belief a delusion? Does economic mobility actually exist in America today? It does.

The U.S. Census Bureau, the Urban Institute, and the Federal Reserve have all pointed out that, as a general

rule, about a fifth of the people in the lowest income quintile will climb to a higher quintile within a year, and that about half will rise within a decade. True, a significant proportion of people will fall over the same period. But the studies nevertheless put paid to the claim that economic mobility is in any way unusual. Millions and millions of poor Americans climb out of the ranks of poverty every year.

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Those who do not rise will probably not become happier if we redistribute more income. Indeed, the effect may be just the opposite. Redistributionist policies tend to reduce incentives to create wealth, which means less economic growth, fewer jobs, and less charitable giving—all to the detriment of those lower on the income scale. But more important, redistribution can, as the American welfare system has shown, turn beneficiaries into demoralized long-term dependents.

Equal Opportunity: The Name of the Game

An accurate and constructive vision of America sees a land of both inequality and opportunity, in which hard work and perseverance are the keys to jumping from the ranks of the have-nots to those of the haves. This vision promotes policies focused not on wiping out economic inequality, but rather on enhancing economic mobility. These policies include improving educational opportunities, addressing cultural impediments to success, enhancing the fluidity of labor markets, searching for ways to include all citizens in America’s investing revolution, and protecting the climate for entrepreneurship.

To focus our policies on opportunity instead of equality will address Americans’ real concern and make us happier to boot.

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