

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Varieties of democracy and life satisfaction: Is there a connection?

Francesco Bromo¹  | Alexander C. Pacek¹ | Benjamin Radcliff²

¹Department of Political Science, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas, USA

²Department of Political Science, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana, USA

Correspondence

Alexander C. Pacek, Department of Political Science, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX, USA.

Email: a-pacek@tamu.edu

Abstract

Objective: How, if at all, do different “varieties” or “principles” of democracy affect human happiness? While the study of democracy’s relationship with well-being is an old one, recent conceptual developments in the study of democracy have not been assessed to a great extent. In this article, we attempt to address this shortcoming.

Method: We examine the relationship between five varieties of democracy (liberal, participatory, deliberative, egalitarian, and polyarchy) and life satisfaction across 103 high-, middle-, and low-income countries in the 2010s.

Results: We find a modest, positive association between most democratic principles and self-reported satisfaction. Further exploration indicates that the strongest association is the one between life satisfaction and *participatory* democracy.

Conclusion: This analysis represents an initial attempt at probing the effect of democracy on human happiness by disentangling the heterogeneous impact of different democratic principles. Implications for the study of democracy and subjective well-being are discussed.

KEYWORDS

human happiness, life satisfaction, subjective well-being, varieties of democracy

Do different “varieties” or “principles” of democracy affect life satisfaction? That is to say, do different conceptualizations or dimensions of democracy affect subjective well-being to the same extent, if at all? The question might seem a grandiose one, but for centuries, the “democratic experiment” has been nothing less than an ongoing attempt to fundamentally alter the means by which citizens relate to the world of politics. The scholarly attention devoted to the study of democracy and democratization (not to mention democratic breakdown and backsliding) has been and continues to be vast and diverse. While much of that focus is on the causes and maintenance of democracy, a significant subset of research has asked versions of

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2024 The Author(s). *Social Science Quarterly* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of Southwestern Social Science Association.

the question: “Does it matter?” Our study here falls into such a category, as we inquire whether democracy matters for something as fundamental as the extent to which human beings find life enjoyable.

We do not, nor can we claim to be pioneers in the enterprise of examining links between democracy and human happiness. As we shall review momentarily, that endeavor has been intriguing scholars for decades. Much of the contemporary scholarly inquiry into the effect of democracy on human happiness has concerned itself with (1) the presence or absence of democracy and (2) the “amount” of democracy (e.g., see Dorn et al. 2007; Inglehart and Klingemann 2000). While little scholarly consensus was found here, one of the principal limitations was in obscuring what exactly about democracy either enhanced or indeed might be detrimental to human well-being. While the bulk of empirical inquiry found that, in general, democracy and human happiness went hand in hand, isolating the impact of particular features proved elusive until relatively recently. We hope to move the discussion forward somewhat in this regard.

With respect to the general study of democracy, trying to unpack the connection between different aspects of democracy and life satisfaction is relatively recent. It has only been in the last few decades that the scientific study of human happiness has taken off, in large part because of the accumulation of more and better data from around the world. As a consequence, we are now capable of measuring subjective well-being across countries in a more rigorous fashion, theorizing about the real-world conditions that determine such differences and testing the resulting empirical predictions.

Similarly, the systematic study of democracy has continued to evolve and become more sophisticated. Of particular interest to us is the advent and use of the “varieties of democracy” framework, developed as an attempt to make finer, more nuanced distinctions across countries as to “how democratic” they were in comparison to one another. In the last decade, the Variety of Democracies measures (V-Dem) (reviewed below) have become something of a gold standard in empirical research (for a comprehensive discussion of the motivation for and description of these measures, see Coppedge et al. 2020; Lindberg et al. 2014; Wolff 2023). Rather than examining the impact of “more or less democracy” on subjective well-being, we are now able to examine how distinct and nuanced dimensions of democracy impact the extent to which citizens find life more satisfying overall.

We use a data set covering 103 high-, middle-, and low-income countries in the 2010s. We rely on linear regression to assess the impact of different principles of democracies (liberal, participatory, deliberative, egalitarian, and polyarchy) on life satisfaction. We control for the factors found to matter for subjective well-being across the world by O'Connor (2017). These are (1) the size and generosity of the welfare state; (2) national income in the form of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita; (3) the unemployment rate; (4) the old-age dependency ratio; (5) an index for a country’s “quality of governance.” We find a modest, positive association between most varieties of democracy and life satisfaction. The coefficients for deliberative and egalitarian democracy fail to reach statistical significance at the conventional levels. Further exploration indicates that the strongest association is the one between life satisfaction and *participatory* democracy. This analysis represents an initial attempt at probing the effect of democracy on human happiness by disentangling the heterogeneous impact of different democratic principles.

The article proceeds as follows: We review the general literature on the links between democracy and life satisfaction as well as the particular meaning and relevance of the V-Dem measures for our study. We then discuss our research design and analysis and conclude with some implications for further research in this vein.

DEMOCRACY AND SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING: AN EMPIRICAL LEDGER

The notion that the political regime loosely defined as “democracy” might be associated with greater human happiness is centuries old: From Rousseau to Bentham to Jefferson, the association was posited in a variety of ways. The ability of men (at the time) to better govern themselves without interference from tyrants was argued to produce a wide range of beneficent outcomes, including progress in “the pursuit of happiness.” As far back as the 1700s, the virtues of “Athenian democracy” vs. “representative

democracy” (among others) were debated by philosophers and political figures of the time. Even while political democracy was largely in its infancy in the West, there was the growing realization that distinctions across different conceptualizations of democracy might have different impacts on salient outcomes.

With the advent of the survey instrument centuries later, the scientific study of this relationship truly accelerated. Initially, the argument was framed in mostly general terms. Democracy was associated with greater levels of “freedom and liberty” and, in addition, produced more desirable social and economic outcomes as well (although this view would be challenged somewhat in years to come). The enterprise focused on isolating the impact of democracy (often measured in simple ways) from other determinants of well-being, such as culture, modernization, and development, and consensus on the causal direction was never fully agreed upon (for extensive reviews of these studies, see Dorn et al. 2007; Haerpfer et al. 2009; Inglehart and Ponarin 2013; Inglehart and Welzel 2009, 2010; Welzel 2007; Welzel and Inglehart 2008).

Scholarly focus grew more specific when trying to establish the mechanisms by which democracy affected subjective well-being. One line of reasoning focused on the “quality” of democracy as a salient attribute. Transparency, lack of corruption, and the capacity to deliver policy outputs equitably and efficiently all were found, perhaps not surprisingly, to increase life satisfaction across countries (Leeman and Stadelmann-Steffen 2022; Loubser and Steenekamp 2017; Ott 2011). In essence, what matters is not “democracy” per se but rather how well democracy is working or perceived to be working (typically measured as “satisfaction with democracy”) for citizens. This inquiry is particularly invaluable in that it moves the discussion forward by examining specific traits of democratic regimes as opposed to the “amount” of democracy across countries.

Other research examined more indirect links between democracy and things shown to matter for how satisfied individuals are with their lives. The earlier studies found a positive relationship between democracy and objective well-being indicators, or put differently, the “physical quality of life” (Frey and Al-Roumi 1999; Moon and Dixon 1985; Shin 1989). A subset of this line of inquiry focused more specifically on the impact of democracy on health-related issues (child mortality, healthcare, longevity, etc.) that have been demonstrated to powerfully matter in life satisfaction research. The effect on health outcomes was generally significant and positive (Bollyky et al. 2019; Pieters et al. 2016; Shandra et al. 2004). These studies provide useful insight into the possible indirect effects of democracy on well-being by focusing on policy outcomes known to improve the quality of life.

A quite different but intriguing approach brings the enterprise closer to our interest here: The impact of particular aspects or dimensions of democracy on human happiness. Specifically, data on the use of “direct democracy” mechanisms via referenda and ballot initiatives have allowed scholars to examine this alternative to representative democracy as a determinant of well-being. The argument is relatively straightforward: Direct participation (and more of it) can lead to political decisions and policy outcomes more in line with what citizens prefer than representative democracy (which, by definition, involves delegation and thus potential deviation from the wishes of the electorate; Manin 1997) might produce. While these studies have largely been limited to Switzerland and, to a lesser extent, the United States, they do demonstrate that more direct and frequent political engagement as a democratic trait is associated with higher levels of life satisfaction (Altman 2017; Frey and Stutzer 2000; Radcliff and Shufeldt 2016; Stadelmann-Steffen and Vatter 2012). It is the possible impact of different aspects of democracy that we now turn to.

VARIETIES OF DEMOCRACY

While the categories of studies summarized above have provided important evidence that democracy matters for human well-being, the nagging question of what exactly *about* democracy matters and why remains. It is unlikely that this intellectual question will be answered concretely and exhaustively any time soon. However, recent innovations in the conceptualization of the meaning of democracy have, at the very least, provided scholars with a bit more ammunition to explore the question further.

Since their inception, the varieties of democracy (V-Dem) measures have created a rich opportunity to delve further into democracy’s impact on life overall. As Coppedge et al. (2016, 2020) and Teorell et al.

TABLE 1 Varieties of democracy.

Principle	Definition
Liberal	Captures the extent of civil liberties and institutional independence (equality before the law and individual freedoms; judicial constraints on the executive; legislative constraints on the executive)
Participatory	Incorporates elements of turnout, direct democracy, and civic engagement (civil society participation; direct popular vote; election and relative power of local and regional government)
Deliberative	Refers to the presence of public debate, reasonable and open-minded discussions, and the role of consultative institutions.
Egalitarian	Focuses on the distribution of political rights and freedoms as well as resources enabling access to power (equal protection; equal access to power; equal distribution of resources)
Polyarchy	Perhaps the broadest and most general conceptualization, incorporating a wide range of institutional and civil liberty traits into one index

Source: Coppedge et al. (2023).

(2016) outline in considerable detail, the voluminous literature on democracy suggests at least eight distinct aspects (or sets of values) democracy represents: electoral (perhaps the oldest and most familiar), liberal, majoritarian, consensual, participatory, deliberative, egalitarian, and polyarchy. As our study relies on five of these for which data were available across our sample of countries, we will discuss them succinctly in Table 1. All measures are scored 0 to 1, or “least to most,” in essence capturing the “amount” of each aspect in a given country for a given point in time.

How precisely each of these dimensions might affect life satisfaction is our central question. Prior studies on the impact of democracy in general, such as the ones discussed above, might suggest that it would be reasonable to assume that all of them would. To date, there has been little attempt to directly test the impact of each individual “variety” on well-being. We can, however, inventory the empirical analyses that examine the core principles of each variety of democracy to the extent that they exist.

With respect to *participatory democracy*, for example, a small but growing body of literature has focused on the “participation” aspect of participatory democracy. It is worth noting that the benefits of this variety of democracy appear in high-, middle-, and low-income countries rather than solely in the developed Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) world. Some forms of participation are associated with higher levels of subjective well-being, while others are not. Bahry and Silver (1990), for example, found that, in the waning days of the Soviet Union, citizens who were overall more satisfied with their lives were also more willing to participate via officially sanctioned channels such as committee and party work. In China, Zhong and Chen (2002) found that less participation in local elections was linked to lower levels of life satisfaction. Similarly, Hiskey and Bowler (2005) and Vowles (2002) found associations between higher (lower) levels of life political participation and higher (lower) levels of life satisfaction in Mexico and New Zealand, respectively. One study to unpack some aspects of democracy found that the opportunity to participate in the political process exerted a positive and significant effect on life satisfaction, in contrast to “competitiveness of executive recruitment” and “constraints on executive power,” which did not (Owen, Videras, and Willemsen 2008). Indeed, an increasing number of studies from around the world highlights the particular importance of participation in enhancing well-being

We also must acknowledge that prior evidence for a direct effect of direct democracy on human happiness remains mixed. Some studies isolated the *procedural* aspects of participatory democracy as having a positive relationship with life satisfaction (Frey and Stutzer 2000). That is to say, the experience of directly participating in the democratic process (vs. through representatives) is as important for enhancing well-being as the outcomes closest to citizens’ preferences from the process itself. Others surmise that direct democracy is more likely and frequent in politics with greater levels of “power sharing” versus “power concentration,” and that, in turn, exerts a positive effect on human happiness (Bernauer and Vatter 2019). The ability to directly participate in the democratic process, as a matter of agency and efficacy, and directly choosing among policy options and outcomes would seem to be of some particular salience for individuals.

Certainly, other core aspects of the other varieties should matter, too. *Egalitarian democracy* stresses “equality” on multiple dimensions. Multiple studies looking at equality in general and specific ways have found a positive association with subjective well-being. If individuals perceive society treating them “as equals” and enabling more personal autonomy and control over one’s life, then they are likely to be more satisfied with their lives (Diener et al. 2005; Verme 2009). Broadly conceived, “social equality” has been found to exert a positive effect on life satisfaction, particularly during economic downturns (Clench-Aas and Holt 2018). A few in-depth studies have focused on specific aspects of equality, such as gender equality (inequality), and found, perhaps unsurprisingly, that the extent of this matters for well-being. Bjørnsvold, Dreher and Fischer (2007) examined gender equality in politics, economics, and the extent of discrimination and found that greater levels of gender equality increased life satisfaction in both women and men, using global data. York and Bell (2014) found that gender equality in politics specifically was associated with greater levels of well-being in general. Similarly, Audette et al. (2019) found that four measures of gender equality had positive and significant associations with subjective well-being.

In a similar vein, we have reason to believe *liberal democracy* and *polyarchy* would affect subjective well-being positively as well. A rough consensus exists where citizens in societies with greater levels of civil liberties and civil rights experience greater levels of happiness and life satisfaction (Inglehart et al. 2008; Veenhoven 2000). This is perhaps one of the least surprising political relationships with subjective well-being in the literature. “Freedom,” broadly defined, makes people feel their lives are more satisfying as a rule. *Polyarchy* stresses a variety of measures that together account for the extent of “good government” across polities. Again, the literature on subjective well-being is replete with examples of how this matters. A consistent pattern emerges where key metrics of good governance—accountability, responsiveness, transparency, lack of corruption, and efficiency of service delivery—all work to enhance subjective well-being around the world, not just in advanced industrial democracies and OECD members (Helliwell and Huang 2008; Ott 2010, 2011).

We are left with an intriguing number of studies that document the effect of specific aspects of the V-Dem varieties of democracy on human well-being. However, the various strengths of these together have yet to be explored in depth. We now turn to our effort to address this in our analysis and discussion.

DATA AND RESEARCH DESIGN

We base our analysis on the data and model suggested by O’Connor (2017), which is, to our knowledge, one of the few major articles to focus on subjective well-being outside of the OECD countries. O’Connor models average life satisfaction across countries by taking as his dependent variable a nation’s mean (aggregate) level of life satisfaction, averaged over several years (2005–2012). Here, life satisfaction is operationalized through the conventional Cantril self-anchoring striving scale (see Glatzer and Gulyas 2014), which invites respondents to evaluate their own lives relative to their perception of the best possible life (with higher values indicating greater congruence between life as lived and life as imagined). By averaging individual scores at the country level and then averaging those values over multiple years, we should have a measure of well-being that is both valid and reliable.

Our main independent variables of interest are the varieties of democracy obtained from the Varieties of Democracy data set (<https://www.v-dem.net/>). In our cross-sectional design, we utilize the scores for each variety that correspond to the time period in the O’Connor data, from which we employ our control variables as well as our main dependent variable of interest, life satisfaction. Thus, we use scores capturing the degree of five varieties of democracy for countries for which scores were available: liberal democracy, deliberative democracy, egalitarian democracy, participatory democracy, and polyarchy. Our analysis, therefore, moves beyond the question: “Does democracy make people more or less satisfied with the lives they lead?” to “Do particular distinct *aspects* of democracy affect subjective well-being, and to what extent?” Given that the data contained in the V-Dem data set are cross-time, we note the obvious limitations of this brief cross-sectional analysis, a point we will return to in the discussion that follows.

TABLE 2 Summary statistics.

Variable	N	Mean	S.D.	Min.	Max.
Life Satisfaction	103	5.61	1.04	3.87	7.80
Dem-Liberal	103	0.47	0.27	0.04	0.87
Dem-Participatory	103	0.39	0.20	0.05	0.78
Dem-Deliberative	103	0.47	0.26	0.02	0.87
Dem-Egalitarian	103	0.45	0.25	0.03	0.85
Dem-Polyarchy	103	0.59	0.25	0.08	0.92
Social Protection Spending	103	13.27	8.50	1.55	32.07
Aggregate Quality of Government	103	0.09	0.91	-1.69	1.86
Old Age Dependency Ratio	103	13.03	6.98	3.40	28.50
Social Connectedness	103	0.82	0.11	0.52	0.96
Unemployment Rate	103	8.44	5.72	0.52	33.58
ln(GDP Per Capita)	103	9.00	1.13	6.06	10.81

We also follow O'Connor (2017) in the specification of a set of theoretically derived control variables appropriate to our analysis. These are (1) the size and generosity of the welfare state, for which O'Connor relies on (and we, again, borrow) per capita spending on social protection programs, following the standard definitions from the International Labor Organization (ILO), as reported in their World Society Security Report; (2) national income in the form of GDP per capita (via the Penn World Table database). Given the scale of this variable, we transform it by taking its natural logarithm to normalize it; (3) the rate of unemployment (from the World Bank's World Development Indicators); (4) the old-age dependency ratio (the population over 65 divided by the population aged 16–64; ILO); (5) an index for a country's "quality of governance" (from the World Bank). The second accounts for the positive impact on well-being usually thought to accompany greater national affluence, the third for the negative effect of unemployment, the fourth for the presumed negative effect of the cross-generational demographic burdens, and the last for the positive impact of government integrity and professionalism in the efficient administration of public policy (which is broad enough in its scope and definition to also serve as an indicator for the overall level of democracy more generally). Data are directly from O'Connor (2017), with sources noted and described there as well. In addition, we include a control for "social connectedness," which might also impact subjective well-being. For this, we rely on following the Gallup World Poll question: "If you were in trouble, do you have relatives or friends you can count on to help you whenever you need them, or not?" (from the World Happiness Report). Table 2 presents some summary statistics of the variables listed above.

Estimation (again, following O'Connor 2017) is ordinary least squares (OLS) regression with robust standard errors (the latter to account for any potential heteroskedasticity, which the cross-sectional nature of the data may amplify).

ANALYSIS

Table 3 reports our results across the five varieties of democracy. Our sample covers 103 high-, middle-, and low-income countries. The variables are averaged over the years 2010–2015. The full list of countries is available in Table A1 in the Appendix in the Supporting Information, along with Pearson correlations for the variables included in our models (Figure A1). We note that all the variables used by O'Connor (2017) have the expected impact on life satisfaction and are significant and of the correct sign. In particular, we note that the two aspects-of-governance variables—the welfare state and government quality—exert a

TABLE 3 Varieties of democracy and subjective well-being.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Dem-Liberal	0.53*				
	(0.31)				
Dem-Participatory		1.02***			
		(0.36)			
Dem-Deliberative			0.47		
			(0.33)		
Dem-Egalitarian				0.42	
				(0.43)	
Dem-Polyarchy					0.62**
					(0.30)
Social Protection Spending	0.05***	0.05***	0.05***	0.05***	0.05***
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Aggregate Quality of Government	0.29**	0.26**	0.30***	0.33***	0.28***
	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.12)	(0.10)
Old Age Dependency Ratio	-0.09***	-0.10***	-0.09***	-0.10***	-0.10***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Social Connectedness	-0.32	-0.39	-0.32	-0.36	-0.33
	(0.55)	(0.53)	(0.55)	(0.56)	(0.55)
Unemployment Rate	-0.04***	-0.04***	-0.04***	-0.04***	-0.04***
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
ln(GDP Per Capita)	0.66***	0.67***	0.66***	0.65***	0.67***
	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.11)
Constant	0.58	0.50	0.63	0.77	0.45
	(0.94)	(0.95)	(0.95)	(0.99)	(0.93)
R-squared	0.76	0.77	0.76	0.76	0.76
Observations	103	103	103	103	103

Note. Robust standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

positive influence on life satisfaction commensurate with the long-established determinants, particularly economic. We do not find a statistically significant effect with respect to social connectedness. Overall, we confirm, again, the importance of considering “politics” (of which democracy is a clear and obvious subset) as a factor in human well-being, along with more traditional and well-established factors.

Turning to our democracy variables, we find support for prior studies that showed an association between “more democracy” (defined in a variety of ways) and higher levels of subjective well-being across countries. While we do not claim to settle the ongoing debate about just precisely what the connection between democracy and human happiness is, we do show that the five democratic principles appear to be modestly and positively related to life satisfaction. In all cases, a one-unit increase in a particular democratic aspect is associated with a half-a-point to one-point average increase in subjective well-being. However, the indicators for deliberative and egalitarian democracy fail to reach statistical significance at the conventional levels. Of the different varieties of democracy, the magnitude of the coefficient is highest for *participatory* democracy.

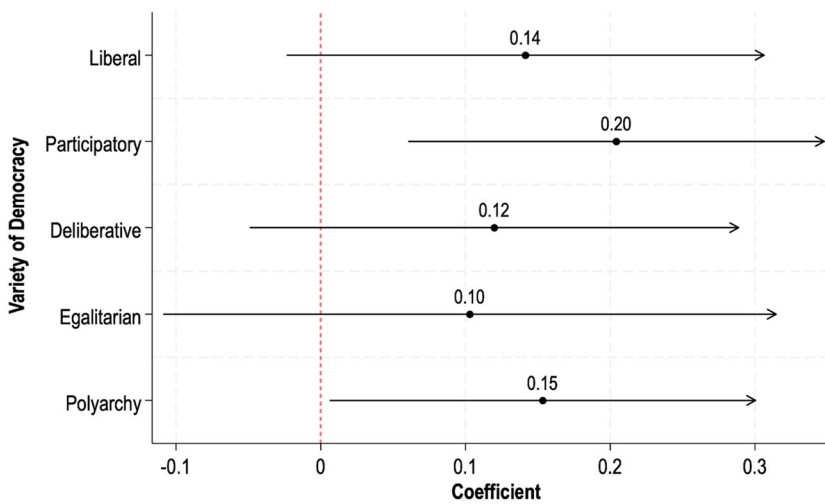


FIGURE 1 Impact of different varieties of democracy on life satisfaction.

Note: The squares indicate the magnitude of the impact of each variety of democracy after centering and standardizing the data. The black lines represent 95 percent confidence intervals. All models include a constant and the controls listed in Table 3 (not shown).

To further compare the strength of the relationship between each of these democratic principles and human happiness, we centered and standardized our data by subtracting the average from each democracy measure and dividing by the standard deviation, such that all of the V-Dem variables have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. We plot the standardized coefficients in Figure 1. After standardization, we can conclude that participatory democracy exhibits the strongest association with life satisfaction, compared to the other aspects of democracy included in our analysis.

Of particular interest is, therefore, the relationship for the “participatory democracy” coefficient. A simple and straightforward interpretation here is that the extent to which people are more directly involved and engaged in the political process, the “happier” they are, all things considered. Why this is the case, of course, is worthy of discussion. As noted earlier, direct involvement itself can be seen as intrinsically rewarding, giving people more agency. Furthermore, direct involvement may lead people to believe that their needs are more likely to be met by accentuating their “voice” in the policy process as opposed to delegating to representatives. Switzerland, for example, has long been studied as a model of “direct democracy” (which is not to say it does not have problems) and was ranked as one of the top three “happiest” countries in the world in 2023. Figure 2 shows levels of participatory democracy across the world in 2022.

In general, the top 10 countries with respect to life evaluation according to the 2023 World Happiness Report (Finland, Denmark, Iceland, Israel, the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, Switzerland, Luxembourg, and New Zealand) are also among the group of countries with higher levels of participatory democracy. That said, all of the V-Dem indicators illustrate that, to a degree, “democracy” is clearly associated with higher levels of life satisfaction across the 103 high-, middle-, and low-income countries covered in our study.

We perform a series of robustness checks to corroborate our results. First, we replicate the models presented in Table 3 by estimating a robust regression as described by Hamilton (1991). As in our initial analysis, all of our control variables (except for social connectedness) are significant and of the correct sign, confirming again the basic O’Connor (2017) model. When we include all the V-Dem measures (both OLS and rreg), the p -values for four of the five indicators are quite high, and the coefficients are no longer significant at the conventional levels. “Participatory democracy,” however, remains significant, exerting a positive effect on subjective well-being. These results are reported in Tables A2 and A3 in the Appendix in the Supporting Information.

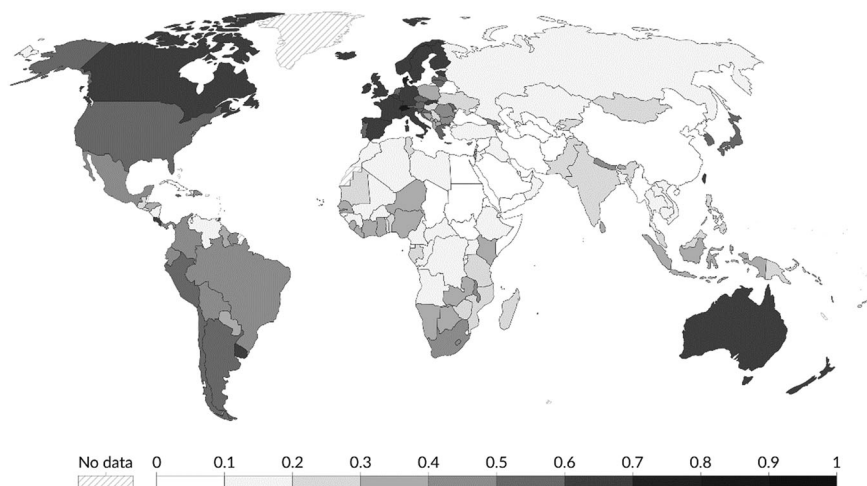


FIGURE 2 Levels of participatory democracy across the world in 2022 (V-Dem data).

Next, we break down our sample by income level and replicate our models on three subsamples. We divide the sample by grouping countries based on real GDP per capita tertiles (see Figure A2 in the Appendix in the Supporting Information). The direction and magnitude of the coefficients indicate that, for the most part, a positive relationship between a given variety of democracy and life satisfaction persists even when the analysis is conducted on subsamples based on income levels. We clearly detect statistical significance at the conventional levels in middle-income countries. However, we note the power limitations of this analysis due to the relatively small number of observations in each subsample.

To investigate whether countries with notoriously high levels of life satisfaction and/or direct democracy might be driving the results, we conducted two tests. First, we excluded the 10 countries with the highest value of life satisfaction from the original sample (in descending order: Denmark, Switzerland, Norway, the Netherlands, Finland, Canada, Sweden, New Zealand, Australia, and Austria) and replicated our models. Next, we jackknifed our results, excluding one country for each iteration, for a total of 103 replications. The results largely hold in terms of direction, magnitude, and statistical significance (see Tables A4 and A5 in the Appendix in the Supporting Information).

Finally, we explore overtime dynamics by taking into account over time variation. Through the World Database of Happiness, we compiled a time series of the life satisfaction indicator. Each country has four data points indicating the average value of life satisfaction by decade (1975–1984; 1985–1994; 1995–2004; 2005–2014). We then averaged the V-Dem measures over the same periods. As for controls, we were able to produce time series only for the economic indicators (unemployment rate and real GDP per capita). We note two limitations. Despite our best efforts, there are a lot of missing data points, particularly for non-OECD countries. This greatly reduces statistical power and the variation we are able to leverage in our analysis. Still, we estimated a pooled model with a total of 216 observations. We likewise estimated a version of the aforementioned models in which we allow the intercepts to vary by country to capture potentially unobserved unit-level heterogeneity. Substantively, the results are consistent with those presented in Table 3 (see Figure A3 in the Appendix in the Supporting Information).

We conclude in the following section by discussing some implications for the study of democracy and subjective well-being.

DISCUSSION

In this article, we have tried to further expand the growing empirical literature centered around a simple but fundamental question: Does politics matter for human well-being. In doing so, we believe we have

added to a growing body of research that tries to connect human well-being to regime type, public policy, government size and quality, mass participation, institutional differences, and political actors. By unpacking key aspects of “democracy” as defined by various scholars, we believe we have done so successfully.

We have offered a new perspective on the relationship between democracy and human happiness, which has been the subject of scholarly debate for decades now. Before discussing our findings, it is important to point out what we are *not* claiming. The decades-long discourse about the relationship between democracy and human happiness is a complicated, convoluted, and often contentious one. While we feel we are adding to this discourse, we do so with humility and the awareness that much more remains to be done. Our own results do not paint an entirely conclusive picture regarding the subject, and while our principal finding regarding the strength of one particular variety of democracy is intriguing, we are certainly not asserting that other dimensions do not play a role, one way or another, in affecting subjective well-being. Future work mapping out in greater detail the specific mechanisms by which this or that aspect of democracy increases or decreases (or indeed has no effect) on human happiness remains to be undertaken. We are optimistic that it will be.

In addition, we return to our most intriguing finding, that the level of “participatory democracy” appears to have the strongest association with subjective well-being. Despite much progress, there are still examples across the globe where people, particularly women, are either disenfranchised altogether or where obstacles to voting remain or are implemented. The normative implications, then, are that in such countries, these policies may result in reductions of subjective well-being, which itself presents an entire array of problems.

We do feel that our contributions, however minor, are real ones, nonetheless. First, while much of the scientific inquiry into determinants of subjective well-being focuses on the developed OECD world (understandable, for a wide range of reasons), we have extended our analysis to a wide sample of high-, middle-, and low-income countries, controlling for a variety of critical factors. Second, these tentative findings help illustrate what the V-Dem authors argued all along: That the impact of something as complex as democracy on salient outcomes cannot be reduced to simple unidimensional scores. We hope in some small way that we have helped illustrate that the “varieties” constructed from their multiple sets of indices do, in fact, matter, and more sophisticated analysis on the relationship between these dimensions and human well-being is likely to bear this out further.

ORCID

Francesco Bromo  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5616-9505>

REFERENCES

- Altman, David. 2017. “The Potential of Direct Democracy: A Global Measure (1900–2014).” *Social Indicators Research* 133(3):1207–27.
- Audette, Andre P., Sean Lam, Haley O’Connor, and Benjamin Radcliff. 2019. “(E)Quality of Life: A Cross-National Analysis of the Effect of Gender Equality on Life Satisfaction.” *Journal of Happiness Studies* 20:2173–88.
- Bahry, Donna, and Brian D. Silver. 1990. “Soviet Citizen Participation on the Eve of Democratization.” *American Political Science Review* 84(3):821–48.
- Bernauer, Julian, and Adrian Vatter. 2019. *Power Diffusion and Democracy: Institutions, Deliberation and Outcomes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bjørnskov, Christian, Axel Dreher, and Justina A. V. Fischer. 2007. “The bigger the better? Evidence of the effect of government size on life satisfaction around the world.” *Public Choice* 130:267–92.
- Bollyky, Thomas, Tara Templin, Matthew Cohen, Diana Schoder, Joseph L. Dieleman, and Simon Wigley. 2019. “The Relationships Between Democratic Experience, Adult Health, and Cause-Specific Mortality in 170 Countries Between 1980 and 2016: An Observational Analysis.” *The Lancet* 393(10181):1628–40.
- Clench-Aas, Jocelyne, and Arne Holt. 2018. “Measures That Increase Social Equality are Effective at Improving Life Satisfaction in Times of Economic Crisis.” *BMC Public Health* 18:1233.
- Coppedge, Michael, John Gerring, Adam Glynn, Carl Henrik Knutsen, Staffan I. Lindberg, Daniel Pemstein, Brigitte Seim, Svend-Erik Skaaning, Jan Teorell, David Altman, Michael Bernhard, Fernando Bizzarro, Joshua Krusell, Matthew Maguire, Kyle Marquardt, Kelly McMann, Valeriya Mechkova, Farhad Miri, Josefine Pernes, Jeffrey Staton, Natalia Stepanova, Eitan Tzelgov, and Yi-Ting Wang. 2020. “Conceptual Scheme.” In *Varieties of Democracy: Measuring Two Centuries of Political Change*, edited by Michael Coppedge, John Gerring, Adam Glynn, Carl Henrik Knutsen, Staffan I. Lindberg, Daniel Pemstein, Brigitte Seim, Svend-Erik Skaaning, and Jan Teorell, 27–42. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Coppedge, Michael, John Gerring, Carl Henrik Knutsen, Staffan I. Lindberg, Jan Teorell, David Altman, Michael Bernhard, Agnes Cornell, M. Steven Fish, Lisa Gastaldi, Haakon Gjerløw, Adam Glynn, Sandra Grahn, Allen Hicken, Katrin Kinzelbach, Kyle L. Marquardt, Kelly McMann, Valeriya Mechkova, Anja Neundorff, Pamela Paxton, Daniel Pemstein, Oskar Rydén, Johannes von Römer, Brigitte Seim, Rachel Sigman, Svend-Erik Skaaning, Jeffrey Staton, Aksel Sundström, Eitan Tzelgov, Luca Uberti, Yi-ting Wang, Tore Wig, and Daniel Ziblatt. 2023. "Codebook v13–March 2023." Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project. https://v-dem.net/documents/24/codebook_v13.pdf.
- Coppedge, Michael, Staffan Lindberg, Svend-Erik Skaaning, and Jan Teorell. 2016. "Measuring High Level Democratic Principles Using the V-Dem Data." *International Political Science Review* 37(5):580–93.
- Diener, E., R. E. Lucas, and S. Oishi. 2005. "Subjective Well-Being: The Science of Happiness and Life Satisfaction." In *Handbook of Positive Psychology*, 2nd ed., edited by C. R. Snyder, and S. J. Lopez, 63–73. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Dorn, David, J. A. V. Fischer, Gebhard Kirchgässner, and Alfonso Sousa-Poza. 2007. "Is it Culture or Democracy? The Impact of Democracy and Culture on Happiness." *Social Indicators Research* 82(3):505–26.
- Frey, Bruno S., and Alois Stutzer. 2000. "Happiness Prospers in Democracy," *Journal of Happiness Studies* 1:79–102.
- Frey, R. Scott, and Ali Al-Roumi. 1999. "Political Democracy and the Physical Quality of Life: The Cross-National Evidence." *Social Indicators Research* 47(1):73–97.
- Glatzer, Wolfgang and Jennifer Gulyas. 2014. "Cantril Self-Anchoring Striving Scale." In *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-being Research*, edited by Alex C. Michalos, 509–11. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Haerpfer, Christian W., Patrick Bernhagen, Ronald F. Inglehart, and Christian Welzel, eds. 2009. *Democratization*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hamilton, Lawrence C. 1991. "How Robust is Robust Regression?" *Stata Technical Bulletin* 1(2):21–26.
- Helliwell, John F., and Haifang Huang. 2008. "How's Your Government? International Evidence Linking Good Government and Well-Being." *British Journal of Political Science* 38(4):595–619.
- Hiskey, Jonathan T., and Shaun Bowler. 2005. "Local Context and Democratization in Mexico." *American Journal of Political Science* 49(1):57–71.
- Inglehart, Ronald F., and Hans-Dieter Klingemann. 2000. "Genes, Culture, Democracy, and Happiness." In *Culture and Subjective Well-Being*, edited by Edward Diener and Eunkook M. Suh, 165–83. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Inglehart, Ronald F., and Eduard D. Ponarin. 2013. "Happiness and Democracy, 1972–2008." *Journal of Siberian Federal University* 6(8):1097–106.
- Inglehart, Ronald F., and Christian Welzel. 2009. "How Development Leads to Democracy: What We Know About Modernization." *Foreign Affairs* 88(2):33–48.
- Inglehart, Ronald F., Roberto Foa, Christopher Peterson, and Christian Welzel. 2008. "Development, Freedom, and Rising Happiness: A Global Perspective (1981–2007)." *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 3(4):264–85.
- Inglehart, Ronald F., and Christian Welzel. 2010. "Changing Mass Priorities: The Link Between Modernization and Democracy." *Perspectives on Politics* 8(2):551–67.
- Leeman, Lucas, and Isabelle Stadelmann-Steffen. 2022. "Satisfaction With Democracy: When Government by the People Brings Electoral Losers and Winners Together." *Comparative Political Studies* 55(1):93–121.
- Lindberg, Staffan I., Michael Coppedge, John Gerring, Jan Teorell et al. 2014. "V-Dem: A New Way to Measure Democracy." *Journal of Democracy* 25(3):159–69.
- Loubser, Reinert, and Cindy Steenekamp. 2017. "Democracy, Well-Being, and Happiness: A 10-Nation Study." *Journal of Public Affairs* 17(1-2):e1646.
- Manin, Bernard. 1997. *The Principles of Representative Government*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Moon, Bruce E., and William J. Dixon. 1985. "Politics, the State, and Basic Human Needs: A Cross-National Study." *American Journal of Political Science* 29(4):661–94.
- O'Connor, Kelsey J. 2017. "Happiness and Welfare State Policy Around the World." *Review of Behavioral Economics* 4(4):397–420.
- Ott, Jan C. 2010. "Good Governance and Happiness in Nations: Technical Quality Precedes Democracy and Quality Beats Size." *Journal of Happiness Studies* 11:353–68.
- . 2011. "Government and Happiness in 130 Nations: Good Governance Fosters Higher Level and More Equality of Happiness." *Social Indicators Research* 102(1):3–22.
- Owen, Ann L., Julio Videras, and Christina Willemsen. 2008. "Democracy, Participation, and Life Satisfaction." *Social Science Quarterly* 89(4):987–1005.
- Pieters, Hannah, Daniele Curzi, Alessandro Olper, and Johan Swinnen. 2016. "Effect of Democratic Reforms on Child Mortality: A Synthetic Control Analysis." *Lancet Global Health* 4(9):627–32.
- Radcliff, Benjamin, and Gregory Shufeldt. 2016. "Direct Democracy and Subjective Well-Being: The Initiative and Life Satisfaction in the American States." *Social Indicators Research* 128(3):1405–23.
- Shandra, John M., Jenna Nobles, Bruce London, and John B. Williamson. 2004. "Dependency, Democracy, and Infant Mortality: A Quantitative Cross-National Analysis of Less Developed Countries." *Social Science Medicine* 59(2):321–33.
- Shin, Doh C. 1989. "Political Democracy and the Quality of Citizens' Lives: A Cross-National Study." *Journal of Developing Societies* 5:30–41.
- Stadelmann-Steffen, Isabelle, and Adrian Vatter. 2012. "Does Satisfaction With Democracy Really Increase Happiness? Direct Democracy and Individual Satisfaction in Switzerland." *Political Behavior* 34(3):535–59.

- Teorell, Jan, Michael Coppedge, Svend-Erik Skaaning, and Staffan I. Lindberg. 2016. "Measuring Electoral Democracy With V-Dem Data: Introducing a New Polyarchy Index." Working Paper Series 2016:25. The Varieties of Democracy Institute, University of Gothenburg.
- Veenhoven, Ruut. 2000. "Freedom and Happiness: A Comparative Study of 46 Nations in the Early 1990s." In *Culture and Subjective Well-Being*, edited by Edward Diener and Eunkook M. Suh, 257–88. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Verme, Paolo. 2009. "Happiness, Freedom, and Control." *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 71(2):146–61.
- Vowles, Jack. 2002. "Offsetting the PR Effect? Party Mobilization and Turnout Decline in New Zealand, 1996–99." *Party Politics* 8(5):587–605.
- Welzel, Christian. 2007. "Are Levels of Democracy Influenced by Mass Attitudes? Testing Attainment and Sustainment Effects on Democracy." *International Political Science Review* 28(4):397–424.
- Welzel, Christian, and Ronald F. Inglehart. 2008. "The Role of Ordinary People in Democratization." *Journal of Democracy* 19(1):126–40.
- Wolff, Jonas. 2023. "From the Varieties of Democracy to the Defense of Liberal Democracy: V-Dem and the Reconstitution of Liberal Hegemony Under Threat." *Contemporary Politics* 29(2):161–81.
- World Happiness Report. 2023. <https://worldhappiness.report/>.
- York, Richard, and Shannon E. Bell. 2014. "Life Satisfaction Across Nations: The Effects of Women's Political Status and Public Priorities." *Social Science Research* 48:48–61.
- Zhong, Yang, and Jie Chen. 2002. "To Vote or Not to Vote: An Analysis of Peasants' Participation in Chinese Village Elections." *Comparative Political Studies* 35(6):686–712.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

How to cite this article: Bromo, Francesco, Alexander C. Pacek, and Benjamin Radcliff. 2024. "Varieties of democracy and life satisfaction: Is there a connection?" *Social Science Quarterly* 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.13404>