

# *Happiness in America*

Prof. Ryan Rynbrandt

Paper Prepared for the Western Political Science Association 2017 Annual Conference

Vancouver, BC

April 14, 2017

## **Abstract:**

*The founding generation of the United States held as a fundamental assumption that the primary purpose of government was to facilitate the happiness of the people. Modern psychology and polling science provide methods by which we can assess the extent to which America is fulfilling this vision and prominent scholars have been advocating that government adopt such measures as a compliment to traditional economic measures. Using a definition of happiness drawn from the writings of the Founding Generation and from positive psychologists, this paper reviews the available indicators and studies to assess what we know about happiness in America, how we might improve our knowledge, and the implications for governance and policy.*

## **The Pursuit of Happiness and American Political Culture:**

### **The Founding Assumption:**

In a previous paper, I established that Thomas Jefferson’s use of “The Pursuit of Happiness” in the Declaration of Independence as one of the three explicitly mentioned unalienable rights to be protected by government was neither a rhetorical flourish nor a simple reformulation of Locke’s Life, Liberty and Property. Rather, Jefferson and his contemporaries held as a fundamental assumption that human beings had a right to happiness, that the primary purpose of government was to facilitate its pursuit and attainment, and that it was the right of the people to alter or abolish governments that failed in this regard.<sup>1</sup>

In-depth analysis of the essays, speeches, personal letters, journal entries, debate transcripts, and jointly signed documents of the leading minds in the establishment of American government and political culture found this assumption to be virtually universal – shared by Federalists and Anti-Federalists, Hamiltonians and Jeffersonians, proponents and opponents of slavery. Indeed, human happiness (or “felicity”) was an obsession for Enlightenment philosophers, theologians, scientists and artists and the American wing of the Enlightenment was no exception.<sup>2</sup> Upon attaining victory in the Revolutionary War, George Washington wrote a letter to the governors of the states in which he expressed a widely shared understanding of the new American Experiment:

---

<sup>1</sup> Rynbrandt, R. T. (2016). The Pursuit of Happiness. Paper prepared for the Western Political Science Association Annual Meeting, San Diego, CA.

<sup>2</sup> McMahon, D. (n.d.). *Happiness: A History* (p. 200). New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press.

“[The citizens of America] are, from this period, to be considered as the actors on a most conspicuous theatre, which seems to be peculiarly designated by Providence for the display of human greatness and felicity... Heaven has crowned all its other blessings, by giving a fairer opportunity for political happiness, than any nation has ever been favored with...at an epocha when the rights of mankind were better understood and more clearly defined, than at any former period, the researches of the human mind after social happiness have been carried to a great extent; the treasures of knowledge, acquired by the labors of philosophers, sages, and legislators, through a long succession of years, are laid open for our use, and their collected wisdom may be happily applied in the establishment of our forms of government...At this auspicious period, the United States came into existence as a nation; and, if their citizens should not be completely free and happy, the fault will be entirely their own...”<sup>3</sup>

Enlightenment thinkers, including the Americans among them, had been busy theorizing about the role of government and other institutions in facilitating happiness and hypothesizing about the ideal methods for doing so.<sup>4</sup> The United States was to be a laboratory for testing those hypotheses. Thus, the Pursuit of Happiness is tightly woven into the fabric of American political culture.

### **The Founding Definition of Happiness:**

What did the founding generation mean by “happiness”? Analysis of their writings and those of their intellectual forebears reveals a nuanced and multi-faceted understanding of what happiness meant. Happiness, like love, is a broad term that encapsulates many different feelings and experiences. For simplicity, I group these feelings and experiences into three broad categories: Enjoyment, Fulfillment and Relationship.

The category of “Enjoyment” includes what most modern Americans think of when the term happiness is encountered: the experience of positive emotion, pleasure, feeling good, comfort and ease. This understanding was important to the founding generation as well. As John Adams wrote in 1776, a few short months before signing the Declaration of Independence

“We ought to consider what is the end of government, before we determine which is the best form. Upon this point all speculative politicians will agree, that the happiness of society is the end of government, as all divines and moral philosophers will agree that the happiness of the individual is the end of man. From this principle it will follow, that the form of government which communicates *ease, comfort, security, or, in one word, happiness*, to the greatest number of persons, and in the greatest degree, is the best.”<sup>5</sup>

It was certainly a part of their overall philosophy that people had a right to enjoy their lives. Yet the unbounded pursuit of pleasure itself was also commonly understood to be anathema to true happiness.

---

<sup>3</sup> Washington, George. *Circular to the States*, 1783.

<sup>4</sup> The idea that America was positioned to experiment with theories of happiness was widespread after the revolution. On planning the first new American University in what was then the western portion of the US, Benjamin Rush wrote “Europe in its present state of political torpor affords no scope for the activity of a benevolent mind. Here [in America] everything is in a plastic state. Here the benefactor of mankind may realize all his schemes for promoting human happiness” Benjamin Rush, *Letter to Charles Nisbet*, December 5, 1783.

<sup>5</sup> John Adams, “Thoughts on Government”, 1776. Emphasis added.

While the founders did advocate the enjoyment of life's pleasures, they were also adamant about doing so in moderation.<sup>6</sup>

Since true happiness was not to be found in pleasure alone, the founding generation put strong emphasis on our second category of experiences. "Fulfillment" includes the application of strengths and talents and engaging in virtuous action. Living a life in which one mastered and applied one's skills, worked hard and produced results of value, and sought to attain moral excellence was a higher level of happiness than just feeling good. In his 1785 essay *On True Happiness*, Benjamin Franklin said:

"Whilst there is a conflict betwixt the two principles of passion and reason, we must be miserable in proportion to the struggle, and when the victory is gained and reason so far subdued as seldom to trouble us with its remonstrances, the happiness we have then is not the happiness of our rational nature, but the happiness only of the inferior and sensual part of us, and consequently a very low and imperfect happiness to what the other would have afforded us.... There is no happiness then but in a virtuous and self-approving conduct. Unless our actions will bear the test of our sober judgments and reflections upon them, they are not the actions and consequently not the happiness of a rational being."

In other words, an important part of the happy life is living it in a way that aligns with our highest values. It was better, in their evaluation, to live a life worth being proud of than to live a life of sensual gratifications.<sup>7</sup>

Since both pleasure and fulfillment in isolation are incomplete, the third category of "Relationship" involves mutually beneficial interactions with family, friends, neighbors and fellow citizens, but also service to our communities and to our world. The personal letters and journal entries of the founders reveal that the happiness dearest to their hearts was that derived from time spent with loved ones, friends and valued colleagues.<sup>8</sup> But beyond personal bonds, they also emphasized service to one's community and considered such service an essential part of what it means to be human. As Jefferson put it,

"It has been said that we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, bind up the wounds of the man beaten by thieves, pour oil and wine into them, set him on our own beast and bring him to the inn, because we receive ourselves pleasure from these acts... These good acts give us pleasure, but how happens it that they give us pleasure? Because nature hath implanted in our breasts a love of others, a sense of duty to them, a moral instinct, in short, which prompts us irresistibly to feel and to succor their distresses... The Creator would indeed have been a bungling artist had he intended man for a social animal without planting in him social dispositions."<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> See for example Thomas Jefferson, *Letter to Maria Cosway*, October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1786 and George Washington, *Letter to George Steptoe Washington*, March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1789

<sup>7</sup> The link between virtue and happiness was a constant theme among members of the founding generation. In his Inaugural Address of 1789, George Washington said "...there is no truth more thoroughly established than that there exists in the economy and course of nature an indissoluble union between virtue and happiness". The kinds of virtues they had in mind are well encapsulated by Jefferson's summation (prudence, temperance, fortitude, justice) or Franklin's longer list (temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity, humility)

<sup>8</sup> See for example George Washington, *Letter to Martha Washington*, June 18<sup>th</sup> 1775; Thomas Jefferson, *Letter to Martha Jefferson Randolph*, January 15<sup>th</sup>, 1792 and the many letters exchanged between John and Abigail Adams.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *Letter to Thomas Law*, 1814

In sum, the goal of America’s founding generation was to make this a nation in which as many as possible enjoyed their lives, found fulfillment in their pursuits and related with others in a mutually beneficial way. These aspects of happiness track nicely with what modern researchers in the field of positive psychology (the scientific study of happiness and thriving) have busied themselves studying for the past several decades.<sup>10</sup>

Since the founders intended the American government to facilitate widespread public happiness, it is worth assessing how it is currently doing in fulfilling that vision. There are a variety of indicators to look at that might show us how well the United States performs in measures of happiness and wellbeing on a global scale and others that can tell us about where we are doing best and where we have room to improve.

### **Common Indicators: Are Things as Bad as They Seem?**

Most of the indicators that commonly make it into media reports give a sobering impression and indicate widespread unhappiness. The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that almost 18% of American adults suffer from a mental illness and according to the World Health Organization the average American has a 47.4 percent chance of having any kind of mental health disorder in his or her lifetime.<sup>11</sup> The Journal of the American Medical Association reported that the percentage of Americans taking anti-depressant medications doubled from 1999-2012, rising from 6.8% to 13%.

These are concerning enough numbers on their own, but when compared to other countries it seems that America is outpacing the world in a number of unfortunate categories. The World Health Organization reports that America leads the world in mental health disorders of any kind, and has a particularly large lead in clinical anxiety.<sup>12</sup> The US also leads the world in mass shootings and gun-related killings and incarcerates far more of its citizens both in sheer number and in percentage of population than any other country on earth. These are not indicators of an exceptionally happy public.

Still, these measures can be misleading. It may not be that Americans are more likely to have mental illnesses than people in other countries, but perhaps they are more likely to seek help for them. Or perhaps American doctors are more likely than doctors abroad to diagnose people with mental illnesses and to prescribe medication rather than other courses of treatment. America may have the same prevalence of violent people as any other country, but perhaps its lead in gun crime is due to the fact that violent people have more access to guns than in other countries. Likewise, we don’t know if Americans are more prone to criminal behavior in general than those in other countries, but we do know that the American government and the governments of its states are on the tail end of several decades of “tough on crime”

---

<sup>10</sup> For a quick overview of the findings in the field, see Boniwell, Ilona (2012) *Positive Psychology in a Nutshell: The Science of Happiness*, New York, NY: McGraw-Hill

<sup>11</sup> Any Mental Illness (AMI) Among U.S. Adults. (n.d.). In *National Institute of Mental Health*. Retrieved March 28, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Kessler, R. C., Aguilar-Gaxiola, S., Alonso, J., Chatterji, S., Lee, S., Ormel, J., ... Wang, P. S. (2009). The global burden of mental disorders: An update from the WHO World Mental Health (WMH) Surveys. *Epidemiologia E Psichiatria Sociale*, 18(1), 23–33.

policies that prioritized incarceration as a solution. Our incarceration rate likely tells us more about our government than about our people.

In short, looking around us at the statistics that garner headlines may tell us something about unhappiness in America, but it won't tell us the whole story nor anything very meaningful about how the US compares on a global scale. To get a more accurate view of how America is doing in its pursuit of happiness, we need to look at measures of well-being and thriving that are truly comparable across borders and accurate within our borders.

## Measuring Happiness on a Global Scale: A Tricky Business

Measuring happiness at the individual level includes a variety of techniques that have been developed over time to be increasingly reliable and accurate. Researchers often use controlled experiments in which the causal factors can be isolated and reports of feelings can be easily connected to specific experiences or behaviors. Other experiments use brain scans or other measures of neurological activity to get beyond self-reports to objective observations of what is actually happening in regions of the brain responsible for feelings of wellbeing, fear, etc. Unfortunately, it is far more difficult to develop measures that help us compare happiness between different cultures, countries and regions.

Problems of logistics and cost prevent the use of experiments or the technology needed for brain scans in every region or country of interest, so self-reports are at the moment the only feasible method of making cross-national comparisons. Yet asking the same question in different countries runs the risk not only of problems in translation, but of differences in how people elicit, experience and define feelings and emotions. As a result, whenever “national happiness rankings” are announced, skepticism is justified and one needs to look carefully at the methods employed by the researchers and their analysis of the data that results.

### Snapshots of Positive and Negative Experiences:

Measuring positive and negative experiences is common in studies of individual happiness. Some innovative studies use electronic gadgets to get real-time reports throughout the day over a period of time on how people are feeling. Done over time, such observations can give a good view of an individual's moods and overall happiness levels. However, when done in snapshot form focusing on a single day or when used for comparison across countries and cultures, the practice becomes problematic.

A good example of measurement difficulties comes from the Gallup *Global Emotions Report 2016*. This global study conducted 147,000 surveys in 140 countries. In the surveys, respondents were asked about whether they had 5 different positive experiences and 5 different negative experiences on a given day. Specifically, the questions asked if the respondent experienced the positive or negative feelings “yesterday”.<sup>13</sup>

The results of the *Global Emotions Report* showed that the countries scoring highest on positive experience index were Paraguay, Guatemala, Honduras, Uzbekistan and Ecuador. The countries with lowest reported negative experiences were Uzbekistan, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Taiwan.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Clifton, J. (2016). *Gallup Global Emotions 2016*. Washington, DC: Gallup World Headquarters.

<sup>14</sup> Gallup did not release the full set of rankings, focusing only at the top ten and bottom ten scoring countries on each metric. As such I was not able to obtain the ranking of the United States. The shaded global maps they

The results were surprising to many followers of happiness research. Many of these countries are not known for their cheerfulness and optimism. But more than that, refugees have been fleeing Honduras in droves to escape high levels of gang violence and poverty. Uzbekistan is a harshly governed police state. The World Values Survey documented a precipitous decline in happiness in Russia and other post-communist countries throughout the 1990s. While happiness is certainly possible in difficult situations and may hide beneath stony exteriors, a closer look at the methods reveals that doubts regarding the results of this study are well justified.

The first problem is with asking respondents to evaluate a single day. Since emotions are highly fluid and changeable, observation over some period of time is necessary to establish whether a given day is typical of or a departure from one's baseline level of happiness. It is highly doubtful that we can gain an understanding of whether people are living a generally happy life by taking a snapshot of their experiences in a given day. The second problem is actually the more important one – cultural differences may render answers from different countries about positive and negative emotional experiences incomparable.

In their own analysis, the authors of the report admit that the geographical groupings suggest reason to suspect cross-country comparisons may not be valid. They note that there is likely systematic error based on cultural norms in how questions about emotional experiences are answered.<sup>15</sup> In other words, some cultures may be more prone to valuing a “stiff upper lip” and not admitting to facing difficulties at all. Other cultures may have more of a bias against talking about certain feelings. Not only that, but happiness researchers Diener and Oishi note that “...certain emotions are considered valuable and appropriate in some cultures, and less so in other cultures... what emotions feel good depends to some extent on culture..”<sup>16</sup> In short, asking people in different countries about their positive and negative emotional experiences is bound to result in answers that do not allow for accurate comparisons.

### **Subjective Life Evaluations:**

Diener and Oishi point to a variety of social psychological studies that demonstrate that culture has a dramatic influence on how people define and experience happiness, and even on what causes them happiness. As such, there is reason to be concerned whether simply asking people how happy they are can lead to comparable results across cultures. If the differences are dramatic, then cross-national studies based on such measures may not be reliable. However, Ruut Veenhoven undertook a variety of studies that investigated the impact of translation problems on happiness and satisfaction questions and determined that such questions were indeed comparable across cultures.<sup>17</sup>

Benjamin Radcliff points to numerous other studies that find that self-assessed happiness and life satisfaction correlate highly with both clinical evaluations and with the evaluations of loved ones.<sup>18</sup> A variety of investigations into the use of life evaluation measures has shown that peoples' thinking about life satisfaction is not as transitory as is their thinking about experiences. Respondents tend to reflect on

---

provide suggest that the United States scores above average on frequency of both expressed positive experiences and expressed negative experiences.

<sup>15</sup> Clifton, *Gallup Global Emotions 2016*, pp.5, 9

<sup>16</sup> Diener, E & Oishi, S (2005) The Nonobvious Social Psychology of Happiness. *Psychological Inquiry* 16 (4)

<sup>17</sup> Veenhoven, R. (1996). Developments in Satisfaction Research. *Social Indicators Research*, 34(1), 1-46.

<sup>18</sup> Radcliff, B. (2013). *The Political Economy of Human Happiness: How Voters' Choices Determine the Quality of Life* (pp. 81-83). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

various aspects of their lives over time rather than thinking about how they feel at the moment. Further, studies have shown that there is more variance between countries in terms of life evaluation than for emotional experiences, allowing for clearer comparisons.<sup>19</sup> Since there is an established body of research that vouches for both the validity and reliability of such measures, subjective life evaluations are a notable step up from taking snapshots of positive and negative emotions experienced in a single day.

The Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) recently produced the *World Happiness Report 2016*. To gauge how happy people are in different countries, the researchers surveyed around 1000 people per year for three years in each of over 150 countries. They used the Cantril Ladder to gauge life satisfaction. The ladder is a common life satisfaction measure which asks respondents “Please imagine a ladder, with steps numbered from 0 at the bottom to 10 at the top. The top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. On which step of the ladder would you say you personally feel you stand at this time?”<sup>20</sup> The approach of asking people about their “best life” allows respondents to use their own individual view of what makes for a good life and thus gets rid of the problem of cultural differences in defining happiness or interpreting what counts as positive and negative experiences.

The results suggest that in terms of life satisfaction Denmark, Switzerland, Iceland, Norway, Finland, Canada and the Netherlands are the happiest countries on earth. Afghanistan, Togo, Syria and Burundi rank as the least happy countries. The United States does well overall, but failed to break into the top ten, ranking 13<sup>th</sup> on this scale.

These results not only sit better with conventional wisdom than the results of the *Global Emotions Report*, but are backed up by other studies. Ronald Inglehart et al used the World Values Survey and European Values Study to investigate happiness across nations comprising nearly 90% of the world’s population. These research efforts were conducted in five waves from 1981 to 2007. Inglehart and his coauthors combined the results of the happiness question with the results of a Cantril-style life satisfaction question to create a “Subjective Wellbeing” measure. In their study, the top ten nations looked remarkably like the top ten in the World Happiness Report, and United States ranked 16<sup>th</sup>.<sup>21</sup> The consistency between these two studies (and their similarity to the results of other studies) suggests that using life satisfaction surveys give us a better idea of where America stands than the experience sampling method.

Still, we have defined happiness not as a single thing but as a combination of enjoyment, fulfillment and meaningful relationships. If we are going to design personal, societal and political interventions to increase wellbeing, it would be beneficial to know more about our performance on these different aspects of felicity. Fortunately, a more nuanced view of the different aspects of felicity that we have discussed is already available.

---

<sup>19</sup> Ed Diener, John F. Helliwell and Daniel Kahneman, (2010) *International Differences in Wellbeing* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press) p. xii

<sup>20</sup> Helliwell, J., Layard, R., & Sachs, J. (2016). *World Happiness Report 2016, Update (Vol. I)*. New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network.

<sup>21</sup> Inglehart, R., Foa, R., Peterson, C., & Welzel, C. (2008). Development, Freedom, and Rising Happiness: A Global Perspective (1981–2007). *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 3(4), 264-285. See also Despite Frustrations, Americans Are Pretty Darned Happy (2008, June 30). In *National Science Foundation News*. Retrieved March 27, 2017.



### Multi-dimensional Well-being Indices:

The Gallup-Healthways *Global Well-Being Index* is the result of a massive study that conducted more than 2.7 million interviews in over 140 countries, resulting in the world's largest dataset of wellbeing indicators. The measures used by Gallup-Healthways track nicely with the research in positive psychology in terms of measuring various aspects of subjective well-being. The study uses ten questions to tap into five elements of well-being, which they define as:

- Purpose: Liking what you do each day and being motivated to achieve your goals
- Social: Having supportive relationships and love in your life
- Financial: Managing your economic life to reduce stress and increase security
- Community: Liking where you live, feeling safe, and having pride in your community
- Physical: Having good health and enough energy to get things done daily<sup>22</sup>

As a result, the study taps into the aspects of happiness we have defined (enjoyment, fulfillment and relationship) in several different ways. It goes beyond simple measures of how a person might be feeling at the moment or an overall assessment of their lives, and gives a more nuanced picture of the different aspects of their felicity. The subjective evaluations help tap into what positive psychology shows is important to personal happiness – not the raw numbers in your paycheck or bank account, but whether you feel safe and secure with your income. Not the number of friends you have, but whether the ones you have are supportive and loving. Not how society views your neighborhood or job, but how you view them.<sup>23</sup>

### Overall Wellbeing in the United States:

The picture painted by the results is similar to that painted by the *World Happiness Report*: the United States is doing fairly well overall when it comes to happiness, but it clearly is not the global leader. And as should be expected, there is good news and bad news for Americans.

The good news is that the US is well above the world average when it comes to the percentage of the adult population thriving in each of the wellbeing elements and places among the top 20 countries in terms of percentage of population thriving in three or more elements. In other words, the United States is not facing catastrophic levels of unhappiness, despite the impression one might get from regularly monitoring the news media.

The bad news is that the US is not the shining city on a hill that it aims to be. Three countries have 40% or more of their people thriving in at least three of the elements listed: Panama, Costa Rica and Denmark. In contrast, the United States has only about a third of its people thriving in three or more elements and does not crack the top ten overall in that category, or in any of the individual wellbeing elements. Indeed, only in two of the elements does America even make it into the top 20. The chart below shows how America compares to the world as a whole, to the Organization of American States (which includes all 35 countries in North, Central and South America from Canada to Chile) and to the top performing country in each category.

---

<sup>22</sup> *State of Global Wellbeing: Results of the Gallup-Healthways Global Wellbeing Index*. (2014). Washington, DC: Gallup Inc. and Healthways Inc., p.7

<sup>23</sup> Moneta, Giovanni (2014). *Positive Psychology: A Critical Introduction*. Hampshire, UK: Palgrave MacMillan



**Figure 4.1: American Wellbeing in Global Context**

		Purpose	Social	Financial	Community	Physical
Percent of Adult Population Thriving	World	18	23	25	26	24
	OAS	37	43	29	37	36
	USA	34	41	39	37	32
	Top	66*	68*	72**	58*	63*
Percent of Adult Population Struggling	World	52	51	45	60	65
	OAS	48	44	41	50	56
	USA	51	45	37	48	57
Percent of Adult Population Suffering	World	30	26	30	14	11
	OAS	15	13	30	14	9
	USA	15	14	24	15	11

\*Panama, \*\*Sweden,

On a global scale, then, the United States does reasonably well but not spectacularly when it comes to happiness. It does particularly well in the percentage of its people thriving in multiple elements. The US ranks 6<sup>th</sup> in the world in percentage of the population thriving in all five elements (8%) and 12<sup>th</sup> in percentage thriving in three or more elements (34%). Unfortunately, it also seems that America is a land of extremes with its people facing feast or famine when it comes to wellbeing. While it compares fairly well to most countries in terms of percentage of population thriving, it does less well in keeping its people out of the “suffering” category. In no category does the United States break into the top 20 countries when it comes to preventing suffering.

**Areas of Strength and Opportunities for Improvement:**

The *Gallup-Healthways State of Global Wellbeing Report* notes that the United States ranks among the top 20 countries in purpose and social well-being. For percentage of population thriving socially, it ranks 15<sup>th</sup>. In the percentage of the population thriving in their sense of purpose, it ranks 17<sup>th</sup>. Still, when it comes to purpose nearly two thirds of Americans are not thriving and about three fifths are not thriving socially.

When it comes to the proportion of those thriving financially the United States falls to 21<sup>st</sup> and ranks only 25<sup>th</sup> both in thriving physically and in thriving community life. While these rankings are well above the global average, the chart above shows that the United States is still only average in comparison to the rest of the Western Hemisphere and lags far behind the leader. Many more Americans could be thriving than currently are.

As noted above, America struggles particularly in keeping people out of suffering. It falls 22 spots below the best performing country in percentage of adults suffering in the purpose category, ranks 34<sup>th</sup> in preventing financial suffering and 43<sup>rd</sup> from the top in percentage of population suffering socially. Since the United States has the world’s largest GDP, it is noteworthy that almost a quarter of all Americans are suffering financially. Particularly concerning is that about a quarter of *employed* Americans are suffering financially. Many who are working hard are still financially insecure.

The US ranks 53<sup>rd</sup> best at keeping people out of physical suffering and a distressing 67<sup>th</sup> when it comes to community suffering. In other words, half of the 135 countries in the study do better than the United States when it comes to the proportion of people who do not like, feel safe in, or have pride in their communities. The difficulties in physical and community wellbeing are particularly acute among young adults.

The *Gallup Healthways State of American Wellbeing Report*, which will be discussed in greater detail below, is a separate study focused specifically on the United States. The study finds that “Over the six years of our well-being measurement, Americans’ life evaluations have improved, emotional health and healthy behaviors have remained stable, and basic access, physical health, and work environment have declined.”<sup>24</sup> The next section digs a bit deeper into what is happening within America’s borders.

## **Happiness within the United States:**

As we have seen, comparing countries in terms of happiness levels is a difficult and imprecise science. There is considerable debate even among the experts as to what each of the studies is really telling us. Well designed and well executed studies like the Gallup-Healthways global report provide the best available comparisons of the United States to other countries and help us know how well we are doing overall, but America is the third largest country in the world, both by population and by land mass and is incredibly diverse. Some areas of America are likely doing far better than the national ranking, and some areas are doing substantially worse.

State rankings can give us an idea of geographical variations, but do not tell us anything terribly specific about who is thriving and who is not in America. For that, we need to look at studies that assess differences between groups of Americans. Fortunately, the experts do agree on the fact that, as Carol Graham put it “The findings on the determinants of happiness within countries are more consistent and robust, as large cross-sections and micro-level data allow us to control for a larger number of factors that vary across individuals...”<sup>25</sup> We now turn to some of these studies to get a more fine-grained understanding of happiness and wellbeing in the United States.

## **Variations among the States:**

### ***The Rankings:***

The *Gallup Healthways State of American Wellbeing Report* used more fine-grained measures than the global study, and is focused specifically on the United States. It includes an overall life evaluation measure, nine dimensions of daily emotions, seven different measures of physical wellbeing, a variety of measures of wellbeing-related lifestyle habits, several aspects of perceptions about work environment and 13 items measuring basic access to things like food, shelter, healthcare, adequate housing, and the like.<sup>26</sup> In other words, the American Wellbeing study does an even better job of measuring enjoyment, fulfillment and relationships than the global study.

---

<sup>24</sup> *State of American Wellbeing: 2013 State, Community and Congressional District Analysis*. (2014). Washington, DC: Gallup Inc. and Healthways Inc., p.2

<sup>25</sup> Graham, Carol. (2009). *Happiness Around the World: The Paradox of Happy Peasants and Miserable Millionaires* (p. 48). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

<sup>26</sup> *State of American Wellbeing: 2013 State, Community and Congressional District Analysis*. (2014) p 37

For seven years, the study has interviewed more than 170,000 US adults per year in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The *State of American Wellbeing 2015 State Rankings* averaged the state scores since 2012, and over the course of the four years of measurements, the top 10 states with the most consistently high well-being were Hawaii, Colorado, Montana, South Dakota, Minnesota, Utah, Nebraska, Iowa, Alaska and Vermont. West Virginia and Kentucky had the lowest scores in the country for seven straight years. The question of what accounts for the performance of each state remains unanswered.

Gallup Healthways did not include an analysis of what might be driving the variations and there are few discernable patterns in the results. In fact, the top ten states display impressive diversity in terms of state politics, culture, climate and economic base. There are not even very solid regional patterns. The Northern Plains and Mountain West do tend to exhibit higher levels of wellbeing. Also, the Old South and some of the Midwestern states hit hardest by the decline in manufacturing in recent decades seem to struggle more in terms of wellbeing – but these regional trends are not true in all cases or in every year.

The study did suggest that there were certain commonalities among the top-performing states, such as “lower chronic disease rates, lower incidence of obesity, more frequent exercise, less smoking, and a more positive outlook on their communities”<sup>27</sup> But beyond that, there is little in the study to scientifically explain why some states are happier than others. We can look at correlations, but there is not enough data about the respondents, the state governments, or the policy atmosphere to infer causation.

### ***What Determines the Variations?***

In 2010, social scientists Ángel Álvarez-Díaz, Lucas González and Benjamin Radcliff attempted a more scientific explanation of the political determinants of variations in happiness between the states. They used The DDB Life Style Survey, which contains a more than 40,000 respondents from the 48 continental states, polled yearly from 1985 to 1998. It also contains a frequently used life satisfaction measure in which respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed that “I am very satisfied with the way things are going in my life these days” with six response categories representing increasing levels of agreement.

With life satisfaction as their dependent variable, the researchers controlled for individual level factors likely to have an impact on happiness including education, employment status, income and satisfaction with income, gender, race, age, marital and parental status, church attendance, along with self-reported health and interpersonal trust.<sup>28</sup> They also included state level factors including each state’s per capita personal income, Robert Putnam’s measure of overall state level of social capital, racial diversity, and state population.<sup>29</sup>

After controlling for all of these variables, they found that more generous welfare programs and more regulation of labor and economic markets contributed to higher levels of life satisfaction in a state, whereas a more free-market approach to governance led to lower overall happiness. Not surprisingly, then, they also found that a more ideologically liberal state government controlled by the Democratic

---

<sup>27</sup> *State of American Wellbeing: 2013 State, Community and Congressional District Analysis*. (2014) p4

<sup>28</sup> Each of these variables has been shown in psychological research to be important for life satisfaction and happiness.

<sup>29</sup> Benjamin Radcliff replicates the study with the same data but added controls for region, culture and year in his 2013 book *The Political Economy of Human Happiness* (pages 159-176). His conclusions remain unchanged.

Party contributed to greater wellbeing.<sup>30</sup> In a separate study, Pacek and Radcliff determined that the arrow of causation did not run in the opposite direction, which is to say that people with higher levels of wellbeing were not more likely to vote Democratic.<sup>31</sup>

The study did an admirable job of controlling for variables known to be important for happiness, and while their findings are compelling on that level we still need to take such state comparisons with a grain of salt for several reasons. First and most importantly, though 40,000 sounds like an impressive sample size, the DDB data was collected over 13 years and 48 states. This works out to an average of just over 64 respondents per state per year - hardly enough to make confident generalizations about an individual state. Secondly, the data are more than two decades old and much has changed in America since then.

In short, if we are to determine what is behind the variations between the states in a way that helps us gear governance and policy toward maximizing wellbeing, we need regular in-depth studies that draw a very large and representative sample from each state. Such a study would ideally use a multi-faceted measure of wellbeing like that used by Gallup-Healthways for developing dependent variables. It should also include data on respondents to control for the main variables relevant to happiness like the data used by Álvarez-Díaz et al. Until then, we are closer to conjecture about the political determinants of state variations in felicity than to true understanding.

### **Variations between Social Groups:**

An understanding of what drives variation between states would help get us closer to understanding the wellbeing implications of political institutions and policy, but so would understanding variation between social groups. Two main studies have made use of data spanning more than three decades (starting in 1972) from the General Social Survey (GSS) to dig into such variations. Yang Yang used data from 1972-2004 and Stevenson and Wolfers used data from 1972-2008.

In the GSS a single question measuring happiness was asked of between 1,500 and 3,000 respondents per year over the entire three decades, "Taken all together, how would you say things are these days? Would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?" While this does not give us the kind of nuanced view of the different aspects of happiness that we gain from studies like those done by Gallup-Healthways, it retains most of the benefits of the life evaluation measures discussed above, particularly since happiness questions and life satisfaction questions correlate closely.<sup>32</sup> Further support for this kind of question comes from psychological studies that find that people's answers to such questions are validated by brain activity and genuine (Duchenne) smiles.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Álvarez-Díaz, n., González, L., & Radcliff, B. (2010, July). The Politics of Happiness: On the Political Determinants of Quality of Life in the American States. *The Journal of Politics*, 72(3).

<sup>31</sup> Pacek, A., & Radcliff, B. (2010, July). Assessing the Welfare State. *Perspectives on Politics*, 6(2), 267-277.

<sup>32</sup> Further, while the question may run into the kind of interpretation and cultural difference problems that plagued the Global Emotions Report if it were used to make comparisons between countries, both studies use only answers within the United States.

<sup>33</sup> Graham, Carol. (2009). *Happiness Around the World: The Paradox of Happy Peasants and Miserable Millionaires* (p. 48). New York, NY: Oxford University Press. P.9

The results of the Yang study show some marked inequalities, most of which are not surprising given what we know of the country, its history, and the findings of other positive psychologists.<sup>34</sup> The results of the Stevenson and Wolfers study document that while there has been no aggregate increase in overall happiness in America, the inequalities noted by Yang have seen significant changes over time.<sup>35</sup>

### **Demographic Differences:**

Both studies discovered significant differences in happiness between demographic groups, with the largest gaps between racial groups. Yang found that white Americans were about 50% more likely to be happy than African-Americans over the three decades in question.<sup>36</sup> However, Stevenson and Wolfers discovered that the gap has shrunk significantly over time, with substantial increases in happiness among nonwhite groups since the 1970s. Neither of these findings is likely to be surprising to those familiar with America's history.

What may be less expected (given a history of gender discrimination, a persistent wage gap and other challenges) is that Yang found women to be slightly happier than men over the three-decade period. The Gallup-Healthways studies likewise found that while overall wellbeing was roughly equal between males and females, women had higher levels of wellbeing than men when it came to social wellbeing and connections to community<sup>37</sup>. The study by Stevenson and Wolfers unveiled yet another unexpected result. According to their research, American women have seen both an overall decrease in happiness and a decrease in happiness relative to men since 1972.<sup>38</sup>

In good news for all of us however, the results of both of the studies using the GSS data and the Gallup-Healthways studies suggest that happiness tends to increase over the lifespan for all groups, with older Americans being generally happier than younger ones.

### **Socioeconomic Differences:**

Socioeconomic status accounts for some of the variation in American happiness. Income mattered in Yang's study in the ways other positive psychology studies have shown – being poor was associated with a 26% lower average level of happiness but increases in wealth beyond the poverty level showed diminishing returns in terms of happiness.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Yang, Y. Social Inequalities in Happiness in the United States, 1972 to 2004: An Age-Period-Cohort Analysis. *American Sociological Review*, 73(2), 204-226.

<sup>35</sup> Stevenson, B., & Wolfers, J. (2008, June). Happiness Inequality in the United States. *The Journal of Legal Studies*, 37(S2), 204-226.

<sup>36</sup> The Yang paper does not mention the status of other racial and ethnic groups, comparing only whites and African-Americans.

<sup>37</sup> *State of Global Wellbeing: Results of the Gallup-Healthways Global Wellbeing Index*. (2014). p 41

<sup>38</sup> Because the decades since that time have seen advances for women in the workplace, in education and in legal protection from discrimination the reason for the trend remains unclear. It may be related to erosions in hard-won legal protections, the added stress on the many women who have joined the workforce yet still shoulder much of the responsibility of caring for their families, the increasing number of women who find themselves raising children alone or some combination thereof.

<sup>39</sup> One of the more common and robust findings in the positive psychology literature (both at the individual and cross-national level) is that while increases in income are strongly related to increases in happiness for the poor, income gains are very weakly correlated with increases in happiness for those who have attained a basic level of financial security.

Education also matters. Yang discovered that overall since the 1970s those with a college education had about a 37% better chance at happiness than those without. This inequality seems to be worsening over time, as Stevenson and Wolfers found that the happiness gaps between Americans with different levels of education have widened significantly since the 1970s. While average happiness has increased among college graduates, people with some college and people who did not pass beyond high school have seen decreases in their average levels of happiness. This may be related to the kinds of jobs that are typically more available to college graduates. The Gallup-Healthways study of American wellbeing showed that jobs in which people have a good deal of autonomy and financial security were associated with greater wellbeing – for example business owners, executives, and professionals had higher wellbeing scores than those working in service, manufacturing or transportation positions.<sup>40</sup>

### **Relationship Differences:**

Relationships are also important, as married respondents were far more likely to be happy than the widowed, divorced and single in Yang’s study and did better in most areas of wellbeing measured by the Gallup-Healthways reports. Stevenson and Wolfers note that this trend has not changed over time.<sup>41</sup> Also consistent across studies and across time was the finding that people with children were less likely to describe their lives as happy than those without.<sup>42</sup>

Again, the studies based on the GSS data can give us a good general idea of the differences in life satisfaction between various social groups in the United States, but should again be expanded and improved upon for future studies. GSS sample sizes make it impossible to really dig into what is going on within subsets of Americans. For example, we cannot confidently interpret data on life satisfaction among African-Americans in the United States when they are represented in the yearly sample by only a few hundred respondents. And again, future studies would benefit from a more thorough battery of questions to capture the enjoyment, fulfillment and relationship aspects of happiness along with the variety of variables shown by positive psychologists to be important determinants of happiness.

### **Conclusion:**

The United States was founded on the idea that people have an unalienable right to happiness; that governments exist to facilitate the pursuit and attainment of happiness among the people; and that we can and should judge our governments on how well they do so. More than just feeling good, the happiness envisioned by the founding generation included different aspects of leading a virtuous and fulfilling life

---

<sup>40</sup> *State of American Wellbeing: 2013 State, Community and Congressional District Analysis*. (2014) p 3.

<sup>41</sup> Another common and robust finding in positive psychology research is that married people are statistically more likely to be happy than unmarried people. However, the literature also finds that people in unhappy marriages are less happy than single, divorced and widowed people.

<sup>42</sup> The evidence about happiness and parenting in the positive psychology literature is mixed. Most studies show that when we control for other factors, people with children are generally less happy than people without, but there is considerable variation among parents. Parental unhappiness is particularly acute during the early child-rearing years and tends to get better over time. In one study, people with 1 or 2 children or with many children are happier than people with three, four or five. Further complicating the matter, other studies show that while people without children enjoy their daily lives more, people with children show more satisfaction with their lives as a whole. This may suggest that having children may act differently on the different aspects of happiness, decreasing the enjoyment of life, but increasing feelings of fulfillment.

and cultivating good relationships with close others and with the broader community. Their views of happiness track closely with those of most positive psychology researchers.

Existing measures and of happiness and wellbeing give us some insight into how well America is doing at fulfilling this vision. The results suggest that on a global scale, the United States is significantly above average but is not the leader in happiness, and in fact struggles a great deal in some specific areas of wellbeing. Within the United States, the variations in happiness between the states remains largely unexplained, though one study suggests that government intervention in the economy and Democratic control of state legislatures contribute positively to overall life satisfaction. In addition, the United States displays inequalities in happiness along racial and ethnic lines that have grown smaller over time and inequalities in happiness along socioeconomic lines that have grown larger.

Prominent happiness researchers such as Ed Diener, Martin Seligman and Daniel Kahneman have advocated that the United States government follow the lead of governments in countries like France and the UK in exploring the development of wellbeing measures as a compliment to traditional economic indicators. In at least one country in the world, using such measures is no longer in the realm of the hypothetical. The Kingdom of Bhutan has replaced traditional economic indicators with a variety of wellbeing measures collectively labeled “Gross National Happiness”. If the United States government were to adopt such measures with an eye to using them in guiding public policy, it would be best served by using multifaceted measures of wellbeing like those used in the Gallup-Healthways studies; by collecting data on all variables known to effect levels of happiness for control purposes and by making certain that we cast as wide and comprehensive a net as possible when taking samples.