The Subjective Well-Being Political Paradox: Happy Welfare States and Unhappy Liberals

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Political scientists traditionally have analyzed the effect of politics on subjective well-being (SWB) at the collective level, finding that more liberal countries report greater SWB. Conversely, psychologists have focused primarily on SWB at the individual level and shown that being more conservative corresponds in greater SWB. We integrate the theoretical foundations of these 2 literatures (e.g., livability and system justification theories) to compare and contrast the effects of country- and individual-level political orientation on SWB simultaneously. Using a panel of 16 West European countries representative of 1,134,384 individuals from 1970 to 2002, we demonstrated this SWB political paradox: More liberal countries and more conservative individuals had higher levels of SWB. More important, we explored measurement as a moderator of the political orientation–SWB relationship to shed some light on why this paradox exists. When orientation is measured in terms of enacted values (i.e., what the government actually does), liberalism corresponds in higher SWB, but when politics is measured in terms of espoused values (i.e., what individuals believe), greater conservatism coincided in higher SWB.

Keywords: subjective well-being, politics, conservatism, liberalism
SWB at both levels of analyses simultaneously. Generating consensus on how politics affect SWB at both levels is important not only in terms of SWB itself but also because variables that lead to lower SWB are related to a number of organizational issues, such as greater absenteeism and turnover (McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011; Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013); increased health problems (Dooley et al., 1996; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2006, 2010); IQ decrements (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013); and lower job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Enscher et al., 2001; McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011; Simon et al., 2010).

The purpose of our study is to reconcile the seemingly disparate findings between the literatures on how politics affect SWB at the country and individual level. This research not only responds to the call for multidisciplinary and multilevel examination of SWB (Ashkanasy, 2011; Judge & Kamkeyer-Mueller, 2011) but also further illustrates how research implications can be misguided when taken from only one level of analysis (Earley & Mosakowski, 2002; Klein & Kozlowski, 2000). Drawing on livability (Veenhoven, 2008; Veenhoven & Ehrhardt, 1995) and system justification theories (Jost & Banaji, 1994), we use a panel of West European market democracies to shed light on why the relationship between politics and SWB ostensibly has competing relationships at the country and individual levels.

**Background and Theoretical Development**

**Livability Theory and Collective Political Orientation**

Governments impact the interests of their citizenry. Livability theory posits (Veenhoven & Ehrhardt, 1995; Veenhoven, 2008) and empirical research supports (Appleton & Song, 2008; Björnskov, Dreher, & Fischer, 2008; Judge, Piccolo, Podsakoff, Shaw, & Rich, 2010; Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2012) the idea that improvements in one’s living conditions can lead to greater well-being. As such, SWB is expected to increase if governmental policies produce collective provisions that create livable conditions satisfying citizen needs and, to some extent, their desires (Radcliff, 2001; Veenhoven & Ehrhardt, 1995). The conundrum for governments is that most consist of differing political parties whose divergent perspectives often lead them to disagree with what the collective provisions should be and how they should be allocated to citizens (Powell & Whitten, 1993; Radcliff, 2001; van Oorschot, 2006). Whereas the collective political orientation of countries falls on a continuum, countries can be and often are populated by a combination of citizens on both extremes of the spectrum. Collectively, liberal or left-wing governments occupy one end and conservative or right-wing governments occupy the other end of the political continuum (Hibbs, 1977).

On the basis of livability theory, political scientists tend to equate liberal or left-wing governments with increased well-being (Álvarez-Díaz, Gonzalez, & Radcliff, 2010; Bok, 2010; Pacek & Radcliff, 2008; Radcliff, 2001), believing that the lack of welfare and over reliance on the free market will result in lower SWB. For example, Esping-Andersen (1990) argued that “the market becomes to the worker a prison within which it is imperative to behave as a commodity in order to survive” (p. 36). In this regard, lower SWB can be expected when workers perceive themselves to be commodities (Easterlin, 2009). Additionally, Lane (2000) contended that because markets are indifferent to the fate of individuals, SWB should be less when there is no safety net protecting citizens from economic hardships. More liberal governments tend to take greater efforts to ensure better health care, public education, and pension systems and do more to protect their citizens from the externalities (e.g., unemployment) of the market economy (Bok, 2010; Scruggs & Allan, 2006). They also actively seek to reduce income inequality that is commonly linked to poor health, crime, and overall misery among citizens (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2006). It is important to note that no government can fully eliminate adverse conditions, but more liberal governments tend to do more to shield citizens by providing a buffer against these hardships and their impact on SWB (Helliwell & Huang, 2008).

Considering the far-reaching negative factors that contribute to low levels of SWB, it is no wonder why many governments have been interested in alleviating these negative factors through the collective provisions and policies that they enact. In fact, the happiest countries in the world, the Scandinavian countries, have lower income inequality and, politically, are considered more liberal countries. On the basis of evidence in support of livability theory, we hypothesize that SWB will be higher in more liberal countries.

**Hypothesis 1:** Citizens of more liberal countries will report levels of SWB than are higher than those reported in more conservative countries.

**System Justification Theory and Individual Political Orientation**

Although livability theory predicts that country-level liberalism enhances SWB, system justification theory predicts a different pattern altogether for individuals. System justification theory posits that people generally tend to (a) support and rationalize the status quo and (b) believe that the current political, social, and economic state of affairs has been realized from relatively fair and legitimate processes (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost & Hunyady, 2003; Jost, Pelham, & Carvallo, 2002). The theory also contends that people are hesitant to call attention to and work to disrupt inequities because of their desire to see themselves and the world as generally fair and meritocratic (Benabou & Tirole, 2006; Jost & Banaji, 1994). System-justifying ideology results partly because it provides individuals with the cognitive structure to cope with uncertainty and threats (Cheung, Noel, & Hardin, 2011; Laurin, Kay, & Shepherd, 2011). As such, individuals are motivated to believe in the fairness, legitimacy, and meritocracy of the surrounding sociopolitical system (i.e., maintain structure) because exposing its flaws and contradictions calls into question their own outcomes, reduces their ability to predict cause-and-effect relationships, and detracts from their understanding of the world, all of which introduce instability and erode structure (Jost & Hunyady, 2003; Jost, Kivetz, Rubini, Guermandi, & Mosso, 2005).

In their recent examination of why “conservatives are happier than liberals,” Napier and Jost (2008, p. 565) concluded that an important factor related to system justification endorsement is one’s individual political orientation. They found that more conservative individuals were more likely to endorse system-justifying beliefs and, more surprisingly, to report higher SWB (Napier & Jost, 2008). This is the case because those who are more politically conservative more readily accept and endorse the legit-
imacy of their social, political, and economic reality in spite of any adverse conditions within the nation in which they live. This acceptance and endorsement heuristic leads to the belief that individuals are responsible for their outcomes and, ultimately, get what they deserve (i.e., rationalize the status quo). This desire to rationalize the status quo serves as a "palliative function of system-justifying ideology" (Jost & Hunyady, 2003; Napier & Jost, 2008, p. 565; italics in original). Thus, Napier and Jost argued that more conservative people report higher SWB because they ignore or rationalize away many of the factors that otherwise might negatively influence their SWB (e.g., unemployment, inequality, disparate health care and education). In support of this notion, evidence (e.g., DiTomaso, 2013) indicates that those with more conservative beliefs were much more likely to attribute unemployment to laziness than to structural issues within the sociopolitical system. Conversely, those holding more liberal views report lower wellbeing because they benefit less (if at all) from this palliative function because, at least in part, to greater empathy for those experiencing adverse conditions (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Napier & Jost, 2008; Savani & Rattan, 2012). On the basis of system justification theory, we hypothesize the following:

**Hypothesis 2:** Those with more politically conservative views will report higher SWB.

**Juxtaposing the Two Perspectives: Measurement as a Moderator**

So how can it be that political liberalism is tied to greater well-being at the country level (Hypothesis 1) but lesser well-being at the individual level (Hypothesis 2)? We contend that this apparent paradox between the literatures stems from differences in the constructions of political orientation across disciplines and levels of analysis. On the one hand, more macro perspectives on political liberalism (e.g., political science, sociology, public policy) tend to focus on what governments provide or do not provide for their citizens. Countries offering greater state-supported housing, health care, education, and remediation of income inequality are deemed more liberal, whereas those that do not are labeled more conservative (Álvarez-Díaz et al., 2010). Likewise, scholars rate governmental political orientation largely on the basis of interest group ratings of legislators’ behavioral support (i.e., voting, advocacy) for liberal and conservative policies (Berry, Fording, Ringquist, Hanson, & Klarner, 2010). On the other hand, more micro approaches (e.g., psychology, behavioral economics) center on individual beliefs about what a government should or should not do for the people it serves (Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009). Those believing governments should be more involved in the provision of social services are tagged as more liberal, whereas those who prefer a more hands-off approach to government assistance are considered more conservative.

Although these two methods of defining political orientation might appear similar at first glance, a closer look illustrates a key difference between the two. Namely, the macro approach focuses more on what governments actually do while the micro perspective centers on beliefs about what governments should do. This difference resembles the separation between espoused and enacted values in the organizational literature (Argyris & Schon, 1978). The former pertains to things that an organization (or its membership) purports to endorse whereas the latter describes the ideals embodied by its actions. Applied to the current context, it appears that while scholars with a micro SWB perspective have explored the impact of espoused political orientation, scholars with a macro perspective have devoted their attention to enacted political orientation.

Recognizing this division in the theoretical and empirical construction of political orientation across disciplines provides a potential reconciliation for the seemingly paradoxical findings produced by micro and macro SWB research. Inconsistent results often call for greater attention to prospective moderators that determine the nature of a relationship between two variables. In this case, it appears that measurement type may be such a moderator. When political orientation is determined by what countries actually do (espoused), the tenets of livability theory should apply and the nature of the liberalism–SWB linkage should be positive because the measured government actions (or lack thereof) are influencing individuals’ lives. Conversely, when espoused political orientation is the focus, system justification theory’s prediction of a negative relationship between liberalism and SWB should hold true because what is being measured is an aggregation of individual worldviews as opposed to actual governmental action.

**Hypothesis 3:** The country-level political orientation effect on citizen’s SWB is moderated by the type of measurement. The effect is positive when enacted political orientation was measured but negative when espoused political orientation was measured.

**Method**

**Sample and Data Collection**

Archival data served as the sample for this study. All individual-level (Level 1) variables were obtained from the Mannheim Eurobarometer data set (ICPSR 4357), which is a collection of Eurobarometers conducted each year in Europe and commonly used in political science research. This data set contains 1,134,384 individuals nested within Western European countries between the years of 1970 to 2002. About 2,000 people per country were surveyed in earlier years and up to 4,000 people per country were surveyed in more recent years. The 16 European countries included are France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Denmark, Ireland, the United Kingdom, Greece, Spain, Portugal, Finland, Sweden, Austria, and Norway. Country-level (Level 2) variables were obtained from the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Two (i.e., decommodification and equality) were produced by political scientists (Scruggs & Allan, 2006) and economists (Deininger & Squire, 1996). Great Britain in the Eurobarometer data is matched with the United Kingdom in the OECD and Scruggs and Allan’s data sets.

**Individual-level (Level 1) measures**

**SWB.** We measured SWB using the following item from the Mannheim Eurobarometer: “On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the life you lead?” The scale ranges from 1 = not at all satisfied to 4 =
very satisfied. Previous research has found this measure to be reliable and valid (Di Tella & MacCulloch, 2006; Myers, 2000) and closely correlates with objective measures of well-being, such as brain activity measures (Layard, 2005).

Political orientation. Political orientation, the degree to which one is more conservative (right) or liberal (left), was measured using the following item: “In political matters people talk of ‘the left’ and ‘the right,’ how would you place your views on this scale?” The scale ranges from 1 = left to 10 = right. Research has found that self-placement on the right–left self-placement scale has “good test–retest reliability and strong predictive validity” (Napier & Jost, 2008, p. 568; see also Jost, 2006; Jost et al., 2009). Scores on this measure were (a) reversed so that higher values indicate greater liberalism and (b) aggregated to the country level and also included as a Level 2 measure.

Country-Level (Level 2) Measures

To enhance the robustness of our results, we triangulate the measurement for country-level political orientation using three measures: decommodification, welfare spending, and equality, where the higher the value, the more liberal, or, alternatively speaking, the closer the country to the “welfare state ideal.”

Decommodification. The decommodification index was retrieved from Scruggs and Allan’s (2006) research and captures three dimensions: (a) the ease of access to welfare, (b) welfare value, and (c) breadth of coverage. The key welfare programs captured in this index are pensions, sickness benefits, and unemployment compensation (Cronbach’s α = .55).

Welfare spending. Welfare spending is measured as the total public social expenditure as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP). This variable, which can range from 0 to 100, was retrieved from the Welfare Expenditure Report produced by the OECD.

Equality. The Gini index, which ranges from 0 (perfect equality) to 1 (perfect inequality), is used commonly in economics and sociology research to capture societal inequity. To make this measure more consistent with the other Level 2 measures, we reverse coded it and multiplied it by 100 so that equality scores ranged from 0 to 100. The Gini index was retrieved from Deininger and Squire’s (1996) research.

Data Analyses

Because the participants in our study were nested within countries and years, their SWB scores are likely not independent and ordinary least squares is inappropriate. We have data about countries over time, but for reasons of parsimony and computational convenience, we model it using a country–year random intercept, as opposed to a three-level model. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated that the variation in SWB attributable to country–year was statistically significant (ICC = .14), F(333, 631834) = 290.18, p < .001. Accordingly, we used multilevel modeling (MLM) with the “xtmixed” command in Stata statistical software (Rabe-Hesketh & Skrondal, 2005). Moreover, because we incorporated variables at both the country (i.e., welfare spending, decommodification, equality) and the individual levels (i.e., SWB and political orientation), we used random intercept models, a specific type of MLM, to test all hypotheses (Kreft & de Leeuw, 1998). Like prior researchers (e.g., Park & DeShon, 2010; Porter, Webb, & Gogus, 2010), we present Rosenthal and Rubin’s (2003) ρequivalent as an indicator of effect size for our MLM analyses.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations are presented in Table 1. When modeling SWB, results tend to be similar in ordinal logistic and linear models (Ferrer-i-Carbonell & Frijters, 2004); hence, we used a linear model for ease of interpretation. To avoid multicollinearity, each model includes only one measure of political orientation at the country level (see Table 2 for a summary). Hypothesis 1 proposed that citizens of more liberal countries (i.e., welfare states) would report higher SWB than those in more conservative countries. In support of this hypothesis, we observed moderate to large effects of decommodification (.03, p < .01, r = .60), welfare spending (.03, p < .01, r = .50) and equality (.02, p < .01, r = .35) on SWB.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual level (Level 1)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Political orientation</td>
<td>5.69</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Subjective well-being</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>−0.10**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Country level (Level 2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Decommodification</td>
<td>28.51</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Welfare spending</td>
<td>23.71</td>
<td>4.61</td>
<td>0.72**</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Equality</td>
<td>69.37</td>
<td>4.77</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Political orientation</td>
<td>5.64</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>−0.08</td>
<td>−0.00</td>
<td>−0.26*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Subjective well-being</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.54**</td>
<td>0.48**</td>
<td>0.45**</td>
<td>−0.38**</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Political orientation is on a right-to-left continuum ranging from more conservative (1) to more liberal (10). At country level a unit of analysis is a country–year, that is, a given country observed in a given year. In country level (Level 2) panel, subjective well-being scores are aggregated to the country–year. Reported correlations are pairwise with about 300 country–year observations and only 77 in cases of equality because of missing data. At individual level, there are at least 400,000 observations and usually more than 700,000 observations.

*p < .05. **p < .01.
Hypothesis 2 predicted that more conservative participants would report higher SWB than their more liberal counterparts. Because we centered political orientation within cluster at Level 1, it is noteworthy that its effects at Levels 1 and 2 are independent and the Level 1 variable indicates the participant’s relative (to the mean) political orientation within their country. Regressing SWB onto political orientation revealed that both country-level (b ranged from −.30 to −.23, ps < .01, r ranged from .31 to .60) and individual-level (b ranged from −.03 to −.03, ps < .01, r ranged from .08 to .10) political orientation predicted SWB as expected in all three models (i.e., across the different enacted measures). Thus, we find support for Hypothesis 2.

Hypothesis 3 posited that measurement type moderates the effect of political orientation such that the effect is positive when enacted political orientation was measured but negative when espoused political orientation was measured. Because the proposed moderation involves testing differences in the relationships between the various indicators of political orientation and SWB, it cannot be tested by computing a product term between an independent variable and a moderator variable. Rather, the task is to determine whether the coefficients reported for country-level espoused and enacted political orientation differ significantly from one another. Toward this end, we used two tactics. First, Stata provides a post hoc function that uses a Wald test to compare the equivalence of any specified coefficients derived from the multilevel analysis. Second, we (a) computed standardized coefficients with confidence intervals for the models reported in Table 2 and (b) conducted a Monte Carlo simulation of 50,000 estimates of the differences between country-level espoused political orientation coefficient and each enacted political orientation coefficient. All of these results led to identical conclusions: Each of the enacted measures (decommodification, welfare spending, and equality) differed from the espoused measure at the country level (see Table 3 for a summary of these results). As Figure 1 illustrates, the effect of the espoused measure was negative, whereas the effects of the three enacted measures were positive, thereby supporting Hypothesis 3.

### Supplemental Analyses

Although not hypothesized, the multilevel nature of our data presents an opportunity to test for possible interactions among the different measures of political orientation. First, we analyzed cross-level interactions of political orientation at the individual and

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**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary of Multilevel Models Predicting Subjective Well-Being</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Variable</td>
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<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person level (Level 1):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country level (Level 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decommodification</td>
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<tr>
<td>Welfare spending</td>
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<tr>
<td>Equality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Political orientation</td>
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<tr>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 1 residual variance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2 residual variance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deviance</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Political orientation is on a right-to-left continuum ranging from more conservative (1) to more liberal (10). At the individual level, political orientation is centered within cluster. At the country level, all variables are grand-mean centered. We also calculate country–year mean of political orientation at Level 2. Intraclass correlation (1) for the null model is .14.

**Table 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary of Tests of Moderation by Measurement Type</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Variable</td>
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<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enacted political orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Espoused political orientation (Level 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
</tr>
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<td>( \chi^2 )</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Coefficients are standardized. Espoused political orientation is on a right-to-left continuum ranging from more conservative (1) to more liberal (10). Numbers in parentheses are 99% confidence intervals. Confidence intervals for differences were derived via Monte Carlo simulation.

\( ** p < .01 \).
country levels but found that none were significant with the exception of the interaction of political orientation (right–left) and welfare spending (γ = .001, p = .02). This indicated that the negative association between political orientation and SWB was slightly larger when welfare spending was lower (b = -.03, p < .01) than when it was higher (b = -.02, p < .01). Second, we tested interactions among the country-level (Level 2) variables and many were significant. For instance, the interaction between welfare spending and decommodification was positive (γ = .01, p < .01) and simple slopes indicated welfare spending related positively to SWB when decommodification was higher (γ = .02, p < .01) but negatively when decommodification was lower (γ = -.04, p < .01). We also performed a robustness check by including a host of controls commonly used in past research on SWB (age, income, employment status, marital status, per capita gross domestic product, unemployment, and inflation), which did not alter the pattern of results reported.

Discussion

Integrating livability and system justification theories, we investigated how politics may lead to ostensibly inverse relationships with SWB at the country and individual levels. Consistent with livability theory, more liberal countries had higher SWB. Conversely, more conservative people reported greater SWB in line with system justification theory. To reconcile these paradoxical findings, we proposed and found that measurement moderated the relationship between political orientation and SWB at the country level. When measures capture what a country does (enacted political orientation), greater liberalism corresponds with higher SWB, but when measures tap what citizens believe (espoused political orientation), the pattern is the opposite. We now turn our attention to the implication of these findings.

Implications for Research and Practice

Perhaps the most significant implication of this work is that it calls attention to a previously unacknowledged paradox within the existing multidisciplinary research on the association between politics and SWB. On the one hand, political scientists measure collective political orientation via espoused values or how countries govern their citizens. In this regard, countries providing greater safety nets are designated more liberal countries (i.e., welfare states). On the other hand, psychologists measure individual political orientation by measuring espoused values, or what individuals believe. In this regard, more conservative values help people rationalize the status quo, thereby buffering their SWB from the negative impact of any existing adverse societal conditions. We found that when individual political orientation is aggregated to the country level, more conservative countries also reported higher SWB. Thus, it is not just the level at which political orientation is measured but rather what the measures reflect that determines the nature of the politics–SWB linkage. As such, our results reconcile the disparate findings and generate consensus regarding how politics affect SWB across the two literatures. It appears that both political scientists and psychologists are correct regarding the relationship between politics and SWB—the culprit of the paradox is measurement differences across the two literatures.

It also appears that the effects of espoused and enacted political orientation on SWB may be largely independent. Individuals living in countries with greater enacted liberalism reported higher SWB than those in countries with less enacted liberalism, irrespective of their own political views or those of their fellow residents. Moreover, more conservative individuals reported higher SWB than their more liberal counterparts irrespective of how their governments actually behaved (i.e., enacted political orientation). This is important because scholars with macro and micro perspectives frequently debate the relative contributions of the person and environment in predicting attitudes and behavior and often settle on a compromise involving interactions between the two (Kristof-Brown & Guay, 2011). In the present study, the effects of political person and environment characteristics on SWB appeared to operate in relative isolation from one another.

To place our effects in perspective, it helps to take a closer look at what the coefficients mean. In our data, decommodification ranged from 18 (Ireland in 1974) to 36 (Sweden in 1994), and such a discrepancy translates into a more than half point difference in SWB [(36 − 18)/18 = .54] on a 4-point scale. Similarly, the observed ranges in welfare spending (from 11 in Portugal in 1985 to 35 in Sweden in 1994) and equality (from 56 in France in 1975 to 77 in the United Kingdom in 1977) corresponded with SWB differences of .72 and .42, respectively. All else being equal, two individuals on opposite ends of the espoused political orientation spectrum should differ in SWB by .3, whereas two countries at the poles would differ by the entire range of the scale. This clearly indicates that one’s political environment and perspective contribute to SWB (albeit in different ways), which is important because SWB influences workplace productivity (Judge, Ilies, & Dimotakis, 2010; Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2011; Judge & Locke, 1993; Judge et al., 1998; Judge, Piccolo, et al., 2010), team cohesion, organizational citizenship behavior, counterproductive work behavior, and turnover (Chiaburu, Peng, Oh, Banks, & Lomeli, 2013; Eatough, Chang, Miloslavic, & Johnson, 2011; Simon et al., 2010).

Governments and organizations depend on each other to provide for the citizenry. Jobs, education, and security, which contribute considerably to individual well-being, are just a few issues requiring the two to work together effectively (Diener et al., 1995; Diener & Fujita, 1995; Diener, Sandvik, Seidlitz, & Diener, 1993; Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2011). This should be especially
important to policy makers and managers because a growing body of literature is uncovering how factors that occur outside of organizations can affect employee attitudes and behaviors within them (Brief et al., 2005; Martins, Edleston, & Veiga, 2002; Pugh, Dietz, Brief, & Wiley, 2008). Because politics is omnipresent, managers and policy makers should be aware of how these factors contribute to SWB so that they can make better decisions. For instance, our findings contribute to the current debate about the effect of welfare (or its components, e.g., health care or education) on SWB. Sometimes this debate is implicit—current health care reform in the United States is assumed to increase people’s well-being (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2011). In other cases, the debate is more explicit. In fact, economics Nobel Prize laureates Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen explicitly argued, in a recent report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress, that welfare increases SWB (Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, 2009). Our findings provide a measure of empirical support for their argument.

Study Limitations, Future Research Directions, and Conclusions

Our results should be interpreted in light of the study’s limitations. First, although our measures for SWB and political orientation have seen use in previous research and have been shown to be reliable and valid (Di Tella & MacCulloch, 2006; Myers, 2000; Napier & Jost, 2008), using a single item indicator does not allow us to easily estimate the internal consistency of scores on these measures. Future researchers should use multiple-item measures when possible. Second, the low internal consistency of scores on the decommodification composite suggests a fairly high degree of measurement error, which typically attenuates relationships between constructs. Although the Spearman–Brown prophecy formula indicates that doubling the number of indicators (from three to six) would achieve a conventionally acceptable level of internal consistency (i.e., .70), we urge researchers to continue developing measures of this construct. Third, despite the large individual-level sample size, our study was limited to 16 Western European countries. Although this relatively small number of countries may make our results conservative, it is also possible that there may be a different relationship between politics and SWB in other parts of the world (e.g., Asia) because of different values or culture. Scholars generalizing our results beyond a Western European context should do so with appropriate caution and may wish to consider country-level moderators.

As with any new findings, we suggest that future researchers should attempt to replicate our findings using additional measures and data sets such as the International Social Survey Programme, newer Eurobarometers that have more recently become available, the World Values Survey, and the Database of Political Institutions from the World Bank. Future researchers also might further explore potential interactions involving political variables. For instance, we observed several significant interactions between most country-level (Level 2) variables as briefly mentioned in the results. Moreover, subsequent inquiry could focus on refining the concept of political ideology (right–left) by perhaps creating subdimensions and exploring how they relate to SWB. Notably, views on fiscal and social issues are often misaligned. Accordingly, political views (e.g., welfare spending, taxation, preferences for size of government, preferences for redistribution, public good provision, health care, and education) could be used to define conservatism and liberalism. The goal of this exercise would be to find out what it is specifically about the broad concept of conservatism that contributes to SWB. Finally, our study found an inverse relationship between enacted and espoused values. Previous research (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorffman, & Gupta, 2004; Taras, Steel, & Kirkman, 2010) also uncovered several examples where values and practices have been found to rate negatively without identifying the specific reason for each case. We suggest future researchers investigate the specific reasons these inverse relationships occur to contribute to the theoretical understanding of the values-to-practice phenomenon.

Politics are everywhere—individuals have political views and countries have political cultures. In this study, we showed how politics at the individual and collective levels simultaneously and differentially influence SWB. Our results explained the SWB political paradox by uncovering that how scholars measure politics matters. It is interesting that both enacted left-wing politics (liberalism) and espoused right-wing politics (conservatism) relate positively to SWB.

References
