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## Happiness and Democracy, 1972-2008

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*Before the avalanche of democratization that occurred around 1990, happiness was strongly correlated with democracy: at the national level, subjective well-being showed correlations close to .8 with such measures of democracy as the Freedom House political rights and civil liberties scores. This could mean that: (1) living under democratic institutions makes people much happier than living under authoritarian ones; or (2) high levels of subjective well-being are conducive to democracy. It is also possible that the correlation could be spurious or reciprocal. Using data on happiness levels of 42 publics from 1981 to 2007 and measures of democracy levels from 1972 to 2008, this paper attempts to clarify why subjective well-being is linked with democracy. If democracy causes democracy, then transitions to democracy should be followed by dramatic increases in happiness. But if happiness is a relatively stable variable that is conducive to democracy but not necessarily raised by it, democratization not be followed by rising happiness – and by moving large numbers of less happy societies into the ranks of the democracies, a major wave of democratization would weaken the subsequent correlation between democracy and happiness.*

*Keywords: Happiness, life satisfaction, democracy, economic development, modernization theory, Freedom House scores, European Value Survey, World Value Survey.*

Throughout the two decades before the massive wave of democratization that occurred around 1990, reported happiness levels showed strong correlations with all of the widely-accepted measures of democracy. For example, the national-level linkages between subjective well-being and the Freedom House political rights and civil liberties scores were in the .7 to .8 range—a remarkably strong correlation that could be interpreted to mean that over half of the total variation in life satisfaction and happiness was caused by a society’s level of democracy.

But it could also mean that a society’s level of democracy tends to reflect its public’s level of subjective well-being.

Correlation may reflect causal linkages, but it does not prove them. There are several possible reasons why two variables go together, including the possibility that the correlation emerged from random processes. With data from more than 80 societies, the probability that a correlation of this strength would emerge randomly is below the .001 level; and the fact that it emerges repeatedly in successive surveys, makes randomness even less

likely. The strong correlation between subjective well-being and democracy could indicate that: (1) living under democratic institutions makes people much happier than living under authoritarian ones; or (2) high levels of subjective well-being are conducive to democracy; or (3) the correlation could be spurious, reflecting the fact that both subjective well-being and democracy are strongly correlated with some other variable such as high levels of economic development; or (4) happiness and democracy might be linked in a reciprocal relationship – possibly with a causal flow that is much stronger in one direction than the other. The answer to this puzzle has far-reaching implications. If the linkage is not spurious and democracy makes people happy, it is a strong argument for adopting democracy; on the other hand, if we find that high levels of happiness are conducive to democracy, this may help us understand how democracy emerges and flourishes.

Using data on happiness levels of 42 publics for which we have substantial time series evidence from 1981 to 2007 from the Values Surveys, and the Freedom House measures of democracy levels from 1972 to 2008, this paper attempts to clarify whether democracy leads to happiness or happiness is conducive to democracy. If democracy produces happiness, then transitions to democracy should be followed by dramatic increases in happiness within the countries that make the transition. But if happiness is a relatively stable variable that is conducive to democracy but not necessarily raised by it, democratization need *not* be followed by rising happiness. In fact, by moving large numbers of less happy societies into the ranks of the democracies, a major wave of democratization would weaken the subsequent correlation between democracy and happiness.

Though the political culture literature has argued that interpersonal trust and tolerance play an important role in the emergence and flourishing

of democratic institutions, it has largely neglected the role of subjective well-being. But it is logical to expect high levels of happiness and life satisfaction would be linked with democracy. Political economy research demonstrates that if the economic cycle has been going well, support for the incumbents increases. Support for a democratic regime reflects a much deeper long-term processes. If, in the long run, people feel that life has been good under a given regime, it gives rise to feelings of legitimacy and diffuse support for that *regime*. High levels of subjective well-being can also help stabilize authoritarian regimes, but authoritarian systems can survive through coercion; democratic regimes, on the other hand, must have mass support or they can be voted out of existence as was the Weimar republic. Thus, societies with happy publics are relatively likely to remain democratic in the long term. Accordingly, Inglehart (1990) found that happiness is strongly related to democracy (cf. Frey & Stutzer, 2000; Inglehart & Klingemann, 2000).

There is another reason why happiness is linked with democracy. High levels of happiness and life satisfaction are part of a syndrome of interpersonal trust, tolerance and political activism (“Self-expression values”) that leads people to give high priority to free choice in all domains of life—including political freedom. Economic growth tends to produce cultural changes in which the public gradually places increasing emphasis on autonomy and self-expression—which give rise to demands for a more liberal political order (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005). The emergence of democratic institutions increases people’s free choice in politics, freedom of expression, and freedom to travel. This, in the long run, tends to produce higher levels of subjective well-being. This relationship seems to be reciprocal: High levels of subjective well-being are conducive to democracy, and democracy provides a

wider range of free choice that is conducive to subjective well-being (Haller & Hadler, 2004; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Ott, 2001; Veenhoven, 2000; Welsch, 2003). Although this relationship is reciprocal, it is asymmetrical. The tendency for democratization to bring happiness is uncertain, as this paper will demonstrate. In the short term (which may be many years), democratization can bring declining happiness. For decades before the surge of democratization that occurred around 1990, high levels of subjective well-being were linked with democracy. Conversely, low levels of subjective well-being were a leading indicator of malaise and political instability: authoritarian regimes were most likely to collapse in countries that had low levels of happiness and overall life satisfaction. Since happiness is a relatively stable variable, the 1990 wave of democratization moved large numbers of relatively unhappy societies

into the ranks of the democracies—dramatically weakening the correlation between democracy and happiness as measured in the following years.

A remarkably strong relationship existed between democracy and the self-reported happiness and life satisfaction levels of given publics, throughout the period before the explosion of democracy around 1990. Fig. 1 shows this relationship among the 42 countries for which we have long-term survey data.<sup>1</sup> This figure is based on a combined index of subjective well-being based on each country's mean level of life satisfaction and happiness, as measured in the first two waves of the Values Surveys, carried out in 1981 and 1990 respectively.<sup>2</sup> Levels of subjective well-being were relatively stable during this period (correlating at above .8 from one wave of surveys to the next).

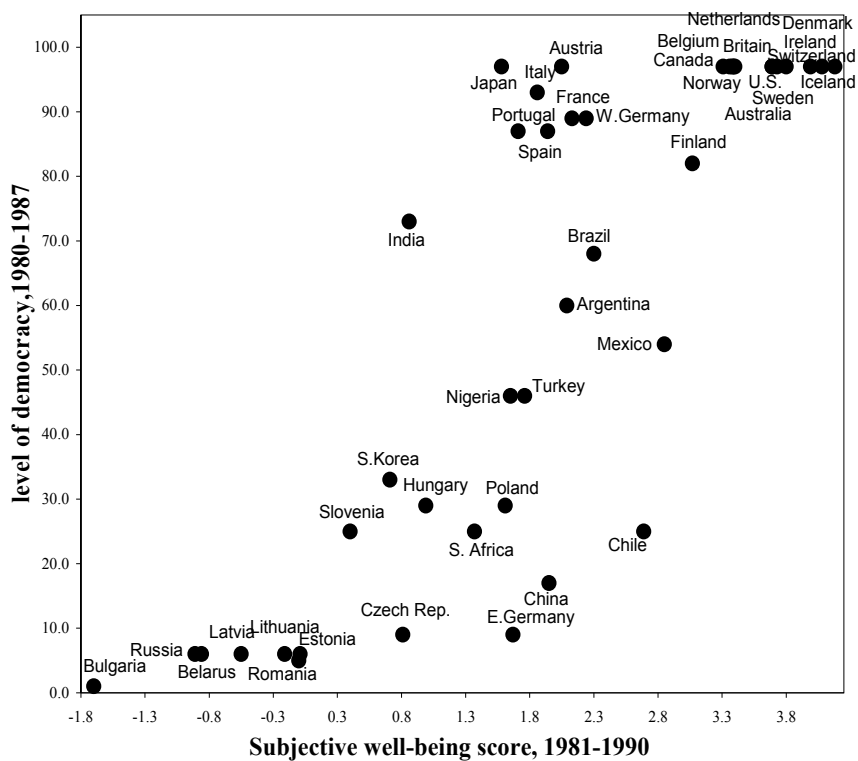


Fig. 1. The linkage between Happiness and Democracy before the Third Wave of Democratization ( $r = .81$ )  
 Source: Values Surveys, 1981-1990 and Freedom House scores, 1981-1987

Life satisfaction is coded on a 10-point scale on which 1 indicates that the respondent is not at all satisfied, and 10 indicates the highest level of life satisfaction; happiness was coded in four categories ranging from 1 “very happy” to 4 “not at all happy.” In order to give equal weight to the two variables (and to produce a scale on which high scores indicate high happiness and life satisfaction), a Subjective well-being index was constructed as follows: Subjective well-being = life satisfaction – 2.5 \* happiness. As Fig. 1 demonstrates, happiness and democracy were strongly linked: the correlation between the two is  $r = .81$ . Since the subjective well-being levels of given societies were relatively stable, one finds equally strong relationships between subjective well-being and these countries’ Freedom House scores throughout the period from 1972 to 1987.

Both democracy and human happiness vary a great deal from one society to another. The societies examined here range from long-established democracies such as Britain, Sweden, Denmark, the United States and Canada, to countries that were extremely authoritarian in 1981-1986, such as China, Russia, and Bulgaria. Happiness levels also vary greatly. For example, in Ireland 41 percent of the public described themselves as “very happy;” while in Belarus, only 5 percent described themselves as “very happy.”

Fig. 1 shows a strong correlation between subjective well-being and democracy; as we have suggested, this linkage could reflect the fact that living under democratic institutions makes people relatively happy; or that high levels of subjective well-being are conducive to democratic institutions; or the correlation could be spurious, reflecting the fact that both subjective well-being and democracy are strongly correlated with some other variable. The most likely such variable is economic development. For some time, it has

been clear that the people of rich countries show much higher levels of subjective well-being than do the people of poor countries (Inglehart, 1990). Although for many years, it was debated whether economic development was conducive to rising levels of subjective well-being, recent research makes it reasonably clear that development does tend to bring rising happiness—although it does so on a curve of diminishing returns: the impact of development is much stronger among low-income and middle-income countries than it is among rich countries, and the fact that, until recently, we only had time series data from rich countries, tended to conceal the fact that economic development tends to bring rising levels of subjective well-being (Inglehart et al., 2008; Diener et al., forthcoming; Inglehart, forthcoming).

As modernization theory implies, economic development tends to bring both democracy and happiness – but the linkage between democracy and happiness is not spurious. As Table 1 demonstrates, it persists even when we control for per capita Gross Domestic Product. As Lipset (1959) pointed out long ago, and as subsequent research has confirmed repeatedly, economic development is strongly linked with democracy. A society’s per capita GDP by itself explains almost 57 percent of the cross-national variation on the Freedom House scores (Model 1). But subjective well-being by seems to have an even stronger impact on democracy—accounting for more than 62 percent of the cross-national variance (Model 2). Economic development and subjective well-being together explain fully 67 percent of the variance in democracy (Model 3). These findings are consistent with the interpretation that economic development tends to bring higher levels of subjective well-being, which in turn is conducive to higher levels of democracy – and that economic development is conducive to democracy, in large part, because it brings higher levels of subjective well-being.

Table 1. Predicting Levels of Democracy in 1986. Dependent variable: combined Freedom House scores, 1986

| Independent Variables:                        | Model 1           | Model 2            | Model 3            |
|---|-------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Real GDP per capita, 1980<br>(in \$1000 U.S.) | .825***<br>(.093) | -----              | .508***<br>(.071)  |
| Subjective well-being index around 1985       | -----             | 2.562***<br>(.250) | 1.395***<br>(.318) |
| Adjusted R-Squared                            | .568              | .624               | .671               |
| Number of Countries                           | 43                | 43                 | 43                 |

In any case, it seems clear that the correlation between subjective well-being and democracy is not a spurious one, due to the fact that both variables are linked with economic development.

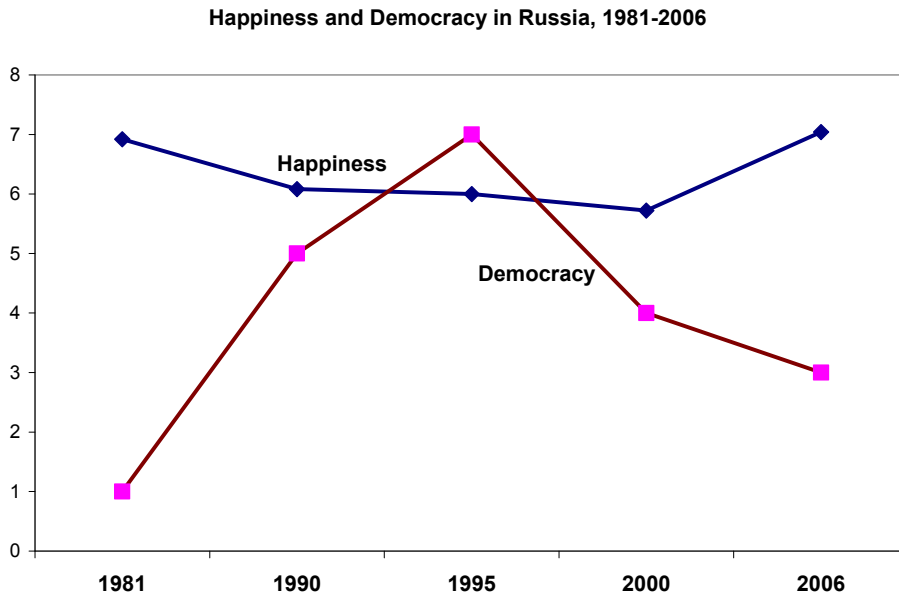
During the past two decades, until about 2008, the world as a whole experienced the highest rate of economic growth ever recorded, and fully half of the world’s population emerged from subsistence-level poverty. These changes increased the extent to which the residents of these societies have free choice in how to live their lives, bringing more economic choice, more social tolerance and greater political freedom. Inglehart et al (2008) argue that these changes have led to rising levels of happiness within most societies.

Though they experienced democratization and rising social tolerance, in many of the ex-communist countries the transition to democracy and a market economy was accompanied by severe economic decline. In Russia, for example, real income fell to less than half its pre-transition level, and life expectancy declined by several years. Democratization did not bring rising happiness, as Fig. 2 demonstrates. Although democracy, as measured by the Freedom House scores, rose sharply in Russia from 1981 to 1990, happiness did not rise—it actually declined somewhat (though happiness levels were much more stable than levels of democracy, as is true almost everywhere). By 1990, Russia had reached

a level on the Freedom House scores that moved it into the category of countries coded as “Free.” But authoritarian rule staged a subsequent comeback in Russia, as was reflected in the Freedom House scores. By 2006, Russia was again coded as strongly authoritarian—but, with economic recovery, happiness levels actually rose. Democracy and happiness moved on very different trajectories.

One way to explain the strong linkage between happiness and democracy, would be to assume that democracy makes people happy. This interpretation is appealing and suggests that we have a quick fix for most of the world’s problems: adopt a democratic constitution and live happily ever after. Unfortunately, the experience of Russia and most of the other Soviet successor states does not support this interpretation. Since their dramatic move toward democracy in 1991, their people have not become happier: with a sharp decline of their economy and society, many of them moved in exactly the *opposite* direction. The correlation between happiness and well-being does not simply reflect the fact that democracy makes people happy: other factors are at least equally important.

Fig. 3A shows the correlation between a society’s level of happiness and its level of democracy at each time point for which we have data on both happiness and democracy.<sup>3</sup> The pattern is striking. From 1972 until shortly before



Note: Democracy is measured by the two Freedom House scales, which range from 1 to 7; their sum ranges from 2 to 14 but since high scores indicate low democracy, their polarity is reversed by subtracting them from 14, producing a scale that ranges from 0 to 12.

Happiness is measured on a scale that ranges from 1 to 4, but since high scores indicate low happiness, polarity is reversed by subtracting from 4, producing a scale that ranges from 0 to 3. This score is then multiplied by 4 to produce a scale that ranges from 0 to 12—giving both happiness and democracy the same 0-12 range.

The 1981 happiness score is from a survey in Tambov oblast, which closely parallels the Russian republic.

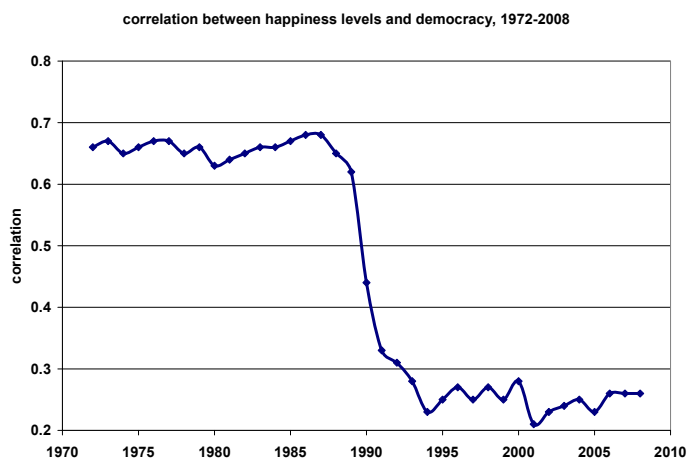
Fig. 2. Happiness and Democracy in Russia, 1981-2006

1990, the two went together to a remarkably strong degree, correlating at near the .7 level. With the wave of democratization that occurred at that point, the correlation dropped sharply. Dozens of countries suddenly made dramatic increases on the Freedom House scales, but their happiness levels only increased slightly, if at all; consequently, by 1995 the correlation between happiness and democracy had plummeted to about the .25 level, remaining there until the most recent measure of democracy in 2008. As is argued below, we believe that in the long run, democracy does tend to be conducive to happiness, but it is clear that democratization does not necessarily bring happiness.

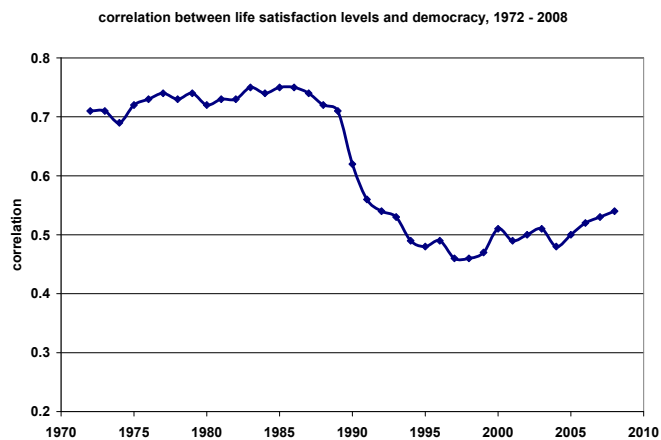
Fig. 3B shows the correlation between life satisfaction and democracy from 1972 to 2008. Although the post-1989 decline is less severe than it is with happiness, the basic pattern is strikingly

similar: from 1972 to 1989, life satisfaction levels were correlated with democracy at levels that ranged from .7 to .8. The post-1988 wave of democratization coincided with a dramatic drop in these correlations, falling below .5 and remaining around there until 2004; in the last few years, the linkage between life satisfaction and democracy has been rising, moving up to about .55. Although happiness has not yet recovered, with economic recovery, life satisfaction did begin to recover. Fig. 3C shows the correlation between democracy and another indicator of well-being, self-reported health – generally a fairly good indicator of objective health. The pattern is remarkably similar to that found with happiness and life satisfaction. We find consistently strong correlations from the early 1970s until about 1986—followed by a sharp decline that persists through the end of the time series. It seems that adopting democracy does not

### A. Happiness and democracy



### B. Life satisfaction and democracy



### C. Self-reported health and democracy

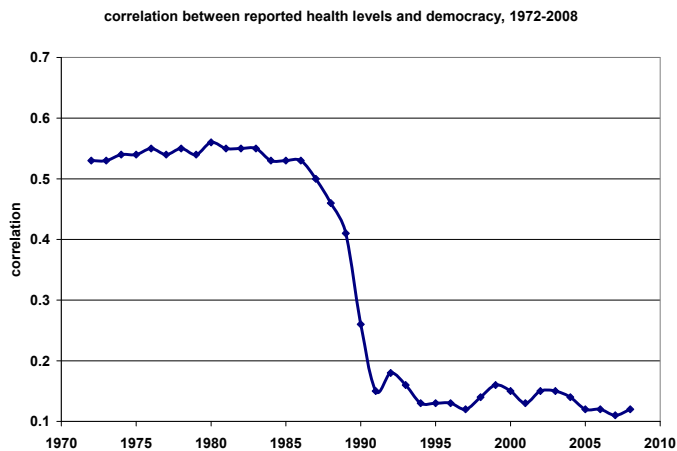


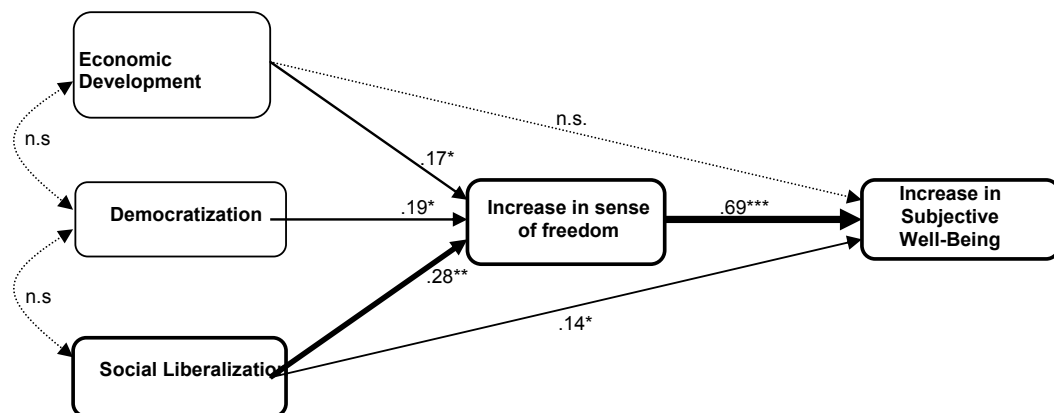
Fig. 3. Correlations between subjective well-being and democracy, 1972-2008

automatically result in high levels of perceived health, any more than it automatically brings high levels of happiness or life satisfaction. The belief that institutions determine culture receives no support from these data.

Nevertheless, we believe that in the long run, democracy does tend to be conducive to subjective well-being—though clearly not in a determinist relationship. Democracy contributes to a climate of free choice that *is* conducive to happiness. People who feel they have relatively high levels of control and choice over how their lives turn out, consistently report higher levels of life satisfaction. Free choice tends to make people happier. And rising emphasis on free choice favors democracy – the institutions that maximize political freedom. But democratic institutions are by no means the only factor shaping human happiness. Protracted periods of economic growth seem to be conducive to rising levels of happiness—and severe economic decline can have the opposite effect. Similarly, the breakdown of the social and political order

that accompanied the collapse of communism in many societies, was linked with declining levels of happiness, despite a sharp, sudden increase in political rights and civil liberties, as measured by the Freedom House indicators. We suspect that democratic institutions do contribute to human happiness to an appreciable extent, but the causal linkage seems to work much more strongly in the opposite direction, with democratic institutions being much more likely to flourish in a social climate characterized by high levels of subjective well-being—which are linked with high levels of trust, tolerance and emphasis on self-expression (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005).

Fig. 4 shows a path analysis of how this works. As Inglehart, Foa, Peterson and Welzel (2008) argue, the period from 1981 to 2007 brought a conjunction of favorable factors. Many low-income and middle-income countries experienced exceptionally high rates of economic growth. Rich countries had less economic growth but they experienced remarkable rates of social liberation, with hard-core opposition to gender



Notes: Path coefficients are standardized regression weights calculated with AMOS. Number of cases is 56. Model fit statistics: NFI=.92, IFI=.94, CFI=.93. Explained variance in increase of sense of freedom is 44% and 62% in increase in subjective well-being. Paths on increase in sense of freedom are calculated controlling for the initial level of sense of freedom and paths on subjective well-being growth are calculated controlling for the initial subjective well-being level. The effects of the initial sense of freedom and subjective well-being levels are not displayed, to produce a more readable chart. A direct path from democratization to subjective well-being growth was also specified and found to be insignificant; this path is also not displayed. Significance levels: \* (p below .10), \*\* (p below .05), \*\*\* (p below .01).

Source: Inglehart, Foa, Peterson and Welzel, 2008.

Fig. 4



equality and homosexuality falling by roughly half since 1981. And in the same period, dozens of countries experienced democratization. The world as a whole experienced exceptional economic growth, widespread democratization and increasing tolerance of social diversity. These changes expanded freedom of choice, which was conducive to rising levels of subjective well-being. As Figure 4 indicates, democratization and rising social tolerance contributed even more than economic development to a growing sense of free choice, and thus to rising levels of happiness.

There is no guarantee that these rising levels of subjective well-being will continue. On

the contrary, democratization tends to be a one-shot occurrence. Moreover, since 2008 economic growth has given way to severe economic decline—which makes it uncertain that social liberation will continue. If the recent economic decline becomes as severe and protracted as the Great Depression of the 1930s, the social and political implications are serious. Falling levels of subjective well-being were a leading indicator of the collapse of former communist systems. But these findings also have positive implications for social scientists and policymakers, for they imply that human happiness is not fixed, but can be influenced by belief systems and social policies.

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- <sup>1</sup> The vertical axis is based on the sum of each country's Freedom House scores for 1981 to 1986, which run from 2 to 14, with high scores reflecting *low* levels of democracy. In order to reverse this polarity, each country's score was subtracted from 14, producing scores ranging from 0 to 12 for any given year, and a maximum score of 72 for the six-year period. The original happiness scores ranged from 1 to 4, with high scores indicating low levels of happiness; their polarity was also reversed, by subtracting each country's mean score from 4, to produce scores ranging from 0 to a theoretical maximum of 3, which would be obtained if everyone described themselves as "very happy." Accordingly, on Figure 1, high scores indicate high levels of happiness and democracy. Similarly strong correlations emerge when we use a much larger pool of nations.
- <sup>2</sup> These data are from the 1981 European Values Study survey and the 1990 European Values Study and World Values Surveys. For further information about these surveys, see the respective web sites: <http://www.europeanvalues.nl/> and <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org>
- <sup>3</sup> Freedom House provides political rights and civil liberties scores for every year since 1972, but our measures of happiness and life satisfaction levels are available only since 1981 and were carried out subsequently only in 1990, 1995, 2000 and 2006. But the happiness and life satisfaction levels are remarkably stable, even for countries like Russia that experienced catastrophic changes: they change so little over time that influential theories have emerged to explain why it is *impossible* for them to change (one interpretation linking them to genetic factors). Consequently, we feel reasonably confident in projecting the 1981 levels back to the early 1970s, and in estimating the subjective well-being scores in intermediate years, from the empirical readings immediately before and after a given year in which democracy was measured.

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## Счастье и демократия, 1972-2008

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*Прежде чем пошла лавина демократизации, которая пришла на период около 1990 года, счастье строго коррелировалось с демократией: на национальном уровне субъективное благосостояние показало корреляции близко к 8 с такими мерами демократии, как политические права, свободы и множество гражданских свобод. Это могло означать, что: (1) проживание с демократическими институтами делает людей намного более счастливыми, чем проживание с авторитарными; или (2) высокий уровень субъективного благосостояния способствует демократии. Также возможно, что корреляция могла быть побочной или взаимной. При помощи данных об уровнях счастья 42 выборок с 1981 до 2007 гг. и мер уровней демократии с 1972 до 2008 гг. настоящая статья пытается разъяснить, почему субъективное благосостояние соединено с демократией. Если демократию вызывает демократия, то переходы к демократии должны сопровождаться драматическими увеличениями счастья. Но если счастье относительно устойчивая переменная, которая является способствующей демократии, но не обязательно повышающаяся ею, демократизация не сопровождается возрастающим счастьем – и, перемещая большие количества менее счастливых обществ в разряды демократических государств, главная волна демократизации ослабила бы последующую корреляцию между демократией и счастьем.*

*Ключевые слова: счастье, жизненное удовлетворение, демократия, экономическое развитие, теория модернизации.*

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