
More Than Money

HAPPINESS IN THE UNITED STATES 243 YEARS AFTER INDEPENDENCE

A report from The Life, Liberty, and Happiness Project

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The Center for Survey Research
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* We thank Menna T. Abdel-Salam, Avery Hester, Rachel Alexander-Lee, Disha Naik, and Christopher J. Rudkowski for their assistance on this report.

This study was reviewed by the East Carolina University and Medical Center Institutional Review Board (#18-000970).

As Americans begin celebration of the 4th of July holiday, we are reminded of Thomas Jefferson's decree that all people are endowed with the unalienable right to pursue happiness. Yet, the right to pursue happiness brings no guarantee that it will be achieved. So, how happy are Americans?

A new report from the Life, Liberty, and Happiness Project at East Carolina University's Center for Survey Research (CSR) finds some promising news: Americans are quite happy. Using data collected from both an online and randomized mail survey of more than 1,000 adults nationwide, the results reveal that 78 percent of Americans somewhat or strongly agree with the statement, "I am happy in general." These results mirror those published one year ago, when the CSR reported that nearly seven in ten Americans expressed satisfaction with their lives.¹

On the surface, these results seem easily explained by the strong U.S. economy, which has now spanned two presidential administrations. Indeed, periods of economic growth and rising incomes produce happier times for Americans.² Currently, evidence of sustained economic growth is clear. Since May of 2014, U.S. payroll employment has added 11.7 million jobs, with job expansion lasting for 56 consecutive months.³ Moreover, the rate of unemployment has hit a near 50-year low.⁴

Despite economic growth, not all Americans have benefitted equally during this time of prolonged prosperity. Regardless of one's financial situation over the past several years, happiness is not universal, nor is it always tied to economic success. Aside from money, what other factors are associated with happiness? Our results indicate that presidential approval, attitudes about whether hard work equates to success, and whether one feels proud to be an American are additional factors that correlate with happiness. (A summary of this report's key findings appears on the next page, with the full report on the pages that follow.)

¹ See the Life, Liberty, and Happiness Project, ECU Center for Survey Research, July 2, 2018, https://surveyresearch.ecu.edu/wp-content/pv-uploads/sites/1566/2018/06/LLH_Report_7-2-2018v2.pdf

² See Christopher Peterson, "Money and Happiness," *Psychology Today*, June 6, 2008, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-good-life/200806/money-and-happiness>

³ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Employment Growth Accelerates in 2018, Extending a Lengthy Expansion," *Monthly Labor Review*, May 2019, https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2019/article/employment-growth-accelerates-in-2018.htm#_edn7

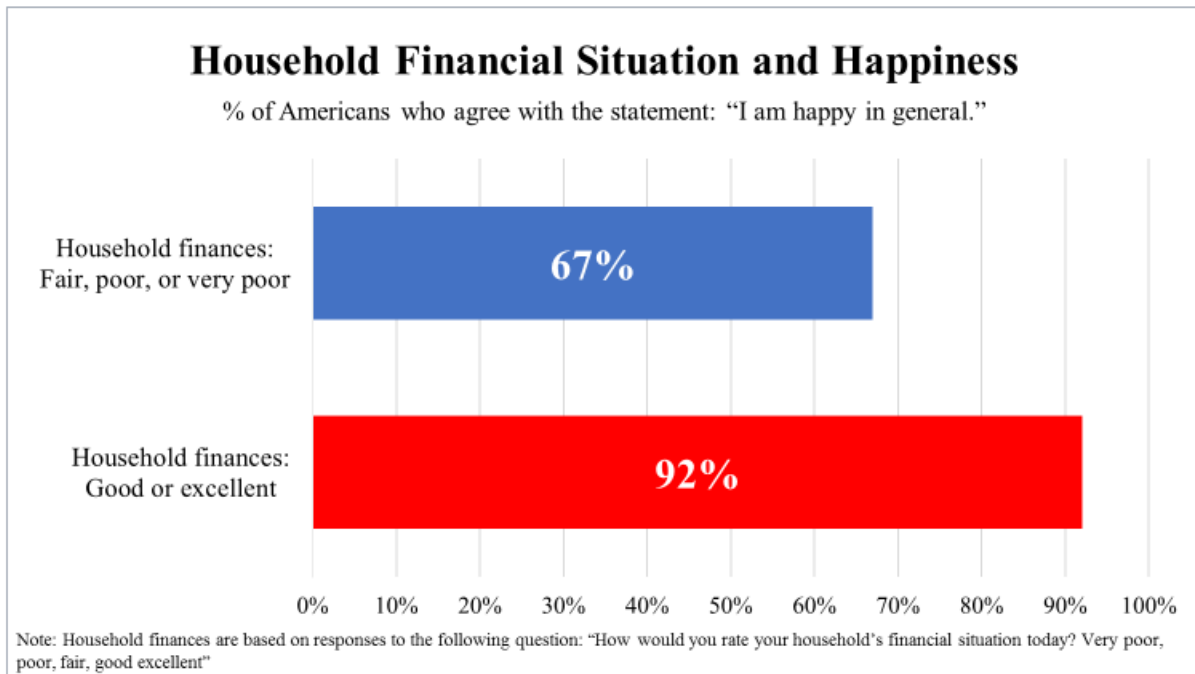
⁴ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Charting the Labor Market: Data from the Current Population Survey (CPS), June 7, 2019, https://www.bls.gov/web/empsit/cps_charts.pdf. See also National Public Radio, "Unemployment Falls to Lowest Level in Almost 50 Years," May 3, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/05/03/719941260/unemployment-falls-to-lowest-level-in-almost-50-years>

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- **A high percentage of Americans report being happy in general.** Approximately 78 percent of Americans agree with the statement, “I am happy in general.”
 - **As expected, household financial situation is related to happiness.** Americans who rate their household’s financial situation as “good” or “excellent” are more likely to report that they are happy in general than those who rate their household’s financial situation as “fair,” “poor,” or “very poor” by a margin of 92 percent to 67 percent.
 - **However, there is more to happiness than money.** As noted above, two out of three Americans report being happy even if their household situation is rated fair, poor, or very poor. Among these less financially well-off Americans:
 - **Presidential approval correlates with happiness.** Approximately 81 percent of less financially well-off Americans report being happy if they approve of how Donald Trump is doing his job as president. This falls to 60 percent for those who disapprove of the president’s performance.
 - Among all Americans regardless of household finances: 88 percent of those who approve of President Trump’s job performance report being happy compared to 71 percent who disapprove of President Trump’s job performance.
 - **Attitudes about whether hard work equates to success are associated with happiness.** Among Americans who rate their financial situation as “fair,” “poor,” or “very poor,” 77 percent report being happy if they believe that most people can succeed if they are willing to work hard. In contrast, only 53 percent are happy if they believe that hard work is no guarantee of success.
 - Among all Americans regardless of household finances: 86 percent of those who connect hard work with success are happy compared to 60 percent who believe hard work is not necessarily sufficient to bringing about success.
 - **Happiness is related to whether a person is proud to be an American.** Among less financially well-off Americans, 70 percent report being happy if they are proud to be an American compared to 56 percent who report being happy if they do not report being proud to be an American.
 - Among all Americans regardless of household finances: 81 percent of those who are proud to be American are happy compared to 66 percent who do not report being proud to be an American.
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Confirmation of the Expected: An Individual’s Financial Situation is Associated with Happiness

Americans who rate their household’s financial situation as “fair,” “poor,” or “very poor,” are less likely to report being happy in general (67 percent) than those who rate their financial situation as “good” or “excellent” (92 percent).

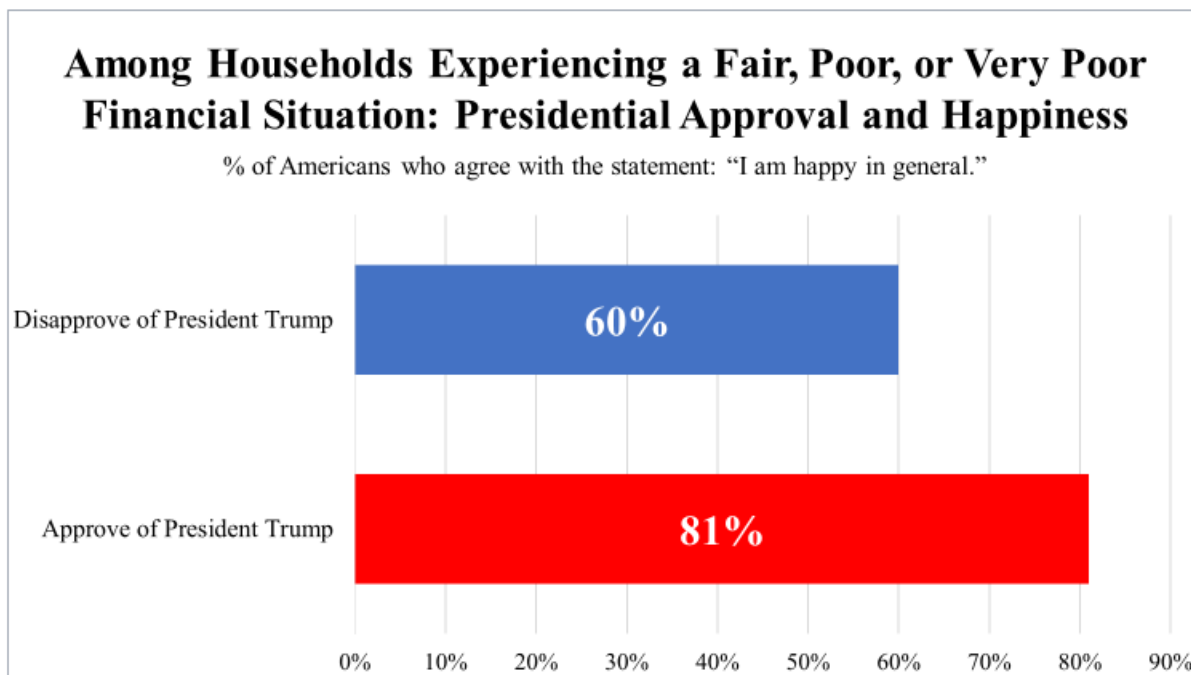


Because financially well-off Americans (i.e., “good” or “excellent”) are significantly more likely to report being happy, we focus primarily on Americans who do not rate their household’s financial situation as positive (i.e., “fair, poor, or very poor”) in the sections that follow.

Presidential Approval and Happiness

Among all Americans, our findings show that those who approve of President Trump’s job performance are more likely to be happy than those who disapprove (88 percent to 71 percent). Turning to Americans *who do not rate their household’s financial situation as positive*, those who approve of President Trump are significantly more likely to report that they are happy in general (81 percent) than those who do not (60 percent). This result likely reflects a phenomenon that is larger than President

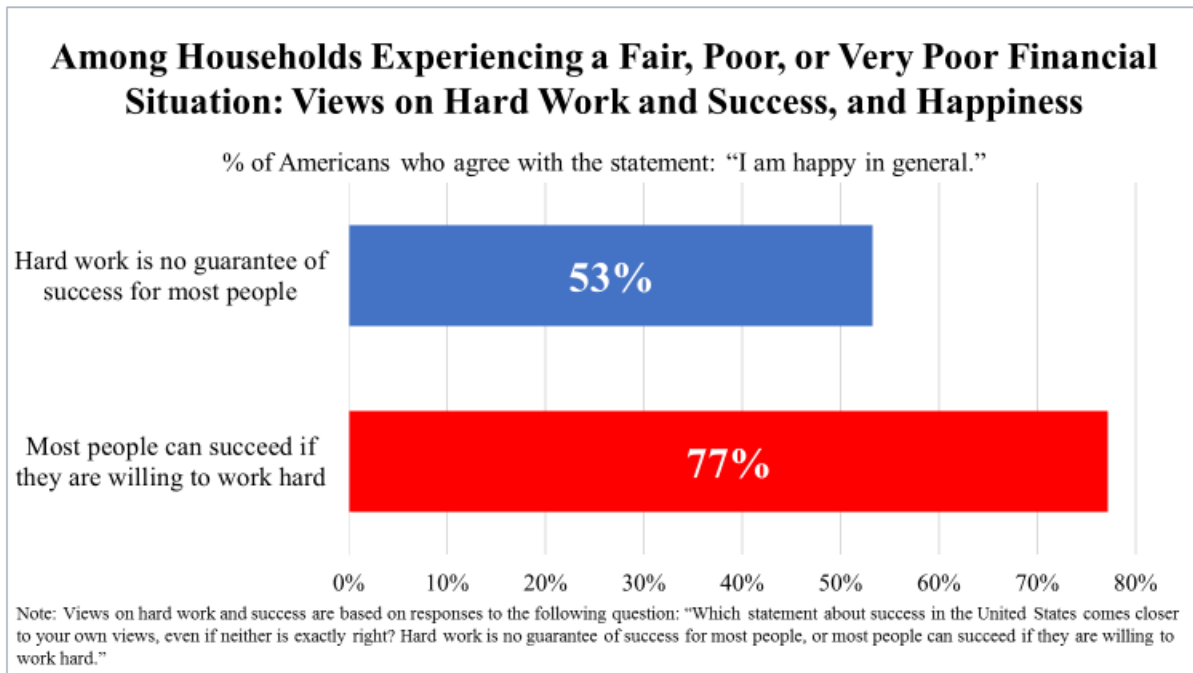
Trump, as polls taken during the Obama presidency reveal that self-identified Democrats were more likely than self-identified Republicans to view their own financial situation as getting better.⁵ As Americans grow more politically polarized, it seems fair to speculate that whether one approves or not of the president may become even more strongly associated with happiness.



Attitudes About Hard Work and Success, and Happiness

Survey participants were asked to answer the following question, "Which statement about success in the United States comes closer to your own views, even if neither is exactly right: Most people can succeed if they are willing to work hard, or Hard work is no guarantee of success for most people." Among the less financially well-off, those who believe that most people can succeed if they are willing to work hard, are more likely to report that they are happy than those do not by a margin of 77 percent to 53 percent. This suggests that a poor financial situation has a much weaker correlation with happiness when one holds the belief that hard work can bring about success.

⁵ Frank Newport, "Americans View Finances Through Lens of Political Identity," Gallup, April 30, 2018, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/233576/americans-view-finances-lens-political-identity.aspx>



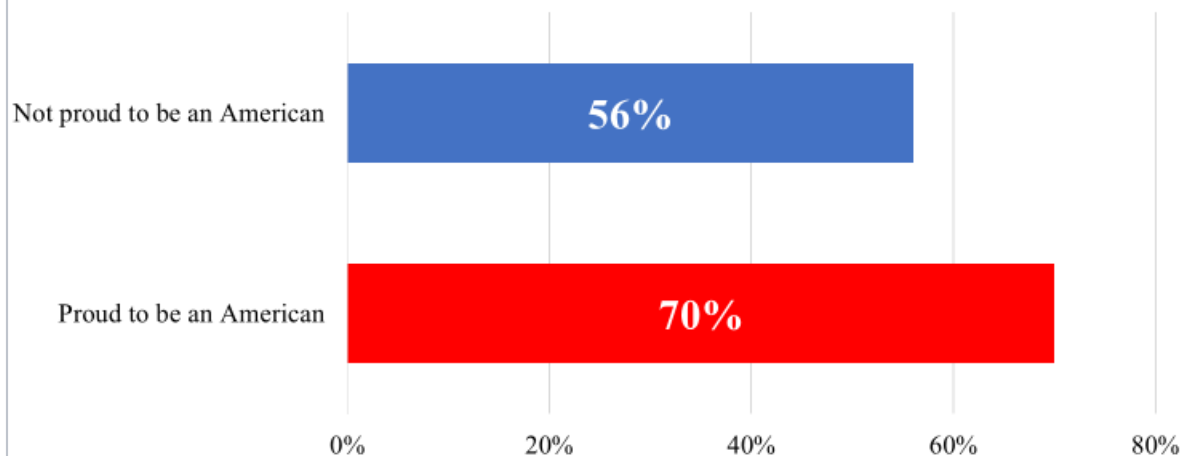
“Proud to be an American” and Happiness

A large majority of respondents report that they are proud to be American (79 percent), leaving about one-in-five who answer “no” to the question, “These days, are you proud to be an American?” Those who are proud to be American are more likely to report that they are happy than those who do not report being proud to be American by a margin of 81 percent to 66 percent.

This difference remains similar even when looking only at those who are not in a good financial situation. Among those in a fair, poor, or very poor financial situation, seven out of ten people (70 percent) who report being proud to be American also report being happy. In comparison, only about half (56 percent) of those in the same financial situation who did not report being proud to be Americans are happy. While finances strongly correlate with happiness, so do other characteristics, such as whether one feels proud to be an American.

Among Households Experiencing a Fair, Poor, or Very Poor Financial Situation: Proud to be an American and Happiness

% of Americans who agree with the statement: "I am happy in general."



Final Thoughts

Thomas Jefferson asserted the right to pursue happiness in the Declaration of Independence, and once stated, "The purpose of government is to enable the people of a nation to live in safety and *happiness*." On this coming 4th of July holiday, Jefferson would surely be pleased to know that a high percentage of Americans are indeed happy.

What factors are associated with our happiness? During our present time of economic growth, one's household financial situation certainly matters. Those who report a good to excellent financial situation are generally more likely to report being happy than those who are less financially well-off.

However, when narrowing the analysis to only those who are experiencing less than desirable financial situations, there is still a significant portion of happy Americans (67 percent). What factors are associated with their happiness? The results in this report suggest that in an increasingly polarized political environment, political considerations appear to matter. Specifically, among those who face more challenging financial circumstances, those who approve of President Trump's job performance are more likely to report that they are happy than those who disapprove of his job performance. While this is likely not a result exclusive to President Trump, the results do support the notion that a relationship exists between how one feels about the job performance of the sitting president and happiness.

The results also point to two other factors that are connected to happiness: attitudes about hard work and success, and how proud a person is to be an American. Again, among less financially well-off Americans, those who equate hard work as the primary determinant of success and those who report being proud to be an American are more likely to report that they are happy in general than those who do not think hard work is a guarantee of success and those who do not report that they are proud to be an American. Taken together, happiness is certainly shaped by money and finances, but, as the old adage goes, “money isn’t everything” with regard to happiness.

Methodology

This report was based on a mixed mode of responses from the Internet and mail. In total, the sample consisted of completed responses from 1,049 adults, 18 years of age or older, living in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia. The mail surveys were delivered to 3,500 randomly selected addresses in the United States. Approximately 431 of these addresses were returned as undeliverable. The mail respondents were contacted in three waves, starting with an informational postcard that introduced the survey, the survey, and a reminder to complete the survey. There were 323 completed and returned surveys at the time of this writing, producing a response rate of 11 percent. The mail surveys were collected between May 20 and June 21, 2019.

The online portion of the survey was conducted among a demographically representative national sample of 726 adults age 18 or older, living in all 50 states. Respondents for this portion of the survey were selected from a group of over one million people that participate in the Qualtrics survey platform. Participants were self-selected into the survey, rather than through random selection. To avoid self-selection bias, participants were not told the nature of the survey when asked to participate. Additionally, to ensure data quality, three validity checks were included in the online survey to ensure that respondents were reading the questions carefully before answering them. The online interviews were conducted between May 21 and May 30, 2019.

The combined sample of mail and Internet respondents were weighted by age, gender, race, education, party identification, and mode. The credibility interval, much like a margin of error, is plus or minus 3.4 percentage points, and takes design effects into consideration. For additional information, please see the ECU-CSR’s AAPOR Transparency Initiative report at <https://surveyresearch.ecu.edu/lifelibertyhappiness/>.