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The Relationship between Democracy and Subjective Well-Being as a Function of Anti-Democratic Attitudes: A Multilevel Analysis of 78 Countries Worldwide

Abstract

Past research has shown a non-significant association between the level of democracy and subjective well-being. This study attempts to address this inconsistency by examining the potential moderating role of anti-democratic attitudes. Drawing on a discrepancy theory framework, it was hypothesized that anti-democratic attitudes would moderate the association between the level of democracy and subjective well-being. To measure subjective well-being (i.e., satisfaction with life and happiness) and anti-democratic attitudes, data from the 7th wave of the World Value Survey as well as from the European Values Study 2017 were used. The level of democracy was assessed using the V-Dem's Electoral Democracy Index 2020. Data on 131,846 participants from 78 countries around the world were available for this study. Findings from multilevel mixed-effects linear regressions revealed that the relationship between the level of democracy and subjective well-being was positive and stronger at lower levels of anti-democratic attitudes compared to higher levels of anti-democratic attitudes. Subjective well-being is a function of the interaction between the level of democracy and negative attitudes toward democracy.

Keywords: well-being, happiness, attitude, democracy, life satisfaction

The Relationship between Democracy and Subjective Well-Being as a Function of Anti-Democratic Attitudes: A Multilevel Analysis of 78 Countries Worldwide

In the tradition of Western thought, the idea that a democratic system of government is associated with well-being has been present (Dorn et al., 2007; Frey & Stutzer, 2002). Inglehart (1988) postulated that life satisfaction is part of a "civic culture" — a political culture syndrome that was hypothesized to be much likelier in stable democracies. There is some evidence of a positive relationship between democracy and subjective well-being (e.g., Dorn et al., 2007; Inglehart et al., 2008; Inglehart & Klingemann, 2000; Owen et al., 2008; Prati, 2022a), especially in countries with direct democracy institutions (Frey & Stutzer, 2000a, 2000b, 2002; Radcliff & Shufeldt, 2016) or with an established democratic tradition (Dorn et al., 2007). However, other studies have shown a non-significant association between democracy and subjective well-being, especially when other covariates in the model are taken into account (e.g., Bjørnskov, 2003; Bjørnskov et al., 2010; Dorn et al., 2008; Helliwell et al., 2018; Helliwell et al., 2021; Inglehart & Klingemann, 2000; Ott, 2011; Schyns, 1998; Veenhoven, 2000). More recently, it was found that the relationship between democracy, as conceptualized and measured using the V-Dem's Electoral Democracy Index (Coppedge et al., 2021), and subjective well-being was small in magnitude and curvilinear (Prati, 2022a). Drawing on a discrepancy theory framework (Prati, 2022b), I argue that a reason for the discrepancy in the previous findings is that the relationship between democracy and subjective well-being may depend on anti-democratic attitudes.

A Discrepancy Theory Framework

According to Modernization theorists (e.g., Inglehart, 2000), cultural beliefs and values such as attitudes toward democracy are crucial for the development and sustainability of democratic institutions. Previous studies revealed a positive association between well-being and positive perceptions or attitudes toward democracy such as democratic satisfaction (Neira et al., 2021; Orviska et al., 2014; Stadelmann-Steffen & Vatter, 2012), perceived importance of living in a democracy

(Loubser & Steenekamp, 2017), and democratic attitudes (Tov & Diener, 2009). It should be noted that a positive relationship between well-being and positive perceptions or attitudes toward democracy cannot say anything about the question of whether people who live in a democratic system are more likely to report higher levels of subjective well-being. Notwithstanding, preferences for non-democratic regimes or anti-democratic attitudes may help explain the inconsistency in findings from past research on the relationship between democratic regimes and subjective well-being. There is evidence that for most of human history, preferences for non-democratic regimes or anti-democratic attitudes were dominant (Femia, 2001) and that there is variation across people and countries in attitudes toward democracy (Inglehart, 2003; Inglehart, 2008; Kirsch & Welzel, 2019; Loubser & Steenekamp, 2017). People living in democratic regimes and holding lower levels of anti-democratic attitudes may be happier or more satisfied with life compared to their citizens reporting higher levels of anti-democratic attitudes. Following the same reasoning, people living in non-democratic regimes and holding anti-democratic attitudes may be happier or more satisfied with life compared to their citizens reporting lower anti-democratic attitudes. I argue that a democratic system of government per se is not a decisive factor for subjective well-being but that the relationship between subjective well-being and democracy is influenced by whether citizens hold democratic attitudes. This line of reasoning is consistent with discrepancy theories.

In their review of three decades of research, Diener et al. (2010) acknowledged the value of discrepancy theories in understanding subjective well-being. One assumption of the multiple discrepancies theory (Michalos, 1985) is that the perceived discrepancy between what one has and wants has direct effects on subjective well-being. More specifically, subjective well-being is based on discrepancies between current conditions and multiple standards including aspirations, attitudes, preferences, and expectations. Previous research revealed that subjective well-being is a function of the discrepancy between preferences for non-democratic regimes and political participation (Prati, 2022b).

Based on a discrepancy theory framework, it is reasonable to assume that the relationship between democracy and subjective well-being is not straightforward but is moderated by preferences for non-democratic regimes or anti-democratic attitudes. Specifically, anti-democracy attitudes may influence the relationship between democracy and subjective well-being because people may experience a negative discrepancy if they live in a democratic regime and their preferences are for non-democratic regimes (Prati, 2022a, 2022b).

Purpose of the Present Study

Drawing on a discrepancy theory framework, the research question addressed is whether anti-democratic attitudes moderate the relationship between the level of democracy and subjective well-being. Happiness and life satisfaction are seen as two major components of subjective well-being (SWB), representing the affective and cognitive domains, respectively (Diener, 2000; Diener et al., 1999; Tov & Diener, 2009). Although the two components are strongly correlated, they are distinct (Diener et al., 1999). Therefore, in the present study, the conceptualization of subjective well-being included both life satisfaction and happiness. Therefore, whether anti-democratic attitudes moderate the relationship between the level of democracy and subjective well-being can be examined by testing the following hypotheses:

H1a. The relationship between the level of democracy and life satisfaction would be positive and stronger at lower levels of anti-democratic attitudes compared to higher levels of anti-democratic attitudes.

H1b. The relationship between the level of democracy and happiness would be positive and stronger at lower levels of anti-democratic attitudes compared to higher levels of anti-democratic attitudes.

To investigate the hypothesis of the present study, I included as many countries from all continents as possible. The inclusion of a wide range of countries with different cultural, political, and socioeconomic backgrounds is important to test the hypothesis.

Method

Data and Methods

Data from the 7th wave (2017-2021) of the World Value Survey (Haerpfer et al., 2020) as well as from the European Values Study 2017 (EVS, 2020) were used to measure SWB and anti-democratic attitudes (EVS/WVS, 2021). Specifically, the two major components of subjective well-being (i.e., life satisfaction and happiness), were measured using the following two questions:

- All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days? (Life satisfaction)
- Taking all things together, would you say that you are very happy, rather happy, not very happy, or not at all happy? (Happiness)

A ten-point response option ranging from 1 (*completely dissatisfied*) to 10 (*completely satisfied*) and a four-point response point ranging from 1 (*very happy*) to 4 (*not at all happy*) were used to measure life satisfaction and happiness, respectively. Responses to the question regarding happiness were re-coded using reverse scoring so that a high score represents higher happiness.

Anti-democratic attitudes were assessed by a list of three items preceded by the following question: "I'm going to describe various types of political systems and ask what you think about each as a way of governing this country. For each one, would you say it is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad or very bad way of governing this country? (1) having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections; (2) having experts, not government, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country; (3) having the army rule." The responses to these items were reverse coded

before constructing the latent variable so that a higher value indicates higher anti-democratic attitudes. The omega coefficient for this three-item scale was .63.

The level of democracy was conceptualized and measured using the V-Dem's Electoral Democracy Index 2020 (Coppedge et al., 2021). The Electoral Democracy Index ranges from 0 (not democratic) to 1 (fully democratic). I integrated the V-Dem and EVS/WVS datasets. After having combined the datasets, data from 78 countries around the world including 131,846 participants were available for this study.

Analytic Approach

The 95% confidence interval was used to define statistical significance. Stata 17 was used. Item-level missingness was low overall (>3%). To handle missing data, multiple imputations were employed. Multilevel mixed-effects linear regressions were used. Anti-democratic attitudes were cluster-mean centered. To facilitate the testing and probing of the interactions, simple intercepts, simple slopes, and the region of significance were calculated using the recommendations provided by Bauer and Curran (2005) and Preacher et al. (2006). Specifically, to evaluate the form of moderation effects, the simple slopes technique and the Johnson-Neyman technique were employed using the interactive calculation tool provided by Preacher et al. (2006). When using the simple slopes technique, lower and higher levels of anti-democratic attitudes were defined as one standard deviation below (-1 SD) and above (+ 1 SD) the mean, respectively. Analyses were controlled for the effect of gender, age, education, marital status, employment status, GDP (gross domestic product) at purchasing power parity (PPP) per capita, government effectiveness, political stability, perceptions of corruption, country income group (i.e., low, lower-middle, upper-middle, and high income), and geographic region as defined by the World Bank. The data for the control variables were obtained from the joint EVS/WVS 2017-2021 dataset (EVS/WVS, 2021), V-Dem's dataset 2020 (Coppedge et al., 2021), and the World Bank Data. The control variables were added because of their potential impact on subjective well-being (Diener, 2000; Diener et al.,

2010; Diener et al., 1999; Geerling & Diener, 2020; Inglehart & Klingemann, 2000; Tay et al., 2014; Veenhoven, 2000; Veenhoven, 2018).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

First, two unconditional mean models (i.e., an empty model, that is, a model containing no predictors), one for life satisfaction and the other for happiness, were built to calculate the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC), representing the proportion of the between-cluster variation $\text{var}(u_{0j})$ in the total variation. ICC was .12, 95% CI [.09, .15], and .09, 95% CI [.06, .11], for life satisfaction and happiness, respectively. Then, to investigate the extent to which the effect of anti-democratic attitudes varies between clusters, I compared the deviance of an augmented intermediated model with that of a constrained model (Sommet & Morselli, 2017). Specifically, the constrained intermediate model included anti-democratic attitudes (level-1 variable) and level of democracy (level-2 variable), while the augmented intermediate model adds to the constrained intermediate model the residual term u_{1j} associated with anti-democratic attitudes (i.e., estimating the random slope variance). I performed two likelihood-ratio tests, one for the model predicting life satisfaction and the other for the model predicting happiness. For both outcomes, the deviance of the augmented intermediated model was significantly lower than the deviance of the constrained model, life satisfaction: $\text{LR } \chi^2(1) = 215.77, p < .001$, and happiness: $\text{LR } \chi^2(1) = 123.57, p < .001$. Therefore, the inclusion of the residual term u_{1j} associated with anti-democratic attitudes significantly improves the fit, and the variation of the effect of anti-democratic attitudes between countries should be taken into account.

Testing the Interaction of Anti-Democratic Attitudes and Level of Democracy Predicting SWB

The results of the models testing the interaction between anti-democratic attitudes (Level-1 variable) and the level of democracy (Level-2 variable) predicting SWB (and controlling for covariates) are shown in Table 1. The interaction between the level of democracy and anti-democratic attitudes in

predicting life satisfaction was significant, $b = -0.23$, $SE = 0.08$, $p = .002$, 95% CI [-0.38, -0.09], thereby confirming H1a. Figure 1 reports the plots of the tests of simple slopes and the Johnson-Neyman method for the moderation effect of anti-democratic attitudes on the relationship between the level of democracy and life satisfaction. The tests of simple slopes as well as the Johnson-Neyman method revealed a negative association between the level of democracy and life satisfaction at higher levels of anti-democratic attitudes (+1 *SD*) and a positive association at lower levels of anti-democratic attitudes (-1 *SD*).

The moderation effect of anti-democratic attitudes on the association between the level of democracy and happiness was significant, $b = -0.08$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.12, -0.04]], thereby confirming H1b. Figure 2 shows the plots of the test of simple slopes as well as the Johnson-Neyman procedure for the moderation effect of anti-democratic attitudes on the association between the level of democracy and happiness. The Johnson–Neyman analysis as well as the tests of simple slopes revealed that the conditional association between the level of democracy and happiness was significant and positive when the scores of anti-democratic attitudes were lower (-1 *SD*). When the scores of anti-democratic attitudes were higher (+1 *SD*), the association between the level of democracy and happiness was negative.

Robustness Check

As a robustness check, I also conducted these multilevel analyses testing the interaction without covariates and using complete case analysis instead of multiple imputations of missing data. Using complete case analysis, the moderation effects of anti-democratic attitudes in the relationships between the level of democracy and life satisfaction, $b = -0.27$, $SE = 0.08$, $p = .001$, 95% CI [-0.42, -0.11] and between the level of democracy and life satisfaction, $b = -0.08$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.12, -0.04], were significant. These results did not change after the exclusion of the covariates. Specifically, the interaction between the level of democracy and anti-democratic attitudes in predicting life

satisfaction, $b = -0.23$, $SE = 0.08$, $p = .002$, 95% CI [-0.38, -0.09], and happiness, $b = -0.08$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.13, -0.04], was significant.

Discussion

The primary aim of this study was to address the discrepancy existing in the literature concerning the relationship between the level of democracy and SWB. Although the association between democracy and well-being is well established in the tradition of Western thought (Dorn et al., 2007; Frey & Stutzer, 2002), the literature did not provide solid support for this assumption (e.g., Bjørnskov, 2003; Bjørnskov et al., 2010; Dorn et al., 2008; Helliwell et al., 2018; Helliwell et al., 2021; Inglehart & Klingemann, 2000; Ott, 2011; Prati, 2022a; Schyns, 1998; Veenhoven, 2000). The inconsistencies in the literature seem to suggest that people in non-democratic societies, even the most autocratic regimes, can be happy and satisfied with their lives. A stream of anti-democratic thought and experience has a long history: “From ancient times, as everyone knows, anti-democratic writers have contended that popular governments were unlikely to provide leaders with wisdom and virtue, and insisted on the natural affinity between the people and the despot” (Dahl, 1966, p. 296). However, this does not mean that democratic or autocratic regimes are irrelevant to people’s SWB. So, the question could be put in this way: What are the conditions that need to be present to find a relationship between the level of democracy and SWB? Drawing on a discrepancy theory framework (Michalos, 1985; Prati, 2022b), I argue that the relationship between democracy and subjective well-being is a function of anti-democratic attitudes.

The findings of the present study revealed that democracy and SWB are related when people’s levels of anti-democratic attitudes are lower (H1a and H1b). As the level of anti-democratic attitudes became higher, the association between democracy and SWB tended to disappear. Therefore, consistent with a discrepancy theory framework (Michalos, 1985; Prati, 2022b), SWB depends on the discrepancies between the current regime and attitudes, preferences, and expectations. What people

think about democracy plays an important role when it comes to the association between democracy and SWB.

Theoretical Implications

The relationship between democracy and subjective well-being has been extensively researched. However, there are inconsistencies in findings from past research and recent findings suggest that the relationship between democracy and subjective well-being was nonlinear and small in magnitude (Prati, 2022a). In this regard, the first theoretical implication of the current study is that, due to their nature, democratic regimes are more likely to be associated with SWB when democratic attitudes are shared, developed, and nurtured. Consequently, democratic institutions need to be supported by a democratic culture that rejects anti-democratic attitudes and authoritarian social norms. It should be noted that the relationship between SWB and the level of democracy should be understood as bidirectional rather than unidirectional. There is some evidence supporting the idea that SWB is of great importance in supporting and validating participatory forms of government (Inglehart & Klingemann, 2000). According to Inglehart (1988), life satisfaction is a major component of a specific political culture syndrome that is grounded in long-established democracies. Regardless of the directionality of the relationship, future theorizing and research on the association between the level of democracy and SWB should take into account the role played by anti-democratic attitudes. A second theoretical implication of the current results is that it is now possible to better understand the relationship between democracy and subjective well-being by taking into account cultural beliefs and values such as attitudes toward democracy. A discrepancy theory framework has been proven to be useful for understanding when and how this relationship unfolds.

Practical Implications

Democratization involves political institution-building. Although many states take the long road to democracy, others fall back into autocracy or do not complete their path (Pridham et al., 1997). In the

literature, a debate has been developed to determine the efficacy and effectiveness of democracy assistance programs (e.g., Finkel et al., 2007). The findings of the current study suggest that governments, non-governmental organizations, and agents who work for regime change should consider not only political institution-building but also the promotion of pro-democratic attitudes among citizens. Higher levels of pro-democratic attitudes increase the likelihood that participation may result in increased life satisfaction (Prati, 2022b) and that citizens derive greater subjective well-being from the process of democratization. The findings of the present study suggest that imposing democracy is not only unlikely to succeed (Fritz, 2015) but also unlikely to deliver benefits to the citizens.

Limitations and Strengths

While these results may be interpreted in several ways, there are good reasons to be cautious. First, the assessment of SWB is based on a single-item measure. The use of single-item measures for assessing psychological constructs might be criticized, primarily because it is assumed that such measures might have unacceptably low reliability. Therefore, the appropriateness of single-item measures for a particular construct should be evaluated. The use of single-item measures might be acceptable if the construct being assessed is not complex and ambiguous to respondents (Wanous et al., 1997). Single-item measures of SWB are widely used in the literature and perform similarly compared to the corresponding multiple-item measure (Abdel-Khalek, 2006; Cheung & Lucas, 2014). Notwithstanding, future research should replicate these findings with multiple-item measures of SWB. Second, findings are based on a cross-sectional study and cannot be interpreted as having causal relations. For instance, people with higher levels of subjective well-being might prefer to live in more democratic countries. In addition, it should be noted that self-report measures might be subject to response biases (e.g., social desirability). Although such cross-sectional relationships need to be interpreted cautiously, the findings of the present study give certain indications of how the level of democracy and life satisfaction relate to each other depending on the internalization of anti-democratic

attitudes. Therefore, for the current study, the moderation effects are of interest regardless of the direction or reciprocal nature of the relationships, because they nevertheless suggest a stronger link between the level of democracy and SWB when people do not hold anti-democratic attitudes. A strength of the current study is the inclusion of people living in 78 countries around the world.

Conclusion

The existing literature on the relationship between happiness and the level of democracy did not take anti-democratic attitudes into account. The current study addressed this gap in the literature by empirically demonstrating that the association between happiness and the level of democracy becomes stronger as levels of anti-democratic attitudes decrease. This finding is consistent with a discrepancy theory framework (Michalos, 1985; Prati, 2022b), in which SWB is a function of the discrepancies between the level of democracy and attitudes. Although these results may be interpreted with caution, the findings of the present study seem to suggest that the process of democratization could not be linked to well-being if it is not accompanied by social and cultural changes reflecting support and legitimization of the democratic regime. Institutional reforms that are undertaken with the aim of generating higher SWB may fail if people hold anti-democratic attitudes. In addition, there is a debate in the literature as to whether democracy is in decline (Diamond & Plattner, 2015). Different reasons were given for why democracy may be in decline, and these include bad governance and lagging economic growth. The results of the present study suggest that the tendency to blame bad governance on democracy could lead to anti-democratic attitudes. Such attitudes not only may facilitate the acceptance of authoritarian governments but also may influence the link between democracy and SWB. Anti-democratic attitudes can be addressed not only by state-building, state capacity, and accountability (Diamond & Plattner, 2015) but also by civic education and active citizenship interventions (e.g., Galston, 2007; Kuenzi, 2005; Prati et al., 2020).

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Table 1*Model Parameters from Multilevel Models Predicting Life Satisfaction and Happiness*

| Predictors | Life satisfaction | | | Happiness | | |
|---|---------------------------|----------|--------------|---------------------------|----------|--------------|
| | <i>b</i> (<i>SE</i>) | <i>p</i> | 95% CI | <i>b</i> (<i>SE</i>) | <i>p</i> | 95% CI |
| | Fixed effects | | | Fixed effects | | |
| Intercept | 8.64(1.14) | <.001 | 6.40, 10.87 | 2.96(0.16) | <.001 | 2.63, 3.27 |
| Anti-democratic attitudes | 0.14(0.05) | .006 | 0.04, 0.23 | 0.06(0.01) | <.001 | 0.03, 0.09 |
| Level of democracy | -0.06(0.35) | .857 | -0.75, 0.62 | 0.09(0.12) | .464 | -0.15, 0.33 |
| Anti-democratic attitudes × level of democracy | -0.23(0.08) | .002 | -0.38, -0.09 | -0.08(0.02) | <.001 | -0.12, -0.04 |
| | Random-effects parameters | | | Random-effects parameters | | |
| <i>SD</i> of anti-democratic attitudes | 0.15(0.02) | | 0.12, 0.18 | 0.04(0.00) | | 0.03, 0.05 |
| <i>SD</i> of the random intercept | 0.44(0.04) | | 0.37, 0.51 | 0.15(0.01) | | 0.13, 0.18 |
| <i>SD</i> of the level-1 residuals | 2.04(0.00) | | 2.03, 2.05 | 0.65(0.00) | | 0.65, 0.65 |

Note. *SD* = standard deviation. *SE* = Standard error. Standard errors are in parentheses. CI = confidence interval; ^a reference category. Analyses were controlled for gender, age, education, marital status, employment status, GDP at PPP per capita, government effectiveness, political stability, perceptions of corruption, country income group, and geographic region as defined by the World Bank.

Figure 1

Moderation effects of anti-democratic attitudes on the relationship between the level of democracy and life satisfaction. Plot of the test of simple slopes (top panel) and the Johnson-Neyman method for the ranging of moderation (bottom panel)

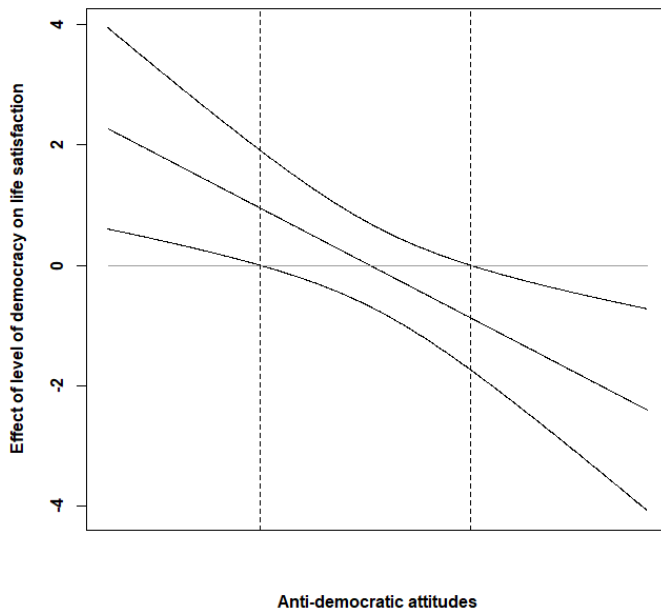
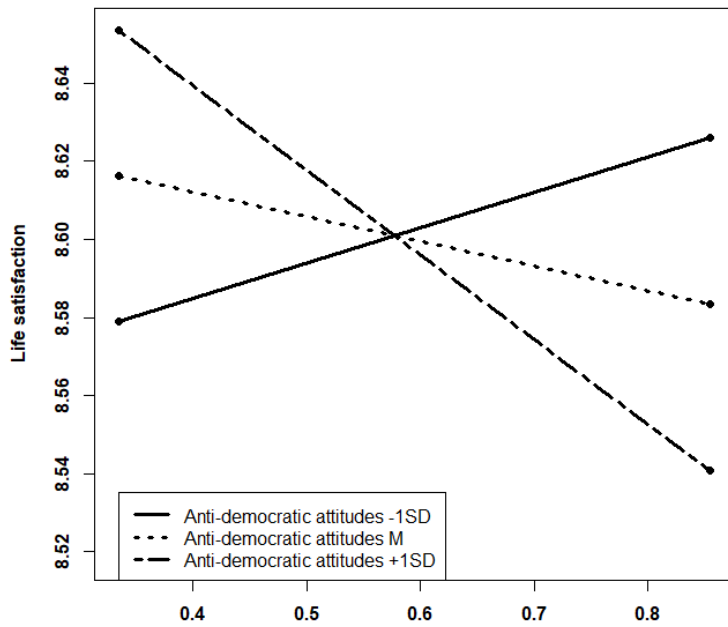


Figure 2

Moderation effects of anti-democratic attitudes on the relationship between the level of democracy and life happiness. Plot of the test of simple slopes (top panel) and the Johnson-Neyman method for the ranging of moderation (bottom panel)

