

# National Pride Brings Happiness—But What You’re Proud of Matters

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Research shows that feeling good about your country also makes you feel good about your own life—and many people take that as good news. But Matthew Wright, a political scientist at American University, and Tim Reeskens, a sociologist from Catholic University in Belgium, suspected that the positive findings about nationalism weren’t telling the whole story. “It’s fine to say pride in your country makes you happy,” says Wright. “But what kind of pride are we talking about? That turns out to make a lot of difference.” The intriguing—and politically suggestive—differences they found appear in a commentary in [Psychological Science](#), a journal published by the [Association for Psychological Science](#).

Reeskens and Wright divided national pride into two species. “Ethnic” nationalism sees ancestry—typically expressed in racial or religious terms—as the key social boundary defining the national “we.” “Civic” nationalism is more inclusive, requiring only respect for a country’s institutions and laws for belonging. Unlike ethnic nationalism, that view is open to minorities or immigrants, at least in principle.

The authors analyzed the responses to four key questions by 40,677 individuals from 31 countries, drawn from the 2008 wave of the cross-national European Values Study. One question assessed “subjective well being,” indicated by general satisfaction with life. Another measured national pride. The other two neatly indicated ethnic and civic national boundaries—asking respondents to rate the importance of respect for laws and institutions, and of ancestry, to being a true . . . fill in the blank . . . German, Swede, Spaniard. The researchers controlled for such factors as gender, work status, urban or rural residence, and the country’s per capita GDP.

Like other researchers, they found that more national pride correlated with greater personal well-being. But the civic nationalists were on the whole happier, and even the proudest ethnic nationalists’ well-being barely surpassed that of people with the lowest level of civic pride.

The analysis challenges popular feel-good theories about nationalism. “There’s been a renaissance of arguments from political theorists and philosophers that a strong sense of national identity has payoffs in terms of social cohesion, which bolsters support for welfare and other redistributive policies,” says Wright. “We’ve finally gotten around to testing these theories.” The conclusion: “You have to look at how people define their pride.”

The findings, he adds, give a clue to what popular responses we might expect to “broad macro-economic and social trends”—that is, millions of people crossing borders (usually from poorer to wealthier countries) looking for work or seeking refuge from war or political repression. “It’s unclear what the political implications of the happiness measure are—though unhappy citizens could demand many politically dangerous, xenophobic responses. Ethnic nationalists, proud or not, appear relatively less happy to begin with and more likely to lead the charge as their nation diversifies around them.”