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The happiness crash of 2020

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THE HAPPINESS CRASH OF 2020

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March 2026
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The Happiness Crash of 2020

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March, 2026

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Abstract

I document a sudden, sharp and historically unprecedented decline in self-reported happiness in the US population. It occurred during 2020, the year of the Covid pandemic, and mainly persists through 2024. This happiness crash spread across nearly all typical demographics and geographies. The happiest groups pre-Covid (e.g., whites, high income, well-educated and politically/ideologically right-leaning) tend to show the largest happiness reductions. The glaring exception is marital status, which has consistently been an important marker for happiness. The already wide happiness premium for marriage has, if anything, become slightly wider. With both married and unmarried reporting large declines in happiness the country has become segregated: slightly over half - the married adults - remain happy on balance; the unmarried, nearly half, are now distinctly unhappy. I also show that across a number of aspects of personal and social capital post-Covid deterioration is the norm, including a collapse of belief in the fairness of others and of trust in the US Supreme Court.

JEL Codes: D60, H00, I10, I31, J10, J12, J18, Z13

Key Words: Happiness, Covid, Demographics, Marriage, Race, Education, Income, Politics, Ideology

1. Introduction

The United States was a reasonably happy country for a long time. It is not happy now. The best that can be said is that it is not unhappy. This change occurred suddenly, in 2020. I will document that change and how broadly it has spread through American society. I will show that no large group has escaped a profound decline of happiness. This paper is entirely descriptive, so I will not speculate on what caused this sudden change. The coincident Covid pandemic is an obvious candidate. But the post-Covid recovery of happiness has been tepid, and a large gap with historical norms remains as of 2024. The open question is whether that gap will close going forward.

This paper is a follow up to Peltzman, 2023 which documented the pre-Covid history of US happiness. I will not repeat the necessary caveats about interpretation of descriptive data in general or the specific data used in both papers. Both papers use data from the General Social Survey (GSS)¹. An additional caveat here is the limited sample sizes post-Covid. This does not affect the main conclusion of a sudden change in average happiness, but it does occasionally limit strong conclusions about groups within society. The exposition is mainly graphical.

The next section reviews the pre-2020 history and shows the post-2020 crash. Then I show how the crash affected standard socio-demographic groups: gender, age, race, marital status, education, income and geography. I conclude by describing political/ideological differences. These are motivated by documented historical happiness differences and the apparently increased salience of politics and ideology around the Covid pandemic.

¹ This is public use data available at <https://gss.norc.org/get-the-data.html>

2. Happiness Then and Now

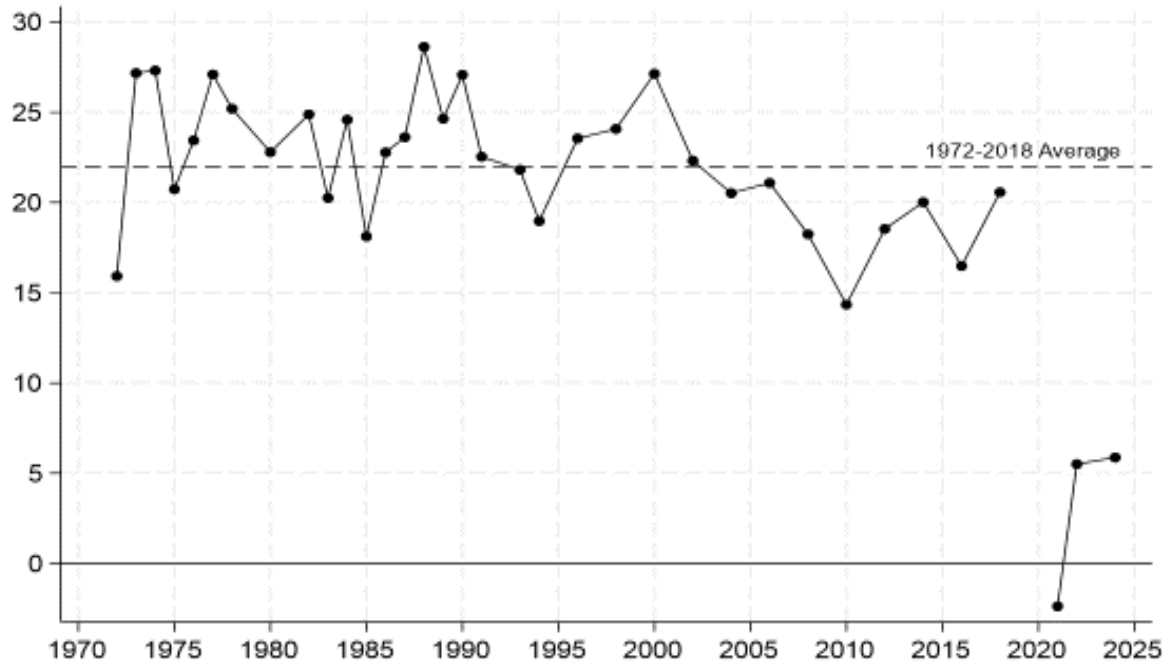
Since 1972 the GSS has asked a random sample of the US population: “Taken all together, how would you say things are these days--would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?” A large literature based on the answers has emerged, which I mainly leave to the previous (2023) paper. Everything henceforth is from the answers of US adults (25 and older) to this identically worded question, with special emphasis on the years immediately before and after 2020. I will use a summary measure of these answers: the percentage of respondents who answer “very happy” minus the percentage answering “not too happy.” This treats the in-between “pretty happy” group as neutral (zero in the calculation). Accordingly, my happiness measure is zero if the ‘very’ and ‘not too’ percentages are equal, positive ‘very’ exceeds ‘not too,’ and negative if the reverse is true. In principle, my measure can range from +100 (every respondent says “very happy”) to -100 (everyone says “not too happy”). Occasionally I will vary labels: “happy” for very happy, “ok” for pretty happy and “sad” for not too happy.

My happiness measure was moderately positive (around +20) for nearly 50 years before 2020. It has not come close to this since then. This history – and the paper’s main message – is in Figure 1. Each dot is a survey year’s average.² Until 2020 average happiness fluctuates around a long-run average of +22; the lowest years (1972 and 2010) are around +15. There is a mild decline post 2000 that leaves the 2002-2018 average at +19. The three post-2020 dots in the lower right-hand corner are much lower than any of these numbers. The first (2021)³ reading is unprecedentedly negative and over 20 points

² The survey was conducted annually in the early years, then biennially until 2020, when it was postponed for a year due to the pandemic.

³ See previous footnote. The delayed 2021 survey was followed by the previously scheduled 2022 and 2024 surveys.

Figure 1. Happiness 1972-2018 and 2021-2024



Source: GSS variable happy. Graph shows percentage difference between "very" and "not so" happy for each survey year. Dashed line shows weighted average across all pre-2020 surveys (22.01). See note to Table 1 for definitions and weighting.

below the immediately preceding (2018) survey. This severe shock is occurring when recovery from the pandemic is only beginning, and there is some moderation in subsequent years. But this uptick to around +5 leaves a substantial double-digit gap with pre-Covid levels. It seems more like a regime change than a temporary shock.

Table 1 shows the detail of the post-Covid shock. It compares the 2020s with the 2010s. Line 4 (Happy – Sad) is my summary measure. This declines by 16.2 points from the 2010s average of +18.9 to +2.7 in the 2020s, as is visible in Figure 1. The preceding lines of Table 1 show that roughly equal parts of this decline come from reduced happiness and from increased sadness. In the 2010s (and back to the 1970s) over twice as many were happy than sad; that margin almost disappeared post-Covid.

I use versions of this 2010s v 2020s comparison going forward. Some caveats and elaborations:

- Table 1 likely exaggerates the longer-run effects of the 2020s shock, because it averages the abnormally low 2021 value with the two subsequent surveys. Excluding 2021, the decline is more like 13 points than 16,⁴ a still unprecedented decline. Where appropriate, I will exclude 2021 data.⁵
- I will emphasize magnitudes rather than statistical significance. Usually,⁶ there is enough statistical power in the samples I use to reject the null for differences or changes around +/- 5 points. Think of 5 points also as a rough dividing line for “meaningful” changes, and view anything in double digits as “important.”

⁴ From +19 pre 2020 to 5 or 6 after 2021. For statistical power, within-sample comparisons in the paper, such as gender or age comparisons, use all the post 2020 data; I indicate where comparisons may be distorted by including 2021.

⁵ Generally, I exclude 2021 data where the time dimension is crucial, and I retain 2021 for comparisons across groups.

⁶ Exceptions will be noted.

Table 1. Happiness and Components. 2012-2018 and 2021-2024

Respondents who are:	Percentages in		Change
	2012-2018	2021-2024	
	(1)	(2)	(3)=(2)-(1)
1. Happy	32.1	23.3	-8.8
2. OK	54.7	56.0	1.4
3. Sad	13.3	20.7	7.4
4. Happy- Sad {1.- 3.}	18.9	2.7	-16.2
Respondents (Number)	8933	10141	

Source: General Social Survey. Variable happy Data show percentages of respondents answering the question: Taken all together, how would you say things are these days - would you say that you are: 1. Very happy (Happy for short) , 2. Pretty happy (OK), or 3. Not too happy (Sad).

The summary happiness measure I use throughout the paper is line 1.- line 3. shown in **bold** on line 4, i.e., the net difference between Happy and Sad. All percentages are calculated using the GSS weight variable wtssps, which corrects for differences in characteristics of the sample and the US population. Totals may differ from components due to rounding.

The sample here and throughout the paper is all respondents 25 and older. Years are chosen to give roughly equal sample sizes just before and after 2020. These include surveys every two years between 2012 and 2018. The scheduled 2020 survey was postponed until 2021 and then two more were conducted in 2022 and 2024 respectively

- GSS methodology differs in the two decades, most notably by a shift to online interviews.⁷

This raises comparability concerns that are partly intractable⁸, but these do not seem important for the broad conclusion of a sharp post-Covid decline.⁹

The next section asks how the happiness crash of 2020 has been distributed across various population groups. The short answer is: broadly.

3. The Socio Demography of the Happiness Crash

In this section I show how different groups experienced the happiness crash of the 2020s. I use standard categories: age, sex, marital status, education and income. Figure 2 shows the first two on this list and illustrates my treatment of the rest. Each sub-group's experience is summarized by three bars: the average in the pre-Covid decade (light blue), a post-2020 average (light red) and the change from pre to post-2020 (solid black). The dashed lines show sample averages for reference.

a. Age and Sex

The left panel of Figure 2 shows three age groups motivated by a much-discussed u-shape in happiness (Blanchflower, 2021). The u is visible¹⁰ in both periods but quantitatively unimportant. There is no meaningful difference across the generations in the response to the 2020 shock (black bars) – the young and their parents and grandparents all experienced the same happiness decline. Similarly,

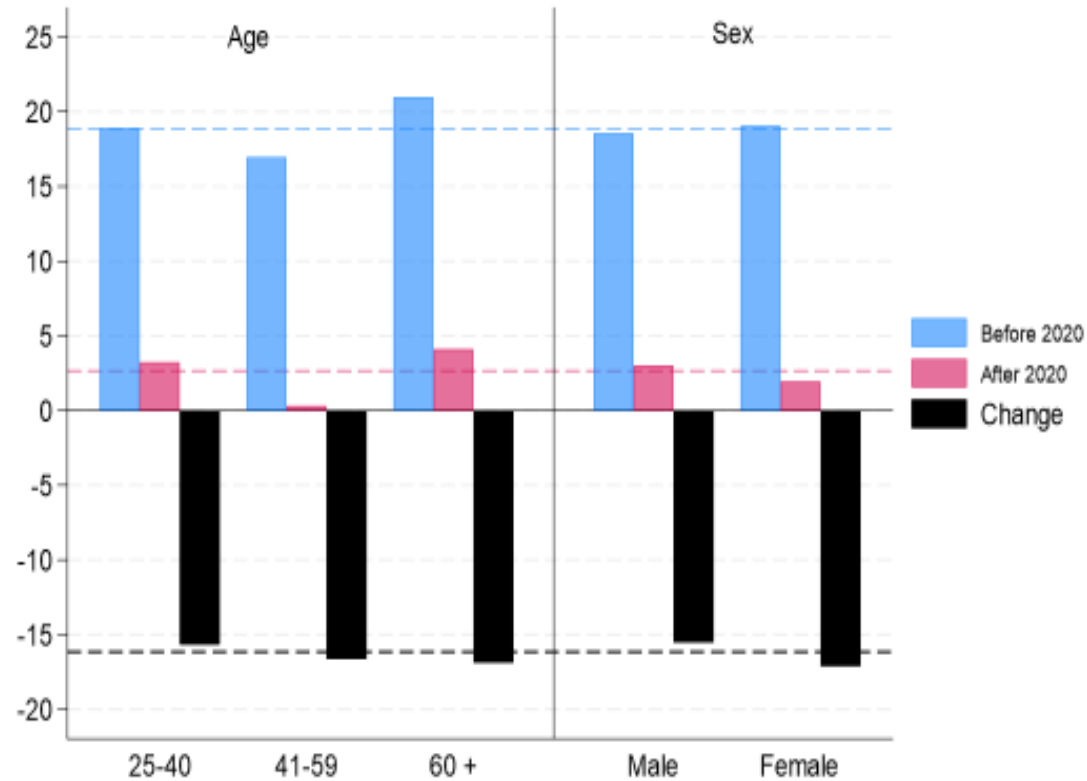
⁷ GSS variable mode tabulates survey methods from 2004 on. Pre-Covid surveys are mainly in-person, with around 10 per cent by phone. For 2021, in-person surveys were replaced entirely by web-based interviews. In-person surveys were partially restored (around 40 per cent of interviews) in 2022 and 2024, and this blend of in-person and web, with some telephone, based interviews is the current “equilibrium.”

⁸ The main concern is “mode sensitivity,” whereby respondents give a systematically different answer to a computer screen than a live interviewer. However, there are no web-based interviews pre-Covid so we cannot know if such sensitivity was important then.

⁹ The only direct comparison is for 2022 and 2024, when substantial in-person interviewing resumed. For those years, the full sample average happiness is +5.7, or 13.2 points below the pre-2020 average. For interviews using pre-2020 methods (in-person or phone), the post 2021 average is +6.8 compared to +4.6 for web-based. The null hypothesis on this 2.2-point difference cannot be rejected at $p < .05$.

¹⁰ Only the middle v older age difference is conventionally significant.

Figure 2. Happiness by Age and Sex. Before and After 2020



See note to Figure 1. Bar heights are average happiness by age and sex groups for all GSS surveys 2012-2018 ("Before 2020" in blue) and for 2021-2024 ("After 2020" in red). Darker black bar shows the change from before to after 2020. The color coded dashed lines are the respective sample averages (18.82 before; 2.66 after and thus a change of -16.16).

males and females (right panel of Figure 2) experience essentially equal declines¹¹ from effectively identical levels of pre 2020 happiness.

b. Race and Marital Status

Racial and marital status differences are more consequential, for different reasons. Figure 3 summarizes both. Race, in the right panel, includes a growing catchall “other” category.¹² Before 2020 there is a large black-white happiness differential, which had been narrowing gradually.¹³ This process accelerates after 2020 – from a 14-point difference before (light blue) to 6 points after 2020 (light red). The other-race group also experiences a smaller happiness decrease than whites, though from a roughly equal pre-2020 level.¹⁴ So, racial differences have compressed. Compression of pre-Covid differences will be a common pattern.

Marital status is a glaring exception. There is no post-Covid compression at all. The left panel of Figure 3 shows a large happiness differential for married v unmarried adults before 2020 (light blue) and an essentially equal decline in happiness for both (black) that leaves their relative position unaffected (light red). This large marital premium – upwards of 30 points – is a durable feature of all pre 2020 data, not just the 2010s. (Peltzman, 2023,2025). And this premium survives the post-Covid shock wholly intact.¹⁵

¹¹ The slightly larger female decline cannot be distinguished from zero statistically.

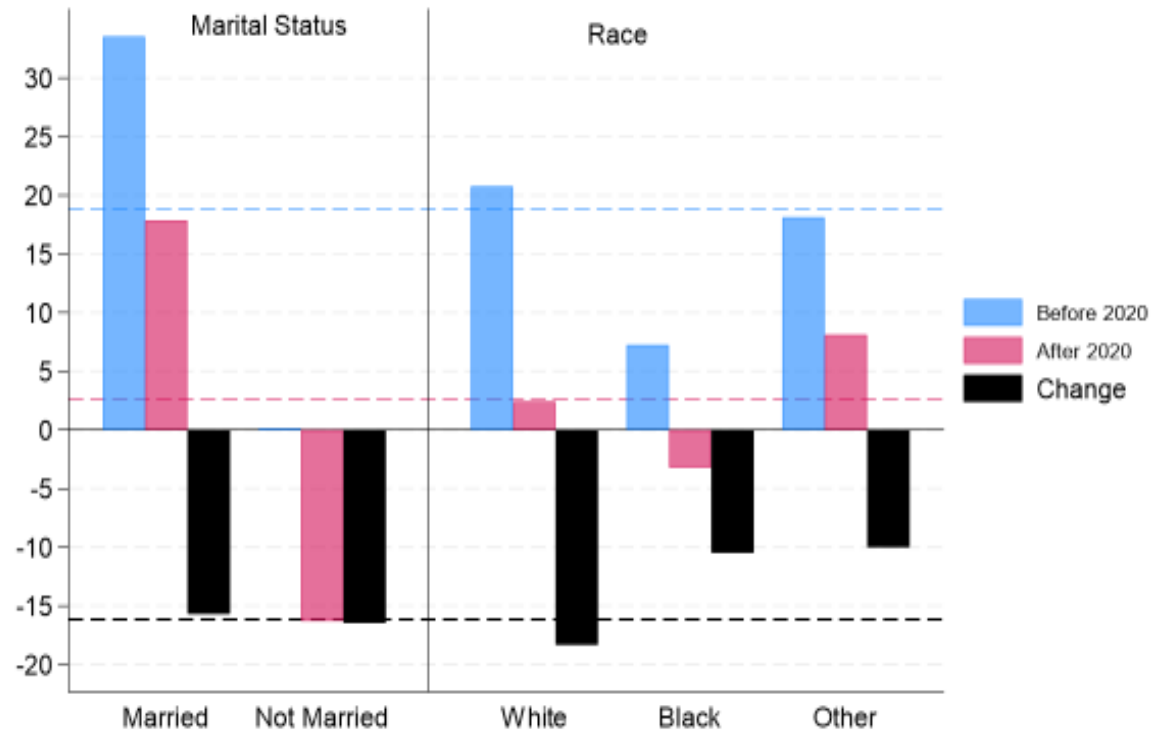
¹² The largest sub-group here are Hispanics who do not identify primarily as white or black. It also includes a variety of south and east Asian groups plus native Americans.

¹³ The differential was around 25 points in the 1970s, and declined to the 14 points, which is the difference in the height of the light blue bars for whites and blacks in Figure 3 for the 2010s. That is, the decline in the black-white gap is under 5 points per decade. See Peltzman (2023).

¹⁴ The implication that the other group is now happier than whites is sensitive to inclusion of 2021 data. Excluding that year leaves the black-white narrowing unaffected, but it leaves a smaller other-white differential that is indistinguishable from zero statistically.

¹⁵ The marital happiness premium is within a point of 33 or 34 before and after 2020 and this is so whether or not we include 2021.

Figure 3. Happiness by Marital Status and Race. Before and After 2020



See note to Figure 1. Data classified from GSS variables marital and racecen1. Bar heights are average happiness for all GSS surveys 2012-2018 ("Before 2020" in light blue) and for 2021-2024 ("After 2020" in light red). Darker black bar shows the change from before to after 2020. The color coded dashed lines are the respective sample averages (18.82 before; 2.66 after and thus a change of -16.16).

This unchanging marital premium is important, because marriage has become less important. In the early 1970s married adults outnumbered unmarried by three to one. By the 2010s that margin had shrunk to 1.25 to 1, where it seems to have stabilized.¹⁶ We have apparently reached some kind of equilibrium at 5 married adults per 4 unmarried. The 4 unmarried were break even happy prior to 2020 – the blue bar is barely above zero in the left panel of Figure 3. In the 2020s happiness has become segregated by marital status. The unmarried – close to half the adult population – are deeply unhappy now. The married remain conspicuously happy, though they also took a big happiness hit post Covid. The two groups have become mirror opposites. Table 2 unpacks the marital status data in Figure 2, with line 4 in each panel showing the ratio of happy to sad respondents pre and post 2020. Before 2020 there are nearly six happy married for each sad one, compared to one for one among the unmarried. The comparable, smaller, ratios post-2020 are 2.36 and 0.46.¹⁷ In other words, we now have a little over twice as many happy as sad married and a little over twice as many sad as happy unmarried. My summary measure is around +18 for the married and nearly as negative (-16.4) for the unmarried. This division of the population into two roughly equal sized camps, one as happy as the other is sad, has no historical precedent.

c. Education and Income

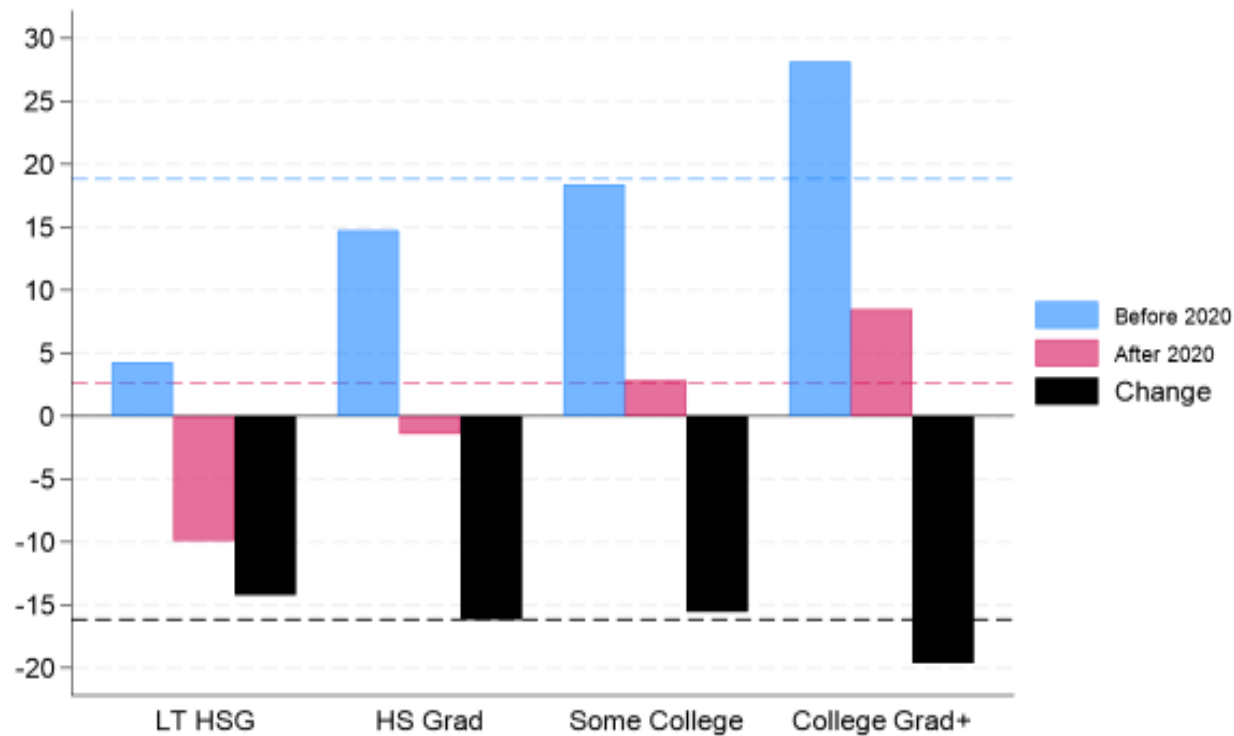
More education has been associated with more happiness for a long time (Peltzman, 2023). In the immediate pre-Covid years – the blue bars in Figure 4 – college graduates are nearly 15 points happier than high school graduates and nearly 25 more than high school drop outs. These differences are a bit wider than the pre-2020 norms¹⁸, and the post-Covid shock (the black bars) seems to have

¹⁶ The marital share has been flat at 55 percent over the whole post 2010 period analyzed in this paper

¹⁷ Table 2, column 3, line 2 also shows that the married and unmarried took different paths to these ratios. For the married, part of the happiness decline is absorbed by a buildup of the middle (OK) category. This does not happen for the unmarried

¹⁸ These differences average around 20 and 10 points for high school dropouts and graduates respectively over the entire 1972-2018 period (Peltzman, 2023).

Figure 4. Happiness by Educational Attainment. Before and After 2020



See note to Figure 1. Bar heights are average happiness by educational attainment group for all GSS surveys 2012-2018 ("Before 2020" in light blue) and for 2021-2024 ("After 2020" in light red). LT HSG is less than 12 years of education; HS Grad is 12 years; Some College is 13 to 15 years and College Grad+ is 16 years or more. Darker black bar shows the change from before to after 2020. The color coded dashed lines are the respective sample averages (18.82 before; 2.66 after and thus a change of -16.16).

pushed them closer together. However, the dominant feature of Figure 4 is that every education group has suffered a similar and substantial decline in happiness¹⁹.

Relative income is another important marker for happiness, more so than education and greater even than marital status at the extremes. Figure 5 shows smoothed representations of this relation before and after 2020. In the pre-Covid decade (blue line) the happiness differential between the lowest quintile (0-20th percentile) and highest (80th percentile and above) is around 40 points. The post 2020 happiness decline hits every income group from poorest to richest (the consistently negative black line). But, as with education and race, the income happiness gap narrows post-Covid, at least up to the top two quintiles²⁰. So, happiness has become more equal across income groups. However, the ubiquitous post-Covid decline has also made happiness more of a luxury for the better off: the bottom 40 percent of households are now unhappy on average, compared to the bottom 20 percent pre-2020 (note where the blue and red lines cross zero in Figure 5).

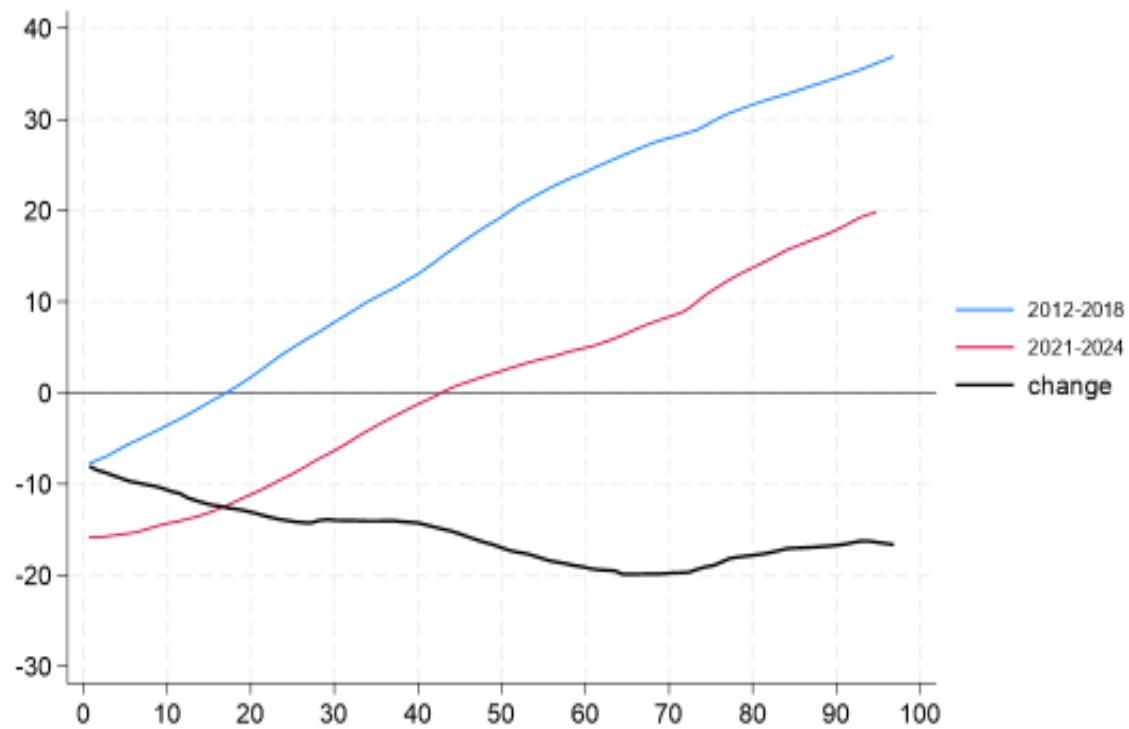
d. Place and Region

Geography has not mattered much for happiness historically (see Peltzman, 2023). The crash of 2020 is no exception. I leave details for Appendix 1. Every region and every kind of habitation, from rural areas to inner cities, has experienced roughly the same sharp post-2020 decline in happiness.

¹⁹ The visible differences in the depth of the black bars in Figure 4 are too small to reject the null (equal happiness reductions) in this sample at conventional significance levels. With four subcategories sample sizes become small enough to compromise statistical power. For example, the less than high school graduate group shows best post-2020, but there are fewer than 1000 respondents in this group. This is too small to rule out the null even against the worst group (college grads).

²⁰ The happiness reduction for the lowest quintile is significantly smaller than any, and a fortiori all, of the top 3 quintiles.

Figure 5. Happiness by Income Percentile. Before and After 2020



Graph shows smoothed average values of net happiness (y-axis) by household income percentile (x-axis) for period before 2020 (blue line) and after (red). Thicker black line shows the change from pre- to post-2020 at each income percentile; this is the difference between the red and blue lines.

e. A Summary

Table 3 summarizes how the happiness crash has been distributed across socio demographic groups. However, unlike the preceding figures and discussion, this table shows marginal effects, i.e., holding other characteristics constant. Specifically, Table 3 shows results from regressions of scaled (see note to Table 3) individual answers to the happiness question on all of the socio demographic variables. The regression includes quadratics in the continuous variables (age and income) and shows deviations from indicated baseline categories for the categorical variables (marital status, race, education). The “baseline” section shows average happiness for individuals with baseline or average characteristics, and it shows variations around the average by age and income.

To illustrate what Table 3 tells us, consider marital status and income as treated in figures 3 and 5 respectively. Both figures show substantial differences. However, happiness, marriage and income are connected in many ways.²¹ Statistically there is a strong positive correlation between marriage and income (Peltzman, 2025). So, part of the 30-point marital happiness premium we see in figure 3 is coming from the higher income of the married. Reciprocally, part of the extra happiness of the rich is coming from the higher proportion of married people at higher incomes. What part? Table 3 provides a statistical answer. For example, column (1) shows a marital status difference of 23.8 points in the decade before 2020 for respondents alike in all other respects including income. That is, most – around 2/3 – of the 30+ point unconditional happiness difference is unrelated to the higher income (and other happiness related characteristics) of married people.

²¹ Too many to begin listing. For starters: happiness can contribute to marital stability and also income; high income people can be more attractive marriage partners; married households often have two earners; etc. and each of the preceding can be reversed.

Table 3. Happiness and Socio-Demographic Categories. Before and After 2020

Variables (and Baseline Categories)	Period		Change: After - Before 2020
	2012-2018	2021-2024	
	Coeff.	Coeff.	
	(1)	(2)	
			(3)=(2)-(1)
Age	-2.312 *	-1.776 *	nm (see below)
Age^2	0.022 *	0.017 *	
Sex (base=Male)			
Female	2.647	3.468 *	0.821
Marital Status (base=Married)			
Not Married	-23.842 *	-28.892 *	-5.050 *
Race (base=White)			
Black	-2.472	3.861	6.334 *
Other	1.601	10.337 *	8.736 *
Education (base=High School Grad)			
Less than 12 years	-3.860	-2.600	1.260
Some College	1.608	-0.756	-2.364
College Graduate+	3.747	-1.138	-4.884
Income Percentile	0.486 *	0.088	nm (see below)
Income Percentile^2	-0.113	0.170	
Baseline: Married White Male HS Grad, mean others	27.421 *	15.235 *	-12.186 *
U in Age: Baseline at			
Age 30	32.403 *	18.433 *	-13.970 *
Age 55	22.027 *	11.201 *	-10.826 *
Age 75	33.809 *	21.203 *	-12.606 *
Income: Baseline at			
10th %	9.929 *	5.289 *	-4.640
50th %	26.636 *	12.903 *	-13.733 *
90th %	39.713 *	25.942 *	-13.771 *
Summary Statistics			
adjusted R^2	0.0905	0.0818	
RMSE	61.1	63.1	
Sample N	8148	8474	

Table 3 (Note)

Table shows coefficients from a regression where:
 Y = a respondent's re-scaled answer to the happiness question (see Table 1): sad=-100, ok=0, happy=+100. Accordingly coefficients of categorical X variables are percentage point deviations of the category from a baseline happiness score.

X-variables include:

Categorical variables with baseline shown in (parentheses):
 Marital status, Race and Education attainment group.

Income percentile and age are continuous X variables (age is truncated at 80) with quadratic terms. Some implications of the coefficients of these quadratics are shown just above the regression summary statistics at the bottom of the table.

The regression is estimated separately for surveys in the decades pre- and post-2020 (columns (1) and (2)). Average happiness for a baseline respondent is shown below the regression coefficients.

NB: column (2) baseline has been adjusted upward to remove the effect of the unusually low 2021 intercept.

Column (3) shows the point change in the deviation from baseline for each category. For example, the .82 for Females means that a pre-2020 female premium v males of 2.65 pre 2020 (column (1)) grew by .82 to 3.47 (column (2)) after 2020.

Average happiness scores and changes implied by the regression for all baseline respondents and those at various ages and income percentiles are shown below the regression coefficients. The post 2020 baselines (changes) would be reduced (further) by around 2 points without the upward adjustment of the intercept described above.

* = significantly different from zero at $p < .05$

nm= not meaningful

The broad patterns in the unconditional data hold up in Table 3, though magnitudes may vary. For example, the u-shape in age in figure 2 is also apparent near the bottom of Table 3.²² Table 3 also shows some notable differences from the unconditional data.²³ However, my focus here is on the different effects of the 2020 crash, which are in column (3). Four differences from unconditional data stand out or are sharpened:

- Rather than remaining unchanged, the marital premium appears to have widened by around 5 points (from 23.8 pre-Covid to 28.9 post.)
- Racial differences have disappeared. Conditional on everything else, whites are now the least happy racial group and the “other” category is most happy.
- Education differences have also disappeared. There is now no significant conditional happiness differential by education.
- The very poorest have escaped most of the 2020 shock. There is only a small 4-point difference, indistinguishable from zero statistically, at the 10th percentile. (See bottom of Table 3.). The happiness shock has been borne mainly by middle- and upper-income households.

The last three bullet points point to narrowing happiness differentials while the first goes the other way.

Indeed, we can begin to see the outlines of definable, if small, groups that may have escaped the 2020

²² There is roughly a 10-point swing down between ages 30 and 55 and then up to age 75 before 2020; the 2020s have slightly milder swings. (The estimated quadratics at the top of the table both reach a minimum at slightly over age 50 in both periods.)

²³ Marginal racial, education and income differences tend to be smaller than unconditional differences. For example, prior to 2020 the difference between college graduates and high school dropouts visible in Figure 4 is around 20 points; it is less than half this (around 8 points) in Table 3. The plausible reason for this attenuation is similar to that for marriage: these variables are cross-correlated in reinforcing ways, such as college graduates having higher incomes and higher marriage rates than high school dropouts.

crash: an other-race, married individual, especially from a very poor household.²⁴ But the main message from Table 3 is the same as the previous figures. The happiness crash of 2020 has cut across the vast majority – old or young, black or white, male or female, married or not, well or little educated, rich or quite poor.

4. Some Questions

The historically unprecedented happiness crash raises many questions. Here I will surface three questions and begin to answer two:

1. Is the Happiness Crash Exceptional?

Many aspects of family, social and political life were disrupted by the Covid pandemic. Perhaps the happiness crash is just one part, or a summary for, this wider disruption. Accordingly, to provide some context, I ask if other broad attitudinal measures also suffered Covid shocks.

The answer to the titular question is No and Yes. Tables 4 and 5 summarize changes in attitudes about various aspects of respondents' daily lives. These are scaled the same way²⁵ as happiness scores, which I show for comparison at the top of each table. I have removed the unusually depressed 2021 values from both tables. Table 4 concerns personal situations, while Table 5 focuses on institutions. The Yes, happiness is exceptional part of my answer is in Table 4: happiness is almost alone as a personal attribute that used to be viewed positively and no longer is. Almost alone, but not entirely, and the exception – the last line of Table 4 - seems important: before 2020 the average American adult believe

²⁴ Caveats about making too much of small single digit changes or differences need to be repeated and emphasized when we slice the sample into small sub-groups. That said, column (3) implies that an other-race individual with the same characteristics as a white individual experienced a happiness reduction of only 3.5 points (-12.2 for the baseline white plus an 8.7 percent other race offset). This small other-race decline is insignificant statistically.

²⁵ That is, as a difference between percentage positive and negative answers.

Table 4. Personal Situation and Social Attitudes. After 2020 v Before				
GSS Name	Question (paraphrased)	Average Score		Change
		Before	After	
		(1)	(2)	(3)=(2)-(1)
happy	Are you happy?	18.8	5.7	-13.1
1. General Situation				
health	How is your health?	-3.7	-10.4	-6.7
hapmar	your marriage happy?	59.2	56.6	-2.6
life	Is life exciting?	46.9	36.5	-10.5
2. Financial Situation				
a. Overall				
satfin	Satisfied with your financial situation?	2.8	-5.3	-8.1
finalter	How has it changed?	11.5	2.1	-9.4
finrela	Own HH income v avg?	-7.9	-4.3	3.6
b. Standard of Living				
parsol	Your SOL>parents?	44.4	38.2	-6.2
kidssol	Your kids>you?	40.2	31.3	-8.9
goodlife	Will your SOL increase?	35.1	16.1	-18.9
c. Work				
satjob	satisfied w/job?	38.2	35.3	-3.0
joblose	likely to lose job?	55.9	52.5	-3.6
jobfind	easily find another?	-23.1	-10.2	12.9
3. Other People				
trust	Can you trust them?	-28.8	-36.8	-8.0
helpful	Are they helpful?	4.7	-1.8 *	-6.5
fair	Are they fair?	14.4	-1.3 *	-15.7

Source GSS and Appendix 2. Answers to the GSS questions have been recoded to match as closely as feasible the coding for the happy variable. So, e.g., positive numbers mean that more respondents answered positively than negatively. Results for happy, from figure 1 or Table 1, are shown first for comparison.

The original coding, the recoding and other detail is in Appendix 2.

Column 1 shows the average score for surveys in the 2010s.

Column 2 shows the average score for 2022 and 1024; it excludes data from the Covid year, 2021

* = result fails to reject the null at $p < .05$. All others are conventionally significant.

Table 5. Confidence in Institutions . After 2020 v Before

GSS Name	Institution	Average Score		Change
		Before	After	
		(1)	(2)	(3)=(2)-(1)
happy	Are you happy?	18.8	5.7	-13.1
1. Government Institutions				
confed	Exec Off Federal Govt	-30.4	-37.2	-6.8
conlegis	Congress	-46.3	-49.7	-3.4
conjudge	US Supreme Court	11.3	-19.0	-30.3
conarmy	Military	48.7	33.7	-15.0
2. Business Sector				
conbus	Major Companies	1.5 *	-7.0	-8.5
confinan	Banks and Finl Instits	-16.9	-7.3	9.6
3. Other Institutions				
coneduc	Education	6.6	-7.2	-13.8
conclerg	Organized Religion	-4.2	-19.8	-15.6
conmedic	Medicine	24.5	10.6	-13.9
consci	Scientific Community	36.5	23.5	-13.0

Source: GSS questions each phrased as: As far as the people running [Institution] would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence or hardly any confidence at all in them.

Exact specification of each institution is shown after the GSS name.

Answers are transformed to same scale as happy (shown for reference), i.e. percentage positive-percentage negative with neutral = 0.

Here positive = a great deal, neutral=only some, negative=hardly any.

Sample size ranges : for column 1 (four surveys from 2012-2018) min 5767, max 5979; for column 2 (2022 and 2024 only, 2021 data are excluded) min=4122, max=4201.

*= not significantly different from zero at $p < .05$. All other values in all columns reject the null with $p < .05$.

that others would treat them fairly. This belief, like happiness, has suddenly disappeared.²⁶ (Precise wording of each question in Table 4 and a fuller summary of answers and coding choices is in Appendix 2.). Table 4 does have other substantial declines, but these (life, goodlife) only dent still highly positive attitudes. The No, happiness is unexceptional part of the answer is that almost all the changes, while often small, are negative. Only perceived job prospects (jobfind) became less negative.²⁷ This pervasive negativity lends weight to a “thousand cuts” view of the happiness crash, as an accumulation of many life aspects that changed for the worse at the same time.²⁸

Table 5 reinforces that view. It shows a striking, nearly across the board, post-Covid decline in confidence in significant public and private institutions. Here double-digit declines are common. Lesser declines for Congress and the President follow a long period of increasing disillusion; by 2020 there is little downside left.²⁹ We also achieved a Federal Government trifecta: The Supreme Court had been viewed positively pre-Covid. That view vanished and was decisively reversed in the 2020s. The Court still outranks Congress and the Presidency, but the gap has narrowed dramatically. The Table also shows that pillars of the community – the schools, churches, doctors and scientists – have lost their luster or had it eroded badly.³⁰

It is no explanation, but if I had begun with Tables 4 and 5 the happiness crash of 2020 could not be surprising. How could we remain happy if we view many aspects of daily life as having suddenly deteriorated?

²⁶ This development deserves more attention than I can give here. The question essentially elicits a yes or no (fair or unfair) answer. A brief history: in the 1970s and 1980s fair outnumbered unfair by a 2 to 1 margin. This margin shrank to under 3 to 2 in the 1990s and stayed there until the pandemic, when it collapsed.

²⁷ In a job market recovering from the Covid shock.

²⁸ Note that marital happiness did not change much, even though overall happiness within the married population fell substantially. This implies that the source of unhappiness is coming from outside close personal relationships.

²⁹ For example, by the 2010s only 1 of every 17 respondents had a great deal of confidence in Congress; ten times as many had hardly any. See Peltzman, 2026 for a fuller discussion of the decline of confidence in government.

³⁰ The lone positive value in column 3 of Table 5, for the financial sector, is a continued rebound from a large hit from the financial crisis of 2008-2009.

2. Is there a Political or Ideological Aspect?

There is a well-established ideological/political dimension to happiness. Most studies have focused on left-right ideology and usually find that right leaning individuals are happier. (Peltzman, 2023). Di Tella and MacCulloch (2005) also find a political aspect: both left and right are happier when their party is in power. I cannot extend their result here, since 7 of the 8 relevant survey years had Democrat Presidents. But I can ask if the right-wing happiness premium survived Covid. The qualified answer is that it did, more or less.

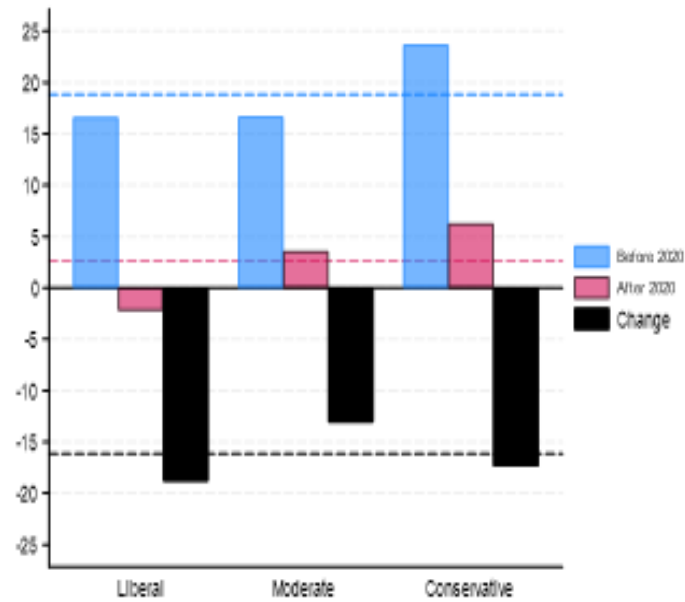
The main facts are in Figure 6 and Table 6. Panel A in Figure 6 shows the ideological dimension and B the political one. The happiness crash spared no ideology or party (black bars). Consistent with the literature, there is a visible right-wing premium in the pre-Covid decade (blue bars). It survived the 2020 crash (red bars), but with two meaningful qualifications. First, the figure hints that politics rather than ideology is the main driver of happiness differences pre-Covid.³¹ Notice the visibly larger gap between Republicans and the rest than between conservatives and the rest both pre- and post-2020. Second, Republicans were hit harder than the others by the Covid shock (compare the depth of the black bars in panel B), and there is no comparable ideological difference (black bars in panel A).

Table 6 shows more explicitly the dominance of partisan v ideological differences and the post-2020 compression of these partisan differences. The first two panels of Table 6 summarize what is visible in Figure 6, except that happiness is centered around the intermediate group (ideological moderates or political independents). So, for example, on either left-right dimension the right

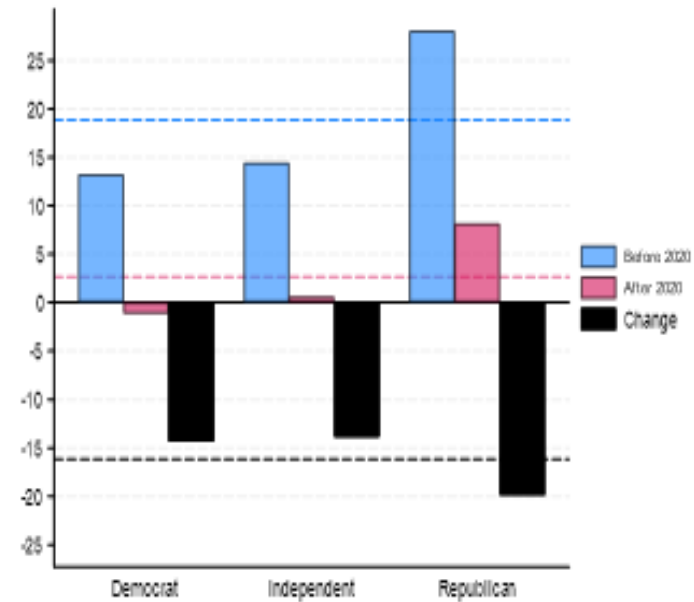
³¹ Politics and ideology overlap significantly but far from completely. In the sample period (post-2010), the ideological breakdown is 27 percent liberal, 38 percent moderate and 35 percent conservative. The corresponding percentages for left-right politics are Democrats 43, independents 21 and Republicans 36. (I am counting anyone who leans even slightly to one or another party as a partisan). Thus, there are more Democrats than liberals and twice as many moderates as independents. The main diagonal of the party-ideological cross-tab (liberal Democrats, moderate independents, conservative Republicans) accounts for only 60 percent of the sample, with more defections from type among Democrats and independents than Republicans.

Figure 6. Ideology, Politics and Happiness. Before and After 2020

A. Ideology



B. Politics



See note to Figure 1. Data classifications condensed from GSS variables `polviews` and `partyid`. Bar heights show happiness 2012 -2018 (light blue), 2021 -2024 (light red) and the change (black) from before to after 2020. Color coded dashed lines are sample averages.

**Table 6. Political and Ideological Happiness Differences.
Before and After 2020.**

Happiness v Intermediate Group	Period		Change: After-Before (3)=(2)-(1)
	Before 2020 (1)	After 2020 (2)	
1. Ideology (v Moderates)			
a) Liberals	0.1 *	-5.6	-5.7
b) Conservatives	7.1	2.5 *	-4.6
c) Diff: Con-Lib =b)-a)	7.0	8.1	1.1 *
2. Politics (v. Independents)			
a) Democrats	-1.1 *	-1.3 *	-0.2 *
b) Republicans	13.7	7.4	-6.3
c) Diff: Rep-Dem= b)-a)	14.8	8.7	-6.0
3. Both (Conditional Means)			
Ideology			
A. Liberals	3.2 *	-3.8	-7.0
B. Conservatives	1.5 *	-1.0 *	-2.5 *
C.Diff: Con-Lib= B.-A.	-1.7 *	2.8 *	4.5 *
Party			
A. Democrats	-2.8 *	0.0 *	2.8 *
B. Republicans	12.4	7.4	-5.0 *
C. Diff: Rep-Dem= B. - A.	15.2	7.4	-7.8

Happiness score differences by ideology and politics. The differences on lines a), b) A. and B. are relative to the intermediate group: moderates for ideology, independents for politics. For example, the first entry in column (1) means that Liberals were 0.1 points happier than Moderates in the period from 2012-2018. Lines c) and C. show the right v left ideological or political difference.

Column (1)= all survey years from 2012 through 2018
 Column (2) = all survey years from 2021 through 2024
 Column (3)= change = after 2020 - before 2020

*= difference or change is not significantly different from 0 at $p < .05$. all other values reject the null at $p < .05$.

Panels 1 and 2. are from cross tabs of raw data - i.e., unconditional means.

Panel 3 shows coefficients from a regression of happiness on dummies for ideology, party and year, where the baselines are the intermediate categories. The coefficients in panel 3 are thus conditional means, holding party or ideology constant. For example, the first entry in column (1), panel 3 means that, holding party constant, Liberals were 3.2 points happier than Moderates in the average 2012-2018 year. Similarly the fourth entry means that, holding ideology constant, Democrats were 2.8 points less happy than Independents in the same period

(conservatives or Republicans) was happier than the middle or left prior to 2020 (column 1), with the partisan right-left difference notably larger (+14.8, line 2.c) than the ideological one (+7.0, line 1a.). The compression of the partisan difference is in columns (2) and (3) of the table: the Republican advantage over Democrats shrinks by 6 points (panel 2, line c); the ideological difference is essentially unchanged³².

The more interesting comparison is in panel 3, which shows conditional differences: i.e., party differences holding ideology constant and vice versa. Column (1) shows that in the decade prior to 2020 the conditional ideological right-left difference is actually negative (-1.7) though indistinguishable from zero, while the partisan difference is large and positive (15.2). Though it deserves more attention than I can give here, this 2010s pattern of greater partisan than ideological differences is typical of the entire pre Covid period going back to the 1970s³³. The Covid shock upset this long-standing pattern. There is still a right-left difference, but the predominant role of partisanship has shrunk considerably.³⁴ This partisan compression follows the broad pattern of the happier groups (Republicans in this case) being hardest hit by the Covid shock³⁵.

³² The pre-Covid period includes a year of Republican presidency (2018), while the post-Covid years are entirely Democrat. However, removing 2018 from the comparison does not change the pattern.

³³ For the entire 1972-2018 period, the conditional partisan difference (Republicans-Democrats) is +11.5 and the conditional ideological (Conservative-Liberal) difference is +3.8. For this much larger sample, the null for ideology can be rejected. So, the safest conclusion is that a small conservative happiness premium remains even after controlling for the larger partisan difference.

³⁴ Specifically, the conditional ideological difference widened by 4.5 points while the party difference narrowed by 7.8 points (compare the line C items in panel 3, col 3). This is a 12.3-point reduction of the party v ideology difference. The partisan difference remains larger than the ideological one in the post-2020 period (+7.4 v +2.8), but it is too small to be significant statistically.

³⁵ The conditional mean changes may exaggerate this compression, because after all Republicans tend to be conservatives and there is still a non-trivial conservative premium. If we compare archetypes: say, Conservative Republicans (CRs) v Liberal Democrats (LDs), there is still compression, but less. For the pre-2020-decade, CR mean happiness is +30.6, or 14.6 more than the +16.0 for LDs. Both are hit hard by the Covid shock, with the CR mean falling to +8.9, while the LD mean falls to -2, or a +10.9 CR premium. However, we are slicing the data too finely to say with confidence that there was less compression for these archetypes than other partisans, or even that there was any compression at all. It remains the case that Republicans and Conservatives remain happier than Democrats and Liberals, as they have been since the 1970s and by roughly similar amounts (+15.4 for the entire

3. What Conclusions Can We Draw?

Only the future will reveal the answer to this one. A long history of moderate happiness was shattered all at once and has not yet materially recovered. It may yet recover, since we only have a few post-Covid years. So, one answer is to wait watchfully for some reversion to pre-Covid norms. The other is to be apprehensively alert to the other logical possibilities. If there is no meaningful recovery from the happiness crash and the concomitant erosion of confidence across many aspects of daily life the best that can be said is that the socio-political future becomes cloudier.

1972-2018 period, or virtually the same as the +14.6 in the 2010s.) On that broader view, the smaller post-Covid premium is an historical anomaly.

Appendices

Appendix 1. Geography and Place in Post-2020 Happiness Change

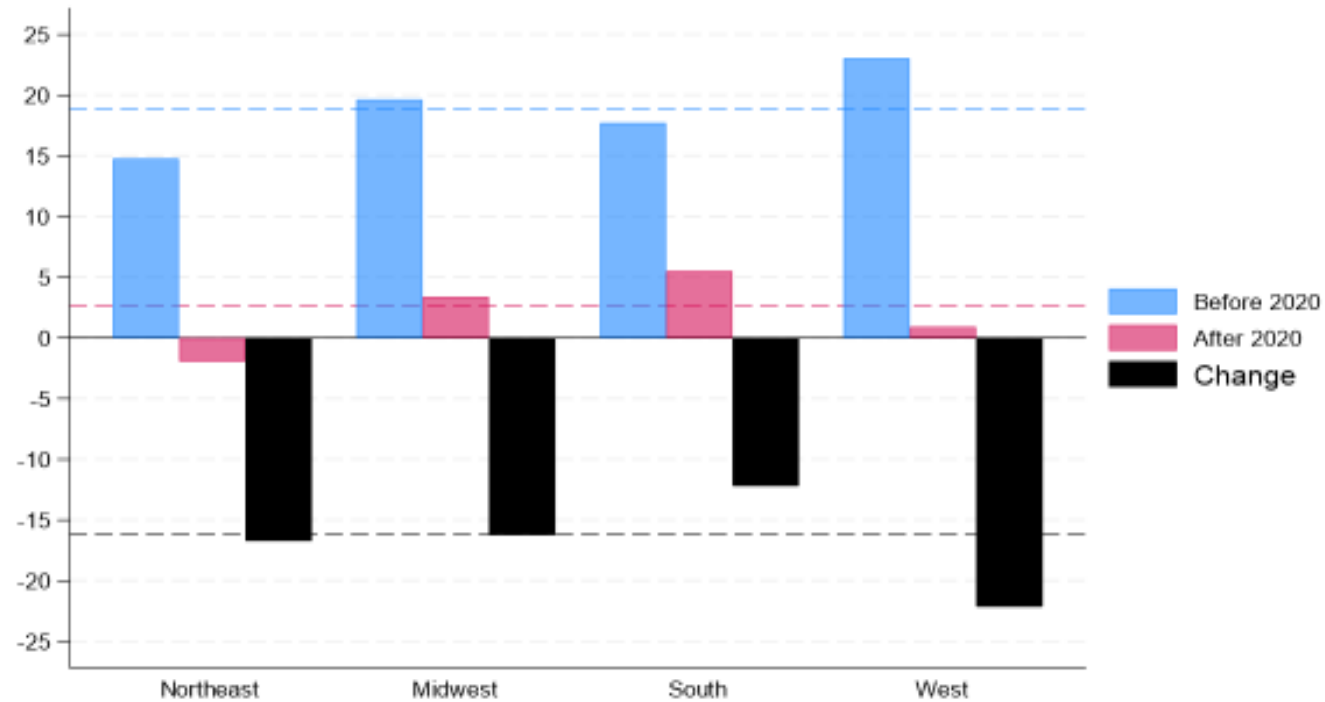
Peltzman (2023) describes pre-2020 happiness differences across regions and places of residence. Regional differences tended to be small, with some variation over time. The only consistent pattern was that the Northeast¹ tended to be about 3 points below the others. Within the regions the happiest places were outside the largest cities, including their suburbs as well as rural areas. However, that difference converged after 2000 and was effectively eliminated by the pre-Covid decade.

The Covid shock is visible in all these geographies. Figure A1a shows the regional dimension. There is some variety: the black bars show that the West declines most and the South least. This difference is meaningful and significant statistically. However, mean reversion may be at play: the West is the happiest region in the pre-2020 decade. This was unusual. Over the entire pre-2020 history the West is indistinguishable from everywhere outside the Northeast. This raises the counterfactual question, which we cannot answer, of whether some of the post-2020 decline in the West is just a return to historical norms. The net result of this regional churning is that the pre-2010 status quo has been restored: the Northeast is slightly sadder than the rest of the country.

The status quo by place of residence has also been preserved. Figure A1b shows that residents inside cities were slightly less happy than those in their suburbs (light blue) and similar to non-metro dwellers. The Covid happiness shock hit all three places evenly – within a point or 2. This is notable in

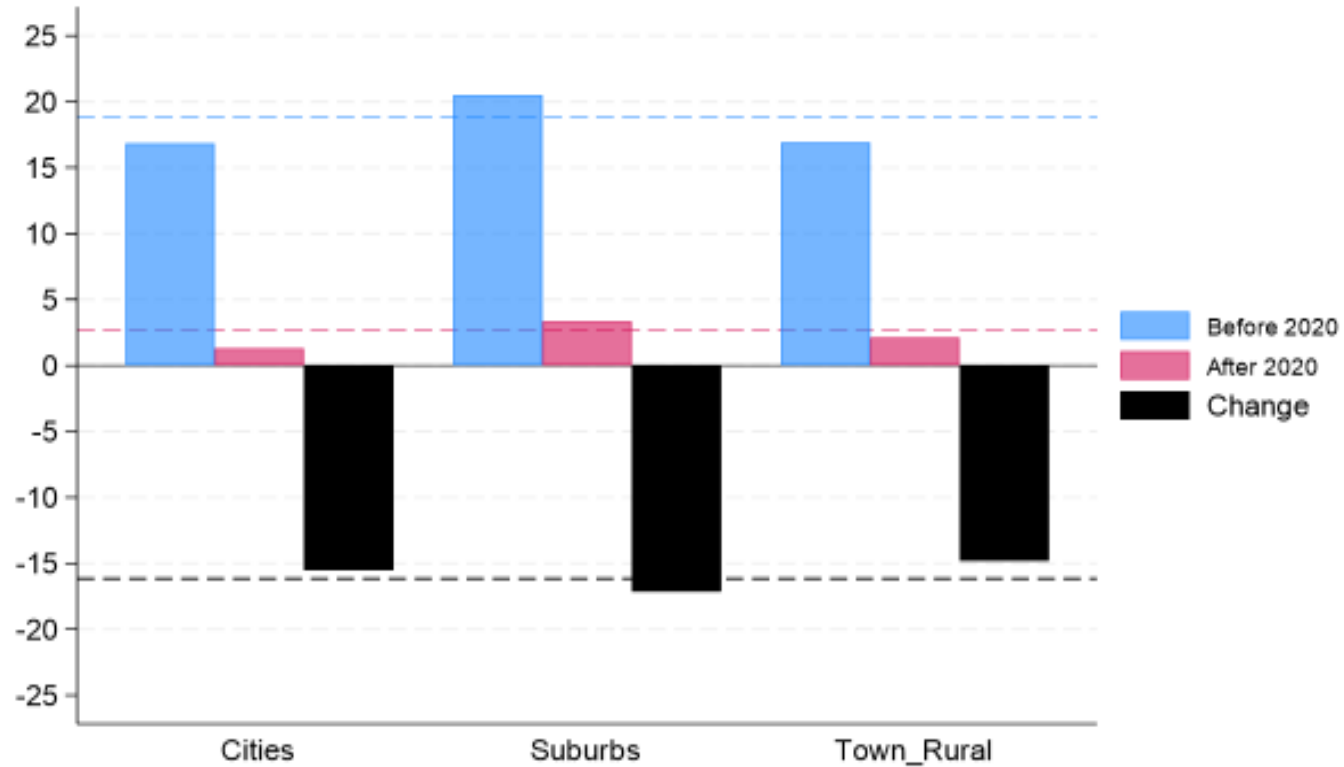
¹ New England and Mid-Atlantic Census regions.

Figure A1a. Happiness by Region. Before and After 2020



See Note to Figure 1. Bar heights are happiness 2012-2018 (light blue), 2021-2024 (light red) and difference (black). Regions combine census regions: Northeast=New England and Mid Atlantic; Midwest=East and West North Central; South= South Atlantic, East and West South Central; West= Mountain and Pacific.

Figure A1b. Happiness by Place. Before and After 2020



See Note to Figure 1. Geographies based on GSS variable xnorcsiz. Bar heights show happiness before (light blue) and after (light red) 2020 and change (black) for respondents living (left to right) within cities of 50,000 or more people, their suburbs and in towns with 2,500 to 50,000 people or in smaller communities or open country.

light of substantial social and economic differences across these geographies² and the uneven effects of the Covid shock per se.³

In sum, a happiness crash occurred from sea to shining sea and everywhere in between.

² For one example, around half the city and suburban residents have gone beyond high school compared to a third for those in small towns and rural areas.

³ For example, the temporary boost to rural areas from relocation from cities.

Appendix 2. Respondent Views of Own Situation and Other People.

Table 4 summarizes how respondents' views of their own situation and of other people evolved in the years surrounding 2020. It compares average answers to selected questions in the 2012-2018 surveys to those in 2022 and 2024. The unusually depressed 2021 survey is excluded. A primary goal is to make the answers comparable to the happiness question. This requires determining what is a positive answer and what is negative and, in some cases, what is the in between answer. The judgments I made here are indicated. Each entry below gives the GSS variable, the question asked (and paraphrased in Table 4) and the total number of responses in each period (Nb, Na) and overall(N). This is followed by a box with a table showing the percentage of respondents⁴ choosing each option in each period (0=before 2020, 1= 2022 and 2024) and overall (Total). Then I describe my choice of positive and negative answers and, if necessary, how answers were recoded. Each entry in Table 4 follows the coding of the happy variable: it is the net difference between the percentage of respondents giving positive answers and negative answers with in-between answers ignored.

1. General Situation

a) health

Would you say your own health, in general, is excellent, good, fair, or poor? N=16159, Nb=5980,

Condition of health	0	1	Total
-----+-----+-----			
excellent	24.10	18.30	21.12
good	48.10	53.04	50.64
fair	21.58	23.93	22.79
poor	6.21	4.72	5.45
-----+-----+-----			
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00

Na=6315.

⁴ As with all the data in the paper, the percentages are weighted averages using GSS variable wtssps to produce random population samples.

I coded excellent as the positive answer, good as the intermediate answer and combined fair and poor as the negative answer.

b. hapmar

(Asked of married respondents) Taking things all together, how would you describe your marriage?

Would you say that your marriage is very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy? N=6961 Nb=4196

Na=2765

Happiness of marriage	0	1	Total
very happy	62.25	60.53	61.54
pretty happy	34.67	35.41	34.98
not too happy	3.08	4.06	3.48
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00

Very is coded as positive, pretty as neutral and not too as negative.

c. life

In general, do you find life exciting, pretty routine, or dull? N=10119. Nb=5937, Na=10119

Is life exciting or dull			
	0	1	Total
-----+-----+-----			
exciting	51.20	41.11	47.02
routine	44.53	54.24	48.55
dull	4.27	4.65	4.42
-----+-----+-----			
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00

Exciting is coded as positive, routine as intermediate and dull as negative.

2. Financial Situation

a) Overall

1. satfin

So far as you and your family are concerned, would you say that you are pretty well satisfied with your present financial situation, more or less satisfied, or not satisfied at all? N=15233, Nb=8934, Na=6299

Satisfaction with financial situation			
	0	1	Total
-----+-----+-----			
pretty well satisfied	29.01	25.11	27.40
more or less satisfied	44.80	44.47	44.66
not satisfied at all	26.19	30.42	27.94
-----+-----+-----			
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00

Pretty well is coded positive, more or less as intermediate and not satisfied at all as negative

2. finalter

During the last few years, has your financial situation been getting better, worse, or has it stayed the same? N=15237, Nb=8938, Na=6299

Change in financial situation			
	0	1	Total
-----+-----+-----			
better	34.56	31.76	33.40
worse	23.08	29.67	25.81
stayed same	42.35	38.57	40.79
-----+-----+-----			
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00

Better is coded as positive, stayed same as intermediate and worse as negative.

3. finrela

Compared with American families in general, would you say your family income is far below average, below average, average, above average, or far above average? (PROBE: Just your best guess.) N=15132, Nb=8872, Na=6260, Na=8872

Opinion of family income			
	0	1	Total
-----+-----+-----			
far below average	6.13	6.92	6.46
below average	25.46	23.81	24.78
average	44.72	42.86	43.95
above average	20.90	22.45	21.54
far above average	2.78	3.95	3.26
-----+-----+-----			
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00

Far below and below were combined as the negative answer, average was coded as intermediate and above and far above were combined as the positive answer.

2b. Standard of Living

1. parsol

Compared to your parents when they were the age you are now, do you think your own standard of living now is much better, somewhat better, about the same, somewhat worse, or much worse than theirs was? N=10101, Nb=5925, Na=4196

R's living standard compared to parents			
	0	1	Total
much better	32.18	27.95	30.45
somewhat better	28.21	29.25	28.64
about the same	23.62	23.84	23.71
somewhat worse	11.37	11.73	11.52
much worse	4.61	7.23	5.68
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00

I combined much and somewhat better for the positive response, much and somewhat worse as the negative response and about the same as the neutral response.

2. kidssol

When your children are at the age you are now, do you think their standard of living will be much better, somewhat better, about the same, somewhat worse, or much worse than yours is now? N=7813, Nb=5893, Na=1920

R's kids living standard compared to R			
	0	1	Total
-----+-----+-----			
much better	27.92	27.90	27.91
somewhat better	25.83	24.24	25.42
about the same	18.77	16.41	18.16
somewhat worse	12.77	15.42	13.45
much worse	4.79	7.97	5.60
no children	9.92	8.07	9.45
-----+-----+-----			
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00

Sample is limited to respondents with children. Coding is same as for parsol – somewhat and much are combined; about the same is neutral.

3. goodlife

The way things are in America, people like me and my family have a good chance of improving our standard of living -- do you agree or disagree? N=10205, Nb=5994, Na=4211

Standard of living of R will improve	0	1	Total
strongly agree	15.18	11.08	13.51
agree	43.37	35.61	40.20
neither agree nor dis	17.95	22.76	19.91
disagree	19.48	22.58	20.75
strongly disagree	4.01	7.97	5.63
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00

Strongly agree and agree are combined and coded positive, neither is coded neutral and strongly disagree and disagree are combined and coded negative.

2c. Work

1.satjob

On the whole, how satisfied are you with the work you do--would you say you are very satisfied, moderately satisfied, a little dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied? N=10656, Nb=6341, Na=4315

Work satisfaction	0	1	Total
very satisfied	51.10	47.01	49.41
moderately satisfied	36.01	41.24	38.18
a little dissatisfied	9.15	8.42	8.85
very dissatisfied	3.73	3.33	3.56
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00

I coded very satisfied as the positive response, moderately satisfied as neutral. I combined a little and very dissatisfied as the negative response. An alternative would be to omit a neutral response and

combine the two satisfied and dissatisfied responses. I rejected this because it would leave almost 90 per cent of the sample positive in both periods and thereby essentially eliminate any inter-period variability. (The choice is consequential: there is no significant change between periods with a dichotomous classification).

2. joblose

Thinking about the next 12 months, how likely do you think it is that you will lose your job or be laid off-- very likely, fairly likely, not too likely, or not at all likely? N=5949, Nb=3542, Na=2407

Is R likely to lose job			
	0	1	Total
very likely	3.89	3.01	3.52
fairly likely	5.02	6.33	5.56
not too likely	26.24	28.85	27.32
not likely	64.85	61.81	63.59
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00

I combined very and fairly likely as the negative response, coded not too likely as neutral and not likely as positive. See discussion of satjob above. The choice of not too as neutral is consequential: counting it as positive would result in an insignificant change between periods.

3. jobfind

About how easy would it be for you to find a job with another employer with approximately the same income and fringe benefits you now have? Would you say very easy, somewhat easy, or not easy at all? N= 5935, Nb=3536, Na=2399

Could R find equally good job			
	0	1	Total
-----+-----+-----			
very easy	19.81	23.79	21.46
somewhat easy	37.26	42.23	39.32
not easy	42.93	33.98	39.22
-----+-----+-----			
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00

I coded very as positive, somewhat as neutral and not as negative.

4. Attitudes Toward Other People

a. trust

Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people? N=8016, Nb=5993, Na=2023

can people be trusted			
	0	1	Total
-----+-----+-----			
can trust	33.39	26.97	31.70
can't be too careful	62.18	63.76	62.60
depends	4.43	9.27	5.71
-----+-----+-----			
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00

I coded can trust as positive, depends as neutral and can't be too careful as negative. Note: depends is not mentioned in the question, is listed last and is chosen by fewer than 10 percent. Thus the question can be considered as effectively dichotomous.

b. helpful

Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful, or that they are mostly just looking out for themselves? N=7996, Nb=5985, Na=2011

People helpful or looking out for selves			
	0	1	Total
try to be helpful	48.42	42.66	46.90
looking out for selves	43.71	44.50	43.92
depends	7.87	12.83	9.18
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00

I coded try to be helpful as positive, depends as neutral and looking out for themselves as negative. Note to trust question above also applies to this question.

c. fair

Do you think most people would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance, or would they try to be fair? N=7979, Nb=5975, Na=2004

People fair or try to take advantage			
	0	1	Total
would take advantage	39.36	45.54	40.99
would try to be fair	53.73	44.21	51.22
depends	6.91	10.25	7.80
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00

I coded would try to be fair as positive, depends as neutral and would take advantage as negative. Note to trust question above also applies to this question.