

## MAKING A DIFFERENCE MAKES YOU HAPPY<sup>1</sup>

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Democracy depends on the time, energy, and engagement of ordinary people. But it remains quite difficult to motivate average citizens even to vote, much less to engage in the more intensive forms of political activism needed to counteract powerful forces that work against rule by the people.

That's why Malte Klar and I set out to determine whether people's engagement in political activity might be associated with the motivator of personal well-being. In other words, despite the struggles inherent in political activism, does being politically active brings its own rewards in terms of happiness and life satisfaction? Such a relationship seemed plausible to us, given past studies illustrating the well-being benefits of volunteering and of having pro-social attitudes and values.

To test this possibility, Klar and I surveyed one group of 344 college students, and then a larger group of 718 adults (all United States residents, half of whom were recruited from an online activism registry, and the other half of whom were community members recruited to match the activists on several demographic variables). Subjects' political activism was assessed via measures like their commitment to activism (e.g., "I take the time I need to engage in activism") and their sense of identity as an activist (e.g., "Being an activist is central to who I am"). Subjects were also asked how often they planned to or had participated in activist behaviors—ranging from sending "a letter or email about a political issue to a public official" to higher-risk activities like engaging "in a political activity in which you knew you will be arrested."

Statistical analyses showed that after controlling for demographic factors like age, race, political orientation, and education, study participants who scored higher in political activism also reported higher levels of personal well-being. Specifically, political activism scores were associated with feeling more pleasant emotions, reporting greater life satisfaction, and having more experiences of freedom, competence, and connection to others. Our application of past research on "psychological thriving" further showed that 28 percent of the politically active adults had reached this highest level of well-being, compared to 18 percent of the community sample.

Because these correlational findings cannot establish whether being politically active actually caused increases in well-being, Klar and I conducted a third study. We asked students to write letters to the head of their college's dining services; some students were assigned to write about "hedonistic" aspects of the food, commenting on the food's taste and how enjoyable it was to eat, while other students were assigned to write about ethical and political aspects of the food, such as whether its production supported fair trade and social justice. Afterwards, students reported on their current personal well-being. Even with this relatively weak and short-term political action, results showed that subjects assigned to write about political issues reported feeling significantly more alert, energized, and alive than did those who wrote about the hedonistic aspects of food.

There are of course many limits to the three studies Klar and I conducted, including their use of only U.S. citizens and their short-term nature. Our results also have an important caveat:

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Engagement in “high-risk” activist behaviors that can lead people to get arrested or physically injured bore no systematic associations with personal well-being. Nonetheless, the results clearly suggested that being politically active is associated with higher levels of personal well-being, and may even cause improvements in vitality.

Politicians and activists typically attempt to motivate ordinary citizens to participate in democracy on the basis of moral appeals or attempts to fix a problem. Our results suggest that it might also be worthwhile to highlight the internal rewards citizens can obtain from being politically engaged: A sense of satisfaction, the experience of pleasant emotions and of connection with others, and a feeling of aliveness.