

# IDEOLOGICAL ORIENTATION AND LIFE SATISFACTION IN OLDER ADULTS: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF COMMITMENT TO SOCIETAL VALUES



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## SUMMARY

*Background and Aims:* The current study was designed to investigate the relationship between political orientation and life satisfaction in older adults with a particular interest in the mediating effect of commitment to societal values and ideological beliefs. *Methods:* A survey was administered to 144 Hungarian older adults, with the variables of interest being that of left-right political orientation, commitment to left- and right-wing related beliefs, and life satisfaction. *Results:* Structural equation modeling was employed and a full mediation was obtained. Leftist orientation was linked to the endorsement of left-wing related values, which, in turn, resulted in an increased level of life satisfaction. Similarly, right-wing orientation was associated with commitment to right-wing related beliefs, which also positively predicted life satisfaction. However, political orientation itself had no direct link to well-being. *Discussion:* Findings suggest that regardless of political orientation, strong commitment to societal values increases life satisfaction in older adults. The role of ideological engagement in the general well-being of older people is discussed.

*Keywords:* ideological orientation, commitment, life satisfaction, elderly

## IDEOLOGICAL ORIENTATION AND LIFE SATISFACTION IN OLDER ADULTS: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF COMMITMENT TO SOCIETAL VALUES

Although older people prefer less demanding and more conventional forms of involvement, such as voting or writing letters (Campbell, 2003; Jennings & Markus, 1988), numerous studies have shown that people stay politically active and ideologically engaged in older age (Pfeiffer, 1974; Rowe & Kahn, 1987; Weaver, 1976). Regarding the European Social Survey data from 2012,<sup>1</sup> 80% of European citizens in the 55–90 age band claimed that they had voted in the last national elections, whereas in the 18–35 age range this ratio was only 56%.

According to Goerres (2007), the main reason for the higher electoral rate among the older population is due to habituation. Voting often becomes a norm, and – based on their previous experience – older adults can make decisions more easily. Another influential factor is the salience and importance of a given political discourse for older people. Weaver (1976) argues that groups of older adults tend to give self-conscious and coherent reactions to political issues, but only if the topic is relevant to them (e.g., health care or social security). Apparently, motivational influences and habitual practices are significant drivers of political activity. Can, however, these factors fully explain why political involvement is increasing in older age? Is it purely a matter of interest and old habit, or does political engagement have other – potentially positive – functions in older people's daily life and general wellbeing?

Although there have been only a few studies conducted, findings consistently show the positive impact of political activity and ideological engagement on wellbeing in the aging population. An early research by Fine (1975) revealed a negative association between satisfaction with life and political powerlessness. More specifically, older people who endorsed the belief that political participation is useless and people have no control over politics reported lower levels of life satisfaction. More recently, Van Hiel and Brebels (2011) have found that adhering to cultural conservative beliefs can buffer the negative effect of age on self-esteem. Nevertheless, some tentative assumptions can be drawn from research investigating the impact of social capital on wellbeing in older adults. A study by Kim, Auh, Lee, and Ahn (2013) showed that political participation was related to decreased levels of depression in older Chinese and Korean immigrants. Similarly, Nilsson, Rana, and Kabir (2006) examined the relationship between community level social capital and overall quality of life in older people in rural Bangladesh. Their results revealed social capital, measured by voting behaviour and membership in community organizations, as a good indicator of life quality.

At the same time, we cannot ignore socioeconomic status (SES) as a potential factor influencing subjective well-being and life satisfaction in older age. Although the connection may seem well-established and evident, it is indispensable to have a look at some of the contradictory results. For instance, in their meta-analysis of 286 empirical studies on the association of SES with

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<sup>1</sup> ESS 2012 dataset was chosen as a point of reference because our survey data were collected in 2011.

subjective well-being (SWB) in older adults, Pinquart and Sörensen (2000) found that both education and income were robust predictors of SWB in later life, with income being the stronger of the two. However, Anderson and others (2012) stated that SES predicts SWB only weakly, while sociometric status, which is based on peer respect rather than income and wealth, has a stronger effect. This indicates that not only belonging to a social group, but also belonging to a broader belief system or just committing to specific issues may have positive impacts on life satisfaction.

When speaking about the elderly, it is important to take into account how society perceives and handles this age group. According to the disengagement theory (Cumming & Henry, 1961), society expects old people to withdraw gradually from productive activities, since it is natural and acceptable for older adults to become less socially involved. In Hungary, this theory has a particular relevance where, for instance, only 19.4% of those between the age of 60 and 64 are employed. While this rate is quite similar in the surrounding countries – Austria has 23.3%, Slovakia has 21.1%, and Slovenia has 18.9% of employment in the same age group –, it is over 80% in Iceland, for example (OECD, 2015). This extreme marginalization can be both the result, and the driver of a social construction. This stereotype, often referred to as ageism, reflects the perception that older people tend to lose their status in society and in the family, they are difficult to mobilize but at the same time easy to manipulate (Kam, 2000); they are neither competent nor competitive and ambitious but more friendly and feminine (Cuddy, Norton & Fiske, 2005). Through internalization, these stable, continuously pres-

ent negative stereotypes can have a significant effect on the personality and behaviour – and most probably subjective well-being – of older people (Goerres, 2007; Specht, Egloff & Schmukle, 2011). Furthermore, internalisation of such stereotypes can lead to lower participation rates among older citizens (Goerres, 2007). In this environment, belonging to groups or committing to beliefs may have a protective role in terms of life satisfaction.

In recent years, considerable attention in political psychology has been paid to the relationship between ideological engagement and life satisfaction. Research findings clearly converge to link strong conservative beliefs to higher levels of life satisfaction (Jetten, Haslam & Barlow, 2012; Napier & Jost, 2008; Schlenker, Chamber & Le, 2012; Taylor, Funk & Craighell, 2006; Van Hiel & Brebels, 2011), even though authors explain this association very differently. Napier and Jost (2008) argue that a likely explanation for why conservatives are happier could be that they are less negatively affected by and more prepared to rationalize social inequalities. Jetten et al. (2012) found that conservatives tend to have higher socioeconomic status and multiple group memberships, and proposed that the relationship between conservative ideology and life satisfaction might be influenced by demographic variables. According to Schlenker et al. (2012), conservative ideology is related to more positive adjustment, such as personal agency, positive outlook, or transcendent moral beliefs, which in turn result in better psychological wellbeing.

Another trend of research provides evidence that commitment to both endpoints of the ideological spectrum can increase wellbeing and life satisfaction. For example, Choma, Busseri and Sadava (2009) argue

that strongly held ideological belief systems, both conservative and liberal, offer values to which people can relate themselves and help create meaning to explain the world. Curini, Jou and Memoli (2013) also found that being a conservative or liberal contributed to higher levels of life satisfaction, but only for those who held a rather radical position and strongly identified with the respective wing.

Neither the explanations nor research findings are completely consistent, but most studies point to the possible mediation effect of psychological variables, including commitment, positive attitudes, and strong endorsement of ideological beliefs. The broader literature of life satisfaction also discusses people's ability and willingness to commit themselves to specific values and ideas as a core indicator of psychological wellbeing (Lazarus & DeLongis, 1983; Debats, 1999).

Previous studies have examined the direct link between political orientation and life satisfaction; however, potential mediators have received much less attention in the broader literature. In the current study, we propose that commitment to ideological beliefs and societal values function as a mediator in the relationship between ideological orientation and life satisfaction. It is hypothesized that commitment to traditional left- or right-wing values and ideas can be the mechanism through which political orientation exerts a positive effect on satisfaction with life in older adults.

## METHOD

### Sample

Data were collected from 201 older adults; however, due to a large number of missing

data points, 57 participants had to be excluded. In the final sample, participants were 144 older adults (82% female) with a mean age of 70 years ( $SD = 6$  years). Regarding the highest level of education, the majority of respondents had a trade certificate (47.2%), followed by high school diploma (21.5%), tertiary education (16.7%), and primary education (16.6%). More than half of the respondents did not provide information about their previous employment (54%). Of those who answered the question, the majority of participants indicated that they had worked in a clerical position (15.4%, i.e., secretary, administration, etc.) before retiring. This was followed by people working in the hospitality (12.1%) and finance (6%) sectors. A substantial proportion of participants mentioned that they had worked in a supervisory role without specifying the industry sector (6.7%). All participants resided in the capital city of Hungary or in its urban agglomeration.

### Materials

Political orientation was measured by a 7-point bipolar self-placement scale, where '1' represented the left-wing and '7' referred to the right-wing. The left-right self-placement scale is the most commonly used instrument to measure political orientation and has proved to be reliable and valid in a number of studies (see Inglehart & Klingemann, 1976; Kroh, 2007). Also, in an Eastern-European context measuring the left-right orientation is more relevant than the conservative-liberal dimension due to historical reasons (Thorisdottir, Jost, Liviatan & Shrout, 2007). While one of the greatest assets of a self-placement scale is its simplified structure, which can make it really easy to identify groups, self-placement itself does not necessarily require deep cognitive processing. It

can be also a result of an affective attachment to a label or a category – inherited from family or peer groups, etc. (Szabó et al., 2011).

Therefore, issue-related items have been used to assess specific personal beliefs rather than group-membership. Commitment to beliefs traditionally related to the left- or the right-wing was measured by eleven face valid items, respectively. Items were generated by a group of researchers (including the authors) based on existing measures of ideological dimensions, topics of current political discourses, and classic definitions of left-right orientation. The statements encompassed a variety of themes in relation to which left- and right-wing politics have a strong and often opposing standpoint (e.g., religion, national sentiment, traditionalism/future-orientation, economics, social equality/inequality, order and governance, and family issues). Participants used a 6-point Likert scale ('1' completely disagree and '6' completely agree) to indicate their agreement with each statement (items are listed in the Appendix). Right-related statements showed good internal consistency ( $\alpha = .77$ ) with item-total correlations ranging from  $r = .27$  to  $r = .62$ . The Cronbach's alpha for left-related items was slightly lower ( $\alpha = .65$ ), but item-total correlations were in the expected interval and ranged between  $r = .21$  and  $r = .35$  indicating acceptable reliability.

The 5-item version of the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWL) was used to measure general well-being (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985). Participants gave responses to items such as 'In most ways my life is close to my ideal' on a 6-point scale anchored by '1' completely disagree and '6' completely agree. The scale demonstrated high levels of reliability ( $\alpha = .84$ ).

## Procedure

Participants were approached through senior clubs in the capital city of Hungary. Field assistants visited six clubs in different districts of the city and invited the members to participate in a research on ideologies and societal values. Respondents were asked to fill out a paper-based questionnaire, the completion of which took approximately 20 minutes.

## RESULTS

First, bivariate correlations were calculated among the left-right self-placement scale, left- and right-related beliefs, and SWL (Table 1). Left-right orientation showed a negative association with left-related statements and a positive relationship with right-related items, but had no correlation with SWL. Both right- and left-related statements positively linked to SWL. Left-related beliefs positively correlated with right-related beliefs indicating that the scales are not measuring two endpoints of one dimension, but that it is possible to express agreement with both left- and right-related societal values.

Next, we conducted a path analysis to further analyse the relationship among the four variables of interest and examine both direct and indirect effects of political orientation on SWL. The model yielded a very good fit to the data ( $\chi^2 = .18$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $\chi^2/df = .18$ ,  $RMSEA = .000$ ,  $CI 90\% = .00-.17$ ,  $CFI = 1$ ,  $TLI = 1$ ,  $SRMR = .009$ , Figure 1). There was no direct path between left-right orientation and SWL; however, the ideological position predicted strong commitment to either left- or right-related beliefs, which, in turn, led to higher levels of SWL. The

Sobel-test indicated that political orientation exerted an indirect effect on wellbeing via leftist ( $z = -2.64$ ,  $s.e. = .04$ ,  $p = .008$ ) and rightist ( $z = 2.47$ ,  $s.e. = .04$ ,  $p = .013$ ) beliefs. Left-right orientation and the two mediators explained 31.3% of variance in SWL.

## DISCUSSION

The present study examined the relationship between ideological orientation and life satisfaction in older adults with a key interest in the mediating quality of commitment to societal values and ideological beliefs. Results obtained supported the hypothesis that ideological commitment functions as a mediator between left-right orientation and wellbeing.

The left-right self-placement scale was significantly related to ideological commitments. Specifically, those who placed themselves closer to the left end of the spectrum endorsed the left-wing related ideas and values to a larger extent. Similarly, participants with a rightist orientation showed stronger commitment to values associated with the right-wing. It is an important finding, as it confirms the association between ideological orientation and value endorsement. Furthermore, it provides supporting evidence for the validity of the items assessing value commitment. Another important finding is the lack of a direct link between political orientation and life satisfaction. However, participants with a definite ideological orientation reported stronger commitment to either left- or right-related beliefs, which in turn resulted in increased levels of life satisfaction. This suggests that although one's score on self-placement scale is unrelated to life satisfaction, it exerts significant effects through value commitment.

These findings indicate that regardless of one's political orientation, strong ideological commitment can play an important role in the enhancement and maintenance of life satisfaction in older people. This is in line with previous research, linking commitments and social engagement to more positive psychological outcomes. For example, measuring a variety of goal orientations and motivational factors, Rapkin and Fischer (1992) explored five distinct profiles of older adults and found that the socially engaged cluster scored significantly lower in depression and higher in self-esteem. Socially engaged older adults were characterized by higher levels of maintenance and independence as, well as lower levels of disengagement motivation. Similarly, a meta-analysis by Pinquart and Sörensen (2000) has revealed that better social integration contributes to greater life satisfaction and higher self-esteem in later life.

Our findings point to the positive effects of political engagement and commitment on the wellbeing of older people. This supports previous research that has demonstrated the psychological benefits of commitments in older age. Considering that pensioners are often perceived as less competent and influential (Cuddy, Norton & Fiske, 2005), political commitment might serve as a means for older people to feel more competent and empowered, and to express their group affiliation. Lazarus and DeLongis (1983) also argue that commitment is of crucial relevance in coping with negative life events (e.g. retirement, loss of roles, status, illnesses, death in family, widowhood). However, in older age some commitments become less important or serviceable, such as organizational responsibilities and workplace obligations. It is possible that strong adherence of societal values can replace the no longer meaningful or service-

able commitments in older adults. According to the activity theory (e.g., Pfeiffer, 1974; Rowe & Kahn, 1987), in successful aging engagement can have a central function to compensate for the age related changes and boost positive adjustment.

Finally, left-related beliefs revealed a positive, weak to medium association with right-related commitment. This indicates that having a dominant ideological orientation does not necessarily mean the complete rejection of values and ideas traditionally related to the opposite end of the ideological dimension, and that it is important to make a distinction between ideological orientation and ideological commitment. While the former one is mainly related to political and institutional variables, such as voting behaviour or party choice, the latter one refers to a more personal level of ideological thinking, including value preferences and societal beliefs. It is, however, also possible that the positive correlation between left- and right-related commitment is a function of the socio-cultural context. Thorisdottir and colleagues (2007) have examined the correlates of left-right orientation in Western and Eastern Europe. They have demonstrated that constructs traditionally related to the left-wing (e.g., openness) predicted right-wing orientation in the Post-communist countries. Furthermore, need for security, which is a core feature of right-wing ideology, was strongly related to the left-wing in Eastern Europe. When interpreting the results, we need to keep in mind that our sample included elderly people who were socialized during the Communism and spent most of their lives in a system where the right-wing ideology did not officially exist. There is no doubt that the communist legacy has greatly influenced and formed the ideological thinking of the ageing population in the Post-socialist region.

## STRENGTHS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

It is important to note that commitment was measured by two scales specifically designed to be relevant and meaningful in the context of the present study, and covered eight main domains of ideological beliefs, therefore findings cannot be generalized. We do not know what level of commitment these items measure, but they certainly capture a deeper ideological value orientation than the one-item self-placement (Szabó et al., 2011). The scales' internal consistency was acceptable and the correlation coefficients with the left-right self-placement scale were in the expected direction indicating convergent validity. Future studies might want to examine the impact of a wider range of societal commitments and/or ideological orientations (e.g., conservative-liberal, moderate-radical) in different socio-cultural contexts and age groups.

It could also be possible to interpret the results from a gender point of view. Effects of ageism, the level and quality of engagement and subjective well-being can be different for men and women. Indeed, previous research has shown gender differences in the social networks and community engagement of older people (McLaughlin et al., 2010). Since our sample consisted of mainly female participants, group differences could not be investigated, but this question can form the topic of future research. Other characteristics of the sample should also be taken into account when interpreting the findings. The subjects are members of pensioner clubs in the capital, which a priori means a community life that positively influences well-being, as opposed to those living in more isolated environments. It has been widely demonstrated

that participation in community activities predicts better wellbeing outcomes for older people (Stephens, Alpass, Towers & Stevenson, 2011).

In addition, it is worth highlighting that a relatively large number of participants had to be excluded from the analyses because of missing data. As the investigated age group tends to be reluctant to respond to surveys, it is possible that participation in the study itself is a sign of actual commitment. Finally, this study was correlational; therefore, we cannot draw conclusions regarding the causality of

our model. Although the model and the interpretation of the findings were informed by theory, future longitudinal research is needed to test the causal effect of ideological orientation on value commitment and wellbeing outcomes.

In sum, the results of this study provide a deeper insight into the role of political engagement in life satisfaction in the older population in Hungary. This suggests that commitment is a potential mechanism underlying the relationship between ideological orientation and wellbeing.

## ÖSSZEFOGLALÓ

IDEOLÓGIAI ORIENTÁCIÓ ÉS ÉLETTEL VALÓ ELÉGEDETTSÉG IDŐSEK KÖRÉBEN.  
A TÁRSADALMI ÉRTÉKEK IRÁNTI ELKÖTELEZŐDÉS MEDIÁCIÓS SZEREPE

*Háttér és célkitűzések:* Jelen tanulmány a politikai orientáció és az élettel való elégedettség kapcsolatát vizsgálja idősebb felnőtteknél. Kiemelt figyelmet kap a társadalmi értékek és ideológiai eszmék iránti elköteleződés mediációs hatása. *Módszer:* 144 magyar idős emberrel történt a felmérés. A változók a következőket mérték: bal-jobb politikai orientáció, elköteleződés a bal- és jobboldalhoz kapcsolódó eszmék iránt, élettel való elégedettség. *Eredmények:* Strukturális egyenlet modellezést alkalmazva teljes mediációt kaptunk. A baloldali orientáció a baloldallal kapcsolatos értékek támogatásával mutatott összefüggést, ami viszont megnövelte az élettel való elégedettség szintjét. Ehhez hasonlóan a jobboldali orientáció a jobboldalhoz kapcsolódó hiedelmekkel függött össze, ami ugyanúgy pozitívan prediktálta az élettel való elégedettséget. Ugyanakkor a politikai orientáció közvetlenül nem kapcsolódott a jólléthez. *Következtetések:* Az eredmények azt mutatják, hogy a társadalmi értékek iránti erős elköteleződés növeli az élettel való elégedettséget idősebb felnőtteknél, a politikai orientációtól függetlenül. A cikkben megvitatásra kerül az ideológiai elkötelezettség szerepe az idősök általános jóllétének szempontjából.

*Kulcsszavak:* ideológiai orientáció, elkötelezettség, élettel való elégedettség, idősök

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlation among the variables of interest

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
1. Left-Right Self-placement	3.45	1.88	1	-0.23*	0.27**	0.02
2. Left-related Beliefs	4.29	0.68		1	0.35**	0.27**
3. Right-related Beliefs	4.64	0.72			1	0.24**
4. Satisfaction With Life	3.06	1.14				1

Note: \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .001$

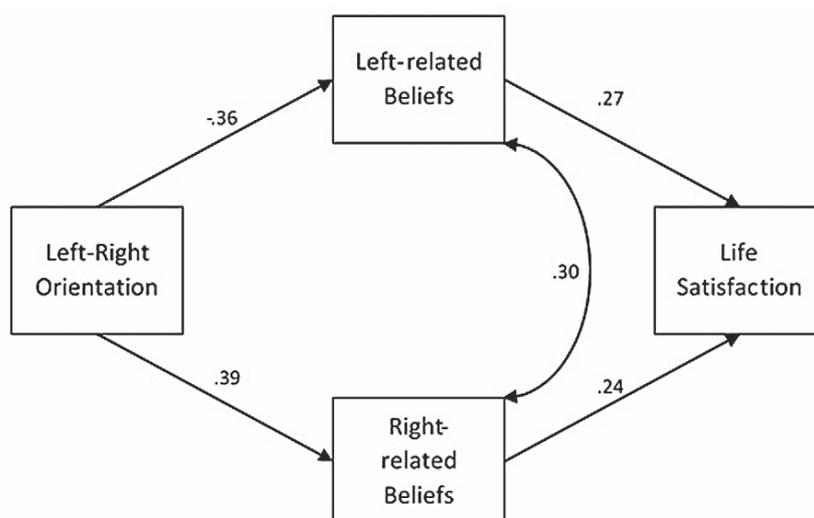


Figure 1. Standardized coefficients for the path model testing the proposed theoretical model

Note: Results are based on MLR estimation and STDYX standardization in Mplus. All coefficients are statistically significant at the 5% level. Fit indices are reported in text

## APPENDIX

### Left-related statements:

National symbols shouldn't be expropriated by political parties.

Life was better under Socialism.

Gays and lesbians should be provided with equal rights.

Looking forward to the future is more important than adhering to traditions.

We should strive to achieve what Western democracies have already accomplished.

The Church shouldn't be involved in Politics.

The problems of the country should be solved by state intervention.

All people in need should be provided with appropriate social benefits.

The issue of Trianon<sup>2</sup> shouldn't be on the political agenda anymore.

<sup>2</sup> The Treaty of Trianon was a peace agreement signed in 1920 at the end of World War I between the Allies and the Hungarian Kingdom to regulate the borders of Hungary as an independent state. As a result of the treaty, 70%

No one should be judged if they don't want to have children.  
The stability of the economy should be ensured by state intervention.

**Right-related statements:**

Dual citizenship should be provided to everyone with Hungarian roots.  
Traditions should be taken into consideration when making social changes.  
It is a parent's primary responsibility to teach their children to be obedient and disciplined.  
If our country wants to improve and grow, we need to make radical changes.  
One cannot have a complete life without religion.  
Having children is a duty towards the society.  
We need a government that maintains order.  
It is very important to preserve our traditions and cultural heritage.  
The domestic market should be protected.  
We need strict laws.  
Family is based on the institution of marriage.

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of Hungary's territory was drawn into other countries and 31% of ethnic Hungarians had to live detached from the home country. Since then, Trianon has been a symbol of national trauma and revisionist aspirations are still popular among the supporters of extreme right-wing parties.