



# Conservatives Are Happier than Liberals: the Mediating Role of Perceived Goal Progress and Flow Experience — a Pilot Study

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## Abstract

Authors presume that conservatives would be happier than liberals because they would develop better mental adjustment especially under contextual threat. The present study aimed at examining whether self-regulatory factors (i.e., dispositional self-control, perception of goal progress, dispositional flow, and dispositional neurotic self-attentiveness) could mediate the link between conservatism and subjective well-being (SWB). It also aimed at testing the view that contextual threat (operationalized through undesired unemployment) may moderate the relationship between conservatism and the mediators under study. In order to examine this, 418 North-American participants from the United States (66.7% females and 33.3% males;  $M_{\text{age}} = 33.63$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.64$ ) answered questionnaires via an online platform, and structural equation model or path analyses were conducted. Main results revealed that: (a) conservatism positively predicted SWB, whereas undesired unemployment negatively predicted SWB; (b) perception of goal progress and dispositional flow fully mediated the conservative-SWB gap; and (c) dispositional self-control was highest in conservatives under contextual threat of undesired unemployment. Finally, this study suggests that conservatives can experience higher SWB because of adaptive cognitive adjustments. Moreover, this study suggests that the rationalization of inequality can have a self-enhancement function that bolsters self-regulation process when exposed to threatening contexts.

**Keywords** Political ideology · Conservatism · Personality · Self-regulation · Contextual threat · Wellbeing

People use naïve beliefs and theories in order to make their environment understandable (e.g., Heider 1958). Political ideologies constitute naïve theories of the world that allow to perceive and interpret social concepts and specific events in a meaningful manner. For example, conservatives tend to conceive fairness in terms of “equity” (e.g., “People get what they deserve!”), while liberals view fairness from the scope of “equality” (e.g., “People are same, so everybody must benefit from the same opportunities!”) (e.g., Napier and Jost 2008). Pioneering theoretical works on psychology of political ideology (e.g., Adorno et al. 1950) elicited a vague of studies focusing on the link between right-wing ideological attitudes (e.g., authoritarianism, conservatism, social dominance) and subjective well-being (SWB) (e.g., Bok 2010; Jetten et al.

2013; Napier and Jost 2008; Okulicz-Kozaryn et al. 2014; Onraet et al. 2013, 2017). SWB refers to “people’s overall evaluations of their lives and their emotional experiences” (Diener et al. 2017, p. 87) and encompasses different constructs such as life satisfaction (i.e., long-term contentment), happiness (i.e., short-term contentment) and agreeable emotions (Chui and Wong 2016). SWB thus emphasizes on *the pursuit of an agreeable life* (e.g., Peterson and Park 2014).

Initially, authors presumed that that right-wing ideological attitude was negatively related to SWB because psychological rigidity (viewed as a psychological reflection of the right-wing ideology) would foster the appearance of psychological disorders (e.g., Adorno et al. 1950). Although some empirical evidence supported such a hypothesis (e.g., Duriez et al. 2011), studies revealed that right-wing ideological attitude could be beneficial for SWB (Napier and Jost 2008; Schlenker et al. 2012). This inconsistency encouraged Onraet et al. (2013) to conduct a meta-analysis that showed that right-wing ideological attitude was *generally* unrelated to SWB, suggesting that moderators could determine the nature of this relationship. Indeed, this hypothesis was supported by some studies that revealed that the relationship between political ideology and

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SWB was complex and could depend upon the societal vs. individual level of analysis (e.g., Okulicz-Kozaryn et al. 2014). At the societal level, authors revealed that people living in liberal countries reported higher levels of SWB than did those who lived in conservative countries (e.g., Bok 2010; Okulicz-Kozaryn et al. 2014). The authors explained this difference by the fact that liberal (or conservative) countries would offer their citizens greater (or lesser) health care, state-supported housing, education, social services, and freedom, thus leading to improve (or undermine) citizens' life quality and thus SWB. However, at the individual level, and thus independently of the liberal vs. conservative type of country, conservative people appeared to score higher on SWB than did people who embraced a liberal political ideology (e.g., Okulicz-Kozaryn et al. 2014; Onraet et al. 2013, 2017). This result would be due to the fact that conservatives (or liberals) would activate more (or less) protective or facilitative cognitive mechanisms (e.g., Napier and Jost 2008; Schlenker et al. 2012). Taken together, these results suggest that living in a liberal country and adopting a cognitive functioning that can be activated by a conservative political ideology would promote the development of SWB.

Focused on the individual level of the ideology-SWB relationship, Napier and Jost (2008) showed that conservatives' propensity to legitimate the presence of social, economic and political inequalities (i.e., palliative function of system-justifying ideology) accounted for their greater ability to experience life satisfaction (a core component of SWB). This suggests that the rationalization of inequality would act as a buffer against the negative incidence of socioeconomic inequalities on people's affects. Furthermore, Schlenker et al. (2012) observed that the positive link between conservatism and life satisfaction could be accounted for by higher levels of health-related factors (e.g., optimism, personal control, positive outlook). The authors suggested that such effects would be due to the fact that conservatives would endorse values and principles (e.g., religion, moral commitment) inciting them to adopt adaptive and healthy psychosocial functioning and behaviors (e.g., temptation resistance, self-control, loyalty, honesty, prosociality, safe behaviors).

In the continuity of previous studies (Napier and Jost 2008; Schlenker et al. 2012), the present one attempted to advance knowledge of the ideology-SWB relationship on the *individual level* and, more specifically, to examine whether dispositional self-regulatory factors (i.e., dispositional self-control, dispositional neurotic self-attentiveness, and dispositional flow) and perception of goal progress could mediate the link between conservatism and SWB. The view that dispositions can mediate the link between ideology and SWB is based on the *principle of social investment* that assumes that social or institutional engagements can generate modifications in people's personalities through changes in their ideologies, values, and goals, thus affecting their life experiences (e.g., Roberts

and Wood 2006). We examined the mediating effect of dispositional self-control because Schlenker et al. (2012) regarded this variable as “a core element” of positive adjustment in conservatives. As for dispositional flow and goal progress, we investigated these two constructs because they are reputed to play a non-negligible role in the self-regulation of cognitions, emotions and behaviors, and are known to be linked to personal agency (e.g., self-efficacy) (see Briki and Markman 2018; Markman and Guenther 2007). We also examined dispositional neurotic self-attentiveness (corresponding to dispositional rumination) because Napier and Jost (2008) assumed that “liberals might become less satisfied with their current situation because of the deleterious effects of rumination” (p. 565).

## The Mediating Role of Self-Regulatory Factors

Self-regulation corresponds to the set of self-corrective actions or adjustments that take place to be on track either to move toward a desired goal (i.e., appetitive circumstance or outcome to the self, such as success, gain or social acceptance) or to move away from an “anti-goal” (i.e., aversive circumstance or outcome to the self, such as failure, loss or social exclusion) (Carver and Scheier 1998, 2017).

### Dispositional Self-Control

Considered as a core component of self-regulation, dispositional self-control can be defined as a structure of the self that both promotes goal-facilitative plans and overrides goal-debilitative impulses (e.g., De Ridder and Gillebaart 2017; Hagger 2013, 2014). Dispositional self-control can also be viewed as a component of a specific Big Five dimension, namely “conscientiousness”, which refers to a set of personality traits, such as morality, abnegation, responsibility, conventionality, organization, and self-control (e.g., Roberts et al. 2005). Burton et al. (2015) showed that conscientiousness accounted for the positive link between conservatism and SWB.

*Why and how can conservative political ideology affect SWB via increased dispositional self-control?* The concept of goal selection, initially theorized by Carver and Scheier (1998), refers to a process consisting both in adopting goals and sub-goals considered important to the self and in rejecting goals and sub-goals considered trivial. Said differently, goal selection leads to prioritize and organize the complex goals hierarchy, which is thought to take place along temporal (long- vs. short-term goals) and abstraction scales (abstract vs. concrete goals) (e.g., Locke and Latham 1990). Specifically, the process of goal progress would be carried out from long-term or abstract goals to short-term or concrete goals, respectively. In this regard, ideological values would influence people's

long-term (or abstract) goals, which in turn would influence short-term (or concrete) goals. For instance, if conservative ideology incites to embrace institutional and moral lifestyles, such as familial and professional duties, religious commitments, and health-related and prosocial concerns, then one can presume that conservatism may reinforce goal selection process and develop a stronger sense of rigor and self-discipline toward moral, prosocial and health-related goals. As a result, conservatives would foster adherence to healthier (or less unhealthy) and more adaptive (or less maladaptive) behaviors than would liberals.

Research reported that dispositional self-control promoted SWB because of its capability to initiate adaptive (or inhibit maladaptive) cognitions, affects and behaviors (e.g., Briki 2016, 2018; Cheung et al. 2014; De Ridder et al. 2012; Hofmann et al. 2014). For instance, Cheung et al. (2014) showed a positive link between dispositional self-control and promotion focus, and a negative link between dispositional self-control and prevention focus. In addition, Cheung et al. (2014) found that both motivational orientations (i.e., promotion and prevention focus) partially mediated the link of dispositional self-control with happiness, indicating that dispositional self-control positively predicted happiness through enhanced promotion focus and through reduced prevention focus. Furthermore, and in line with the assumption that dispositional self-control can inhibit goal-debilitative impulses (Hagger 2013, 2014), Hofmann et al. (2014) suggested that the positive effect of dispositional self-control on SWB would be explained by the capability of dispositional self-control to manage conflicting goals or desires. In line with this, the authors observed that people with high dispositional self-control reported fewer competing goals or desires than did people with low dispositional self-control.

### Perceived Goal Progress and Dispositional Flow

A mechanism whereby self-regulation can promote goal attainment refers to perception of goal progress (e.g., Briki 2018; Briki and Markman 2018). Studies revealed that perception of goal progress, which can be “triggered by an initiating event [...] that elicits a mental simulation of some outcome trajectory” (Briki and Markman 2018, p. 10), accounted for consecutive behaviors and promoted task completion (e.g., Dhar et al. 2007; Iso-Ahola and Dotson 2019). Recently, Briki (2018) has investigated the interrelationships between dispositional self-control, self-regulatory variables (i.e., perception of goal progress and self-efficacy) and SWB in the context of physical activity. He observed that perception of goal progress partially mediated the positive effect of dispositional self-control on SWB, thus highlighting the powerful role of dispositional self-control in the process of goal attainment thereby fostering positive feelings and emotions. Hence, if conservatives possess greater self-regulation abilities than do liberals

(as we suggested above), then one can suggest that conservatives would be able to make greater progress toward self-relevant end-states. We can also suggest that individuals with better self-regulation abilities would experience greater levels of flow because perception of goal progress would trigger intrinsic motivation and automatic cognitive processing eliciting modified states of mind (e.g., Briki 2017; Iso-Ahola and Dotson 2016; Markman and Guenther 2007). Indeed, flow is reputed to be an experience of modified state of mind that has specific characteristics, such as total task absorption (concentration), interest (intrinsic motivation), loss of self-attentiveness, distorted sense of space and time, and happiness (e.g., Carpentier et al. 2012; Csikszentmihalyi et al. 2005).

### Dispositional Neurotic Self-Attentiveness

Napier and Jost (2008) suggested the view that conservatives would be happier than would liberals because they would be less likely to ruminate and dwell on inequalities. The tendency to ruminate refers to the concept of dispositional neurotic self-attentiveness (a component of a broader phenomenon called “dispositional self-attentiveness”), which can be defined as a chronic “self-attentiveness motivated by threats, losses, or injustices to the self” (Trapnell and Campbell 1999, p. 297). Research showed that neurotic self-attentiveness was positively associated with neuroticism (i.e., general emotional instability and tendency to experience psychological distress) and negative emotions, and was negatively associated with positive emotions and SWB (e.g., Carpentier et al. 2012; Newman and Nezlek 2019; Ruscio et al. 2015; Trapnell and Campbell 1999). Burton et al. (2015) found evidence that conservatives were less neurotic than were liberals, and that neuroticism explained the ideology-SWB gap. *Why may conservatives display less neurotic self-attentiveness than liberals?* Since conservatives tend to legitimate social injustices, one might view conservative political ideology as a shield against negative affective consequences of economic and societal inequalities (Napier and Jost 2008). In addition, given the fact that threat of injustice is a core component of neurotic self-attentiveness (Trapnell and Campbell 1999) and that conservatism may act as a buffer against psychological distress (Van Hiel and Brebels 2011), we assume that conservative ideology might counteract the development of dispositional neurotic self-attentiveness.

### The Moderating Role of Contextual Threat

The relationship between political conservatism and psychological outcomes has raised the interest of a number of scholars worldwide for several decades (e.g., Adorno et al. 1950; Onraet et al. 2017). Although psychologists evidenced that conservative-related attitudes (e.g., psychological rigidity,

authoritarianism) were positively associated with maladaptive affective and cognitive patterns (e.g., neuroticism, negative emotion, depression) (e.g., Duriez et al. 2011; Peterson and Duncan 2007), other authors reported a small and positive link between conservatism and SWB (e.g., Napier and Jost 2008; Schlenker et al. 2012). Such inconsistencies incited scholars to examine “which contexts and life conditions affect happiness differently for conservatives and liberals” (Van Hiel et al. 2015, p. 1216). Interestingly, authors reported positive links between psychological rigidity and SWB under contextual threat or psychological distress (e.g., Brandt et al. 2015; Van Hiel and Brebels 2011; Van Hiel and De Clercq 2009). Following this perspective, Onraet et al. (2017) examined the moderating effect of contextual threat (e.g., undesired unemployment) on the positive effect of conservatism on SWB. The authors observed that, under “very high” contextual threat, people with high conservatism experienced higher levels of SWB than did people with low conservatism. In this study, we operationalized the variable “contextual threat” by the threatening situation of undesired unemployment with regard to SWB.

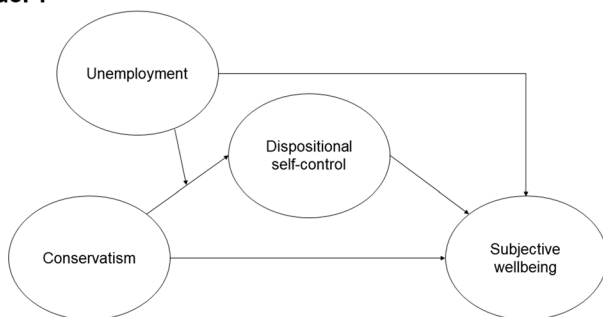
## Research Overview

Attempting to bring a contribution to the “ideology-SWB gap” studies, this study pursued two purposes. Firstly, in line with Schlenker et al. (2012) assuming that the ideology-SWB gap could be accounted for by adaptive cognitive and

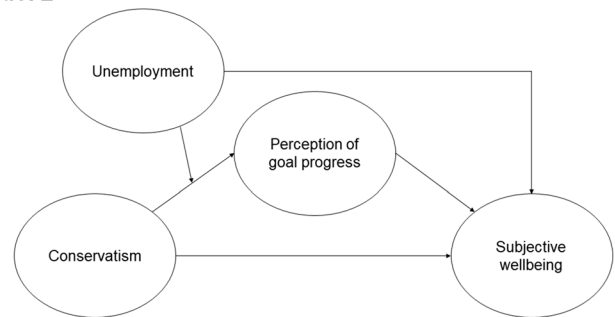
motivational factors, this study aimed at examining whether self-regulatory variables (i.e., dispositional self-control, perception of goal progress, dispositional flow, and dispositional neurotic self-attentiveness) could mediate the link between conservatism and SWB (see Fig. 1). We expected every self-regulatory factor to mediate the ideology-SWB relationship, in the sense that conservatism would enhance SWB through enhanced levels of dispositional self-control, perceived goal progress, and dispositional flow, as well as through diminished levels of dispositional neurotic self-attentiveness. Secondly, in line with Van Hiel et al.’s (2015) recommendation to explore conditions under which ideology affects SWB, this study aimed at testing the view that contextual threat (here, the situation of undesired unemployment) may moderate the relationship between conservatism and the mediators under study (see Fig. 1). We examined contextual threat because perceived threat appeared to influence the link between psychological rigidity (a conservative-related attitude) and SWB (e.g., Brandt et al. 2015). We expected undesired unemployment to moderate the relationship between conservatism and the mediators under study. The situation of being unemployed while not looking for a job — thus referring to a situation of desired unemployment — was not considered as a contextual threat with regard to SWB because it did not reflect a job privation situation.

In order to examine this, we asked a group of participants to answer questionnaires via an online platform. In order to test our hypotheses while avoiding multicollinearity and loss of statistical power issues when including all mediating variables

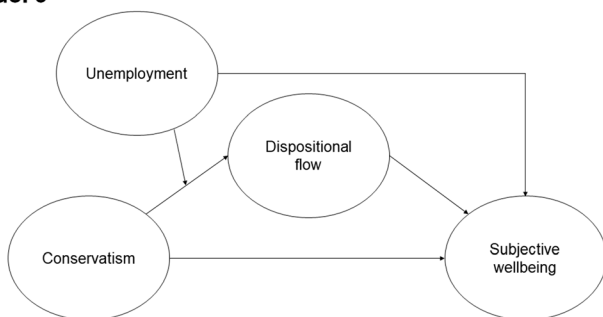
**Model 1**



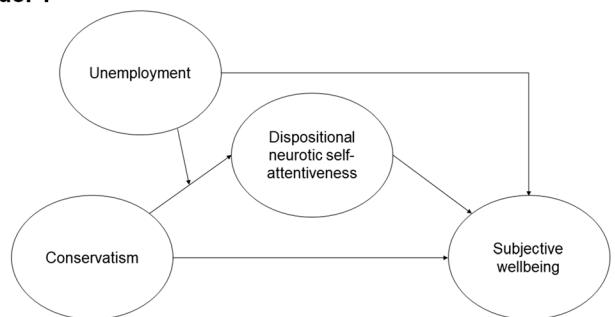
**Model 2**



**Model 3**



**Model 4**



**Fig. 1** Conceptual diagrams



within a same model, we built four separate models (i.e., Model 1, Model 2, Model 3, and Model 4). Model 1 used dispositional self-control as a mediator; Model 2 employed perception of goal progress; Model 3 focused on dispositional flow; and Model 4 investigated dispositional neurotic self-attentiveness. In addition, in order to control the threatening situation of undesired unemployment, we added in all models a path between unemployment and SWB. We considered the examined model as *theoretically* valid when undesired unemployment negatively predicted SWB (see Fig. 1).

## Method

### Participants

Four hundred eighteen North-American participants from the United States (279 females, 66.7%, and 139 males, 33.3%;  $M_{\text{age}} = 33.63$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.64$ , from 18 to 70 years old) voluntarily took part in this study. Participants were recruited online from a crowdsourcing platform (ClickWorker), and were asked to inform diverse demographic indicators (Ethnicity: 9.8% African American, 5.5% Asian American, 67.9% Caucasian American, 8.4% Hispanic American, and 8.4% other; Party affiliation: 33.5% Democrat, 22.5% Republican, and 44% other or no affiliation; Income: 64.6% below \$40,000, 26.6% \$40,000–90,000, and 8.9% above \$90,000; Religiosity: 46.2% religious and 53.8% not religious; marital status: 38.8% married and 61.2% unmarried; and employment status: 66.3% employed or not looking for a job and 33.7% undesirably unemployed).

### Study Design and Procedure

This study was performed in line with the Declaration of Helsinki. In addition, it was carried out with the authorization of the Institutional Review Board of the university of the main investigator of the study. Any registered adults in the online platform, coming from the United States, could access to the survey after reading basic information regarding the study. They could read that the survey consisted in examining links between opinions, feelings and self-perceptions in order to develop a better understanding of how people could experience certain states of mind. They could also read that they would respond to several questions and receive a compensation of 0.25\$ in case they would accept to take part in the study — importantly, we requested people not to participate in the study in case they considered this compensation as unfair. We also highlighted that participants' responses would be anonymous, confidential, and stored by the main investigator of the present study. Thus, we urged participants to report spontaneous and honest responses. When participants accepted to participate in the study, they were asked to provide their written

informed consent by mentioning that they understood the objective of the study and that they agreed to perform it. Thus, all participants sent us their written informed consent. Then, participants could start answering our questions, which were presented through this sequence: Demographics (e.g., sex, age, employment) (page 1), SWB followed by political ideology (page 2), dispositional self-control followed by dispositional neurotic self-attentiveness (page 3), and perceived goal progress and dispositional flow (page 4). Once they completed the survey, participants received an automatic message designed to thank them for their contribution.

### Measures

Given the fact that the study was performed online and that participants achieved it in exchange for a modest financial compensation (0.25\$), we voluntarily limited the number of items to measure our constructs of interest in order to encourage participants to stay focused on all questions and to answer them honestly.

**Independent Variable and Moderator** Political ideology was assessed on a 7-point numerical scale ranging from “*strongly liberal*” (1) to “*strongly conservative*” (7). The categorical variable “unemployment” was transformed into quantitative scores, as follows: “*employed or not looking for a job*” (0) and “*unemployed*” (1).

**Mediators** Participants rated the items of all below-mentioned mediators on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from “*not at all*” (1) to “*very much so*” (7). All employed items for the measurement of dispositional self-control, dispositional flow and dispositional neurotic self-attentiveness variables are presented in [Appendix 1](#).

**Model 1** Dispositional self-control was assessed using a questionnaire, developed by Tangney et al. (2004), which is composed of two specific dimensions: “*Restraint*” (i.e., tendency to initiate desired behaviors) and “*impulsivity*” (i.e., tendency to act spontaneously on attempts or tendency to override temptations [after reverse coding items]) (Maloney et al. 2012). For each dimension, based on Maloney et al.'s (2012) psychometric analyses, we chose the two items that showed the highest loadings. For instance, the item “*I wish I had more self-discipline*” (a reverse-coded item) allowed to assess “*restraint*” ( $\alpha = 0.57$ , eigenvalues = 1.40, 0.60), while the item “*Sometimes I can't stop myself from doing something, even if I know it is wrong*” (a reverse-coded item) permitted to measure “*impulsivity*” ( $\alpha = 0.76$ , eigenvalues = 1.61, 0.39) (see [Appendix 1](#)). All items of the variable “*impulsivity*” were reverse-coded. In Model 1, “*restraint*” and “*impulsivity*” corresponded to the two manifest variables of the latent variable “*dispositional self-control*”.

**Model 2** To assess perception of goal progress, we employed a method inspired by that of Koestner et al. (2008). Firstly, we invited participants to list only one activity that they viewed as the most important one of their lives: Participants wrote different sorts of response, such as “Participating in my Church’s services”, “Helping animals”, “Doing physical exercise”, etc. Secondly, they were invited to list their most important goal for this year in the activity they mentioned; specifically, they read this: “A personal goal is a project or concern that people think about, plan for, carry out, and sometimes (though not always) complete or succeed at. Please list the most important goal that you have for this year in the activity you mentioned above”. Thirdly, participants were asked to answer the following item: “How much progress are you making toward this goal?”

**Model 3** Dispositional flow was assessed using specific items from the 10-item Flow Short Scale, developed by Rheinberg et al. (2003), that were adapted to measure a stable tendency to experience flow within the activity that participants considered and reported as the most important one of their lives. To do so, we added the adverb “often” in all used items, which were all preceded by the expression “In the activity I’ve listed above...”. The Flow Short Scale is composed of two subscales, namely “fluency of performance” and “activity absorption”. On the basis of Rheinberg et al.’s (2003) psychometric analyses, we selected the two items that displayed the highest loadings on each subscale. For instance, the item “In the activity I’ve listed above, I often feel just the right amount of challenge” was used to assess dispositional fluency of performance ( $\alpha = 0.47$ , eigenvalues = 1.31, 0.70), while the item “In the activity I’ve listed above, I am often totally absorbed in what I am doing” aimed to assess dispositional activity absorption ( $\alpha = 0.70$ , eigenvalues = 1.54, 0.56) (see Appendix 1). In Model 3, these two

subscales were considered as the manifest variables of “flow” (latent variable).

**Model 4** Neurotic self-attentiveness was measured using the 12-item “Rumination” component of the Rumination-Reflection Questionnaire developed by Trapnell and Campbell (1999). We also selected the two items that had the highest loadings (e.g., I tend to “ruminate” or dwell over things that happen to me for a really long time afterward”;  $\alpha = 0.87$ , eigenvalues = 1.77, 0.24) (see Appendix 1).

**Dependent Variable** In order to measure SWB, we used two unique items of “happiness” and “life satisfaction” ( $\alpha = 0.91$ , eigenvalues = 1.84, 0.16) that participants rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale (from “not at all happy” or “not at all satisfied with my life” [1] to “very happy” or “very satisfied with my life” [7], respectively).

## Results

We carried out analyses based on the z-standardization of scores of all items. When needed, we averaged the scores of items to compose a higher-order variable (e.g., “restraint”). We computed two sorts of analyses: (a) Pearson’s  $r$  correlation (IBM SPSS 22 software) and (b) structural equation model (Models 1 and 3) or path (Models 2 and 4) analyses (IBM SPSS AMOS 22 software with bootstrap samples = 5000 and bias-corrected confidence intervals = 95%). The path values corresponded to unstandardized coefficients, which were similar to standardized ones because of all scores were a priori z-standardized. Results of correlation analyses are presented in Table 1, while those of mediation and moderation analyses are presented in Tables 2 and 3, respectively.

**Table 1** Pearson’s  $r$  correlations among study variables

Latent variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Conservatism	–					
2. Dispositional self-control	–.07	–				
3. Perceived goal progress	.11*	.10*	–			
4. Dispositional flow	.12*	.11*	.48***	–		
5. Dispositional neurotic self-attentiveness	–.04	–.43***	–.12*	–.15**	–	
6. Subjective wellbeing	.12*	.24***	.40***	.40***	–.32***	–
7. Undesired unemployment	.00	.04	–.17**	–.12*	.04	–.20***

The significance thresholds for two tailed tests are: \*\*\* means  $p < .001$ , \*\* means  $p < .01$ , and \* means  $p < .05$ . Regarding the numerical variable “political ideology”, “strongly liberal” was coded “1”, while “strongly conservative” was coded “7”. Regarding the categorical variable “unemployment”, “employed or not looking for a job” was coded “0”, while “undesirably unemployed” was coded “1”. In order to simplify the reading of the table, we mentioned “conservatism” and “undesired unemployment” instead of “political ideology” and “unemployment”, respectively. Consistent with Cohen (1992), the absolute value of each correlation is its effect size

**Table 2** Direct and indirect effects of the mediation analyses for all models

Mediator and dependent variable	Type of effect	Independent variable		Mediator			
		Conservatism	Undesired unemployment	DSC (Model 1)	Goal progress (Model 2)	Flow (Model 3)	DNSA (Model 4)
DSC (Model 1)	Direct	.04	.08*	–	–	–	–
	Indirect	–	–	–	–	–	–
Goal progress (Model 2)	Direct	.11*	–.17***	–	–	–	–
	Indirect	–	–	–	–	–	–
Flow (Model 3)	Direct	.09*	–.09*	–	–	–	–
	Indirect	–	–	–	–	–	–
DNSA (Model 4)	Direct	–.04	.03	–	–	–	–
	Indirect	–	–	–	–	–	–
SWB (Model 1)	Direct	.10*	–.24***	.42***	–	–	–
	Indirect	.02	–	–	–	–	–
SWB (Model 2)	Direct	.08	–.14**	–	.35***	–	–
	Indirect	.04*	–	–	–	–	–
SWB (Model 3)	Direct	.05	–.13**	–	–	.74***	–
	Indirect	.11*	–	–	–	–	–
SWB (Model 4)	Direct	.10*	–.18***	–	–	–	–.32***
	Indirect	.01	–	–	–	–	–

DSC = dispositional self-control. DNSA = dispositional neurotic self-attentiveness. SWB = subjective wellbeing.

\*  $p \leq .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , and \*\*\*  $p < .001$  for a two-tailed test. Regarding the numerical variable “political ideology”, “strongly liberal” was coded “1”, while “strongly conservative” was coded “7”. Regarding the categorical variable “unemployment”, “employed or not looking for a job” was coded “0”, while “undesirably unemployed” was coded “1”. In order to simplify the reading of the table, we mentioned “conservatism” and “undesired unemployment” instead of “political ideology” and “unemployment”, respectively

**Correlations**

The Pearson’s  $r$  correlation analyses showed that conservatism was positively related to perceived goal progress ( $r = .11, p < .05$ ), dispositional flow ( $r = .12, p < .05$ ), and SWB ( $r = .12, p < .05$ ) (see Table 1). However, conservatism was unrelated to dispositional self-control, dispositional neurotic self-attentiveness, and undesired unemployment (see Table 1). Dispositional self-control ( $r = .24, p < .001$ ), perceived goal progress ( $r = .40, p < .001$ ), and dispositional flow ( $r = .40, p < .001$ ) were positively related to SWB (see Table 1). Dispositional neurotic self-attentiveness ( $r = -.32, p < .001$ ) and undesired unemployment ( $r = -.20, p < .001$ )

were negatively related to SWB (see Table 1). Undesired unemployment was negatively related to perceived goal progress ( $r = -.17, p < .001$ ) and dispositional flow ( $r = -.12, p < .001$ ), but was unrelated to dispositional self-control and dispositional neurotic self-attentiveness (see Table 1). Dispositional self-control, perceived goal progress, and dispositional flow were positively related to each other ( $r_s = .10$  to  $.48, p_s < .05$ ), whereas these variables were all negatively related to dispositional neurotic self-attentiveness ( $r_s = -.43$  to  $-.12, p_s < .05$ ) (see Table 1).

**Paths, Mediations, and Moderations**

**Model 1** The model appeared to yield acceptable fit indexes ( $\chi^2(4, N = 418) = 3.00, p = .56$ ; CFI = 1.00; NFI = .99; AIC = 49.00; RMSEA = .00,  $p = .87$ ). Path analyses indicated that conservatism ( $\beta = .10, t = 2.31, p = .02$ ) and dispositional self-control ( $\beta = .42, t = 4.37, p < .001$ ) positively predicted SWB, and that undesired unemployment negatively predicted SWB ( $\beta = -.24, t = -5.48, p < .001$ ) (see Table 2). Additionally, undesired unemployment ( $\beta = .10, t = 2.52, p = .01$ ) and undesired unemployment  $\times$  conservatism ( $\beta = .08, t = 2.54, p = .05$ ) positively predicted dispositional self-control (see Tables 2 and 3). Conservatism did not predict dispositional self-control ( $\beta = .04, t = 1.08, p = .28$ ), thus

**Table 3** Moderation analyses with undesired unemployment as a moderator for all models

Model	Path	$\beta$	SE	$t$ -value	$p$ value
Model 1	Conservatism $\rightarrow$ DSC	.08	.04	1.93	.05
Model 2	Conservatism $\rightarrow$ Goal progress	.08	.05	1.53	.11
Model 3	Conservatism $\rightarrow$ Flow	.04	.04	1.11	.27
Model 4	Conservatism $\rightarrow$ DNSA	–.03	0.05	–.58	.56

DSC = dispositional self-control. DNSA = dispositional neurotic self-attentiveness

dispositional self-control could not be a mediator of the conservatism-SWB relationship (see Table 2). Furthermore, a moderation slope analysis (Dawson and Richter 2006) indicated that the levels of dispositional self-control were highest in conservatives under contextual threat of undesired unemployment (*employment/not-looking-for-a-job*: gradient of slope =  $-.04$ ,  $t$ -value of slope =  $-.03$ ,  $p$  value of slope =  $.98$ ; *undesired unemployment*: gradient of slope =  $.12$ ,  $t$ -value of slope =  $.09$ ,  $p$  value of slope =  $.93$ ) (see Fig. 2).

**Model 2** The model yielded acceptable fit indexes ( $\chi^2$  (1,  $N = 418$ ) =  $1.14$ ,  $p = .29$ ; CFI =  $.99$ ; NFI =  $.99$ ; AIC =  $39.14$ ; RMSEA =  $.02$ ,  $p = .50$ ). Path analyses showed that conservatism did not predict SWB ( $\beta = .08$ ,  $t = 1.79$ ,  $p = .07$ ), whereas perceived goal progress ( $\beta = .35$ ,  $t = 8.13$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and undesired unemployment ( $\beta = -.14$ ,  $t = -3.17$ ,  $p = .002$ ) predicted SWB (see Table 2). Conservatism positively predicted perceived goal progress ( $\beta = .11$ ,  $t = 2.37$ ,  $p = .02$ ), while undesired unemployment negatively predicted this variable ( $\beta = -.17$ ,  $t = -3.49$ ,  $p < .001$ ) (see Table 2). Undesired unemployment  $\times$  conservatism did not predict perceived goal progress ( $\beta = .08$ ,  $t = 1.59$ ,  $p = .11$ ) (see Table 3). Mediation analyses showed that the indirect effect of conservatism on SWB was significant (95% CIs =  $.01$  to  $.08$ ,  $p = .02$ ) (see Table 2). As a result, perceived goal progress fully mediated the beneficial effect of conservatism on SWB.

**Model 3** The model displayed acceptable fit indexes ( $\chi^2$  (4,  $N = 418$ ) =  $3.63$ ,  $p = .46$ ; CFI =  $1.00$ ; NFI =  $.99$ ; AIC =  $49.63$ ; RMSEA =  $.00$ ,  $p = .82$ ). Analyses showed that dispositional flow positively predicted SWB ( $\beta = .74$ ,  $t = 6.98$ ,  $p < .001$ ), whereas undesired unemployment negatively predicted SWB ( $\beta = -.13$ ,  $t = -3.05$ ,  $p = .002$ ) (see Table 2). Conservatism did not predict SWB ( $\beta = .05$ ,  $t = 1.19$ ,  $p = .23$ ), but positively predicted dispositional flow ( $\beta = .09$ ,  $t = 2.47$ ,  $p = .01$ ) (see Table 2). Undesired unemployment

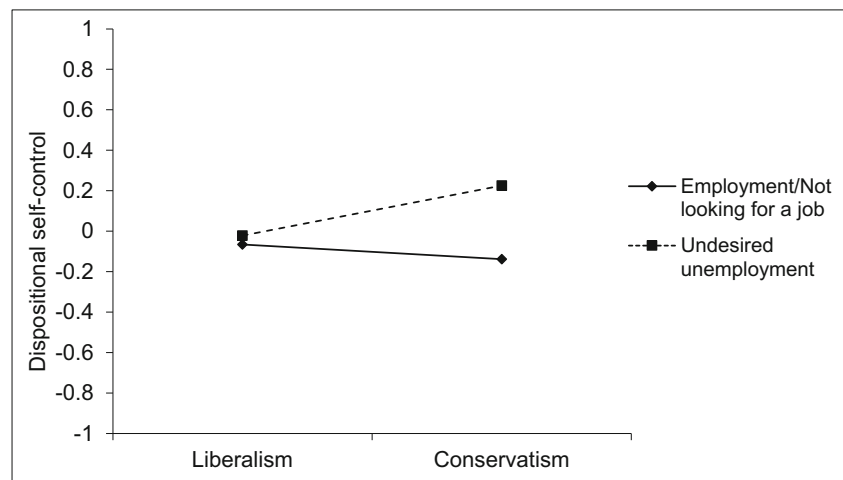
negatively predicted dispositional flow ( $\beta = -.09$ ,  $t = -2.42$ ,  $p = .02$ ) but undesired unemployment  $\times$  conservatism did not predict this variable ( $\beta = .04$ ,  $t = 1.11$ ,  $p = .27$ ) (see Tables 2 and 3). Mediation analyses displayed that the indirect effect of conservatism on SWB was significant (95% CIs =  $.02$  to  $.20$ ,  $p = .02$ ) (see Table 2). Hence, the mediating effect of dispositional flow between conservatism and SWB was full.

**Model 4** The model revealed acceptable fit indexes ( $\chi^2$  (1,  $N = 418$ ) =  $2.16$ ,  $p = .14$ ; CFI =  $.98$ ; NFI =  $.97$ ; AIC =  $40.16$ ; RMSEA =  $.05$ ,  $p = .33$ ). Path analyses showed that conservatism ( $\beta = .10$ ,  $t = 2.34$ ,  $p = .02$ ), dispositional neurotic self-attentiveness ( $\beta = -.32$ ,  $t = 6.98$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and undesired unemployment ( $\beta = -.18$ ,  $t = -4.26$ ,  $p < .001$ ) predicted SWB (see Table 2). Conservatism ( $\beta = -.04$ ,  $t = -.94$ ,  $p = .35$ ), undesired unemployment ( $\beta = -.03$ ,  $t = -.73$ ,  $p = .46$ ), and undesired unemployment  $\times$  conservatism ( $\beta = -.03$ ,  $t = -.58$ ,  $p = .56$ ) did not predict dispositional neurotic self-attentiveness (see Tables 2 and 3). Given such results, no mediating effect could be found (see Table 2).

## Discussion

The objective of the present study was to advance knowledge of the ideology-SWB gap by examining whether self-regulatory factors (i.e., dispositional self-control, perception of goal progress, dispositional flow, and dispositional neurotic self-attentiveness) could account for this relationship. This study also attempted to see whether and how contextual threat — operationalized by the situation of being undesirably unemployed — might moderate the relationship between ideology and a given mediator. With these aims, we asked a group of participants to answer questionnaires via an online platform and we analyzed their data using different models.

**Fig. 2** Interaction between political ideology and unemployment on dispositional self-control (within Model 1)





## The Ideology-SWB Relationship

The analyses revealed that conservatism was positively related to SWB (see Tables 1 and 2), supporting previous research that showed that conservatives scored higher on SWB than did liberals (e.g., Jetten et al. 2013; Napier and Jost 2008; Onraet et al. 2013, 2017; Schlenker et al. 2012). The analyses also revealed that conservatism was positively related to perceived goal progress and dispositional flow (see Tables 1 and 2), and that these two variables fully accounted for the positive influence of conservatism on SWB (see Table 2). In other words, conservatives reported higher levels of SWB than did liberals because they would be better at self-regulating themselves while pursuing important goals, thus supporting Schlenker et al.'s (2012) study that showed that positive adjustment explained why conservatives could be happier than liberals. Our findings, by contrast, seem to run counter studies that evidenced that authoritarianism (an attitude reputed to be related to conservatism) fostered negative adjustment and psychological ill-being (e.g., Duriez et al. 2011; Jost et al. 2003). Notwithstanding, such studies did not investigate conservatism as a political ideology, but rather investigated correlates of conservatism. In that regard, Schlenker et al. (2012) argued that “Just as scientists perceive events through the lenses of their theories, people perceive world events through the lenses of their political ideologies” (p. 140), suggesting that political ideology cannot be reduced to specific attitudes or personality traits. In other words, the understanding of political ideology would require to regard it as a phenomenon being more than the sum of isolated psychological characteristics.

The literature on the ideology-SWB link thus reminds that psychosocial phenomena can display different facets depending on the scope from which they are observed. The societal (or sociological) and individual (or psychological) perspectives of the ideology-SWB link are not opposite, but rather they unveil complementary realities. The sociological perspective refers to what the countries do for their citizens, and echoes the ideas of several psychologists assuming that well-being would result from the capability of the surrounding social environment to satisfy people's psychological needs, such as the need for safety (i.e., need to experience safety from external threats; e.g., Maslow 1970) or the need for autonomy (i.e., need to experience that one's own behaviors are self-determined; e.g., Deci and Ryan 2008). As for the psychological approach, it focuses on the ideals, values or regulations that underlie individuals' cognitions, affects and behaviors, and our study brought additional evidence that conservative values — emphasizing on the importance of internal factors such as abnegation, responsibility and self-discipline to account for external life events (e.g., Burton et al. 2015) — can bolster SWB by enhancing the perceptions of moving toward the desired goals and being immersed in the task.

A social psychology literature associates the perception of moving toward a desired goal with the phenomenon of psychological momentum, which reflects a sort of psychological force that enhances positive self-perceptions (e.g., self-efficacy) and engagement in the task or activity (e.g., Briki and Markman 2018; Markman and Guenther 2007). Hence, our study suggests that conservative values (e.g., abnegation, responsibility) can enhance SWB by precipitating experiences of psychological momentum. Indeed, continuous efforts, fostered by conservative values, may enhance perceived goal progress and self-efficacy, contributing to experience success and happiness. As for the experiences of flow, authors presume that it can be triggered in response to the perception of moving quickly toward a desired goal (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi et al. 2005; Markman and Guenther 2007). The analyses supported such a suggestion by showing a positive and moderate association between perceived goal progress and dispositional flow (see Table 1). Another important factor of flow is the perception of a balance between skills and perceived challenges (Csikszentmihalyi et al. 2005). Thus, and based on our results, one can suggest that conservative values would encourage individuals to seek optimal challenges, thereby leading them to experience greater positive feelings and emotions.

## The Moderating Role of Undesired Unemployment

The analyses revealed that conservatism was unrelated to dispositional self-control and dispositional neurotic self-attentiveness (see Tables 1 and 2), running counter our expectations that relied on the view that the conservatism-SWB gap could be explained by higher or lower levels of self-control or rumination, respectively (Napier and Jost 2008; Schlenker et al. 2012). Nonetheless, analyses indicated not only that undesired unemployment positively predicted dispositional self-control (see Table 2), but also that dispositional self-control was strongest in conservatives under contextual threat of undesired unemployment (see Table 3 and Fig. 2). This echoes Onraet et al.'s (2017) findings reporting that people with high conservatism, as compared to people with low conservatism, scored higher on SWB when exposed to “very high” contextual threat. However, Onraet et al. (2017) showed that SWB was higher in the “very low” contextual threat condition than in the “very high” contextual threat condition. These results led the authors to conclude that “Adhering to right-wing attitudes can [...] have an ego-defensive function in these contexts [of threat], providing a buffer against the negative consequences of threatening events” (p. 17). Notwithstanding, and interestingly, our result does not support the existence of a “self-protective function” (Onraet et al. 2017, p. 11), but rather suggests the existence of a *self-enhancement function* that bolsters self-regulation process.

Self-enhancement can also be thought from the perspective of theories that account for restorative responses to psychological

distress. The uncertainty-identity theory (e.g., Hogg 2014), for instance, argues that people are motivated to identify with social groups when uncertainty thwarts personal control and undermines positive self-views. Similarly, the model of group-based control (e.g., Fritsche et al. 2013) assumes that people exposed to threat are motivated to restore personal control by affirming their social identity and behaving as group agents. Taken together, these frameworks suggest that control restoration process and increased adherence to values of one's own social group in response to threat may explain why conservatives — who cherish values of responsibility, duty and hard work — would be more self-disciplined while pursuing desired goals under contextual threat. In addition, and consistent with the tenets of the anxiety-to-approach model (e.g., Lüders et al. 2016), defining one's own self on the belonging group level in response to personal anxiety would allow to restore personal control and positive self-perceptions by re-establishing motivational orientation concerned with gain and success, thereby fostering positive feelings and self-worth.

## Conclusion and Perspectives

The present study supports the general view that, at the individual level, conservative people are happier than are liberal ones (e.g., Napier and Jost 2008; Schlenker et al. 2012), and that this fact can be due to conservatives' greater capability to adjust themselves to their social environments and to activate adaptive thinking (Schlenker et al. 2012). In addition, this study suggests that the rationalization of inequality, which reflects a central cognitive characteristic of conservatives' thinking and reasoning (Napier and Jost 2008), can bolster adaptive self-regulatory functions when exposed to threatening contexts.

However, our study contains some limitations, and a major one refers to its correlational nature. Therefore, complementary studies should employ more rigorous causal designs such as experiments. For example, studies could experimentally test the effects of political ideologies (with their characteristic values) and situational threat (e.g., loss vs. no-loss conditions) on perceived goal progress, flow, self-control, and positive emotions. A second major limitation refers to the fact that we used a single item to measure political ideology. However, although the use of a limited number of items could have facilitated survey completion and thus could have ensured reliability of data, ideology constitutes a multifaceted and complex phenomenon that may require the use of several items to be properly captured (Okulicz-Kozaryn et al. 2014). However, the literature shows a lack of psychometric studies on the political ideology construct (Okulicz-Kozaryn et al. 2014). A third limitation refers to the fact that the study used a sample of participants coming from a Western country only (the United States). Because the notions of "conservatism" and "liberalism" can be differently interpreted according to the countries and cultures, the generalizability of

our results to other Western countries should be done with caution. Hence, this study should be replicated with other Western (and even non-Western) samples of participants. Lastly, this study was performed online, which may have generated a self-selection bias in the sampling, as the participants who voluntarily decided to take part in the survey would not represent the entire target population. However, the goal of our study was more about the investigation of general relationships between variables than about examining how a given group or community can function. However, the data collection through the online platform may have led to reduce the accuracy of participants' responses, even if we attempted to limit this bias by encouraging participants' task commitment through a financial remuneration. Moreover, as for any investigations using self-report measures, desirability social could have biased participants' responses. Nonetheless, the methodology of this study attempted to prevent such a bias by informing the participants that their data would remain anonymous and confidential.

From an applied standpoint, our study has some implications. This study suggests that endorsing the view that the world comprises social and economic injustices (palliative function of system-justification), combined with the idea that inequalities are not fatalities and thus can be overcome through commitment to goal attainment process (perception of control), could help people maintain or even increase engagement in their goals despite the existence of obstacles. If this way of thinking would be more salient in conservatives than in liberals, adopting such a reasoning would not be enough to make conservative a liberal individual, since political ideology is inherently complex and thus cannot be reduced to separated cognitive variables.

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## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Appendix 1. Employed items for the measurement of all self-regulatory variables

Variable: "Dispositional self-control" was measured using items coming from the 13-item Tangney et al. (2004) questionnaire.

Dimension: "Restraint".

Items: "I wish I had more self-discipline" (reverse-coded item) and "I am good at resisting temptation".

Dimension: "Impulsivity".

Items: “Sometimes I can’t stop myself from doing something, even if I know it is wrong” and “I do certain things that are bad for me, if they are fun”.

Variable: “Dispositional flow” was measured using items inspired from the 10-item Rheinberg et al. (2003) Flow Short Scale.

Dimension: (Dispositional) “fluency of performance”.

Items: “In the activity I’ve listed above, I often feel just the right amount of challenge” and “In the activity I’ve listed above, I often know what I have to do each step of the way”.

Dimension: (Dispositional) “activity absorption”.

Items: “In the activity I’ve listed above, I am often totally absorbed in what I am doing” and “In the activity I’ve listed above, the right thoughts/movements often occur of their own accord”.

Variable: “Dispositional neurotic self-attentiveness” (or dispositional rumination) was measured using two items inspired from the 12-item Trapnell and Campbell’s (1999) Rumination-Reflection Questionnaire.

Dimension: (Dispositional) rumination.

Items: “I tend to ‘ruminate’ or dwell over things that happen to me for a really long time afterward” and “Often I’m playing back over in my mind how I acted in a past situation”.

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