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## Democracy and Happiness: A True Correlation?

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### ABSTRACT

Democracy has exploded in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, and while many assume that this would increase happiness, recently there has been evidence presented by critics that prove otherwise. Thus, one must ask the question, does democracy truly cause happiness? Literature suggests this is indeed the case, and through qualitative and comparative analysis it has been demonstrated that democracy does indeed cause happiness, but only if civil liberties are respected by their government. This was done by examining the arguments made by the critics of democracy and happiness. These arguments often focus on fledgling, illiberal democracies, instead of strong, established liberal democracies. These critics additionally use non-democracies who are economically powerful and stable to prove their point, instead of providing a more full view of non-democracies. These results are often cherry-picked, and it is clear that more democratic nations are happier on average than non-democracies. Additionally, in order to increase the happiness of liberal democracies, tenants such as direct democracy can help a country struggling to find happiness for its citizens. That way, democracy can provide the happiness through choice as it was intended to.

**Keywords:** Democracy, happiness, happiness economics, liberal democracy, illiberal democracy.

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## 1.0 Introduction

Democracy has become the overwhelming governmental trend in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Democracy is defined as “a government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free elections”<sup>2</sup>. People chose democracy because it will allow them to indirectly, through representation, make decisions in government. Citizens want to be able to indirectly choose policies they feel will strengthen their country. This includes policies like taxes and economic regulation and social programs such as Social Security and Medicare. By electing those who support these policies, citizens believe that these governmental policies will led their country in a better direction and make their individual lives better. Professor Robert Inglehart argues that democracy breeds happiness because “If, in the long run, people believe that their life as a whole has been good under a given regime, it produces legitimacy and diffuses support for that regime”<sup>3</sup>. Those regimes that make people happy stay in power, whereas in non-democracies citizens cannot regulate who is in power at all. Therefore, it would make sense that this regulation by the citizens would lead to democracies being happier than non-democracies. But, recent trends have led many to question the legitimacy of this claim. For example, many Eastern European countries were recently converted from communism to democracy in the late 1980s and early 1990s. One would expect that their happiness would increase after this, but research has shown that their happiness has plummeted until recently. There are in fact many statistics to show that non-democratic countries such as the UAE and Vietnam are happier than democratic countries such as Greece and Ukraine<sup>4</sup>. When faced with these statistics, one must ask several questions. First, does democracy cause happiness? What components of democracy cause this? If democracy does indeed cause happiness, then what is wrong with the evidence provided by the critics of democracy and happiness? Literature on the subject is vast, with the majority of scholars agreeing that democracy does indeed cause happiness. According to Dolan et. al. (2008) found that happiness comes from liberal democracies, or “a democracy based on the recognition of individual rights and freedoms, in which decisions from direct or representative processes prevail in many policy areas”<sup>5</sup> are what put these ideals into law. Other scholars, such as Veenhoven (2010) and (1991) and Inglehart (2008) support this. Inglehart (2006), Barker (2011) and Veenhoven (2010) also all found that this happiness comes from civil liberties, which allow for citizens to participate politically and it provides them more control over their own life. In order to test these theories, a simple average comparison of happiness using a happiness report is used between countries that have been designated liberal democracies and countries that have been designated illiberal democracies. Additionally, a similar comparison of averages is used to compare democracies and non-democracies. In both of these cases, democracies were found to be happier than those in both illiberal democracies and non-democracies. In this paper, the way that happiness is measured will first be discussed, followed by a brief literature review, a look at the methodology of the study and its results, and a case study analysis of several countries significant to the study. Lastly, possible improvements to providing happiness in liberal democracies will be discussed. This study is significant because it provides encouragement to citizens in illiberal democracies and non-democracies who have become unhappy with the lack of choice that they have in their government. By seeing that liberal democracy does indeed increase their happiness, then perhaps they may gain the willingness to call for reform in their own governments.

## 2.0 Measuring happiness

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<sup>2</sup> Definition of Democracy: Merriam Webster Dictionary. (n.d.). Retrieved February 26, 2016, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/democracy>.

<sup>3</sup> Inglehart, R. (2006). Democracy and Happiness: What Causes What? *University of Michigan Press*, 9. From <http://www3.nd.edu/~adutt/activities/documents/InglehartHappinessandDemocracy1.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Helliwell, J., Layard, R., & Sachs, J. (2013). World Happiness Report. *World Happiness Report*. From <http://worldhappiness.report/>

<sup>5</sup> Liberal democracy definition Collins Dictionary. (n.d.). Retrieved February 26, 2016, from <http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/liberal-democracy>.

First, one must discuss the fundamentals behind measuring happiness. In this study, the two most popular indexes that measure happiness are used: The World Happiness Report and the Happy Planet Index. The first of these measures, The World Happiness Report, was created by the United Nations in 2011 in order to help guide public policy. The World Happiness Report uses three indicators in order to measure happiness: the Cantril Ladder of Life, life satisfaction, and happiness with life as a whole<sup>6</sup>. The Cantril Ladder of Life survey uses this following question: “Please imagine a ladder with steps numbered from zero at the bottom to 10 at the top. The top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. On which step of the ladder would you say you personally feel you stand at this time? (ladder-present) On which step do you think you will stand about five years from now? (ladder-future)”<sup>7</sup>. Second, they measure life satisfaction by asking respondents, “on a scale of zero to 10, how satisfied are you with your life?”<sup>8</sup>. Third, they measure happiness with life as a whole by asking respondents, “on a scale from zero to 10, how happy are you with your life as a whole?”<sup>9</sup>. The Happy Planet Index, on the other hand, uses experienced well-being, life expectancy, and ecological footprint. Experienced well-being under the Happy Planet Index is also measured by the Cantril Ladder of Life<sup>10</sup>. Life expectancy according to the Happy Planet Index is the number of years an average person is expected to live in a country, according to the UNDP Human Development Report<sup>11</sup>. Ecological footprint, according to the Happy Planet Index, measures how much land is required to sustain a country’s consumption patterns<sup>12</sup>. These variables are placed into a formula, which is:

$$\text{Happy Planet Index} \approx \frac{\text{Experienced well-being} \times \text{Life expectancy}}{\text{Ecological footprint}}$$

(Happyplanetindex.org)

All of the researchers seen in this essay use one or both of these measurements when they measure happiness.

### 3.0 Literature review

There are many studies regarding civil liberties and happiness. In the work *Democracy and Happiness: What Causes What*, Robert Inglehart examined the association between the Freedom House Score, which measures civil liberties and political freedom in countries and happiness. Inglehart found that there was a strong positive relationship between the increase in civil liberties and the happiness of people in a country<sup>13</sup>. Civil liberties are defined as “freedom from arbitrary government interference”<sup>14</sup>. This is put into law by such liberties as freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and freedom to assemble<sup>15</sup>. These liberties also include equal protection rights such as racial equality, gender equality, and universal suffrage. The relationship was very strong before an explosion of democracies in the 1990s, when much of Eastern Europe and Africa became democracies<sup>16</sup>. For the period 1990-2000, the relationship between democracy and happiness became fairly weak<sup>17</sup>. Inglehart provides no conclusions for this finding, but he provides a reason for this in *Developing Freedom and Rising Happiness: A Global Perspective* (2008). Inglehart states that this difference exists because of the turmoil surrounding the

<sup>6</sup> Helliwell, J., Layard, R., & Sachs, J. (2013). World Happiness Report. *World Happiness Report*.

<sup>7</sup> Understanding How Gallup Uses the Cantril Scale. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/122453/Understanding-Gallup-Uses-Cantril-Scale.aspx>

<sup>8</sup> Methodological Research: European Social Survey. (n.d.). From <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> About the HPI | Happy Planet Index. (n.d.). Retrieved February 26, 2015, from <http://www.happyplanetindex.org/about/>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Inglehart, R. (2006). *Democracy and Happiness: What Causes What?* University of Michigan Press, 9.

<sup>14</sup> Definition of Civil Liberties. (n.d.). Retrieved from [http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/civil liberty](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/civil%20liberty)

<sup>15</sup> Zakaria, F. (1997). The Rise of Illiberal Democracy. *Foreign Affairs*. From <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1997-11-01/rise-illiberal-democracy>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

transition from a communist state to a democratic state<sup>18</sup>. When a communist state become democratic, jobs are no longer provided by the government, the entire government must be restructured, and there are many who still wished they lived under the old regime. These factors led to great unhappiness, which did not end until the democracy became established<sup>19</sup>. Veenhoven (2000)<sup>20</sup> found very similar results to Inglehart's. Inglehart (2008) isolates gender equality and equal treatment for members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community, colloquially known as LGBT<sup>21</sup>. The researchers found that the more accepting a society and government is of LGBT rights and gender equality, the happier the society is overall<sup>22</sup>. Liberal democracies must also provide universal suffrage. In Dolan et al (2008), the researchers found that there is a positive correlation between those who vote and overall life satisfaction<sup>23</sup>. However, the voter's satisfaction returns to normal levels a month after the election<sup>24</sup>. The researchers conclude that this is because the citizens feel that since they are have already voted, they no longer have direct control over the candidate's actions<sup>25</sup>. This is significant because of how a lack of universal suffrage might affect democracies. In these democracies, not all citizens are allowed to vote, meaning that they cannot reap the happiness benefits associated with voting. Therefore, those democracies that provide universal suffrage should be happier.

But why are civil liberties so important for happiness? This is because civil liberties in a democracy are fundamental in allowing for political participation. Political participation would be defined as any activity that shapes, affects, or involves the political sphere. This could be something as simple as being able to openly criticize a politician in power, but could be as complex as organizing a rally or creating a political party. This is incredibly important to happiness because it offers choices politically to an individual. In an autocratic regime, citizens cannot influence the decisions made by the government at all. Therefore, if there is a policy that is hurting them and making their lives worse, they can do little to change this, which would without a doubt make someone unhappy. Illiberal democracies, or those democracies without civil liberties, offer the illusion of choice. While these democracies may offer political participation rights to those who believe in the actions of the government, they may also fail to offer the basic civil liberties to those who are in the minority. Those who are not offered these rights will feel like their voice is not being heard in their political system, which would inevitably make them unhappy. For this reason, rights such as equal protection regardless of race, sex, and sexual orientation are fundamental in a liberal democracy. Political participation in a liberal democracy makes all who participate happier. Political scientist Chris Barker verifies this; political participation builds personal connections because it offers a way for citizens to personally connect with others who are interested in similar issues<sup>26</sup>. Participation also provides citizens a way to help others where they have very little to gain themselves<sup>27</sup>. This can be seen in social movements where the individuals have little to gain, such as whites in the Civil Rights Movement or heterosexual individuals in the struggle for gay rights equality<sup>28</sup>. By acting selflessly, these citizens will increase fulfillment in life, which should make them happier<sup>29</sup>. Lastly, Barker argues that citizens find happiness through victory<sup>30</sup>. By achieving victory,

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<sup>18</sup> Inglehart, R., Foa, Peterson, & Welzel. (2008). Development, Freedom, and Rising Happiness: A Global Perspective. *Perpectives on Psychological Science*, 3(4), 268. From <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40212250>

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Veehoven. (n.d.). Freedom and Happiness: A Comparative Study in 46 Nations in the 1990s. *Culture and Subjective Wellbeing*, 257-288. <http://www2.eur.nl/fsw/research/veenhoven/Pub2000s/2000a-full.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> Inglehart, R., Foa, Peterson, & Welzel. (2008). Development, Freedom, and Rising Happiness: A Global Perspective. *Perpectives on Psychological Science*, 3(4), 268. Retrieved from [http://www.academia.edu/2814177/Development\\_freedom\\_and\\_rising\\_happiness\\_A\\_global\\_perspective\\_1981\\_2007\\_](http://www.academia.edu/2814177/Development_freedom_and_rising_happiness_A_global_perspective_1981_2007_)

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Dolan, P., Metacalfe, R., & Powdthavee, N. (2008). Electing Happiness. *Discussion Papers in Economics*, 11. Retrieved from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/23552540\\_Electing\\_Happiness\\_Does\\_Happiness\\_Effect\\_Voting\\_and\\_do\\_Elections\\_Affect\\_Happiness](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/23552540_Electing_Happiness_Does_Happiness_Effect_Voting_and_do_Elections_Affect_Happiness)

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Barker, C., & Martin, B. (2011). Participation: The Happiness Connection. *Journal of Public Deliberation*, 7(1), 9. From <http://www.publicdeliberation.net/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1167&context=jpd>

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

these activists feel that they really changed the political process for the better, making them feel fulfilled and happy<sup>31</sup>. Ronald Inglehart also discusses the importance of civil liberties, but he thinks so for different reasons<sup>32</sup>. Inglehart explains this association to be one involving control<sup>33</sup>. Those who feel that they have high levels of control feel happier in their lives, and those who are in democracies with more civil liberties are provided this<sup>34</sup>.

But why were some non-democracies considered happier than democracies? First, critics of democracy and happiness group together liberal democracies and illiberal democracies. As was previously explained, liberal and illiberal democracies are fundamentally different. Liberal democracy provides the civil liberties that make all of their citizens happy, whereas illiberal democracies only provide civil liberties to at the most some of their citizens. Therefore, it is unfair to place these two democracies together when illiberal democracies are without the fundamental quality that makes liberal democracies happy. Second, these critics do not take into account several factors that go into determining happiness. Variables such as unemployment, economic growth, and income inequality greatly affect the happiness of individuals in the country, and these factors put together can easily outweigh the effects of civil liberties<sup>35</sup>. Additionally, there are issues regarding stability. If a country is very corrupt or is facing severe internal struggles such as rebellions and uprisings, citizens will have less faith in the government in providing them protection because they feel their government might not have the will or resources to take care of them<sup>36</sup>. This lack of faith creates unhappiness because of the uncertainty inherent in lack of governmental protection<sup>37</sup>. Also, when a country is under attack, citizens will see the adverse effects of war. This could be anything from rationing to the death of loved ones<sup>38</sup>. These external attacks have been proven to cause unhappiness<sup>39</sup>, something that the critics of democracy and happiness do not take into account. Additionally, there is a factor of culture. Culture is incredibly significant in determining happiness, as some cultures place further emphasis on attaining happiness while others place emphasis on other factors<sup>40</sup>.

#### 4.0 Methodology

In order to test the arguments made by the literature, several tests were made in order to see if their theories exist in the real world. In order to measure democracy, the Freedom in the World Index from 2015 is used to measure the level of democracy in the countries in the world<sup>41</sup>. In the Freedom in the World Index, they use two indicators to measure freedom, which are political and civil rights. Countries who scored a six on the any of these indexes means that they are not free in these respective areas, and countries that scored a one are very free in these respective areas. In the studies, countries that scored above a three and were democratic were to be considered illiberal democracies, and countries that scored under a three were to be considered democracies. In the case of democracies versus non-democracies, information from the CIA World Factbook<sup>42</sup> was used in order to determine the government type of each country. In regards to using a measure for happiness, the World Happiness Report from 2015 was used to determine the happiness level of each country in question. A simple test of the average of the level of happiness of democracies versus non-democracies was first used, as there were no significant outliers in regards to happiness level. Second, the average level of happiness for

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Inglehart, R. (2006). *Democracy and Happiness: What Causes What?* University of Michigan Press, 9.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Veehoven. (1991). Is Happiness Relative? *Social Indicators Research*, 24(1), 1-34. From [http://pages.ucsd.edu/~nchristenfeld/Happiness\\_Readings\\_files/Class%209%20-%20Veehoven%201991.pdf](http://pages.ucsd.edu/~nchristenfeld/Happiness_Readings_files/Class%209%20-%20Veehoven%201991.pdf)

<sup>39</sup> Veehoven. (1991). Is Happiness Relative? *Social Indicators Research*, 24(1), 1-34.

<sup>40</sup> Inglehart, R. (2006). *Democracy and Happiness: What Causes What?* University of Michigan Press, 9.

<sup>41</sup> Retrieved from <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2015>

<sup>42</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>

liberal and illiberal democracies was also tested, as there were also no significant outliers in regards to happiness level.

## 5.0 Results

The results of this comparison are striking. The average for democracies was a 6.04, whereas the average for non-democracies was a 5.6, which is a small difference. However, the average for liberal democracies was a 6.73, whereas the average for illiberal democracies was a 5.45<sup>43</sup>. This provides significant evidence that supports the claim that liberal democracy does indeed create happiness. However, there are several issues with these results. First, this does not necessarily mean causation; it merely means correlation. Second, because the majority of the literature on this topic is either qualitative in nature or limited in scope, it is not possible to control for any control variables. However, in the following section, there will be a discussion of several diluting factors that may lead to the decrease in happiness among liberal democracies and an increase among non-democracies.

## 6.0 Case studies and research on happiness

The critics of democracy and happiness also cherry-pick what sort of democracies and non-democracies they wish to discuss. First, they use new, fledgling democracies as examples. These democracies are less happy than their more established counterparts, simply because of the unhappiness inherent in transitions to democracy. Moving from a non-democracy to a democracy creates a lot of turmoil in both the government and society, which has been proven to cause a great deal of unhappiness<sup>44</sup>. However, when the democracies become more established, their happiness rises. This is seen in Eastern Europe. At first, the shift from communism to democracy in Eastern Europe caused a great deal of unhappiness, but, when the democracy in each country became well-established and civil liberties were provided to the citizens, the happiness increased<sup>45</sup>. Therefore, when critics of democracy and happiness use these newer democracies as examples, they are providing a skewed perspective on the happiness of democracies. Second, they choose non-democracies with large Gross Domestic Products, low unemployment, and low poverty, while they compare democracies with severe internal strife and high unemployment. For example, the United Arab Emirates, while being a monarchy and considered “Not Free” by the Freedom House Index<sup>46</sup>, is one of the richest countries in the world, with the seventh largest per capita GDP in the world, has zero percent poverty, and is quickly growing<sup>47</sup>. Greece, on the other hand, while it is a democracy and is considered “Free” by the Freedom House Index<sup>48</sup>, has been experiencing significant economic downturn in the recent years, severe unrest in its cities, and 25 percent unemployment<sup>49</sup>. Picking and choosing democracies and non-democracies does not prove correlation; it is simply a discussion of outliers. Additionally, the Happy Planet Index causes a skew in numbers. This is because of how heavily it considers a country’s ecological footprint in regards to happiness. This allows for countries such as Costa Rica and Vietnam to have an excellent Happy Planet Index rating simply because of its low ecological footprint, whereas countries such as the United States are heavily penalized for its large footprint.

## 7.0 Solutions

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Inglehart, R., Foa, Peterson, & Welzel. (2008). Development, Freedom, and Rising Happiness: A Global Perspective. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 3(4), 268.

<sup>45</sup> Inglehart, R. (2006). *Democracy and Happiness: What Causes What?* University of Michigan Press, 9.

<sup>46</sup> Freedom in the World 2015. (n.d.). Retrieved February 26, 2016, from <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2015>

<sup>47</sup> CIA World Factbook: United Arab Emirates. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/gr.html>

<sup>48</sup> Freedom in the World 2015. (n.d.). Retrieved February 26, 2016, from <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2015>

<sup>49</sup> CIA World Factbook: Greece. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/gr.html>

Now that it is established that liberal democracies are happier than illiberal democracies, how do you make liberal democracies happier? The most definitive method is through direct democracy. Direct democracy is defined as can be defined as “a form or system of democracy giving citizens an extraordinary amount of participation in the legislation process and granting them a maximum of political self-determination” (Switzerland’s Direct Democracy). Forms of direct democracy include ballot initiatives, recall elections, and referendums<sup>50</sup>. Frey and Stutzer (2000) test how factors such as age, gender, unemployment, and direct democracy affect overall happiness in cantons in Switzerland<sup>51</sup>. Frey and Stutzer (2000) found that direct democracy has a highly positive effect on happiness. But why does this occur? Direct democracy was created as a way for citizens to become immediately involved in the political process, instead of the representation that is seen in democratic-republics. These democratic methods allow citizens to directly influence the democratic process, which would allow citizens to see that their action truly does matter in the political process<sup>52</sup>. Economists Bruno Frey and Alois Stutzer verify this by discussing direct democracy and how it was created in order for citizens to have power against arbitrary parliamentary decisions and to limit the power of special interest groups<sup>53</sup>. Additionally, politicians are forced to follow the preferences of the voters in a direct democracy, in the fear that their actions may be annulled by ballot initiatives or that the politicians themselves may be removed by a recall election<sup>54</sup>.

## 8.0 Conclusion

Choice is what makes people happy. Choice provides people the opportunity to do what they believe makes them happy, whether it is spending time with their family, enjoying the outdoors, or watching their favorite sports. This can be seen differently in the government by procedural utility. People not only value the decisions that are made in regards to policy by the government, but also the way that the decision is reached<sup>55</sup>. If people trust the way the system reaches its conclusion, they will be more happy and accepting of its result<sup>56</sup>. Democracy provides procedural utility through representation. People select representatives that they believe best embody their beliefs, in the hopes that the representative’s actions in the political process will provide the best outcomes for themselves. But, democracies, if not closely analyzed, can be easily seen as ineffective in creating happiness. It is easy to be distracted by the cherry-picked results by critics of happiness and democracy, but upon closer analysis it is clear that these critics do not take into account economic and social conditions. This may several in several policies implications. Specifically, in illiberal democracies and non-democracies with very unhappy citizens, the governments can provide democratic reforms as a means to increase the happiness of its citizens in order to quell unrest and possible revolt. In liberal democracies with unhappy citizens, they may instead attempt to provide direct democracy to their citizens in order to increase their happiness. Additionally, this will further encourage world powers such as United States to advocate for liberalization in regards to civil and political rights in the world, as this may increase the happiness of the citizens in the countries and hopefully provide the country with greater stability. Overall, these revelations will hopefully lead to positive change in the world in terms of greater participation of citizens in their government.

<sup>50</sup> Frey, B. S., & Stutzer, A. (2000). Happiness, Economy, and Insitutions. *The Economic Journal*, 110(466), 926. Retrieved from: <http://carnegieendowment.org/pdf/files/stutzer.pdf>

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Stutzer, F. (n.d.). Introducing Procedural Utility. *University of Zurich*. [http://www.bsfrey.ch/articles/406\\_04.pdf](http://www.bsfrey.ch/articles/406_04.pdf)

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.