

# The Miami Herald

Posted on Wed, Mar. 23, 2011

## Region scores high on 'happiness' index

By MARIFELI PEREZ-STABLE

[Marifeliperez-stable.com](http://Marifeliperez-stable.com)

Life satisfaction — commonly known as happiness — is what it's all about. What makes us happy is another matter altogether. The adage that money can't buy happiness, it turns out, is mostly wrong.

If by money we mean luxury cars, McMansions and exquisite jewelry, then there might be some truth to it. If, on the other hand, we mean individual and national well-being, money does buy us happiness.

In *The Economics of Happiness in the Americas*, Margarita Corral — a doctoral candidate at Vanderbilt University — draws a portrait of subjective well-being in our hemisphere based on the 2010 Americas Barometer survey ([AmericasBarometer.org](http://AmericasBarometer.org)).

Except for Haiti, majorities in the 26 countries surveyed see themselves leading satisfying lives. The top five are Brazil (71.6 percent), Costa Rica (67.7 percent), Venezuela (65.6 percent), Panama (65.1 percent) with Trinidad & Tobago and Honduras tied at 63.3 percent. Haiti aside, the next five from the bottom are Jamaica, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Belize and Peru, though all are above 50 percent.

Recent studies have upended a paradox of earlier research: income matters only for individual satisfaction and does not necessarily increase in wealthier countries. Happiness is a relative state of mind. If we see ourselves less well-off than those immediately around us, we tend to feel less satisfied with our lives. Conversely, people in poorer countries may feel satisfied if their living conditions are better than their neighbors.

Corral argues that economic factors are important at both the individual and national levels. How we perceive our personal material situation, household wealth and the national economy are strong predictors of happiness. Other factors such as marital status and whether or not an individual has children, church attendance, age, interpersonal trust and political (the right-left continuum) identity also count. So do gender, education and size of town.

The Americas Barometer data confirm that economic factors — income and perceptions of the individual and national situations — bear a positive correlation with levels of life satisfaction. For the region as a whole, perception of our individual economic conditions is by far the strongest predictor of individual happiness. Perception of the national economy is also important but not as strongly. Corral highlights what social scientists should always keep in the forefront: subjective experience matters.

Thus, it isn't at all surprising that Brazil leads the Americas on the happiness index. After having been "the country of the future and always will be," Brazil is now the world's seventh largest economy, has markedly reduced poverty and expanded the middle class, all thanks to market-oriented reforms and smart, progressive social policies. To boot, Brazil will host the Soccer World

Cup (2014) and the Summer Olympics (2016).

In contrast to other contexts, marriage has a positive but not significant effect on life satisfaction among the region's citizens. Church goers and those who are surrounded by people they trust also register high levels of satisfaction. Women, the elderly, young adults, the better educated and those who live in large cities likewise express high levels of happiness. Yet, having children and being unemployed weigh negatively on individual satisfaction.

As in other studies, Americas Barometer finds that citizens with conservative views tend to be happier than their counterparts on the left.

Conservatives in the region have more reasons to be happy today than three decades ago when state-centered economic policies had wreaked havoc. Most have also learned to be democrats, winning elections at first, then succumbing to the voters later, now hoping to win the next round.

Latin Americans on the left, however, are facing societies that still require many years of good economic performance and sound social policies to make significant, lasting dents on poverty and inequality.

President Obama has just returned from visits to Brazil, Chile and El Salvador. In general, Latin Americans view the United States favorably. Understandably perhaps, Obama hasn't paid much attention to the region. Unlike earlier times, Latin America is mostly on the right track. American administrations have been better at paying attention when things go wrong.

The United States registered toward the bottom of the life-satisfaction index. At 58.7 percent, we fall between Guyana and Bolivia. That's not a good place to be.