



World Wellbeing Panel

September 2024

Understanding the effect of policy on
national wellbeing

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Report by Chris Barrington-Leigh (McGill University)

with

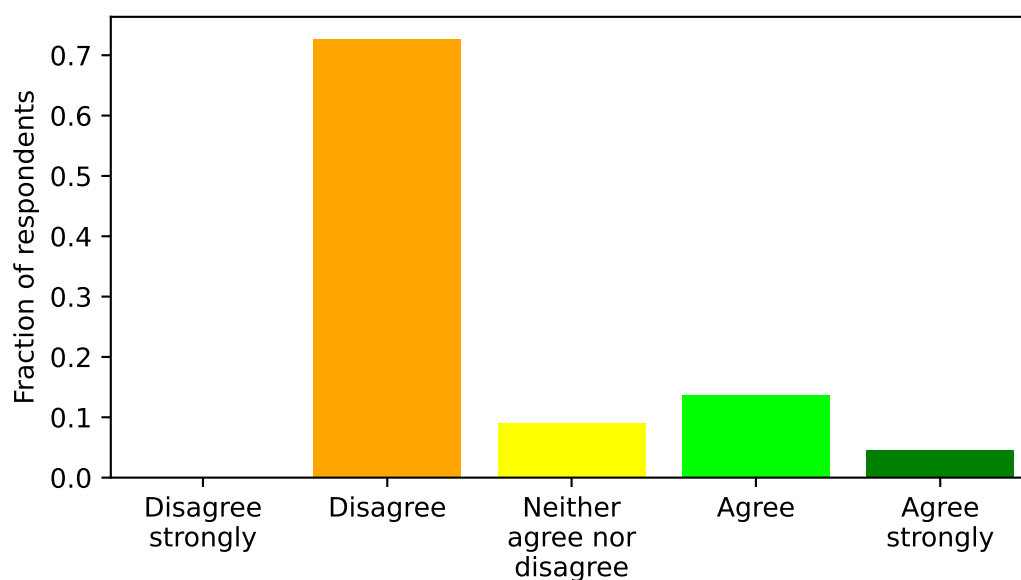
Tony Beatton (Queensland University of Technology),
Paul Frijters (Nova Academia; Prince Mohammed Bin Salman College), and
Arthur Grimes (Victoria University of Wellington)

In September 2024, members of the World Wellbeing Panel were asked for their views on two statements relating to the overall state of knowledge in wellbeing policy. This was a follow-up on a similar poll conducted in March 2017.

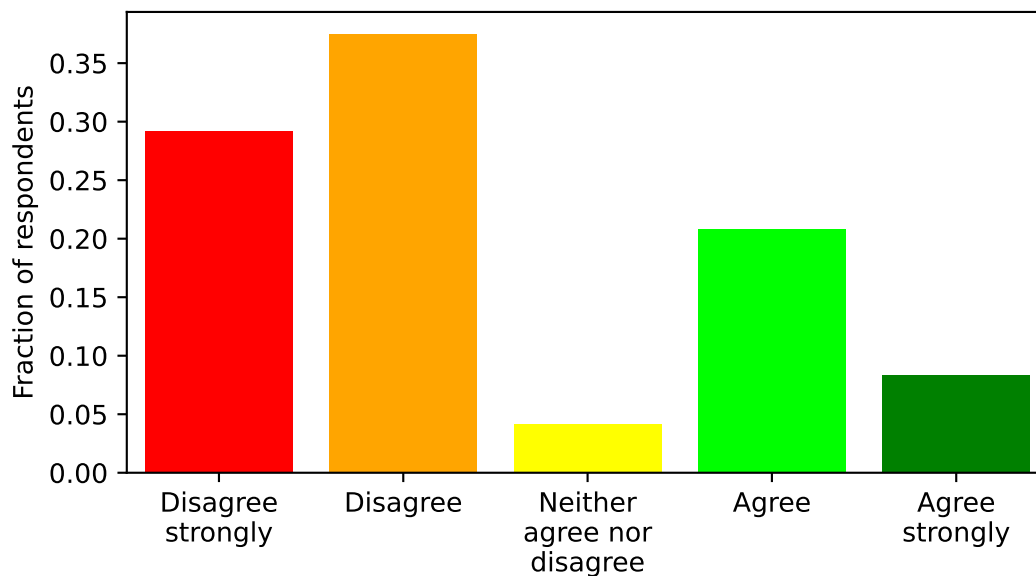
Statement 1:

Despite dozens of years of research, we still know precious little about what policies increase national wellbeing.

We received responses distributed as follows:



while in 2017 the same question received these responses:



There was a strong, though not unanimous consensus against the statement that **“Despite dozens of years of research, we still know precious little about what policies increase national wellbeing.”**

Interestingly, while only four out of 22 respondents answered *Agree* or *Completely Agree*, no one chose the *Completely disagree* response. Instead, 16 out of 22 respondents chose the slightly more moderate *Disagree* option, suggesting some sympathy for the idea that our knowledge is still limited. By contrast, when we last asked this question in 2017, 16 responses out of 24 were nearly evenly split between *Disagree* and *Completely Disagree*, while a significant fraction (7 out of 24) *Agreed* or *Strongly Agreed* with the statement.

Turning to the panel's written explanations, there was general consensus that we have made progress in our understanding of how policies affect wellbeing, and that the body of knowledge relevant to the question is substantial. Several also mentioned that this body of knowledge has grown significantly in recent years, and that the evidence includes outcomes of experiments. Panelists cited four forms of evidence that this knowledge is substantial: (i) reviews and reference works about wellbeing and wellbeing policy (Welsch,); (ii) examples of life circumstances which have been shown to be important for wellbeing, (iii) the existence and accomplishments of knowledge synthesis organizations such as What Works Wellbeing and the Campaign to End Loneliness, both in the UK (**Graham**), and (iv) a shift in public concerns towards interest in mental health and loneliness.

A number of panelists gave examples of individual circumstances or policy priorities which we know lead to higher wellbeing, and **Frijters** even suggested a specific policy portfolio.

Respondents in both Agree and Disagree camps offered explanations of why well-being policy is still not widespread even though we have learned a lot about the determinants of wellbeing. For instance, even if knowledge about improving wellbeing is not esoteric, it will not matter without the will of policymakers to make wellbeing the purpose of their efforts, or without appropriate training of policymakers to overcome previous education stressing the overarching importance of narrower outcomes. Conversely, the knowledge may still be esoteric due to a lack of appropriate translation of the academic research to the language of policy. Panelists mentioned that while the body of knowledge is extensive, it is still largely characterized by low causal confidence (**Binder, Krekel**), making it insecure for policy implementation. Another challenge with translating evidence to policy is that old prescriptions may no longer work as the economic, social, and technological environment changes (**Pugno**).

Frequently mentioned was the distinction between an understanding of what explains differences or changes in wellbeing in a population, on one hand, versus knowledge about the feasibility and effectiveness of relevant policy initiatives, on the other (e.g. **Lepinteur, Knabe**). A related issue was the distinction between “micro” level knowledge — i.e., about determinants of wellbeing at the level of individuals — versus knowing what will work at the aggregate level, where spillovers and distributional constraints may be at play. However, some respondents explicitly cited evidence about that “macro” level, indicating that we also know plenty about which policy priorities lead to high national wellbeing, from comparing across countries (**Grimes**).

Joshanloo cited the remaining uncertainties around the choice of life evaluation question wording, the comparison of different measures, and the challenge of cross-cultural comparisons as significant barriers to effective wellbeing policymaking.

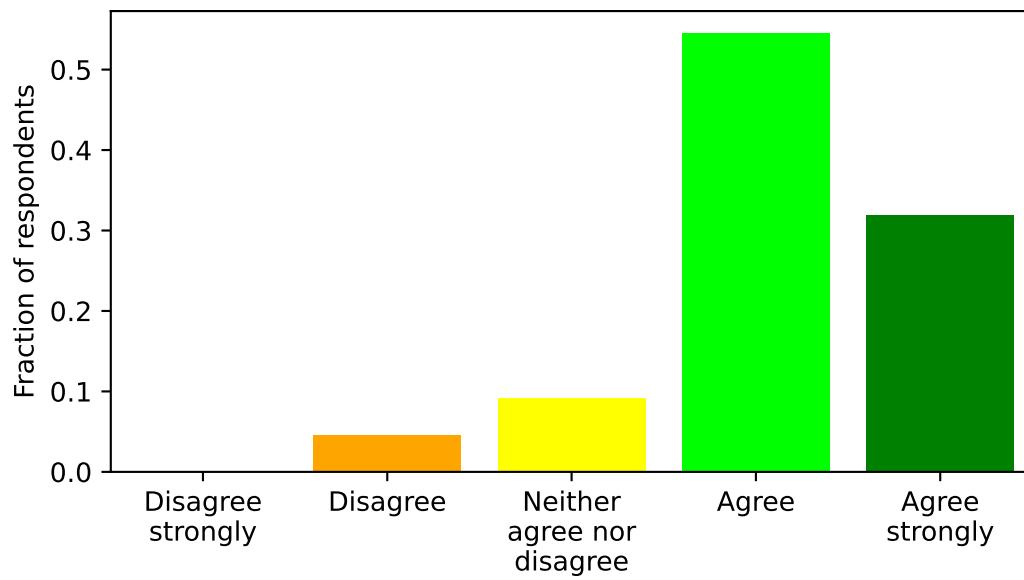
As is usually the case, we did not define wellbeing or “national wellbeing” as part of the question we posed. While most respondents implicitly or explicitly referred to the literature on subjective, cognitive life evaluations, some respondents referred to different concepts or frameworks of wellbeing (**Unanue, Greyling**), or made reference to individual wellbeing being distinct from national wellbeing (**Mahadea**). This is a question the World Wellbeing Panel addressed in our previous poll.

Many nuances to these ideas lie in the insights of individuals' responses. Please see the detailed answers.

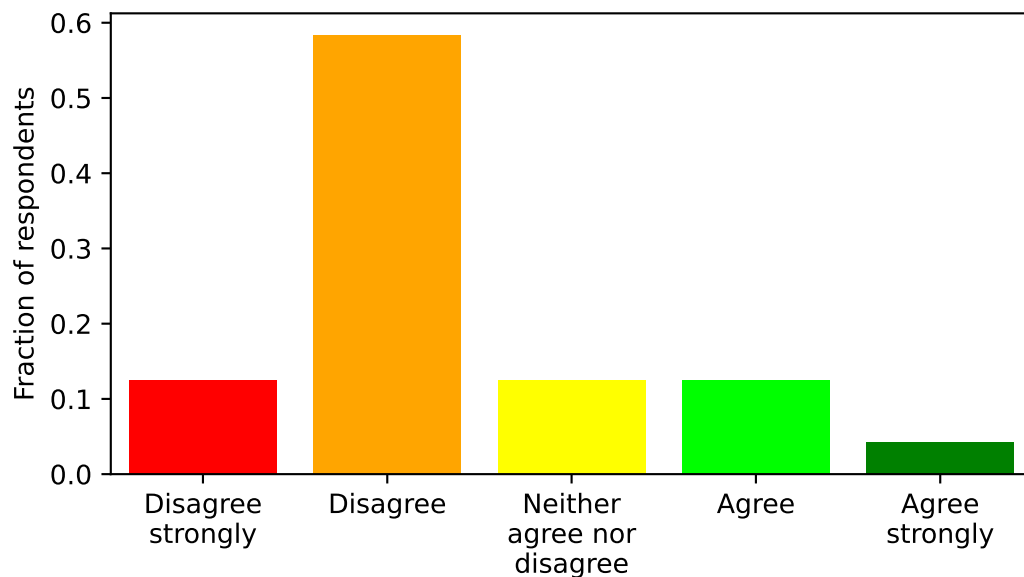
Statement 2:

In order to find out practically what can raise national wellbeing, we still need many more experiments and policy trials in all major areas of national policy.

We received the following responses:



In 2017 we had worded the question differently. It was “In order to find out what raises national wellbeing, we need to have thousands of randomised controlled trials in all major areas of national policy.” The responses were distributed as follows:



The second statement considered by our panelists was “**In order to find out practically what can raise national wellbeing, we still need many more experiments and policy trials in all major areas of national policy.**” This was rephrased from the version we posed in 2017, which was “In order to find out what raises national wellbeing, we need to have thousands of randomised controlled trials in all major areas of national policy.” To the 2017 version, 17 respondents expressed disagreement, while four agreed (and three were in the middle). This time we had the opposite response: 19 agreed while only one disagreed (and two hedged). The disagreement in 2017 was largely related to the limitations of RCTs, both in practicality and in scalability or external validity.

While agreeing that trials and experiments are useful, many nevertheless emphasized caveats echoed from responses to the first poll question. For instance, **Foster** emphasizes political will over the excuse of insufficient knowledge, writing that “we need ... not more experiments, but more policy-makers who are actually trying to maximise wellbeing.” **Rojas** agrees, reminding us that “economists do not know yet how to promote economic growth, even after 80 years of studying it. What really matters is that policy efforts may have a larger impact if inspired on current well-being knowledge rather than on current economic growth knowledge.”

On the other hand, even if we agreed on knowing an enormous amount about improving wellbeing, we would still want to pursue policy experiments, continuously, whenever possible. This is because impacts known from the past or from another geography may not apply to a given current population and epoch (**Ferrer-i-Carbonell, Mahadea**), not least because interactions between various policy interventions make each policy novel (**Sarracino**).

Many respondents built on their answers to the first statement, and suggested that empirical testing of policies could overcome the challenges noted above. These included, for different respondents, a need to better test how policies scale up (**O'Connor**) and, conversely, a need to more narrowly target micro drivers of wellbeing, for instance for particular sub-populations or for specific feasible interventions (**Grimes**).

It is also important to know whether the evidence from experiments will impact, or be ignored by, policy makers (**Stutzer**).

Just as some pointed out that our limits to knowledge about the effects of policy are not unique to the field of wellbeing, so too the value of policy experimentation transcends policy objectives. In particular, even if wellbeing is one's policy goal, most of what one needs to know about the expected outcome of a policy intervention is not about wellbeing, but rather about intermediate, objective outcomes. Thus, the argument in favour of experiments and policy trials is as strong as the desire for evidence-based policy, more broadly (**Barrington-Leigh**).

Indeed, a more fundamental problem than an insufficiency of wellbeing-motivated testing and piloting of policies is the lack of any specific detail about the goals associated with enacted policies. That is, making the expectations and objectives more transparent when a policy is introduced may not be in governments' political interests, but would be a better starting point for learning about what works (**Beaton**).

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