

Democrats Seen as the 'Undeserving Rich' Face Rejection by Party Voters

September 11 2009

(PhysOrg.com) -- In a recent study, researchers from several universities looked at why white working-class voters voted Republican in recent national elections even when they didn't like Republican policies.

The study, "The Undeserving Rich: 'Moral Values' and the White Working Class," is in the current issue of *Sociological Forum*, available online at tinyurl.com/qyefm9 .

It finds that, even when [Republican](#) policies are unpopular, they often come bundled with an overarching moral framework that is extremely resonant to this set of [voters](#), a framework marked by what voters considered an "appropriate" attitude toward personal wealth.

This attitude was characterized by respondents as a "down to earth" quality as opposed to "aloofness." Whether candidates see themselves as better than "normal human beings" because of their wealth, say the researchers, was to many respondents more important than how much money they actually have.

"For our respondents, this difference was not trivial," says one of the study's authors, Steven G. Hoffman, Ph.D., visiting assistant professor of sociology, at the University at Buffalo.

"In particular, the way in which the two candidates in the 2004 presidential election -- both wealthy men -- handled themselves in relation to their wealth was important to our respondents; it was seen as a

clue to candidates' moral fiber," he says.

For example, John Kerry (described by various respondents as "aloof," "upper level" and "a little snooty") was identified as being part of what the study calls "the undeserving rich," Hoffman says. "Whereas George W. Bush's wealth did not demean his character, because he was seen as a member of the 'deserving rich' ('...he's just a regular cowboy, a cowboy rancher.')."

"In fact, of all the Bush voters interviewed, 25.8 percent spontaneously mentioned some variant of that theme," Hoffman explains.

In addition to Hoffman, study authors are, Monica Prasad, Ph.D., assistant professor of sociology at Northwestern University, and Northwestern graduate students Kieren Bezila and Kate Kindleberger; Andrew Perrin, Ph.D., associate professor and chair of sociology, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and UNC graduate students Kim Manturuk and Andrew R. Payton; and Ashleigh Smith Powers, Ph.D., assistant professor of political science and psychology, Millsaps College.

The researchers explain that the behavior of white working-class voters has puzzled many scholars because Republican economic priorities seem to favor the wealthy at the expense of redistributive policies that would provide immediate benefits to larger segments of the population.

Hoffman notes, "In 2008, Barack Obama captured far more white working-class votes than the Democrats have in the past several elections. Nevertheless, the Republican Party --usually considered a party of the wealthy, professional and business classes -- has over the years made considerable inroads into traditional Democratic working class election territory.

"White working-class voters who support Republican candidates have been fodder for much political discussion and speculation," Hoffman further explains, "and a debate has arisen about the role that 'moral values' plays in the political decision making of this segment of voters, hence our study."

The researchers used in-depth interviews to uncover the framework that has supported the voting practices of these Democratic voters. The notion of an "appropriate" attitude to wealth, served for these voters as an indicator of a candidate's general moral philosophy and as a rule-of-thumb signal of whether the candidate will govern with working-class voters' interests in mind.

Hoffman notes, "A review of National Election Studies' data support the argument that this attitude was a key influence on voting decisions in 2004, even when controlling for voters' partisan identification."

Two major studies, both conducted and published before the 2004 election, converge on the finding that many working class respondents argue that morals are a more important marker of worth than socio-economic status.

The authors point out that in attempting to explain why Republicans have attracted votes from the less-wealthy segments of the population, scholarly literature has previously settled on six possible explanations. These include: beliefs among voters that Republican policies will help the general economy, or one day may help them become rich; that such voters generally agree with the ideology behind Republican policies -- that the rich become rich through hard work and should be rewarded; that while Republican economic policies are unpopular with this group, they are bundled with other issues that are popular, such as Republican positions on abortion, gay marriage or foreign policy; or that the voters in question are unaware of Republican economic policies or

misinformed about their true nature.

Still another explanation is that, while Republican economic policies are unpopular, voters vote in this way because they prefer the "moral values" of the Republican Party, a position which the Hoffman study clearly supports.

Hoffman points out that an exit poll taken during the 2004 presidential election found that nearly a quarter of voters chose "moral values" as their primary reason for choosing their favored candidate, and 80 percent of those who did so voted for Bush.

"In the immediate aftermath of the election," he says, "a wave of scholarly research dismissed the 'moral values' argument. One study pointed out that the wording of the exit poll question was too vague to allow for strong conclusions to be drawn (after all, fighting poverty can be seen as an issue of moral values) and others showed that issues that might be considered proxies for moral values were either statistically insignificant or had very small effects in predicting support for Bush."

"More recently, however," Hoffman says, "there has been a second wave of research that suggests that there is indeed something to the moral values argument after all." For example, a 2007 study used National Election Studies (NES) data to show that if "moral values" are understood more broadly, they do indeed show effects on voting.

Study results are based on research funded in part through a grant from the Fund for the Advancement of the Discipline (FAD), a competitive research grant program funded by the American Sociological Association (ASA) and a matching grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF). FAD is administered by the ASA.

Provided by University at Buffalo ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: Democrats Seen as the 'Undeserving Rich' Face Rejection by Party Voters (2009, September 11) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-09-democrats-undeserving-rich-party-voters.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.