

A rare survey of the one percent

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Though little reliable survey research exists about the nation's wealthiest one percent, public discourse is rife with claims about their opinions and attitudes. Now a Northwestern University pilot study sheds light on philanthropic and other behaviors of the so-called one percent.

"Our goal is to replace the rhetoric with facts," said Fay Lomax Cook, co-author of "Wealthy Americans, Philanthropy and the Common Good" and professor in Northwestern's School of Education and Social Policy. "The best surveys on wealthy Americans typically examine the top 20 to 30 percent of the nation's income earners. As a result, they contain too small a sample to generalize about the one percent."

To uncover the political and social attitudes and behaviors of the one percent, Cook, with Northwestern political scientist Benjamin I. Page, Institute for Policy Research researcher Rachel Moskowitz and a large team of researchers, surveyed a random sample of 104 representatives from Chicago-area households with a median wealth of \$7.5 million.

They believe their Survey of Economically Successful Americans and the Common Good -- developed with and carried out by NORC at the University of Chicago -- is the first representative, systematic effort to survey the political and social opinions of the one percent.

Experts at NORC, a highly respected national opinion and social science research center, conducted face-to-face or telephone interviews with each respondent that were designed to last 45 minutes.

Among the survey findings:

****Members of the one percent are far more likely to initiate contact with a federal official than is the general public. About half of the survey's 104 respondents reported initiating contact with a member of Congress, White House official or federal regulatory agency official at least once in the last six months. In contrast, a 2008 public [opinion](#) survey by American National Election Studies found that only 25 percent of the general public had contacted any elected official in the past 12 months.**

****Members of the one percent tend to emphasize relying on free markets or private philanthropy to produce good outcomes. More than other citizens, they tend to think in terms of “getting government out of the way” to solve public problems. Many tilt toward cutting, rather than expanding, popular entitlement programs, such as Social Security and Medicare. Most favor charter schools, merit pay and other market-oriented education reforms. More than two-thirds say the federal government “has gone too far in regulating business and free enterprise.”**

****More members of the one percent point to the federal budget deficit as the country's most pressing problem than to any other problem facing the nation. A much smaller group mentions unemployment and jobs. In contrast, members of the general public (57%) think the economy and jobs are the nation's most pressing problem and only five percent of the general public thinks it is the deficit.**

****Members of the one percent are more active in politics than less affluent Americans. Nearly all respondents said they voted in the 2008 presidential election; 84% reported paying attention to politics most of the time; 64 percent contributed money to a political candidate within the last four years; and one in five said they helped solicit or bundle contributions from other people to a political party, cause or candidate. On average, they reported giving \$4,633 to political campaigns and**

organizations in the past 12 months.

**** Members of the one percent volunteer much more of their time, effort and money to charitable causes than do members of the general public. Nine in ten respondents report participating in at least one volunteer activity and a majority volunteered in four different volunteer areas. Respondents are particularly likely to volunteer for education (65%), poverty and the needy (60 percent), private and community foundations (54 percent), youth development (52 percent), arts, culture and the humanities (46 percent) and religious organizations (46 percent).**

****A typical (median) member of the one percent donates about four percent of his or her income to charitable causes. Those who have inherited substantial wealth tend to give not only more total dollars but also a higher proportion of their income to charity than non-inheritors. Fully one in five have established a philanthropic family foundation.**

“To the surprise of some members of the research team, our study suggests that most members of the one percent are concerned about the common good, not just about their own narrow self-interests,” said Page, the Gordon S. Fulcher Professor of Decision Making in Northwestern’s Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences. “In some important cases, however, their beliefs about how to achieve the common good differ markedly from what other citizens believe.”

The pilot survey was funded by the Russell Sage Foundation. Cook, who is director of Northwestern’s Institute for Policy Research, and Page are in the process of refining the Survey of Economically Successful Americans and working toward conducting a nationwide study of the one percent.

Provided by Northwestern University

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