

# Christians are more than twice as likely to blame a person's poverty on lack of effort

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By **Julie Zauzmer** August 3

Which is generally more often to blame if a person is poor: lack of effort on their own part, or difficult circumstances beyond their control?

The Washington Post and the Kaiser Family Foundation asked 1,686 American adults to answer that question — and found that religion is a significant predictor of how Americans perceive poverty.

Christians, especially white evangelical Christians, are much more likely than non-Christians to view poverty as the result of individual failings.

“There’s a strong Christian impulse to understand poverty as deeply rooted in morality — often, as the Bible makes clear, in unwillingness to work, in bad financial decisions or in broken family structures,” said Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. “The Christian worldview is saying that all poverty is due to sin, though that doesn’t necessarily mean the sin of the person in poverty. In the Garden of Eden, there would have been no poverty. In a fallen world, there is poverty.”

In the poll, which was conducted from April 13 to May 1 and has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 4 percentage points, 46 percent of all Christians said that a lack of effort is generally to blame for a person’s poverty, compared with 29 percent of all non-Christians. The gulf widens further among specific Christian groups: 53 percent of white evangelical Protestants blamed lack of effort while 41 percent blamed circumstances, and 50 percent of Catholics blamed lack of effort while 45 percent blamed circumstances. In contrast, by more than 2 to 1, Americans who are atheist, agnostic or have no particular affiliation said difficult circumstances are more to blame when a person is poor than lack of effort (65 percent to 31 percent).

The question is, of course, not just an ethical one but a political one, and the partisan divide is sharp: Among Democrats, 26 percent blamed a lack of effort and 72 percent blamed circumstances. Among Republicans, 63 percent blamed lack of effort and 32 percent blamed circumstances. And race mattered, too: Just 32 percent of black Christians blamed lack of effort, compared to 64 percent who blamed circumstances.

A statistical analysis of the data showed that political partisanship is the most important factor in views on the causes of poverty, but religious identity stands out as one of several important demographic factors.

Theologians point to passages in the New Testament that shape Christians' views on poverty, from the verse in Thessalonians that says, "The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat," to Jesus' exhortations to care for needy people, including those who are sick and in prison, to the many interpretations of his statement quoted in Matthew, Mark and John, "The poor you will always have with you."

Helen Rhee, a historian who studies wealth and poverty in Christianity, attributed Christians' diverging viewpoint first to scripture and second to a theological divide in the early 20th century. At the same time that fundamentalists were splitting from modernists over whether Christians should accept Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, an academic split emerged: premillennialists vs. postmillennialists.

The premillennialists think that the "Second Coming of Christ" is nearing, and with it the elevation of believers to heaven and the terrible tribulations of nonbelievers on earth promised in the Book of Revelation. The postmillennialists interpret Revelation differently, and believe that humans will achieve a blessed era of peace on earth, after which Christ will return.

As conservative evangelicals embraced premillennialism and more liberal Christians turned toward postmillennialism, their approach toward aiding the poor changed in accordance with their beliefs. The postmillennialists, who thought it was their responsibility to work toward a better epoch on Earth, focused on dismantling harmful economic structures to create a more just world. The premillennialists, who thought the world might end imminently, wanted to save as many souls as possible to spare those individuals from the torment soon to come for nonbelievers.

To the premillennialists, Rhee said, "The world is already lost. Things are going to get worse and worse. ... The betterment of society is very intangible. You don't know whether it's going to happen or not. It's a very difficult thing to do. You've got to just focus on what is important — that is, salvation of the soul. That is, preach the gospel. Evangelism."

Saving an individual's soul by correcting his personal behavior will do him far more good than fixing an economic structure, if the world is about to end anyway, Rhee explained. "They are being compassionate."

That thinking has influenced Christian culture to this day. Mohler, a conservative evangelical, said, "There's a rightful Christian impulse to consider poverty a moral issue. ... Evangelicals are absolutely right to look at the personal dimensions. No apology there."

But he added that the sins that cause a person to be in poverty may be the sins of others, not of the person who is poor, and he said that conservative Christians need to acknowledge that more often. “I think conservative Christians often have a very inadequate understanding of the structural dimension of sin.”

Julisa Reed, 25, in rural Orangeburg County, S.C., answered the question, “I believe it’s mostly lack of effort on their part. Because, I mean, it’s very seldom that people put forth great effort only to receive no type of opportunities.”

That’s a view she has developed in her church, a predominantly African American Baptist congregation. She said that her pastor has preached about people who try to earn money through criminal activity rather than hard work, and about people who go through financial difficulties but don’t turn to the church for spiritual support. “Not to say that if they come to the church everything will be perfect,” she said. “It’s just that belief system, the faith that you have that everything will work out — you’re less likely to give up because you’re doing things in the light of the Lord. Whatever is happening is his plan for your life.”

She said she speaks from firsthand experience. After graduating from college in 2014, she struggled for almost three years to find a stable job. Finally, a few months ago, a lawnmower factory where she had worked temporarily gave her a full-time position as an inventory control analyst — an even better job than the one she had applied for, and one that allowed her to buy the car she had been saving up for.

“If you keep trying, you’ll get there,” she said. “If you put in the effort, it comes.”

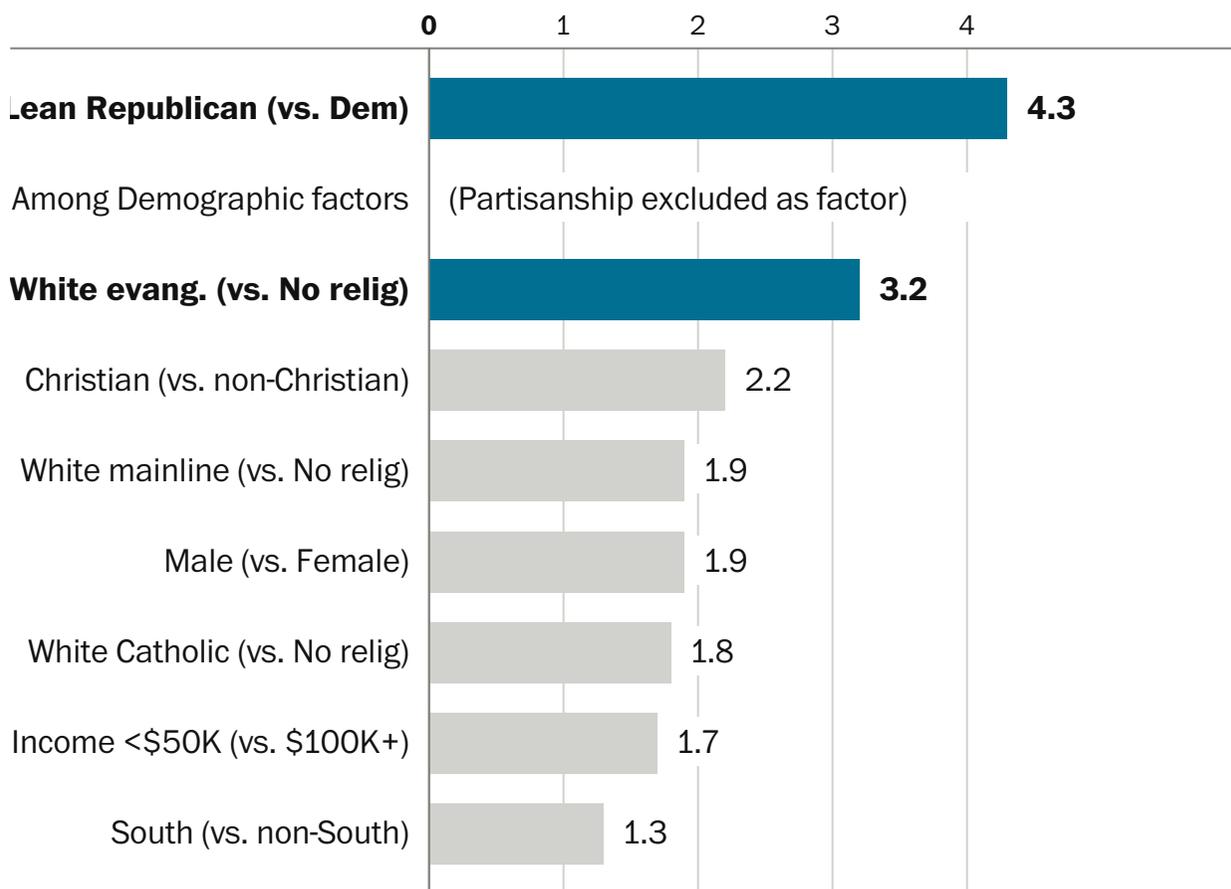
The Post conducted a statistical analysis known as logistic regression to examine how closely different personal attributes are connected with whether respondents said a “lack of effort” is the main reason people are poor, and quantify the impact of each demographic attribute when other factors are held constant.

For instance, comparing men and women, the regression found the odds of a man saying people are poor due to a lack of effort are 1.9 times that of a woman, or about twice as likely.

When comparing demographics and religious factors, the odds of Christians saying poverty was caused by a lack of effort were 2.2 times that of non-Christians. Compared to those with no religion, the odds of white evangelicals saying a lack of effort causes poverty were 3.2 to 1.

## **Politics and demographics connected to views on poor**

Bars represent the relative odds of saying people are poor due to a lack of effort comparing one group to another in a logistic regression analysis. Partisanship is consistently the most influential factor; religious differences are significant among other demographics, but are not significant when party is taken into account.



Demographics not displayed due to insignificance or small sample size include race, urbanicity, and age.

Source: Washington Post-Kaiser Family Foundation poll April 13-May 1

SCOTT CLEMENT/WASHINGTON POST

Many people’s beliefs on the question have nothing to do with their faith. Some said that they hear one thing in church, then come to a different conclusion. Michael O’Connell of Rossville, Ga., said he hears plenty about the need to help the poor at his evangelical church on Sundays. His pastor talks about people who, through no fault of their own, are in need of assistance: the elderly, the disabled.

Still, when asked if he thought people were poor because of circumstances beyond their control, O’Connell replied that they were more often poor because of their own lack of effort.

“There’s just too many that just rely on government or they rely on family. They just rely too much on other people helping them, rather than just going out and doing it themselves,” he said. “They don’t talk about that in church. They talk more about people in need in church than people who are just lazy.”

Regardless of their personal beliefs about what makes a person poor, almost everyone who discussed the question with the Post said that their church teaches them to help individuals who are in need, and that their congregation works hard at putting those teachings into action. Churches of every denomination and political persuasion run food banks, soup kitchens and shelters.

“Those are stereotypes,” Mohler said about the difference between conservative and liberal churches. “In reality, I think we all know what to do when a hungry person is before us.”

*Scott Clement and Emily Guskin contributed to this report. This post has been updated.*

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