

# Poll: Voters Prefer Candidates Who Talk About Poor

*New Messaging on Poor Trumps Best Current GOP and Dem Language*

In recent years, many political leaders have been convinced they should not talk about the poor but instead focus exclusively on the middle class in their political message and strategic choices. A nationwide survey of a representative sample of voters conducted September 26-30 has found this is a mistake for candidates, advocates, and policy makers. When framed correctly, voters across the socioeconomic and political spectrum respond much more favorably to those who talk about the working poor. And perhaps more importantly, **this new messaging trumps the best arguments for cutting funding to government programs that help lower income Americans.**

## Key Findings

- When framed correctly, voters are much more likely to support candidates promising to protect programs that help the working poor than candidates using the most effective arguments for cutting them.
- Just shy of 60% of voters say this new language is the stronger argument when compared against the most successful arguments for cuts, and this new language is especially effective with Independents and Republicans.
- Voters are more likely to trust politicians who talk about the importance of helping the working poor over those who talk only about fighting for the middle class.
- Personalizing the poor and describing them in terms of their struggles and how hard they have to work just to get by is much more effective than focusing on their vulnerabilities, needs, or lack of privilege.
- 87% of Americans think helping the working poor should be a *top* or *important* priority of government.
- By a 72% to 28% margin, voters think millionaires paying taxes at a lower rate than their workers is a bigger problem than “47% of Americans” not paying federal income taxes.

## Methodology

The online survey of n=1,005 respondents was conducted using a nationwide, double opt-in research panel. The sample was drawn and weighted to be census representative on age, gender, and race. The margin of error for the sample is +/-3.0 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. The poll consisted of traditional poll questions testing attitudes and maximum differential scaling (head-to-head comparisons) between messages.

Along with developing new “Pro” messaging in support of government poverty programs, a survey was done of traditional “Pro” and “Con” arguments currently in use, with traditional “Pro/Con” arguments taken directly from statements by prominent national political leaders and interest groups. Thirteen new and traditional “Pro” messages were tested against each other to determine which were most effective. Eight “Con” messages were also tested against each other to determine which were most effective. Respondents were then asked to choose whether their favorite “Pro” or “Con” message was most convincing.

## Voters believe government has a responsibility to help the working poor

- 52% of voters said that “dealing with the problems of the working poor” should be a “top priority” of government.
- 87% of voters (and 88% of Independent voters) said that it should either be a top priority or important priority.
- Even 77% of Republicans said it should be a top or important priority.
- Of the different demographic subgroups tested (age, income, education, religion), evangelical Christians were the subgroup who most strongly believed it should be a *top priority* (62%).
- There was little difference between demographic subgroups when looking at “top priority” and “important priority” together.

- Only 2% of voters felt the federal government did not have a role to play in addressing these problems.

*Question: Thinking of priorities for the federal government, should dealing with the problems of the working poor be a top priority, an important but lower priority, not too important, or should it not be done?*

**Voters believe people are poor because they don't earn enough rather than because they don't work**

- 69% of voters think Americans who are poor are that way because they can't earn enough from their work.
- 73% of Independents think people are poor because they don't earn enough.
- There is a 23 point difference between Democrat and Republican views on why people are poor. Nevertheless, the majority of Republicans (56%) still believe people are poor because they aren't paid enough rather than because they don't work.

*Question: Do you think that most poor people in the United States are people who work but can't earn enough money or people who don't work?*

**Hypothetical candidates supporting government poverty programs (using the proper messaging) outperform candidates seeking to cut those programs.**

- Candidates supporting government programs to help the working poor are chosen 61% to 39% over candidates using the best testing "Con" arguments for cutting poverty programs based on deficit and creating dependence.
- There was a clear progression of support for the "Pro" candidate at each level of education with the biggest difference being between high school graduates who *supported* the "Pro" candidate at a 25% higher rate than those with post-graduate education.
- As explained below, the poll tested numerous "Pro" messages. Although the message tested here used the working poor frames, the poll showed other specific messages tested better than the one used by the hypothetical "Pro" candidate in this question. The results would likely have been even stronger if the best "Pro" argument was used. 1-in-5 respondents who chose the "Con" candidate in this question said they found the "Pro" argument more convincing when asked to choose between the best "Pro" and "Con" arguments later in the survey.

*Question: If you were choosing between two candidates running for U.S. Congress, based just on the following statements, which candidate would you be more likely to vote for: Candidate A or Candidate B?*

- *Candidate A says, "We have a huge federal budget deficit and cannot afford new programs for the poor and may have to cut back on some of the ones we have. There are already plenty of programs to help those in need and some poor people in this country are becoming overly dependent upon government support. Our national debt hurts the poor the worst, and tackling the debt will be my top priority." [Rotate]*
- *Candidate B says, "Even if it is not politically popular, I believe we must continue to help our working poor. Many of the people who rely upon federal poverty programs are already working at one or more low-paying jobs but still struggling to support their family. I will be fighting to help these Americans achieve financial security." [Rotate]*

**Messages that personalize the poor and frame them in terms of how hard they have to work are more effective than traditional poverty messages.**

- When respondents chose between messages that were the most convincing arguments for government programs to help the poor, the two messages that framed the poor in terms of how hard they worked were chosen as the most compelling message at almost a 50% higher rate than the other messages.
- These top two "Pro" messages were the top choice of Democrats, but by a smaller margin than with the general population. The reason the top two "Pro" messages did so well overall is because they dramatically outperformed the other messages with Independents and

Republicans, and the close third place message for Democrats was one of the least convincing for Independents and Republicans (see below).

- The best message was: “Twenty-six million Americans are paid so little that—even with two full-time wage-earners in the household—they’d still live in poverty.”
- The second best message was: “Working hard should mean getting ahead and not having to choose between taking your kid to the doctor or keeping a second job that pays the rent.”
- Although there was variation in intensity of support for the different messages by party ID, the message rank was consistent across Party, with two exceptions. The “patriotism message” using the relative U.S. poverty rate compared to other countries was the second lowest choice for Democrats but tied as the third best choice for Republicans and Independents. And the “unfair” message that focused on how tax and spending priorities favor the rich over the poor tied for 3<sup>rd</sup> best with Democrats, but was least compelling to Republicans, and third-to-last by both Independents and overall.
- The least compelling arguments overall were those that framed poverty in terms of unfair circumstances or systems and vulnerability/need of the poor. It is worth noting that Democrats tended to like these arguments more than the rest of the country, which may explain why these tend to be the most common frames used by Democrats and progressives to talk about poverty.

*Question: On each screen please read each of the four reasons carefully and then select:*

- *The MOST CONVINCING reason for supporting government programs that help the poor, and*
- *The LEAST CONVINCING reason.*

“Pro” lines tested by rank with best at the top (note a smaller pre-poll survey of just “Pro” messages was used to reduce the original 13 “Pro” lines down to these 8 that were tested in the full survey):

- I. Twenty-six million Americans are paid so little that—even with two full-time wage-earners in the household—they’d still live in poverty.
- II. Working hard should mean getting ahead and not having to choose between taking your kid to the doctor or keeping a second job that pays the rent.
- III. Many poor people are working harder than those who are better off – often working multiple jobs, long hours, and doing hard manual labor.
- IV. It’s hard work being poor in America, where many people continue to live in poverty even though they are working two jobs.
- V. The U.S has the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest poverty rate among developed countries –only Mexico and Turkey are worse. We need to ensure that working Americans stop falling behind.
- VI. In recent years, the tax and spending priorities in this country have favored the wealthy at the expense of the poor.
- VII. No one chooses to be poor. Birth, education, and other circumstances often lead to a cycle of poverty that is difficult to escape.
- VIII. Failing to provide help to families and children most in need is simply un-American.

**“Con” arguments focused on fraud and those claiming cuts are needed to help the poor are the most effective arguments for cutting government programs.**

- The top two messages both implied that cuts/changes were good for the poor.
- While there were 2 top choices, there was more variation within subgroups on preferences with the “Con” arguments than the “Pro” ones.
- Evangelicals were the biggest outliers, preferring “individual vs government responsibility” frames and arguments talking about changes needed to protect programs, as opposed to those criticizing the programs that scored highly with others.

*“Con” lines by rank:*

- I. Entitlement programs are full of fraud and abuse. Instead of expanding programs like Medicaid, we need to make them more accountable.

- II. We cannot sustain growing dependence on government assistance, which has created a debt crisis where those who get hurt worst are the poor.
- III. The way we get the economy moving again is not with poverty programs but by overhauling our burdensome tax code, cutting taxes for job creators, and stopping failed stimulus spending.
- IV. We can't afford continued government handouts that lack accountability and don't work.
- V. Bloated entitlement programs clearly don't work. Our poverty rate is at one of the highest points it's ever been.
- VI. We have a moral responsibility to care for the poor, but it is an individual responsibility and not a government responsibility.
- VII. Government handouts perpetuate a cycle of poverty and dependence.
- VIII. Jesus said we should care for the poor but he never said we should use government to do so.

**Voters pick best "Pro" message over best "Con" one.**

- When given a choice between the "Pro" and "Con" message each respondent found most compelling, voters picked the "Pro" one 58% to 42%.
- Looking only at Democrats and Independents, they pick the best "Pro" message 65% to 35%.
- Liberals and Moderates pick the best "Pro" message 71% to 29%.
- Older voters (61 years+) and Republicans both preferred the "Con" message (by 10 and 20 points respectively). Of note, older voters also preferred the top "Con" message focused on fraud by significantly higher margins than other ages, but they were evenly split between the top two "Pro" messages.

*Question: Which of the following two messages do you agree with MORE?  
[display respondent's top pro/con message]*

**Big numbers help people see poverty problem better than ratios**

- Split samples of a variant of the best "Pro" argument using both "26 million" and "1-in-5 working Americans" as alternatives demonstrated that the 26 million frame worked better.
- The two outliers to this were evangelicals and age 18-30 who much preferred the 1-in-5 frame.
- It should be noted that there are many "official" estimates of America's workforce and wage levels, and picking specific numbers could allow for distraction and an opportunity for opponents to nit-pick (e.g., Census numbers are better than Dept. Labor, etc.).

**Labels matter, and best labels frame poor in terms of family and effort**

- The difference in appeal between the best label "families striving to make ends meet" and worst "poor families" was huge: 79% vs 39%.
- Independent voters found the "striving" label even more appealing than Democrats and Republicans
- Religious subgroups found the "poor/vulnerable" labels more favorable than the general population but still less favorable than the top labels.
- The poor/underprivileged labels were least appealing with 61% and 56% of voters finding them unappealing respectively.

*Question: For each of the following words or phrases used to describe different groups in American society, please indicate whether you find that word or phrase very appealing, somewhat appealing, somewhat unappealing, or very unappealing. [Randomize]*

*Ranked by appeal:*

1. *Families striving to make ends meet*
2. *Struggling families*
3. *Working poor*
4. *Low-income families*
5. *Lower middle-class families*
6. *Less fortunate families*
7. *Families in poverty*

8. *Vulnerable families*
9. *Underprivileged families*
10. *Poor families*

**Voters think candidates who talk about the importance of helping the poor are more authentic than those who talk only about the middle class.**

- Voters were 50% more likely to believe candidates who talked about the importance of helping struggling families were motivated by principle than candidates who talked only about helping the middle class.
- This difference in authenticity was even more pronounced among younger voters (18-30), regular church attenders, and African Americans.
- Candidates saying it would be nice to help the poor but that we can't afford to were also considered more authentic than those talking only about the middle class.
- Ironically, the income groups least likely to think candidates talking about the middle class were being authentic were middle class voters (making \$50-75K) and rich voters making \$150K.

*Question: For each of the following statements that a candidate for Congress might make, please indicate whether you think that statement is based mostly on principle or mostly on politics:[Randomize]*

1. *I will fight to protect the middle class in this country.*
2. *Looking out for the poorest members of our society is a moral obligation of government and society.*
3. *Millions of Americans work multiple jobs to support their family but are still poor. They deserve a hand up.*
4. *It would be nice to be able to do more to help the poor in this country but we simply cannot afford it.*

**Voters think millionaires pay lower tax rates than their workers is a bigger problem than 47% of Americans not paying income tax.**

- By a 72% to 28% margin, voters said millionaires paying lower taxes was the bigger problem.
- Looking at Party ID, 83% of Democrats, 74% of Independents, and even 56% of Republicans said millionaires paying less was the bigger problem.
- There was a progression in attitude by each income level with a high of 80% of those making <\$25K saying millionaires paying less was the bigger problem to a low of 56% of those making over \$150K, though even the high income range still felt millionaire taxes were the bigger problem.
- Even 60% of those who chose the best "Con" argument for cutting government poverty programs over the best "Pro" argument for protecting them said millionaires paying less was a bigger problem.

*Question: Which of the following do you consider to be a bigger problem with our federal income tax system:*

*That many millionaires pay taxes at a lower rate than their secretaries and other average workers; or That 47% of Americans--retirees, low income workers, and students -- pay no federal income tax.*