

Wealth and the 47 percent: An ancient debate

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The first two debates of this presidential campaign have left little doubt about the central political and philosophical issue dividing the country today. The candidates have all drawn a bright line between the two parties on the issue of wealth, and how much we as a society should share it. Should we tax the haves to help out the have-nots, or let only the fittest thrive in a Darwinian struggle?

This core idea shapes policy positions on Social Security, government health care programs, student loans, veterans' benefits, and more. But it basically comes down to what's called redistribution. Republicans think redistribution is a dirty word, a handout for the feckless 47 percent. Democrats view it as a humane value.

This is an old philosophical difference—ancient, in fact. Our earliest ancestors didn't debate the niceties of redistribution—they just slugged it out. In its crudest form, the redistribution issue came down to the strongest and ablest fighters declaring: "Give me yours, and don't touch mine." Then they used their physical prowess to enforce that policy. The weak had little choice but to comply.

Happily, we've evolved far beyond that brutish norm. Or have we? A team of psychological scientists is now arguing that we are more stuck in our evolutionary past than we like to admit. We may debate civilly and settle our differences in the voting booth, but is it possible that physical prowess still shapes our positions on this fundamental social issue?

Evolutionary psychologists Michael Bang Petersen of Denmark's Aarhus University and Daniel Sznycer of the University of California, Santa Barbara, decided to explore this provocative idea in the laboratory. They wanted to see if the idea of redistribution still lingers in the modern mind, activating a fundamental—and aggressive—conflict over scarce resources.

Their study was simple. They collected information on upper body strength, socioeconomic status, and support for redistribution policies in three countries—Denmark, Argentina and the U.S. When they crunched all this data together, they found that, yes, men who were economically privileged and also physically strong were opposed to wealth redistribution. By contrast, strong men who were disadvantaged—they favored redistribution policies. In other words, men with physical prowess favored whatever policy increased their share of society's wealth. This was found in all three countries studied, and the finding remained robust with controls for age, exercise and political ideology.

Notably, women's body strength had no influence on their positions on wealth distribution. The scientists predicted this finding. Direct physical aggression was probably a less rewarding strategy for our female forebears, who had less to gain and more to lose from confrontation. Physical prowess did not—and does not—play a role in women's political decision making, at least as it concerns conflict over resources.

These findings, described in a forthcoming issue of the journal *Psychological Science*, indicate that our bodies are not irrelevant in our political decision making—as much as we may resist that idea. Men with big biceps, rich and poor, are more prone to bargain in their own self-interest. Weaker men—again both rich and poor—are not apt to contest policies that hurt them. Like our weak ancient ancestors, weak modern men appear passive and reluctant to assert their own interests—as if policy decisions were still a matter of direct physical confrontation rather than the electoral dynamics of millions of voters.

Excerpts from Wray Herbert's two blogs—"We're Only Human" and "Full Frontal Psychology"—appear regularly in [The Huffington Post](#) and in *Scientific American Mind*.