

# Wealth, Welfare and the Brother-In-Law Rule

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One of the enigmas of the American political landscape is the impoverished Republican. This is the American with very little money, and many unmet needs, who nevertheless votes for people and policies that will deny him or her assistance. Indeed, many of the reddest states in the nation—those whose leaders want to gut the state’s welfare programs—are among the largest beneficiaries of government aid.

This makes no sense. With economic inequality at a historic high, why would so many Americans want to cut spending on social services targeted specifically for them? Are these Republicans such ideological purists—so opposed to wealth redistribution on principle—that they are willing to sacrifice their own self-interest?

It’s possible that this plays a part. But it’s also possible that it works the other way—that is, that policy preferences and the ideologies that legitimize them are the result of psychological motivations. That’s the argument of psychological scientist Jazmin Brown-Iannuzzi of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, who with her colleagues has been exploring this perplexing phenomenon. These scientists suggest that regardless of how wealthy people actually are, they sometimes base their political beliefs on how wealthy they feel compared to others. As a result, feeling poor might lead people to favor policies that help the poor, but feeling rich may lead them to favor policies that help the rich.

The scientists tested this idea in a series of experiments. They wanted to see if perceptions of relative status shape people’s views about wealth redistribution, and if changes in perceived status lead to changes in these policy preferences. So in the first study, they simply asked people to look at a symbolic ladder, representing all Americans, and to pick the rung corresponding to their status. They also gathered information on these subjects’ actual socioeconomic status. Then they asked them questions about wealth redistribution policies: Should the wealthy be taxed to provide benefits for the poor? And so forth. And finally, all the subjects named their party affiliation and labeled their ideology, from extremely liberal to extremely conservative.

The results were as predicted. Those who perceived themselves as higher on the country’s socioeconomic ladder were less supportive of government programs for the needy—regardless of their own actual income or education.

This was a correlational study, and did not address the question of what causes what. So in a second study, the scientists manipulated people’s subjective status. They told some that they had more discretionary income than others like them, and told others that they had less. They expected that those who imagined they were better off would be more opposed to the funding of social services for the needy. And that’s just what they found. What’s more, those who saw themselves as better off also labeled themselves as more conservative. This suggests that subjective status leads first to small-government policy positions, which are only then justified with a conservative label.

These results, reported in a forthcoming issue of the journal *Psychological Science*, are the first experimental evidence that fluctuations in perceived status can actually change attitudes about wealth redistribution. Importantly, these subjects may have believed that conservative policies were serving their self-interest, but in fact they were not better off than those with liberal policy preferences. The scientists ran another version of this study, using an economic game to manipulate perceived status, and got similar results: Those who believed they had out-performed most of the others recommended rule changes that would let the wealthy keep their money. What's more, the economic "winners" saw liberal policy advocates as economic losers who are biased by self-interest.

The 20<sup>th</sup>-century journalist and social satirist H.L. Mencken once quipped that a wealthy man is one who earns \$100 a year more than his wife's sister's husband. Brown-Iannuzzi and her colleagues believe that these findings may validate the brother-in-law rule. It's notable that policy and ideology shift together, the scientists say, because it suggests that ideological justification requires no deliberate reasoning. Although people may at times consciously reason through their ideology and party affiliation, more often than not they are reacting automatically to their (often mistaken) perceptions about their rung on the economic ladder.

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