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# Most Americans Point to Circumstances, Not Work Ethic, for Why People Are Rich or Poor

*Young people have more negative views of impact of billionaires*

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## How we did this

Pew Research Center has conducted extensive research on the public's economic attitudes, including opinions about economic inequality. As part of this research, we conducted this study to better understand Americans' views of the factors behind why some people are rich or poor. We also wanted to learn if attitudes had changed since September 2018.

For this analysis, we surveyed 12,638 U.S. adults in January 2020. Everyone who took part is a member of Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel (ATP), an online survey panel that is recruited through national, random sampling of residential addresses. This way nearly all U.S. adults have a chance of selection. The survey is weighted to be representative of the U.S. adult population by gender, race, ethnicity, partisan affiliation, education and other categories. Read more about the ATP's methodology. We also conducted a contemporaneous telephone survey, conducted Jan. 8-13 among 1,504 adults, to measure changes in attitudes and to determine if there were mode differences between the survey conducted online and the survey on the telephone.

[Here are the questions used for the report](#), along with responses, and its [methodology](#).

# Most Americans Point to Circumstances, Not Work Ethic, for Why People Are Rich or Poor

*Young people have more negative views of impact of billionaires*

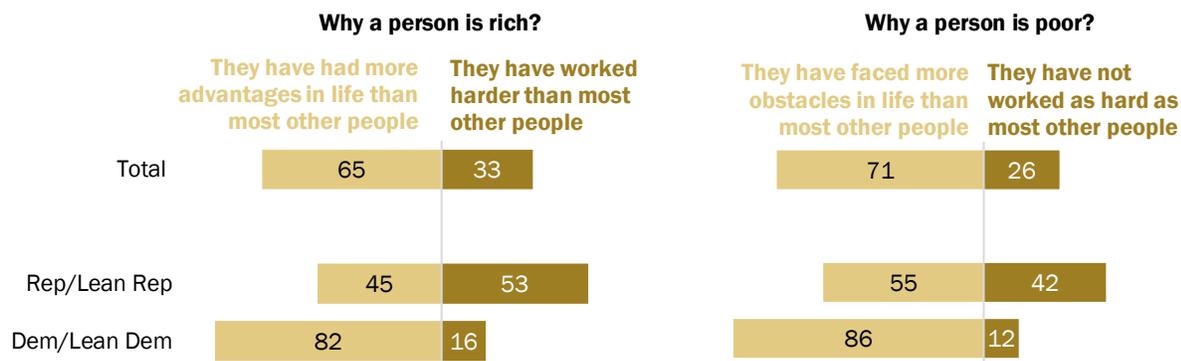
On the fundamental question of why some people are rich and others are poor, more Americans point to the advantages they possess – or the obstacles they face – rather than their work ethic. Nearly two-thirds of U.S. adults (65%) say the main reason some people are rich is because they have had more advantages in life than most other people; far fewer say it is because they have worked harder than others (33%).

An even larger majority (71%) says people are poor because they have faced more obstacles in life. Only about a quarter (26%) say they are poor because they have not worked as hard.

As in the past, these views are deeply divided along partisan lines, according to a new survey by Pew Research Center, conducted Jan. 6-19 among 12,638 U.S. adults who are members of the Center’s American Trends Panel. Large majorities of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents say advantages in life have more to do with why someone is rich (82%) and that having faced more obstacles has more to do with why someone is poor (86%).

## A majority of Americans say people are rich because they have had more ‘advantages in life’; fewer say it’s because they have worked harder than others

*In your opinion, which generally has more to do with ... (%)*



Note: No answer responses not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 6-19, 2020.

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Opinions among Republicans and Republican leaners are more divided: 53% say hard work has more to do with why a person is rich, while 45% say it is because they have more advantages. In views of why a person is poor, 55% of Republicans say it is more because they have faced obstacles most others have not, while 42% say it is more because they have not worked as hard as most others.

## Views of reasons why people are rich, 2014-2020

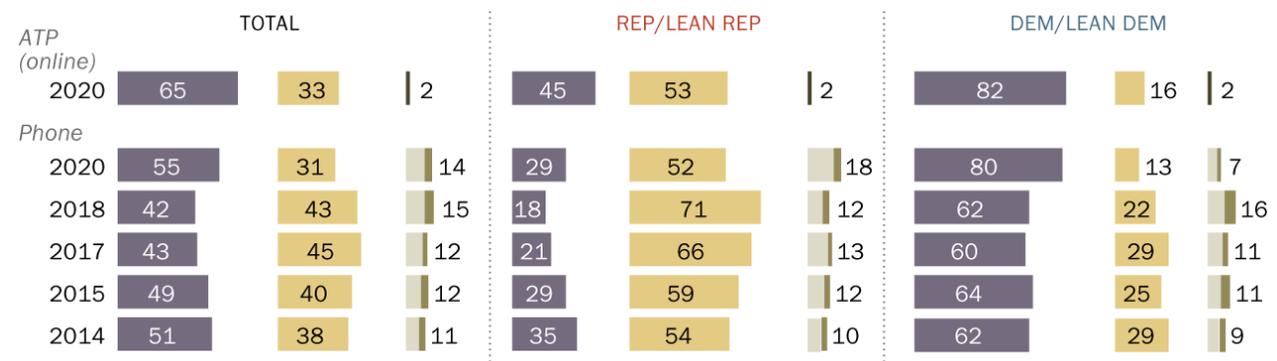
Views of why people are rich have changed significantly over the past few years, with a growing share of Americans saying the main reason a person is rich is because they possess more advantages than other people.

In a separate telephone survey also conducted in January, the share saying the main reason a person is rich is because they have more advantages than others has increased 13 percentage points since 2018, while there has been a comparable decline (12 points) in the share attributing a person's wealth more to hard work. These changes are evident among both Republicans and Democrats.

### Since 2018, Republicans and Democrats have become more likely to say a person is rich because they have more advantages than others

Which generally has more to do with why a person is rich? (%)

- They have had more advantages in life than most other people
- They have worked harder than most other people
- DK/Ref (Vol.)
- Both/neither (Vol.)
- Refused



Source: Most recent telephone poll conducted Jan. 8-13, 2020. Americans Trends Panel (ATP) survey conducted Jan. 6-19, 2020. Trend for prior years conducted via telephone.

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It is important to note that there are mode differences between the telephone and online surveys. The differences are more pronounced among Republicans than Democrats. Comparing the January telephone and panel surveys among Republicans, similar shares say that rich people are wealthy more because “they have worked harder than most other people.” However, there is a 16 percentage point difference in the shares who attribute being rich to having “had more advantages in life” (29% on the phone, 45% online). One reason for this difference is that a sizable share of Republicans volunteer “both” (14%) or “don’t know” (4%) as a response on the telephone, while these types of volunteered responses are not possible online (a small share – 2% – skip the question online).

Democrats offer similar views on this question, regardless of survey mode. Roughly eight-in-ten say people are rich because they have had more advantages in life, though that is the highest share offering this response since the question was first asked in 2014. For more on survey mode differences, see [\*“Trends are a cornerstone of public opinion research. How do we maintain them when there’s a shift in survey mode?”\*](#)

## Views of the impact of billionaires on the country

When asked about the impact of billionaires on the country, a majority (58%) say it is neither bad nor good, [according to the January survey](#).

Nearly a quarter (23%) say the fact that some people have personal fortunes of a billion dollars or more is a bad thing, while slightly fewer (19%) see this as a good thing.

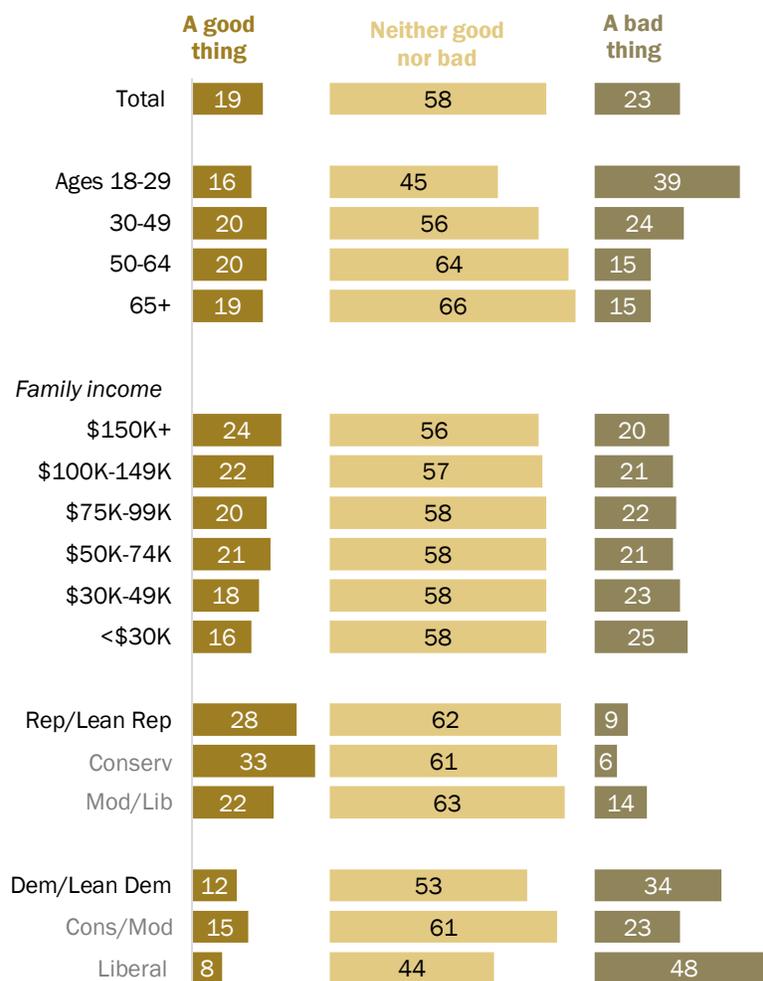
Republicans and Democrats differ over the impact of billionaires. While a majority of Republicans (62%) say having billionaires in this country is neither bad nor good, more view this positively (28%) than negatively (9%).

By contrast, more Democrats say the fact that some people have fortunes of a billion dollars or more is bad (34%) than good (12%); 53% say it is neither bad nor good.

Liberal Democrats, in particular, have a negative view about billionaires. Nearly half (48%) say they are a bad thing for the country, roughly twice the share of conservative and moderate Democrats (23%) who say this.

### Young adults, liberal Democrats are more likely than others to say billionaires are a 'bad thing' for the U.S.

*Do you think the fact that there are some people in this country who have personal fortunes of a billion dollars or more is ... (%)*



Note: No answer responses not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 6-19, 2020.

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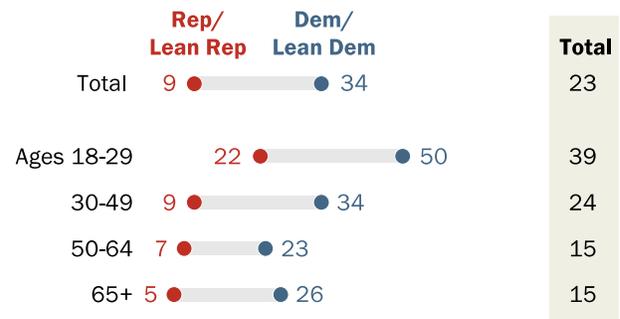
Young adults are more likely than older people to say that billionaires are a bad thing. Nearly four-in-ten adults under age 30 (39%) say the fact that some have fortunes of a billion dollar or more is a bad thing; that compares with 24% of those ages 30 to 49 and just 15% of those 50 and older.

In both parties, those under age 30 are more likely than older people to express negative views of how billionaires affect the country. Still, while half of young Democrats say billionaires are a bad thing, just 22% of 18 to 29-year-old Republicans agree.

Among the public, there are only modest differences by family income in views of the impact of billionaires. Among Republicans, however, 37% with family incomes of \$150,000 or more say the fact that there are billionaires is a good thing, while a substantially smaller share of Republicans with incomes of less than \$30,000 (23%) say the same.

### Half of under-30 Democrats say billionaires are bad for the country

*% who say it's a **bad thing** that some people in the U.S. have personal fortunes of a billion dollars or more*



Note: No answer responses not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 6-19, 2020.

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## Acknowledgments

This report is a collaborative effort based on the input and analysis of the following individuals:

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## Methodology

### The American Trends Panel survey methodology

The American Trends Panel (ATP), created by Pew Research Center, is a nationally representative panel of randomly selected U.S. adults. Panelists participate via self-administered web surveys. Panelists who do not have internet access at home are provided with a tablet and wireless internet connection. The panel is being managed by Ipsos.

Data in this report are drawn from the panel wave conducted January 6 to January 19, 2020. A total of 12,638 panelists responded out of 15,463 who were sampled, for a response rate of 82%.

This does not include nine panelists who were removed from the data due to extremely high rates of refusal or straightlining. The cumulative response rate accounting for nonresponse to the recruitment surveys and attrition is 5.3%. The break-off rate among panelists who logged onto the survey and completed at least one item is 1%. The margin of sampling error for the full sample of 12,638 respondents is plus or minus 1.3 percentage points.

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#### American Trends Panel recruitment surveys

Recruitment dates	Mode	Invited	Joined	Active panelists remaining
Jan. 23 to March 16, 2014	Landline/ cell RDD	9,809	5,338	2,315
Aug. 27 to Oct. 4, 2015	Landline/ cell RDD	6,004	2,976	1,337
April 25 to June 4, 2017	Landline/ cell RDD	3,905	1,628	685
Aug. 8 to Oct. 31, 2018	ABS/web	9,396	8,778	6,421
Aug. 19 to Nov. 30, 2019	ABS/web	5,900	4,720	4,705
	<b>Total</b>	<b>35,014</b>	<b>23,440</b>	<b>15,463</b>

Note: Approximately once per year, panelists who have not participated in multiple consecutive waves or who did not complete an annual profiling survey are removed from the panel. Panelists also become inactive if they ask to be removed from the panel.

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The ATP was created in 2014, with the first cohort of panelists invited to join the panel at the end of a large, national, landline and cellphone random-digit-dial survey that was conducted in both English and Spanish. Two additional recruitments were conducted using the same method in 2015 and 2017, respectively. Across these three surveys, a total of 19,718 adults were invited to join the ATP, of which 9,942 agreed to participate.

In August 2018, the ATP switched from telephone to address-based recruitment. Invitations were sent to a random, address-based sample (ABS) of households selected from the U.S. Postal Service's Delivery Sequence File. In each household, the adult with the next birthday was asked to go online to complete a survey, at the end of which they were invited to join the panel. For a

random half-sample of invitations, households without internet access were instructed to return a postcard. These households were contacted by telephone and sent a tablet if they agreed to participate. A total of 9,396 were invited to join the panel, and 8,778 agreed to join the panel and completed an initial profile survey. The same recruitment procedure was carried out on August 19, 2019, from which a total of 5,900 were invited to join the panel and 4,720 agreed to join the panel and completed an initial profile survey. Of the 23,440 individuals who have ever joined the ATP, 15,463 remained active panelists and continued to receive survey invitations at the time this survey was conducted.

The U.S. Postal Service's Delivery Sequence File has been estimated to cover as much as 98% of the population, although some studies suggest that the coverage could be in the low 90% range.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> AAPOR Task Force on Address-based Sampling. 2016. "[AAPOR Report: Address-based Sampling](#)."

## Weighting

The ATP data were weighted in a multistep process that begins with a base weight incorporating the respondents' original selection probability. The next step in the weighting uses an iterative technique that aligns the sample to population benchmarks on the dimensions listed in the accompanying table.

Sampling errors and tests of statistical significance take into account the effect of weighting. Interviews are conducted in both English and Spanish.

In addition to sampling error, one should bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

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## Weighting dimensions

Variable	Benchmark source
Gender	2018 American Community Survey
Age	
Education	
Race/Hispanic origin	2019 CPS March Metropolitan status Supplement
Country of birth among Hispanics	
Home internet access	
Volunteerism	2017 CPS Volunteering & Civic Life Supplement
Voter registration	2018 CPS Voting and Registration Supplement
Party affiliation	Average of the three most recent Pew Research Center telephone surveys.

Note: Estimates from the ACS are based on non-institutionalized adults. Voter registration is calculated using procedures from Hur, Achen (2013) and rescaled to include the total US adult population.

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The following table shows the unweighted sample sizes and the error attributable to sampling that would be expected at the 95% level of confidence for different groups in the survey:

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*Survey conducted January 6-19, 2020*

<b>Group</b>	<b>Unweighted sample size</b>	<b>Weighted %</b>	<b>Plus or minus ...</b>
Total sample	12,638		1.3 percentage points
Rep/Lean Rep	5,221	44	2.0 percentage points
Dem/Lean Dem	7,013	51	1.8 percentage points

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Sample sizes and sampling errors for other subgroups are available upon request.

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**2020 PEW RESEARCH CENTER'S AMERICAN TRENDS PANEL  
ATP W59 JANUARY  
FINAL TOPLINE  
JANUARY 6-19, 2020  
N=12,638**

*Note on trends:* Several questions have been asked both on the phone and online. These are labeled throughout the topline: "**phone trend for comparison.**" The extent of the mode differences varies across questions; while there are negligible differences on some questions, others have more pronounced differences. Caution should be taken when evaluating online and phone estimates. See report for more details.

**ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS PREVIOUSLY RELEASED**

**ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS HELD FOR FUTURE RELEASE**

**ROTATE WHYPOOR AND WHYRICH BY FORM. ASK WHYPOOR FIRST IF FORM=1, ASK WHYRICH FIRST IF FORM=2.**

**ASK ALL:**

WHYPOOR In your opinion, which generally has more to do with why a person is poor? **[RANDOMIZE]**

Jan 6-19  
2020

26	They have not worked as hard as most other people
71	They have faced more obstacles in life than most other people
3	No answer

**PHONE TREND FOR COMPARISON:**

**ASK ALL:**

[In your opinion/Next,] which generally has more to do with why a person is poor? **[RANDOMIZE]**

	They have not worked as hard as most other <u>people</u>	They have faced more obstacles in life than most <u>other people</u>	(VOL) <u>Both</u>	(VOL) <u>DK/Ref</u>
Jan 8-13, 2020	23	64	8	5

**ADDITIONAL PHONE TREND FOR COMPARISON:**

*In your opinion, which is generally more often to blame if a person is poor? Lack of effort on his or her own part, or circumstances beyond his or her control?*

	Lack of <u>effort</u>	Circumstances <u>beyond control</u>	(VOL.) <u>Both</u>	(VOL.) <u>DK/Ref</u>
Nov 30-Dec 5, 2016	34	53	10	3
Dec 8-13, 2015	37	48	11	3
Jan 23-Feb 9, 2014	39	50	8	3
Jan 15-19, 2014 (U)	35	50	11	4
Apr 4-15, 2012	38	46	11	5
Mar 11-21, 2010	32	49	14	5
October, 1997	39	44	14	3
CBS/NYT: 1995	35	42	18	4
CBS/NYT: 1994	44	34	18	4
LAT: 1992	27	52	18	3
NYT: December, 1990	30	48	20	2
Gallup: May, 1990	35	45	17	3

**PHONE TREND FOR COMPARISON CONTINUED ...**

	Lack of <u>effort</u>	Circumstances <u>beyond control</u>	(VOL.) <u>Both</u>	(VOL.) <u>DK/Ref</u>
<i>Gallup</i> : 1989	38	42	17	3
<i>Gallup</i> : 1988	40	37	17	6
<i>Gallup</i> : 1984	33	34	31	2
<i>CBS/NYT</i> : 1982	37	39	17	7
<i>Gallup</i> : 1967	42	19	36	3
<i>Gallup</i> : 1965	40	29	28	3
<i>Gallup</i> : November, 1964	31	31	34	5
<i>Gallup</i> : September, 1964	34	25	38	3
<i>Gallup</i> : March, 1964	34	29	32	6

**ROTATE WHYPOOR AND WHYRICH BY FORM. ASK WHYPOOR FIRST IF FORM=1, ASK WHYRICH FIRST IF FORM=2.****ASK ALL:**WHYRICH In your opinion, which generally has more to do with why a person is rich? **[RANDOMIZE]**

Jan 6-19

2020

33	They have worked harder than most other people
65	They have had more advantages in life than most other people
2	No answer

**PHONE TREND FOR COMPARISON:****ASK ALL:****[In your opinion/Next,] which generally has more to do with why a person is rich? [RANDOMIZE]**

	They have worked harder than most <u>other people</u>	They have had more advantages in life than most <u>other people</u>	(VOL.) <u>Both</u>	(VOL.) <u>DK/Ref</u>
Jan 8-13, 2020	31	55	10	4
Sep 18-24, 2018	43	42	10	5
Apr 5-11, 2017	45	43	9	3
Dec 8-13, 2015	40	49	8	4
Jan 15-19, 2014	38	51	7	4

**ADDITIONAL PHONE TREND FOR COMPARISON:****In your opinion, which generally has more to do with why a person is rich [READ AND RANDOMIZE]**

	Most rich people today are wealthy mainly because of their hard work, ambition, or <u>education</u>	Most rich people today are wealthy mainly because they know the right people or were born <u>into wealthy families</u>	(VOL.) <u>Neither/Both equally</u>	(VOL.) <u>Other</u>	(VOL.) <u>DK/Ref</u>
Dec 6-19, 2011 (SDT)	43	46	8	*	3
Jan 24-Feb 19, 2008 (SDT)	42	46	8	*	4

**ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS HELD FOR FUTURE RELEASE**

**ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS PREVIOUSLY RELEASED**

**ASK ALL:**

BILLION Do you think the fact that there are some people in this country who have personal fortunes of a billion dollars or more is...

Jan 6-19

2020

19	A good thing for the country
23	A bad thing for the country
58	Neither a good thing or a bad thing
1	No answer

**ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS HELD FOR FUTURE RELEASE**

**ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS PREVIOUSLY RELEASED**

**ASK ALL:**

PARTY In politics today, do you consider yourself a:

**ASK IF INDEP/SOMETHING ELSE (PARTY=3 or 4) OR MISSING:**

PARTYLN As of today do you lean more to...<sup>2</sup>

<u>Republican</u>	<u>Democrat</u>	<u>Independent</u>	<u>Something else</u>	<u>No answer</u>	<u>Lean Rep</u>	<u>Lean Dem</u>
27	29	29	13	2	17	22

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**Key to Pew Research trends noted in the topline:**

(SDT)	Pew Research Center Social & Demographic Trends
(U)	Pew Research Center/USA Today polls

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<sup>2</sup> Party and PartyIn asked in a prior survey.