

# A Values-Based Approach to the Concept of Hard Work



RURAL VOTER INSTITUTE RESEARCH, 2022

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## Who We Interviewed

Our 2021 panelists were registered rural and small-town voters in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota. Respondents included Trump-Biden voters, Trump voters who fell within RVI’s persuadable voter profile, and one 2016 Clinton voter. Respondents described their political views as three strong Republicans, one strong Democrat, one lean Republican, one lean Democrat, one self-described Independent, and one voter who did not identify with any Party.

Our participants were equally divided between men and women. Participants were drawn from four generations of voters, including Generation X, Millennial, Boomer, and the Silent Generation. Participants had either a bachelor’s degree, graduate degree, or some college. We organized interviews in multiple ways including a focus group, dyad, and an in-depth-interview in alternating months from August to December of 2021.

## Topline Findings:

- **Hard work was a defining value** for rural voters and played an outsized importance in their view of life and politics, often through a partisan lens.
- **Hard work was regularly associated with sacrifice, not simply manual labor.** Getting paid to do physically intensive work was not really “hard work” if one enjoyed it, according to participants. Office work was hard work if you did not like doing it but still performed quality work. Hard work, as a value, was tied to taking pride in one’s work and sacrificing to do that work. Doing a good job and doing more than the minimum requirement was a defining aspect of hard work.
- **The perceived threat to hard work stemmed from a fear of a “something-for-nothing” culture becoming prevalent.** This threat from a “something-for-nothing” culture was more than a societal

concern for many respondents who identified it with what seemed to be a multi-faceted frustration with some aspect of their own station in life. Specifically, individuals were frustrated by the belief they were working more than other individuals (those individuals whom they perceived to choose not to work hard and “elites” who never had to work hard to earn their status) and hence subsidizing those groups in some way with their labors rather than furthering their own station in life.

- This line of thinking at times led to the concern of an impending drift toward socialism. The extreme right’s battle cry of “socialism” may be connecting with rural and small-town voters on a fundamental level because it reflects not a fear of a socialistic takeover of the system of government, but rather because it connects with voters’ awareness of innate economic inequalities compounded by a lack of real upward mobility.
- **Voters preferred leaders for whom hard work is a part of their values system** yet failed to name an elected official they felt embodied that. Voters were readily able to name elected officials they felt did not value hard work.
  - There is room for candidates of either party to define themselves as the candidate of hard-work, but Democratic candidates must do it in spite of the Democratic brand deficit on this concept and presuppositions associated with it by many rural voters, including negative brand associations by Trump-Biden swing voters. Republican candidates start off with an advantage on the value of hard work because of associations with the Party brand. Even as Democratic candidates work to define themselves related to the value of hard work, Party entities need to organize long-term efforts to narrow the brand deficit with rural voters.
- **Democrats are having the wrong conversations.** When one rural voter panelist explained his conviction that Democrats’ focus on societal issues essentially devalues him as an individual (a recurring subtle issue with panelists), a rural Democrat responded by continuing to explain the societal focus of the Democratic agenda seemingly oblivious to what had just been said. Democratic candidates must individualize the way they communicate their agenda and message. Existing small-town and rural Democratic organizers, Party Committees, and volunteers must be empowered and equipped to engage rural voters framing the message about the individual and his/her/their stake in the Party’s agenda or a candidate’s vision.

## Defining Hard Work as a Value

Panelists repeatedly described hard work as a foundational value. Hard work isn’t necessarily physical labor, but “hard work gives meaning to life” according to one respondent. Another respondent linked different perspectives on hard work to individuals growing up with differing values. One Trump-Biden voter linked her concept of hard work to her religious (Christian) upbringing.

Hard work was defined not as manual labor, but instead as work that required sacrifice and taking pride in the quality of one’s work. One respondent even explained his work was hard work because he sacrificed moments with his children and spouse to work to pay the bills. Hard work means putting in “effort,” “focus,” and “energy” into tasks and labors. “Hard work is a rare find. ... Hard work is all about sacrifice. You’ve got to sacrifice something,” one Trump-Biden voter explained. Another respondent explained hard work as “wanting to do the best job possible” and “going above and beyond” what is required. That sacrifice that defines hard work as a value means, “you get up and go to work when you aren’t feeling like

it” according to one moderate Republican. One’s efforts are considered hard work if it is the “best” one can do.

Another rural respondent explained that someone doing hard physical work may not consider office work “hard work” but it can be just as much hard work and just as stressful as manual labor. Another respondent explained that if an individual does something he or she finds enjoyable regardless of whether it is paid then that activity cannot be considered hard work.

## Threat of “Something-for-Nothing” Culture

A perceived “something-for-nothing” culture was an imminent threat to the value of hard work according to 2020 research findings. RVI’s 2021 respondents referred to people being too incentivized to not work because of covid unemployment benefits that respondents felt were overly generous. There was a belief often cited by panelists that people were able to make more money or an amount of money competitive to what they would make working by instead not working and receiving unemployment and other benefits. This idea was a source of great frustration for panelists subscribing to that view.

Society’s obsession with convenience, instant gratification, and low costs have lowered the prevalence of hard work as a value according to a conservative-minded and non-party affiliated respondent. Another respondent stated that big city residents place a lower value on hard work than people in the local rural area.

In all 2021 interviews respondents were read a statement based on the 2020 panels views regarding hard work as a value. Panelists were then asked if they agreed or disagreed and why.

*“The value of hard work is under attack in America. Few people value hard work and our society is moving toward a culture of something for nothing. We need leaders who have done a hard day’s work and who respect hard work in its own right.”*

The only respondent who disagreed with this statement was the lone self-described strong Democrat who said that while workers currently had the upper hand in negotiating it was part of a cyclical pattern that included alternatively the workforce and the employers having greater negotiating leverage. She said the cycle would eventually come full circle.

Multiple respondents described a “something-for-nothing” culture growing in America and expressed a fear it would lead or was leading to socialism.

A strong element of nostalgia was tied to the value of hard work. One respondent spoke of people “who always worked their butts off ... and felt they were proud they were working their butts off,” in contrast of his view of the world today, “It’s turned people who were honest, hard working people into welfare [recipients] where they are on the dole.” Millennials were frequently cited as lacking in a work ethic compared to previous generations. One panelist said that while Millennials tended to feel needlessly entitled, Gen-Xers felt entitled because they’d earned it through experience and expertise built over time.

## Why

A large majority of respondents tended to voice frustration with people who chose not to work or the “elite” who did not have to work. These sentiments in conjunction with respondents’ description of their own frustrations with a perceived “something-for-nothing” culture suggests a significant part of the underlying issue is the respondents’ frustration with their own lack of socio-economic upward mobility while at the

same time feeling their labors are providing resources to enrich the elite or subsidize incentives for others to “not work.” Further, some respondents used racially coded language when referring to those whom they believed did not choose to work.

## Choosing Not to Work?

One respondent said that many individuals no longer took responsibility for themselves and instead believed the larger society owes them such things as a job, an income, and health care.

Social program spending was often criticized as a reason for the devaluing of work. Two panelists specifically criticized Social Security for being a “welfare program.” A female Trump voter said that Social Security was not an entitlement program because she and others had paid into it all their lives. Another Trump voter said Social Security was a “pillar” that would always exist but that the rate people pay into it should be increased to keep it solvent.

## Elites

Many people were critical of those who grew up with what could be described as privileged circumstances that offered advantages without work or sacrifice by the individual and left those individuals lacking an appreciation for the value of hard work.

## Personal Component

Other programs such as unemployment and the pandemic-related temporary freeze on evictions lead to greater unemployment according to one Trump-Biden voter. He said the problem was not new but had worsened during and after the pandemic.

“You can’t keep giving people free rides all the time. Somebody has to pay.”

A vast majority of respondents spoke from the perspective of being that “somebody” has to pay. Panelists were frustrated by a feeling that their labor was helping pay for others not to work and at the same time they were watching the “elite” enjoy advantages they did not have to work to earn.

Added to this stress was the frustration that upward mobility was limited with the value of hard work. Hard work did not necessarily equate to success according to many panelists. One Trump-Biden voter explained that working hard does not help one get ahead in life. “Laborers are left behind to get peanuts,” she said.

## Racial Component

One panelist of color cited the “many challenges” that come with being Black, and elaborated on economic opportunity, wage inequality, and other issues in an in-depth-interview.

Two white respondents invoked racist dog whistles (coded political language), even as they said the factors they associated with the devaluation of hard work were true across racial demographics and were a matter of economic class.

Phrases such as “DC ghetto,” “single-parent families,” “problem of urban areas,” “welfare is a trap,” and children “with different fathers” were linked to devaluing the concept of hard work.

The same respondents said, “the odds are stacked against these people and it’s not just a racial thing. The odds are stacked against these people. If you go to the rural South it’s just as many poor white people;” “the issue is “not a problem of race. It’s a problem of class;” “it’s a racial thing in some cities;”

and, “people who don’t have the income advantage. Working two or three jobs and neglecting the kids. A lot of it starts at home.”

## **Hard Work, Candidates, and Party Brands**

When asked to name an elected official who valued hard work or who embodied the value of hard work, no respondent could name one. At the same time, multiple respondents readily volunteered elected officials they felt did not value hard work or who embodied a “something for nothing” worldview in opposition to the value of hard work.

Panelists talked about being impressed by hard work in a leader and explained that most officials in office now do not respect hard work. Panelists volunteered that the Bush family, Kennedy family, Rothchild family, Al Gore, Gretchen Whitmer, and “the Squad,” were elites and antagonists to the value of hard work.

When asked by the moderator specifically if the Trump kids were elites who did not value hard work, one respondent defended them saying that they were helping “other people and don’t really put themselves in the [position of] privilege.”

### **Biden and Trump got mixed reviews on valuing or understanding hard work.**

A Trump-Biden voter said that President Biden, “values hard work,” and is “doing a lot for the people.” The same respondent said Trump doesn’t value hard work. A pro-Biden rural Democrat said the President understands and lives the value of hard work while Trump just believed in getting someone else to do the work for him. One moderate Republican male, a Trump-Biden voter, said Joe Biden did hard work for decades in the Senate, riding the train back and forth to Delaware, and that Biden does not get enough credit for his hard work. One female rural Trump voter was confident Joe Biden didn’t know what hard work means.

One consistent Trump voter blamed Trump’s stimulus as pandering for people to owe them (politicians) and cited Trump by name for promoting “victim mentality” and the respondent went on to criticize “Section 8 Housing” and “food stamps.” Trump was referred to as a workaholic, “thrives on hard work” and as someone who “only sleeps 3 or 4 hours a night” because he is working so hard.

### **Republicans are seen as the party that values hard work. Democrats, not so much.**

One Trump voter described Republicans as better for working-class and middle-class Americans while Democrats were more focused on the “upper class” and controlling the population to “do what they want them to do”. When his view was challenged by another panelist, he said that Democrats supported a system where people had to work hard to take care of other people who weren’t working hard and that one’s tax dollars were paying for those who did not want to work.

A Trump-Biden voter said neither major political party appreciated the value of hard work and that each party would say one thing but do something else. Another Trump-Biden voter described each party as working hard at obstructing the other party depending on who was in power. She concluded that, “Republicans value hard work more, to bootstrap yourself up and make something of yourself.” Yet another Trump-Biden voter said that Republicans not only value hard work more than Democrats, but that Republicans are better at support for training people to get back in the workforce and that hence Republicans are the party that values a person working hard and “earning their keep.”

One panelist told the group that the something-for-nothing culture was a product of “the progressive wing” of the Democratic Party although some centrists of both parties supported it. Another panelist said it was oversimplifying the matter to say a something-for-nothing culture was from the Democrats. He said that idea was more specifically from the progressive wing of the Democratic Party. A consistent Trump voter said the issue was not unique to just one party but also said it was supported by the whole of the Democratic Party because the Party had excluded all but the progressive wing.

A panelist described the Republican Party as the party that supports the value of hard work with public policies that incentivize the private sector to create a strong economy. The panelist said Republicans believe that jobs create wealth for people. In contrast, the panelist described the Democratic Party as believing the government’s job is to bring people wealth “which is fascism” and the goal of Democrats is “happiness, not the pursuit of happiness.” Democrats were generally more associated with social agendas than economic agendas.

## **Democrats are having the wrong conversations.**

Rural respondents appeared to feel that Democrats are ignoring them, as individuals, in favor of a societal collective to which the rural respondents felt they did not belong.

Republican, conservative, and swing panelists appeared in virtual agreement that the value of hard work was under attack. The primary objector to that point was the lone “strong Democrat” interviewed. She went on to say that Democrats’ focus was on the “collective” and “society as a whole” and “taking care of everybody as a group” even as a Republican panelist complained about Democrats’ lack of focus on the individual.

Further research is warranted to test approaches framing messages around the individual rather than the collective and empowering individuals to take pride in their lives.

## **Warrants Further Testing**

Two Trump-Biden voters talked about a perception that people were incentivized to not work because of social safety net programs. They also said a possible remedy might be to pay more in prices for goods and services to raise wages rather than to “pay more in taxes” to fund social safety net programs. How those beliefs relate to messaging increasing the minimum wage is worth further testing.