

THE SENTINEL

RedBlueAmerica: Are Republicans cold-hearted toward the poor?

By Joel Mathis and Ben Boychuk

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The image of the heartless, Scrooge-like Republican is a staple of the liberal imagination, but does it have any bearing in reality? Recent poll results from the Pew Research Center raise the question anew: They show that 86 percent of self-described “steadfast conservatives” believe that in America, “the poor have it easy.” Just 6 percent of “solid liberals” believe the same thing.

Who is right? Are liberals too soft hearted, or are conservatives big ol’ meanies? Joel Mathis and Ben Boychuk, the RedBlueAmerica columnists, debate the issue.

JOEL MATHIS

Republicans may hate their reputation for indifference to and contempt for the poor. But to borrow one of their favorite phrases: They built that.

It was certainly on display during the last presidential election: When GOP nominee Mitt Romney got behind closed doors, he talked about the “47 percent” of Americans who would rather get federal subsidies than work for a living. (Conveniently, perhaps, Romney ignored that most of that 47 percent does both.)

It was on display a few years back, when the conservative Wall Street Journal labeled poor families “lucky duckies” because of the tax credits they receive to do little things like make sure their children don’t starve.

And it was certainly on display back in the 1980s and 1970s when Ronald Reagan — using barely concealed racial code words — breathed fire at the “welfare queens” and the “strapping young bucks” who allegedly used food stamps to buy T-bone steaks.

It’s all a destructive myth.

Studies show that the chronic stress of being poor — yes, even in America — makes many people vulnerable to diabetes, heart problems, and other health issues. Other

studies have suggested that such stress simply makes it harder to make good decisions or consistently pursue the kinds of long-term goals and behaviors that might lift a person out of poverty. The folks find little official sympathy from the Republican Party and its ilk.

To be sure: There are some conservatives who are concerned with poverty, who believe in free-market solutions to helping people lift themselves out of poverty, and often those folks have good ideas that might benefit everybody involved in the fight against the ills of being poor.

But the Pew survey suggests those folks are outliers. That's the kind of thing that would only be said by somebody who has never been poor. And it's a belief apparently held by the vast majority of Republicans. They earned their reputation, fair and square.

BEN BOYCHUK

What a preposterous poll the Pew Research Center people are peddling.

As it happens, anyone can take a shortened version of the poll online by visiting <http://www.people-press.org/quiz/political-typology/>. No surprise, I wound up in the "solidly conservative" camp when answered the 23-question quiz.

But it wasn't a particularly satisfying outcome. Although the poll's design allows for a little nuance — a fraction of respondents answered, "I don't know" — it's very much an either-or proposition.

On the topic of whether poor Americans are, here is how the Pew quiz poses the question: "Which of the following statements comes closest to your view? 'Poor people today have it easy because they can get government benefits without doing anything in return.' Or 'Poor people have hard lives because government benefits don't go far enough to help them live decently.'"

Both statements are gross oversimplifications.

"Some of those questions are really dumb," remarked Jason Bedrick, an education policy analyst for the libertarian (don't you dare call it conservative!) Cato Institute in Washington, D.C. "You can believe that the poor have it hard and that government programs aren't the best way to help them."

Precisely. This gets to the heart of the conservative — and libertarian — critique of the 21st century American welfare state.

We see a labor participation rate that's fallen to a 36-year low — 62.8 percent — even as the unemployment rate has dipped to 6.1 percent. That means millions of Americans who could be working are not. They've simply given up looking for gainful employment in a stagnant economy.

In some cases, it's better to stay unemployed than work because the government benefits are better. In 35 states, according to a 2013 Cato study, welfare pays more than a minimum wage job.

That doesn't mean welfare recipients' lives are easy. But it does mean certain government policies have created incentives against the habits — like honest work and maintaining two-parent families — that would make their lives better and more meaningful. That's a nuance the Pew poll doesn't quite capture.