

Obama's "You Didn't Build That" Speech Out of Sync With American Public Opinion

Emily Ekins | July 17, 2012

In a campaign stump **speech** in Roanoke, Virginia last Friday, President Obama clearly revealed that he believes individual success in this country is largely driven by luck and other people, rather than hard work, ingenuity, or productivity. (The speech is **similar** to a 2011 **speech** by Senate candidate Elizabeth Warren, condemning individualism.)

Obama's claim is in stark contrast with what most of the public thinks. Since polls first began asking about this, upwards of 60 percent of Americans believe hard work matters more than lucky breaks, inheritance, or connections in determining success and wealth.

Obama declared: "If you've been successful you didn't get there on your own." He reasons, "I'm always struck by people who think 'well, it must be because I was just so smart'. There are a lot of smart people out there! 'It must be because I worked harder than everybody else.' Let me tell you something—there are a whole bunch of hardworking people out there!"

To be clear, Obama does concede that individuals matter, but he says their choices are less important than what others do for them. It is notable that Obama's dismissal of the idea of hard work leading to success goes beyond Warren's commentary, which made the less controversial point that successful business people make use of publicly funded infrastructure. The president on the other hand stated, "If you've got a business, you didn't build that. Somebody else made that happen." Presuming this was not a verbal flub (and **Obama spokeswoman Lis Smith indicates it was not**), Obama's belief is a radical departure from popular notions about the relationship between individual initiative and success.

The president's reasoning might be described in the academic literature as one with a "low internal locus of control," assuming that luck and environment matter most. For instance, a student who did poorly on a test would assume the test was too difficult, or the teacher was incompetent; if this student did well she would conclude the test was too easy or she was lucky.

An individual with a “high internal locus of control” believes she can influence her success. If she did poorly on a school test, she may conclude that she did not study hard enough, if she did well, she would attribute this to good study habits. Clearly both environment and choice matter, but what someone believes matters most reveals a great deal about how they perceive the economic system more generally.

Survey researchers have used various survey questions to gauge whether Americans’ tend to place the explanation for their success internally or externally.

A striking difference emerges between Americans and Western and Northern Europeans.

For instance 63 percent of Americans believe that hard work usually brings a better life compared to 37 percent of the French, 45 percent of the Dutch, and 46 percent of Norwegians. Only 14 percent of Americans primarily believe that success is more a matter of luck and connections, compared to a third of the French, Dutch, and Norwegians. Britons and Germans find themselves in between these groups and Americans.

For more than half a century, survey researchers have explored Americans’ beliefs about the relationship between hard work, productivity, luck, inheritance, connections and wealth and success. Data from the [General Social Survey](#) demonstrate Americans’ beliefs have changed little over time, and that they still believe hard work matters most.

A query of the [Roper Center’s](#) collection of surveys bolsters the General Social Survey’s results. Many differently worded surveys over the past half century, as shown in the timeline below, demonstrate that clear majorities still believe in the pillar of the American Dream: that hard work matters most.