

'Protestant ethic' still sways dreams of wealth

by [David Gibson](#) in the [October 18, 2011](#) issue

Back in 1905, Max Weber's landmark treatise, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, argued that a Calvinist belief in God's plan for the saved was crucial to the rise of capitalism because it inspired individuals to work hard and earn money as a sign of divine blessing on their lives.

More than a century later, new research shows that whatever its merits, the Protestant ethic is thriving among American believers.

That's especially true among the evangelicals who are driving today's economic conservatism, and the idea goes a long way toward explaining the political disputes that are dividing the country and shaping the presidential campaign.

According to the Baylor Religion Survey released September 20, nearly three-quarters of Americans believe that God has a plan for their lives, and those who hold strongly to those beliefs—about four in ten—are much more likely to embrace the sort of conservative economic philosophy that would make Tea Party activists proud.

In fact, believers who say God is directly guiding their lives and endowing the U.S. with divine blessings are much more likely than other Americans to agree that "the government does too much" and that "able-bodied people who are out of work shouldn't receive unemployment checks." What's more, they are more than twice as likely as all other Americans to say that success "is achieved by ability rather than luck."

The Baylor study, based on interviews with more than 1,700 adults last fall, shows that black Protestants are most likely to espouse these ideas (71 percent), followed by evangelicals at 55 percent. Catholics and mainline Protestants are well behind, at about 42 percent, trailed by unaffiliated believers and Jews, who come in at around 3 percent.

Baylor sociologist Paul Froese noted that today's economic Protestantism seems to channel the free-market ideas of Adam Smith, the famous 18th-century moral philosopher who developed the theory of an "invisible hand" of competition, and the more recent libertarian views of the late University of Chicago economist Milton Friedman.

One major caveat emerges, however: Froese noted that American believers add an important religious gloss to these market-driven theories by arguing that God is tipping the scales in the favor of hard-working true believers. "For many Americans, the invisible hand of Adam Smith has become God's hand," Froese said.

This kind of economic theology is being trumpeted most effectively by the Republican Party, especially GOP presidential hopefuls Rick Perry and Michele Bachmann. "Political candidates can promote economic conservatism and a lack of government regulation merely by referring to an engaged God," Froese said. "It works because many rank-and-file voters believe that a lack of government regulation and lower taxes is part of God's plan."

This approach also works politically because, contrary to what one might expect, Americans with lower incomes and less education are more likely to believe that God has a plan for their lives—and that when it comes to the economy, the best government is that which governs least. (African-American Protestants are an exception to the trend, believing in both God's guiding hand and a strong role for government.)

For example, 41 percent of respondents said they "strongly believe" that God has a plan for them, but just 17 percent of respondents with incomes of more than \$100,000 hold such a belief.

That kind of populist optimism, adhered to in spite of today's deepening economic misery, was also demonstrated by a recent Associated Press-CNBC survey that found that two in ten Americans think they will be millionaires in the next decade. That conviction increases the further one moves down the economic ladder—and thus the lower one's actual chances of achieving such financial nirvana.

Critics view these attitudes as a kind of magical thinking that opens the most financially vulnerable people to the pitches of "prosperity gospel" preachers who use cable television pulpits to solicit donations that they say will bring their viewers economic blessings.

But the popularity of this "gospel of wealth" could also play out in the budget showdown in Washington as President Obama tries to win reelection on a platform of economic "fairness" (which for him means higher taxes on the wealthy along with budget cuts). Republicans, on the other hand, are raising the red flag of "class warfare" in opposing the president's plans—in effect defending the wealthy at a time of near-recession and growing economic inequality.

That message could yet work for the GOP if enough middle- and working- class Americans believe that they, too, will be in that upper-income echelon sooner rather than later and that God will help them get there—as long as Washington doesn't get in the way. —RNS