

Rich people found to be more charitable if given a sense of control

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A pair of researchers, one with Harvard Business School, the other with the University of British Columbia, found that when soliciting donations from wealthy people, it pays to offer them a sense of control. In their paper published on the open access site *PLOS ONE*, Ashley Whillans and Elizabeth Dunn describe their study, which involved sending donation request letters to wealthy alumni.

The researchers began their study by noting that [recent research](#) has found that people tend to respond more positively to agentic self-concepts than they do to more generalized themes. To that end, they designed and carried out a study to test the idea as it applied to [charitable donations](#).

The study consisted of composing and then sending letters to 12,000 Ivy League alumni who earn at least \$100,000 annually. Those targeted held positions in public corporations, which meant their income was verifiable. The researchers wrote two versions of their letter, both of which were geared toward asking for a donation to help with community action activities. But the phrasing was different. One letter was written in such a way as to give the reader a feeling of control—"Sometimes, one person needs to come forward and take individual action." The other was written in a more general sense: "Sometimes, a community needs to come forward to support a common goal."

The researchers then compared how much individuals donated. They found that those who had received the letters offering more control were more generous—they gave on average \$432. Those sent the more general [letter](#), on the other hand, gave on average just \$270. The difference came to an average of 1.5 times as much.

The researchers suggest that the difference consisted simply of giving prospective donors a feeling of more control over how the donated money would be spent. They further suggest that their findings indicate

that in the future, those conducting charity drives might gear their requests in ways that offer some degree of [control](#) to prospective donors. They might find they get more in return.

More information: Ashley V. Whillans et al. Agentic appeals increase charitable giving in an affluent sample of donors, *PLOS ONE* (2018).
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