

**Spencer Piston.** *Class Attitudes in America: Sympathy for the Poor, Resentment of the Rich, and Political Implications.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 234pp. (\$99.99 hardcover, \$29.99 paper).

An important debate has emerged regarding how much political representation varies across social classes. One perspective argues that, “The voices of citizens with lower or moderate incomes are lost on the ears of inattentive government officials” (Jacobs and Skocpol 2005, 1; also see Bartels 2008; Gilens 2012; Gilens and Page 2017). Others offer a more nuanced assessment, showing that political responsiveness to different income groups is often statistically indistinguishable (e.g., Bhatti and Erikson 2011; Brunner, Ross, and Washington 2013; Enns 2015) and when differences do emerge, the rich do not always win (e.g., Branham, Soroka, and Wlezien 2017; Ellis 2017; Flavin 2012; Rigby and Wright 2011).

In *Class Attitudes in America*, Spencer Piston flips this debate on its head by shifting the focus away from individuals’ class position to how individuals’ view those in different economic classes. Piston finds that those with more “sympathy for the poor” are more likely to support a host of social welfare policies and redistributive efforts, such as aid to the unemployed, housing for the homeless, and reducing the gap between the rich and the poor. Similarly, “resentment of the rich” corresponds with increased support for higher taxes on the wealthy. Piston also shows that individual’s sympathy for the poor and resentment of the rich are only weakly correlated with income level.

In other words, it is one’s view of different social classes, not the social class a person occupies, that matters most for redistributive policy preferences. However, the redistributive implications of the policy must be clear. For example, the relationship between resentment of the rich and support for the estate tax only exists for those who understand that the estate tax affects only a small percentage of Americans (also see Bartels 2005). Thus, the focus on class attitudes and relevant policy knowledge helps explain public opposition to the estate tax, which is surprising considering that over 90 percent of the estate tax was paid by the top 10 percent of income earners and only about 80 small farms and businesses paid any estate tax in 2017 (Sammartino, et al., 2016).

Chapter six extends the analysis from policy preferences to vote choice and we see evidence that class attitudes corresponded with presidential support in 2008 and 2012. In addition to offering a rich theoretical account of the importance of class attitudes, Piston uses an impressive array of existing survey data, novel experiments, and new survey data to test his arguments. Equally as impressive—and laudable—Piston has made all replication data available for his book on his website (Piston 2020). This is a model of transparency for others to follow.

Not surprisingly, such a novel theoretical and empirical contribution opens many pathways for future research. One important extension for future research will be to move beyond attitudes toward the “rich” and the “poor” to also consider attitudes toward the middle class. Given the weak economic conditions preceding the 2008 presidential election and the

long-standing belief that the Democratic Party is better than the Republican Party at helping the poor, in Chapter 6 Piston predicts that class attitudes will benefit Obama. Consistent with this prediction, Figure 6.7 shows that ANES survey respondents were more likely to use the word “poor” when talking about what they like about Obama and what they dislike about McCain. However, when I looked at the open-ended responses in the 2008 ANES, I found that respondents invoked “middle” or “working class” more than three times as often as “poor” for why they liked Obama (108 vs 33 mentions). This pattern does not challenge Piston’s argument in any way, but it suggests that considering attitudes toward the middle and working class could be an important theoretical extension.

Another possible extension relates to the findings for 2016. In contrast to the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections, Piston finds no relationship between resentment of the rich and feelings toward Trump. Was 2016—and Donald Trump—so unique that typical relationships between class attitudes and presidential support did not apply? Or does the null finding suggest a broader shift, with attitudes toward the rich and the poor having a diminished influence on U.S. politics moving forward? Perhaps attitudes toward the middle class have become the critical consideration for voters. It is also possible that the null result for 2016 reflects something unique about the survey sample. For example, there are almost twice as many Democrats (43%) than Republicans (22%) in the unweighted Qualtrics sample. None of these possibilities suggest a deficiency in *Class Attitudes*. Rather, they highlight the many opportunities for important new research that stem from the research agenda and the data presented in Piston’s book.

In sum, *Class Attitudes in America* combines an important theoretical paradigm with a wealth of data (which Piston has made publicly available) and careful measurement. This research also holds important normative implications and political recommendations. A better public understanding of the redistributive implications of policies and greater sympathy for those in need would combine to increase support for social welfare policies and redistribution. While this may sound intuitive, the focus on class attitudes represents a novel approach in political science that speaks to the longstanding, but surprising finding, that different social classes often share similar policy preferences (Enns and Wlezien 2011; Gilens 1999; Hochschild 1979; Sears and Funk 1990). While questions remain, these questions reflect the importance of the research agenda that Piston has begun.

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