

Introduction: Reigning Myths about Class Attitudes

News articles often claim that Americans do not think about class very much,¹ and that when Americans do think about class their thinking tends to disparage the poor² and praise the rich.³ Many news articles also claim that in America most people do not want government to help the poor. They would rather their elected representatives give a tax break to a millionaire than spend government money on somebody who actually needs it.⁴

These claims are examples of *reigning myths* about public attitudes about class. Like many myths, each of these claims contains a grain of truth. An enterprising reporter can uncover an underpaid trucker who says he thinks millionaires are taxed too much, because when he becomes rich someday he doesn't want to fork it all over to Uncle Sam. Another journalist, with enough effort, can find somebody who complains about poor people leeching off the government instead of working for a living.⁵ This kind of story makes for good copy, and it has become a story that many have come to believe. But good copy, however often it is repeated, is not the same thing as truth. To say that Americans resent the poor,⁶ or to say that they sympathize with the rich,⁷ is to focus on the exception at the expense of the rule. On balance, the reigning myths distort our understanding of class attitudes and their role in American politics.

One of the reasons these myths about class attitudes have endured is that surprisingly few people have actually examined them rigorously. I analyze the beliefs of thousands of ordinary people, expressed in a series of national surveys, in order to paint a more accurate picture of the American public than is possible through the isolated anecdotes found in many newspaper articles.⁸

2 *Introduction: Reigning Myths about Class Attitudes*

My findings lead to a very different account of the role of class attitudes in American politics than the one that newspaper readers typically encounter. I argue that many people do think about class, not just in their social lives but also when thinking about politics. They do so by considering and evaluating social class groups, and this book focuses on attitudes toward two such groups: poor people and rich people.⁹ Of course, not all people mean the exact same thing when they use the terms “poor” and “rich.” Any two given individuals might disagree about whether their neighbor is rich, just as they might disagree about Barack Obama’s race¹⁰ or Chelsea Manning’s gender.¹¹ Despite the fuzzy boundaries of these categories, however, social groups are meaningful – even central – to public thinking about politics. Class is no exception.

Attitudes toward class groups make up two defining divisions in American public opinion. The first division lies in how one views the poor. Most Americans fall on the sympathetic side of this line. They tend to believe poor people have less than they deserve and report feelings of compassion for them. Other Americans, fewer in number, reject this sympathetic outlook toward poor people. If an analyst learns the extent to which a given person views the poor sympathetically, that analyst then becomes better able to predict which policies that person will support and how that person will vote.

Another key cleavage in the American public has to do with their views of the rich. Most Americans believe that the rich have more than they deserve; many also report feeling anger and resentment toward them. A smaller group of Americans actually believe that rich people get a raw deal – that they have less than they deserve. Those who resent the rich have very different political preferences from those who do not.

While sympathy for the poor and resentment of the rich are powerful forces that often shape political preferences, their power is variable: greater in some instances than in others. I argue that the importance of these attitudes toward class groups to public opinion hinges on two factors. The first of these is whether or not the public is provided with clear cues about whether a given policy or political candidate helps or hurts the poor or the rich. In extreme cases, when the relationship between a policy or candidate and these class groups is completely unknown, sympathy for the poor and resentment of the rich are irrelevant to public opinion. The second factor is the extent to which political elites frame issues in ways that draw attention to class considerations – or deflect attention away from these considerations. For example, I show that even though the federal estate tax on inheritances only affects the

Introduction: Reigning Myths about Class Attitudes

3

richest Americans, framing the policy as a “death tax” downplays class considerations, attenuating the impact of resentment of the rich on opinion about the policy. Sympathy for the poor and resentment of the rich, then, are powerful forces, but their influence on political preferences is neither inevitable nor totalizing. I speak to the importance of these attitudes toward class groups even as I also qualify it.

I propose, in sum, that majorities of Americans view poor people sympathetically, that majorities view rich people resentfully, and that under predictable conditions, these attitudes toward the poor and the rich shape Americans’ political preferences. These contentions directly contradict reigning myths about how Americans think about class. It is critical to note, therefore, that my claims are supported by a great deal of evidence, while the reigning myths are not.

My first source of evidence consists of ordinary Americans speaking in their own words. This is very different from the approach taken in most surveys, in which respondents are asked to select from predetermined options (e.g., “Do you ‘Strongly Agree,’ ‘Agree,’ ‘Disagree,’ or ‘Strongly Disagree’ with each of the following statements?”). Instead, interviewers ask Americans to think aloud – to discuss what comes to mind when they think about a candidate for office or a political party. The American National Election Studies (ANES) time series surveys of nationally representative samples of adult citizens routinely include these questions, but scholars do not often analyze these questions with respect to what they reveal about American attitudes about class.¹² I analyze a series of these studies dating back to 1992, and the results point in a clear direction. Contrary to accounts of class indifference, ordinary people routinely discuss the poor and the rich when talking about policies, candidates for office, and political parties. This is not just a recent phenomenon; it predates the Great Recession. When Americans form their judgments about political entities, the poor and the rich are often on their minds.

Furthermore, the character of ordinary Americans’ thinking about the poor and the rich contradicts existing claims in political science. Those individuals who mention the poor in their responses to these survey questions do not typically say that they worry about government giving the poor free handouts. Instead, they express the concern that government is *not doing enough* to help poor people get by. Those who mention the rich, meanwhile, do not usually worry that government is strangling innovation by overtaxing “job creators.” Rather, they complain that rich people are not paying their fair share in taxes. Of course, the opinions of people who mention the poor in unfavorable ways or the rich in

4 *Introduction: Reigning Myths about Class Attitudes*

favorable ways are in the data also. But these people are like black swans: they are the exception, not the rule. In general, when we take Americans on their terms by analyzing their own words, we see that they tend to discuss poor people in sympathetic ways and rich people in resentful ways.

The second source of evidence comes from responses to survey questions I developed to measure attitudes toward the poor and the rich. In a series of national surveys, I ask ordinary individuals across the country whether they feel that poor people have less or more than they deserve. I also ask how often they feel sympathy, compassion, anger, and resentment toward poor people and toward rich people. The results are clear: nationally representative samples of Americans are more likely to express sympathetic views – and less likely to express resentful views – toward the poor than toward the rich. These findings belie the common contention that most of the American public views the poor as deserving of their low status, and the rich as deserving of their high status.

Sympathy for the poor and resentment of the rich are also tightly connected to a wide range of political preferences. This may be surprising to some political scientists, who routinely exclude measures of attitudes toward the poor and the rich from their models of policy opinion. To be sure, findings from Larry Bartels' landmark book *Unequal Democracy*,¹³ as well as similar results from the disciplines of political science and social psychology,¹⁴ suggest that the poor are viewed more favorably, and the rich less favorably, than is commonly believed. I extend these findings by demonstrating that in many cases, those who sympathize with the poor are more likely than those who do not to support government programs intended to transfer resources to those at the bottom of the economic distribution. Resentment of the rich, meanwhile, is often positively associated with support for increased taxes on those at the top of the economic distribution.

The survey analyses also reveal that sympathy for the poor and resentment of the rich help explain why Americans vote the way they have in recent elections. For example, these class group attitudes are powerfully associated with vote choice in the 2012 presidential election and the 2016 presidential primary (but not in the 2016 general election). These findings shed new light on a topic central to the study of American democracy: how voters decide which candidates will represent them in public office.

Critically, I find that relationships between attitudes toward class groups and political preferences endure after holding constant other political variables such as partisanship, ideological principles, racial prejudice, beliefs about income inequality, beliefs about upward economic

Introduction: Reigning Myths about Class Attitudes

5

mobility, and demographics. In comparison, relationships between beliefs about income inequality or upward mobility and public opinion are relatively weak. Finally, the relationships between attitudes toward class groups and political preferences do not appear to be driven by self-interest, as they remain when respondents who might be considered to be poor or rich themselves are excluded from the analyses. These results lend additional support to my argument that in many cases, Americans base their judgments about politics in no small part on their attitudes toward poor people and rich people.

The third and final source of evidence comes from survey experiments, in which I randomly assign subjects into different groups and assign each group to receive a different version of a survey question. This allows me to have confidence that any difference in the responses among the groups arises from the differences I have created in the survey questions. In one such experiment, I reconsider the claim, made by Ann Schneider and Helen Ingram's widely-cited model of policymaking, that legislators who propose policies with harmful effects on the poor will become more popular as a result.¹⁵ These scholars contend that the American public views the poor negatively and therefore rewards politicians' efforts to punish the poor. In contrast, I argue that majorities of Americans view the poor with sympathy, and therefore that politicians will actually become less popular if their policies are perceived to hurt the poor.

I use an experiment in order to adjudicate between these two perspectives. One group of experimental subjects reads a description of a politician whose policies transfer resources *away from* the poor, and another group reads a description of a second politician, otherwise identical to the first, whose policies transfer resources *to* the poor. Then I compare the popularity of the politician across the two groups of respondents, to see whether hurting the poor or helping them is more effective at winning public support. The results are clear: the politician is more popular in the condition in which he helps the poor, especially among those individuals who view the poor sympathetically. This finding is a testament to the power of sympathy for the poor over Americans' evaluations of candidates for public office.

These three sources of evidence – Americans' own words, their responses to original survey questions, and their behavior in an experimental setting – all lead to an unambiguous conclusion. Sympathy for the poor and resentment of the rich are widespread, and under predictable conditions these attitudes powerfully influence the political preferences of the American public.

6 *Introduction: Reigning Myths about Class Attitudes*

LATE TO CLASS

Journalists are not the only ones who have overlooked the importance of attitudes about class to American politics. With few exceptions, political scientists omit measures of attitudes toward class groups from their analyses of public opinion and electoral behavior. A content analysis¹⁶ of three top journals in political science, *APSR*, *AJPS*, and *JOP* from 1980 to the present, yielded not a single article that examines the effects of attitudes toward class groups on vote choice.¹⁷ As I will show, this oversight warps our understanding of American politics.

How did so many of us miss such a central element of American thinking about politics? The answer is that many intelligent and talented scholars have been focused on research questions that allow little room to uncover the influence of sympathy for the poor and resentment of the rich on public opinion.

For example, one question that dominates scholarly thinking is: Why is there so little socialism in the United States?¹⁸ From this perspective, the development of the American welfare state has taken a very different path from that of welfare states in many Western European democracies. The welfare state in the United States is often described as a “laggard”¹⁹ – slow to develop, small in scope, miserly in its protection of the poor, and vulnerable to cutbacks. Scholars who find the American welfare state to be less socialist than welfare states in Western Europe design their research to determine how this state of affairs arose. One explanation leaps, perhaps too easily, to mind: government does not do much to help its poorest citizens because Americans want it that way.²⁰

The problem with this simple explanation is that there is a great deal of evidence against it. For example, Benjamin Page and Larry Jacobs show that majorities of Americans support a wide range of downwardly redistributive policies, defined for the purposes of this book as either government programs that transfer resources to the poorest citizens or government increases in taxes on the rich.²¹

A skeptic might respond that if the public *really* wanted government to do more to aid the poor or take from the rich, government would do so.²² Such skepticism is only warranted if one assumes that in contemporary American democracy, what the public says goes. This assumption is belied by political outcomes in the United States today. If the government did whatever majorities of the public wanted, the United States military would be attacking North Korea. Government would ban atheists from teaching in public schools. Marijuana would be legal across the country, as would

physician-assisted suicide for the terminally ill, and the government would be barred from taking private property for economic development through eminent domain.²³ To be sure, in many cases public policy is consistent with the public will – but in many cases it is not. The United States would be a very different place if the majoritarian public always had its way.

One reason the majority does not always dictate policy is that the framers of the American Constitution consciously crafted our institutions to filter and refine the will of the electorate.²⁴ They were cognizant of the possibility that some “passion” would seize a majority of the public – a dominant “faction” – which could then do injury to “the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community,” as James Madison put it in the tenth of the Federalist Papers.²⁵ Our system of separated institutions sharing power,²⁶ with the concomitant checks and balances, staggered elections, and supermajority rules, are all aimed at mitigating against the possibility that an electoral majority will dominate policymaking.

It is strange, therefore, that scholars have not always been able to resist the temptation to infer public opinion from political outcomes. As Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson observe, the idea that politicians must adopt the preferences of the majority has dominated the thinking of many political scientists since the publication of Anthony Downs’ *The Median Voter* in 1957.²⁷ One of Downs’ key predictions is – or at least is often interpreted to mean²⁸ – that in a two-party system, the parties will adopt nearly identical policy positions, positions that converge on the preferences of the “median voter,” the midpoint of the ideological distribution. This rendition is admirable in its parsimony, but it bears little resemblance to the reality of American politics,²⁹ in which the policy positions of the two major parties have in fact been moving away from the median voter for decades.³⁰ The reasons for this polarization are complex, but scholarship makes clear that, surprising as it may seem to some, the public is not the only entity that influences the policies that legislators choose to pass. Interest groups, the media, donors, rules, legislators’ preferences, inequalities in political participation, inequalities in representation, and additional factors often preclude majority public opinion from determining policy.³¹

To be sure, the question of why the United States government does not do more to assist its poorest citizens is an important one, and it will be discussed later in this book. For now, I submit that some of those who find fault with American government’s efforts to increase aid to the poor or taxes on the rich have been too quick to assume a one-to-one correspondence

8 *Introduction: Reigning Myths about Class Attitudes*

between policy outcomes and public opinion.³² This assumption is contradicted by the findings in Martin Gilens' book *Affluence and Influence*. Gilens concludes that, "under most circumstances, the preferences of the vast majority of Americans appear to have essentially no impact on which policies the government does or doesn't adopt."³³ We need to let go of the assumption that what the public wants, it gets.

Another question that has commanded much scholarly attention, thereby obscuring the influence of class attitudes on public opinion, is as follows: Why aren't class divisions more pronounced in American politics? Many political scientists have been puzzled by the lack of a major class divide in American public opinion and political behavior. For example, the economic policy preferences of employed Americans are not all that different from the preferences of the unemployed.³⁴ Similarly, the association between occupational status and political preferences is only moderate,³⁵ paling in comparison to other divides, such as the divide in political preferences between racial groups such as whites and blacks.³⁶ Scholarship about class has long proceeded in the shadow of Karl Marx, who predicted class-based revolution. From this perspective, the relatively small differences in public opinion among different class groups are especially puzzling. Researchers have attempted to address this puzzle, with notable successes.³⁷

Yet efforts to explain circumstances when class is unimportant are ill-suited to provide us with tools to understand those circumstances when class *is* important. As I will show, Americans may not be divided very much by their class positions, but they are deeply divided by their class attitudes. That is, while poor people and rich people, on average, think a lot alike about politics, Americans think very differently *about* poor people and rich people. These attitudes toward the poor and the rich mark a major fault line in public opinion. They help us understand why the public supports certain policies and candidates while opposing others. Research on the absence of major conflict among class groups ought not blind students of American politics to the importance of class attitudes to public opinion.

Scholars' focus on explaining public opposition to welfare has also made it difficult for social scientists to recognize the prevalence of sympathy for the poor. In 1996, President Clinton signed a bill transforming Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), drastically reducing government benefits to poor families. This legislation enjoyed strong public support: cash or cash-like³⁸ welfare to able-bodied adults was, and is, unpopular.

But welfare is a unique case. Nearly every government program intended to channel resources to the poor that has ever appeared on a survey has enjoyed the support of large proportions of the American public, with welfare a lonely exception. An important one, to be sure, and one that deserves explanation – yet research has already identified reasons why welfare is uniquely unpopular. Chief among these reasons, Martin Gilens shows in *Why Americans Hate Welfare*, are widespread white prejudice against blacks and the related belief that many welfare recipients are lazy.³⁹ But TANF is not the only program in the world that channels resources to the poor: Gilens is careful to note that the Earned Income Tax Credit, Supplemental Security Income, Head Start, and Social Security all enjoy substantial public support, as does the general principle of government helping the poor.⁴⁰ Those who are tempted to conclude that Americans don't like aid to the poor based on public attitudes about welfare should beware of letting the rotten apple spoil the barrel.⁴¹ Our tunnel vision on public opinion about cash welfare threatens to distort our perspective on the role of attitudes about class groups in American politics.

The takeaway from this discussion is that the answers social scientists get depend on the questions we ask. If scholars are focused on trying to explain why there isn't more socialism in the United States, why there isn't more of a class divide in public opinion and electoral behavior, and why welfare is so unpopular, we are unlikely to uncover much evidence of sympathy for the poor and resentment of the rich. In place of the traditional research questions in the literature, therefore, I ask: what do Americans think about poor people and rich people? And how, if at all, do their attitudes toward the poor and the rich organize their thinking about public policies and candidates for public office? As will be seen, this approach results in a more accurate understanding of attitudes toward class groups in the United States and their influence in American politics. My findings suggest that government has done less than it might have to redistribute wealth downward *in spite of*, not because of, American attitudes about the poor and the rich. Those engaged in the battle to create a more economically egalitarian society should view the American public not as an inevitable enemy but as a potential ally.

A LOOK AHEAD

In Chapter 1, I conduct an initial investigation of the possibility that attitudes toward poor people and rich people influence political preferences. I do so by analyzing nationally representative samples from four

10 *Introduction: Reigning Myths about Class Attitudes*

separate ANES surveys: those conducted in 1992, 1996, 2000, and 2008.⁴² Contrary to claims of class indifference in American politics, the results reveal that respondents frequently mention poor people and rich people when discussing what they like or dislike about political parties and candidates for public office. Furthermore, their discussions of the poor are predominantly sympathetic in nature: respondents often complain that a given candidate for office, or a given political party, does not do enough to help the poor. Meanwhile, references to the rich typically take on a resentful tone: respondents often say that they dislike a candidate or a party because that party seems to favor the interests of the rich at the expense of the interests of the rest of America.

To place the findings of these analyses in context, I also assess how often the survey respondents mention “inequality.” I do so because a vibrant strand of recent scholarship addresses the topic of how increasing economic inequality has affected public opinion in the United States.⁴³ While research in this tradition is important and has yielded valuable insights, much of it begs a key question: How much do Americans rely on the concept of economic inequality to make sense of politics in the first place? Interestingly, the open-ended responses reveal only a few instances in which ordinary individuals use terminology related to inequality. This is consistent with research from Eunji Kim, Rasmus Pedersen, and Diana Mutz, which finds that economic inequality is a highly abstract concept that is often misunderstood by individuals and not tightly connected to their political judgments.⁴⁴

It is not at all clear, then, that ordinary individuals have economic inequality on their minds when forming their political preferences. But Americans do routinely refer to class groups such as the poor and the rich when talking about candidates for public office and political parties. The chapter concludes by charting the boundaries of the concepts “poor” and “rich” in the public mind, by asking ordinary Americans what these terms mean to them.

The responses to these open-ended questions are especially useful because they take Americans on their own terms, pointing a clear path forward for the remainder of the book. For example, I find that respondents rarely refer to subgroups of the poor (such as the “working poor,” “poor children,” or the “deserving poor”). While policymakers have often made use of such subcategories, it is not at all clear that ordinary individuals do the same. I therefore theorize and test propositions about public thinking about *broad* class groups – poor people and rich people – in the subsequent chapters.