

Class Attitudes in America

This book explains a long-standing puzzle in American politics: why so many Americans support downwardly redistributive social welfare programs, when such support seems to fly in the face of standard conceptions of the American public as antigovernment, individualistic, and racially prejudiced. Bringing class attitudes into the investigation, Spencer Piston demonstrates through rigorous empirical analysis that sympathy for the poor and resentment of the rich explain American support for downwardly redistributive programs – not only those that benefit the middle class, but also those that explicitly target the poor. The book captures an important and neglected component of citizen attitudes toward a host of major public policies and candidate evaluations. It also explains why government does so little to combat economic inequality; in key instances, political elites downplay class considerations, deactivating sympathy for the poor and resentment of the rich.

Spencer Piston is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Boston University. He studies the influence of attitudes toward racial and class groups on public opinion and political behavior.

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Class Attitudes in America

*Sympathy for the Poor, Resentment of the Rich,
and Political Implications*

SPENCER PISTON

Boston University



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*To Rob Piston and Jane Piston, who taught me
how to live and how to love*

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Acknowledgments

In a way, this book began when I was a community organizer for the Greater Lansing Association for Development and Empowerment (GLADE) in Lansing, Michigan. On a daily basis I worked with people who gladly paid the substantial costs of political action in order to build a more just world. They were willing to do so much in part because they saw the distribution of wealth in this country as profoundly unfair. In many cases their deepest sympathies were for the poor, and their greatest resentments were of the rich. Imagine my surprise when I began graduate school and was informed by social scientists that Americans do not care about class! Much of the evidence in this book can be viewed as corroboration of what the members of GLADE showed me long ago.

My greatest thanks go to the co-chairs of my dissertation committee: Vince Hutchings and Skip Lupia. Before I had even thought about what my dissertation might be about, I started a research paper on a separate topic and each of them met with me weekly (and sometimes more) over the winter semester of 2009. For the rest of my life I will be grateful to their contributions to that paper, to this book, and most of all to my development as a scholar. I would be remiss if I did not also mention the downside to having the two of them for advisors; because their mentorship was so exemplary, for years I was denied the opportunity to join in the graduate student ritual of complaining about faculty, which kept me from fully bonding with my peers.

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