

Class War? What Americans Really Think about Economic Inequality by Benjamin I. Page and Lawrence R. Jacobs. University of Chicago Press, 2009. 160pp. Cloth, \$39.00; paper, \$13.00.

As the saying goes, everybody wants to go to heaven but nobody wants to die. In political terms, people want lower taxes and more government services—with the gap filled, presumably, with a mixture of borrowed funds and savings realized by cutting government waste. In their book, Page and Jacobs put together survey data and make a convincing case that this cynical story is *not* a fair summary of public opinion. Most Americans—Democrats and Republicans alike—support government intervention in health care, education, and jobs, and are willing to pay taxes for these benefits.

Page and Jacobs recognize that there is confusion; for example, most Americans do not realize that sales taxes cost lower-income people more, as a percentage of their earnings, while income taxes hit higher-income groups more. The result is widespread confusion about what are the most effective ways to pay for government spending. People are also misled about how to cut the budget, for example overwhelmingly wanting to reduce the share of the federal budget that goes to foreign aid, while vastly overestimating the share of the budget that goes to this purpose (average estimate of 15%, compared to an actual value of 0.3%).

Confusions on specific tax and budget items aside, Page and Jacobs are persuasive that majority public opinion is consistent with tax increases targeted to specific programs aimed at bringing a basic standard of living and economic opportunity to all Americans. They discuss how survey respondents generally feel that such an expansion of the role of government is consistent with generally expressed free-market attitudes.

This is a book on public opinion, not policy, and the authors offer no judgment on whether the public's majority preference is achievable or desirable. For example, a vast majority of Americans—including 80% of Republicans—feel that “Government should spend whatever is necessary to ensure that all children have really good public schools they can go to” (p. 59), and another clear majority—this time including 60% of Republicans—agree with the statement that “The government in Washington ought to see to it that everyone who wants to work can find a job” (p. 62). It is an open question whether these goals are possible given the tax increases that voters are willing to accept. However, as Page and Jacobs point out, to the extent that politicians are responding to voters' policy preferences, fear of taxes or of big government should not be a political obstacle.

Page and Jacobs discuss how the influence of lobbyists, campaign contributors, and ideological activists may be making politicians afraid to take an active part in confronting economic inequality, despite broad support for government programs in this area. I suspect that a larger issue is whether such programs will really work. The evidence is that national elections are won and lost based on economic conditions, and parties will be loath to implement policies that they think will slow the economy before the next election, however popular they might be right now. This is not to say voters are wrong to support governmental action to reduce economic inequality but rather to indicate a way in which economically conservative views among the political class could blunt politicians' responses to such desires.

In summary, Page and Jacobs offer an excellent synthesis of Americans' majority views, demonstrating that, at least in the short term, broad agreement on an active

governmental role in reducing inequality, within the context of providing opportunity in a free-market economy. Their data are taken from a survey conducted in summer 2007, a year before the recent economic meltdown.

Andrew Gelman, Dept. of Statistics and Dept. of
Political Science, Columbia University, New York

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