

Book Review: Who Cares? Public Ambivalence & Government Activism from the New Deal to the second gilded age

<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/2011/04/10/book-review-w-ho-cares-public-ambivalence-and-government-activism/?pfstyle=w p>

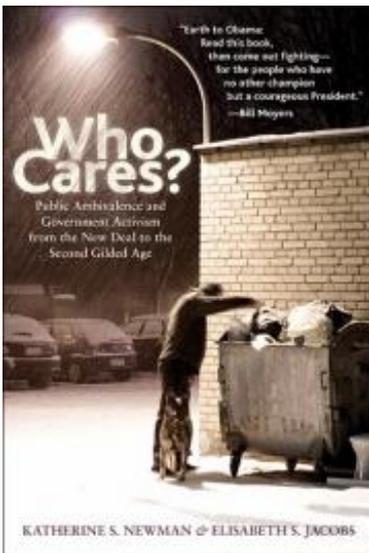
April 15, 2011

Alastair Hill finds some important advice for both Barack Obama and David Cameron on the 'policy moods' in Britain and America.

Who Cares? Public Ambivalence & Government Activism. Katherine S. Newman and Elisabeth S. Jacobs. [Princeton University Press](#). April 2010.

Find this book at: [Google Books](#) [Amazon](#) [LSE Library](#)

On the face of it, *Who Cares?* is a rather strange name for a book about politics and not least for a study which focuses on public sentiment towards political agendas. Nevertheless, in analysing public opinion in three distinct periods of American political history, Katherine Newman and Elisabeth Jacobs set out some interesting observations for contemporary policy-makers.



The first period is [FDR's New Deal](#), an era often regarded by historians as one in which public opinion was broadly behind the implementation of generous social policies. In contrast the analysis presented in the first part of the book suggests that Roosevelt encountered a great deal of resistance towards many aspects of the New Deal. Through analysis of government letters and polling, Newman and Jacobs assert that the majority of American public opinion was actually largely ambivalent, or even opposed to many of FDR's social reforms. Chapter two goes on to suggest that a similar trend was prevalent during [Johnson's 'Great Society' reforms](#). While Johnson received favourable public support initially, Newman and Jacobs contend that he too also later encountered widespread popular resistance. What is more intriguing however is the analysis offered in the book's third chapter which suggests that similar trends existed in periods in which conservative American Presidents sought to buck the trend towards a more active U.S. welfare state. Like FDR and Johnson, Reagan and later the Bush's all encountered strong

resistance to their own attempts at reform.

Based on this analysis Newman and Jacobs assert that contemporary policy-makers should bear in mind two important factors in judging what type of policy public opinion will be prepared to accept. The first is James Stimson's conception of 'policy mood'. This is the idea that when government policy veers too far in one direction, public opinion demands a swing back the other way. Secondly, there is the V.O. Key's conception of 'latent opinion'. This is defined as the public opinion that might exist in the future based on the cumulative effect of policies on public opinion. Governments may temper particularly radical reforms, or change the timing to get the bad news out of the way early, if they believe that latent opinion will turn against them and affect their electoral chances in the future.

From these two insights the book concludes with some strong advice for the Obama administration. In the face of rampant inequality as a result of years of Republican supply-side policies increasing both the pre and post tax incomes of the richest in American society, the book's conclusion is that the 'policy mood' in the United States is as ready as it will ever be for radical liberal reforms. Newman and Jacobs strongly urge Barack Obama to not act now to avoid missing the window of opportunity for government activism in the face of rising social problems.

Yet at the time of writing there is little to suggest that Obama's term will be much more than a missed opportunity. In contrast, across the Atlantic the coalition government in the United Kingdom is continuing to implement its own programme of radical reforms. However rather than enhancing government activism, the widespread pushing back of the frontiers of the British state is now in full flight, and whilst resistance in public opinion is growing, after 13 years of highly centralised Labour government the 'policy mood' is arguably at its most favourable for such reforms.

The British coalition seems to have heeded the book's advice aptly then, whereas Obama's administration will likely fail to meet the gauntlet laid down by Newman and Jacobs. British coalition Ministers look only too eager not to miss their opportunity for radical reforms – unpopular or not.

***Alastair Hill** graduated from the LSE in 2010 with MSc Political Theory, and now works for a political consultancy company.*