

Popular perceptions of the rich in 13 countries

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Why are popular perceptions of the rich important for a society? The simple answer: because the first sparks of economic growth are often kindled when a society starts to view the rich in a positive light. This has been true throughout the history of the United States, and it has also been true in China since the early 1980s when Deng Xiaoping declared: “Let some people get rich first!” (Naughton, 1993, p. 501). It is also true today in Vietnam, where the rich are viewed more positively than in almost any other country – and where GDP per capita has increased six-fold since a far-reaching programme of economic reforms was launched in 1986.

In China, the number of people living in extreme poverty has fallen from 88 per cent in 1981 to less than 1 per cent today, while at the same time the number of billionaires has increased more than in any other country; today, more billionaires live in China than anywhere except the USA (Hyatt, 2023).

In Vietnam, 80 per cent of the population were living in poverty in 1993; today that figure is less than 5 per cent (World Bank, 2022, p. 2, figure 0.1 m; Zitelmann, 2024a). Conversely, many societies started on the road to suffering and decay when they launched policies directed against the rich, as in China during the Cultural Revolution, or in Venezuela after the election of the socialist President Hugo Chávez. As the recent example of Venezuela has shown, it is not only the rich who suffer from anti-rich policies, but also the poor.

The Russian Revolution began with the struggle against the bourgeoisie, against the rich. In December 1917, Lenin demanded that extreme force be used against “this offal of humanity, these hopelessly decayed and atrophied limbs, this contagion, this plague, this ulcer”, specifically “the rich and their hangers-on”, and the bourgeois intellectuals (Lenin, 1947, pp. 259–60). His aim was “to *purge* the land of Russia of all vermin”, the rich and other rogues. How this should be done, he explained in drastic words: “In one place half a score of rich, a dozen rogues, half a dozen workers who shirk their work ... will be put in prison. In another place they will be put to cleaning latrines ... In a fourth place, one out of every ten idlers will be shot on the spot” (Lenin, 1947, p. 262).

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Martin Ivanovich Latsis, one of the first leaders of the Soviet political police, instructed his subordinates on 1 November 1918:

We don't make war against any people in particular. We are exterminating the bourgeoisie as a class. In your investigations don't look for documents and pieces of evidence about what the defendant has done, whether in deed or in speaking or acting against Soviet authority. The first question you should ask him is what class he comes from, what are his roots, his education, his training, and his occupation.

(Quoted in Courtois et al., 1999, p. 8)

Hatred was first directed against the rich and the 'bourgeoisie', but soon the Bolsheviks waged war against the population as a whole, especially the workers and peasants in whose name they claimed to act.

Resentment against the rich has often even led to negative economic outcomes in democratic states, as the examples of Sweden and Great Britain in the 1970s show, where overzealous high-tax policies and nationalisations led to massive declines in wealth (see Zitelmann, 2024b, pp. 127–48, 171–88). So there are very good reasons for learning more about how a society perceives the rich.

2 | ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE RICH

Hatred of the rich is an extreme manifestation and mobilisation of existing prejudices and stereotypes. Particularly in situations of social crisis and upheaval, people look for scapegoats.

There is an unwritten history of mass murders, the victims of which were the rich and 'privileged' groups in society. George Gilder writes in his work *Wealth and Poverty*:

On every continent and in every epoch the peoples who have excelled in creating wealth have been the victims of some of society's greatest brutalities. Recent history has seen, in Germany, the holocaust of Jews; in Russia, the pogroms of Kulaks and Jews; in northern Nigeria, the eviction and slaughter of tribesmen; in Indonesia, the killing of near a million overseas Chinese; in China itself, the Red Guard rampages against the productive; in Uganda, the massacre of whites and Indians; in Tanzania, their expropriation and expulsion; in Bangladesh, the murder and confinement of the Biharis. And as the seventies drew to a close, much of the human wealth and capital of both Cuba and Southeast Asia was relegated to the open seas. Everywhere the horrors and the bodies pile up, in the world's perennial struggle to rid itself of the menace of riches – of the shopkeepers, the bankers, the merchants, the traders, the entrepreneurs.

(Gilder, 2012, p. 139)

In general, minorities targeted for genocide have long been victims of prejudice and have been scapegoated for complex social developments that were incomprehensible to the majority of people. These scapegoats can be weak minorities, such as poor migrants. But they can also be perceived as strong minorities, such as the rich, Jews or Asians.

Over the past few decades alone, scholars have published thousands of articles, papers, and books on prejudice, and the research and literature are almost impossible to survey, even for experts. There are studies on prejudice against Jews, against black people, against women,



against members of various sexual minorities, and so on. However, researchers have shown little interest in conducting studies on prejudices against, and stereotypes of, one particular minority: the rich. This may be a result of the political orientation of many of the social scientists who are involved in prejudice research and whose research interests are often linked to their political convictions: they want their research to contribute to the fight against prejudice and for the rights of minorities or groups labelled as 'disadvantaged'. From the point of view of these scientists, the rich obviously do not fit these criteria.

Over the past few years, from 2018 to 2023, I have commissioned a total of 48 surveys, most of which were conducted by the polling institution Ipsos MORI. It was an expensive project that cost me more than 660,000 euros. I did not receive any support from private or state entities, funding the project with my own money.

The research focused on two topics:

- (1) Popular perceptions of the market economy and capitalism. This survey was conducted in 35 countries, and I summarised the results in Zitelmann (2023).
- (2) The image of the rich and social envy in international comparison. My partial findings have been presented in a monograph and three papers (Zitelmann, 2020a, 2020b, 2021, 2022).

In this paper, I summarise the results of the research on the image of the rich and social envy in all the countries surveyed for this topic. More detailed descriptions of the methodology and the state of research can be found in the publications mentioned under item (2) above. My research also makes a contribution to envy research, the results of which I have summarised in Chapter 4 of my book *The Rich in Public Opinion* (Zitelmann, 2020a).

The empirical research, then, consists of surveys that have so far been conducted in 13 countries. We asked the same questions in the United States, Great Britain, Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Sweden, China, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Poland and Chile from May 2018 to November 2022. This survey has, for the first time, made it possible to compare attitudes towards the rich in this many different countries.

Wealth and the aspiration to be or become rich have very different meanings in different countries. It is striking that in Asia – but also in a highly dynamic country such as Poland – the desire to become rich is significantly stronger than in many European countries and the United States (Figure 1).

Other questions in the study were used to find out how the rich are perceived by respondents in each country. We defined 'rich' in Europe and the United States as individuals with net assets worth at least 1 million euros/dollars/pounds (not including the house/apartment they live in).

In all 13 countries, we presented respondents with a list of 14 personality traits and asked, 'Which, if any, of the following are most likely to apply to rich people?' Of the 14 personality traits, seven were positive: visionary/farsighted; industrious, bold/daring, imaginative, intelligent, optimistic and honest. The remaining seven traits were negative: materialistic, greedy, self-centred, arrogant, superficial, ruthless and cold-hearted.

We then calculated the average percentage of positive traits and negative traits for each country and divided these two percentages to arrive at the Personality Trait Coefficient (PTC) depicted in Figure 2 – the lower the PTC, the more positive the respondents' perceptions of rich people. The most positive perceptions were found in Vietnam. In September 2022, the Foreign Trade University in Hanoi invited me to a workshop. It had been conducting research on attitudes towards the rich in Vietnam and arrived at a similar conclusion.

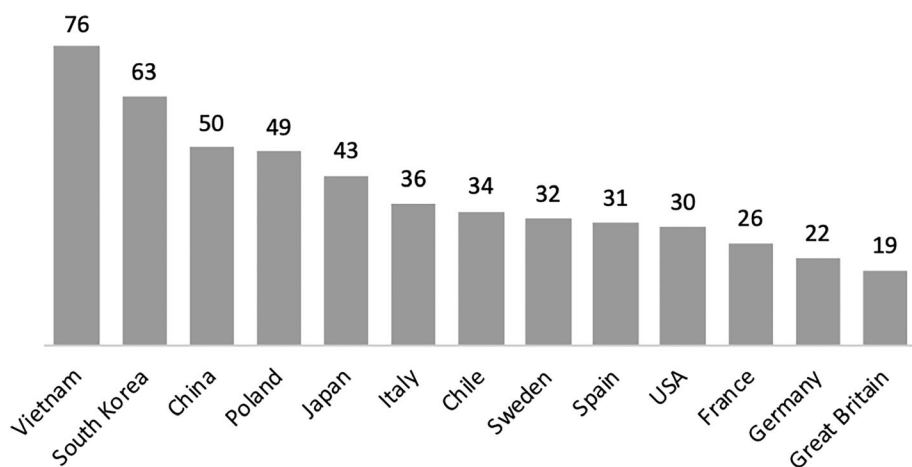


FIGURE 1 Question: ‘For some people, it is important to be rich. How important, if at all, is it for you personally to be rich?’ Answer: ‘Very important’ / ‘Fairly important’. *Note:* All data as a percentage of respondents. *Sources:* Allensbach Institute surveys 11,085 and 8,271; Ipsos MORI surveys J-18-031911-01-02, J-19-01009-29, J-19-01009-47, J-20-091774-05, J-21-041026-01, 22-087515-44, 22-055857-01, and 22-055857-01. © Rainer Zitelmann, 2023.

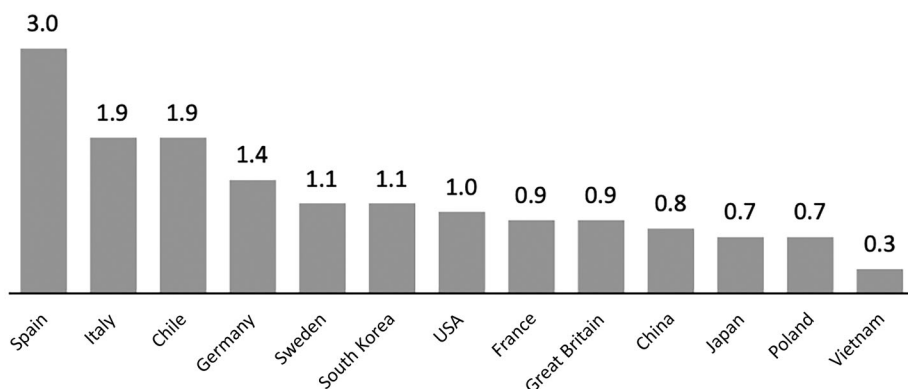


FIGURE 2 Personality Trait Coefficient (PTC) in 13 countries. *Note:* The lower the coefficient, the more positive the personality traits attributed to the rich. *Sources:* Allensbach Institute surveys 11,085 and 8,271, Ipsos MORI surveys J18-031911-01-02, J-19-01009-29, J-19-01009-47 J-20-091774-05 and 22-055857-01. © Rainer Zitelmann, 2023.

In nine of the 13 countries we presented respondents with two additional questions: We asked whether they personally knew one or more rich people. Respondents who said they knew one or more rich people were then presented with the same list of positive and negative personality traits and asked which of these traits they would attribute to the rich person they know best.

It turned out that people who personally knew one or more rich people rated them much more positively than the population as a whole had done for rich people in general. This becomes clear, for example, when one asks whether rich people are ‘honest’. In Germany, for example, only 3 per cent of respondents said rich people were honest, but 42 per cent said that

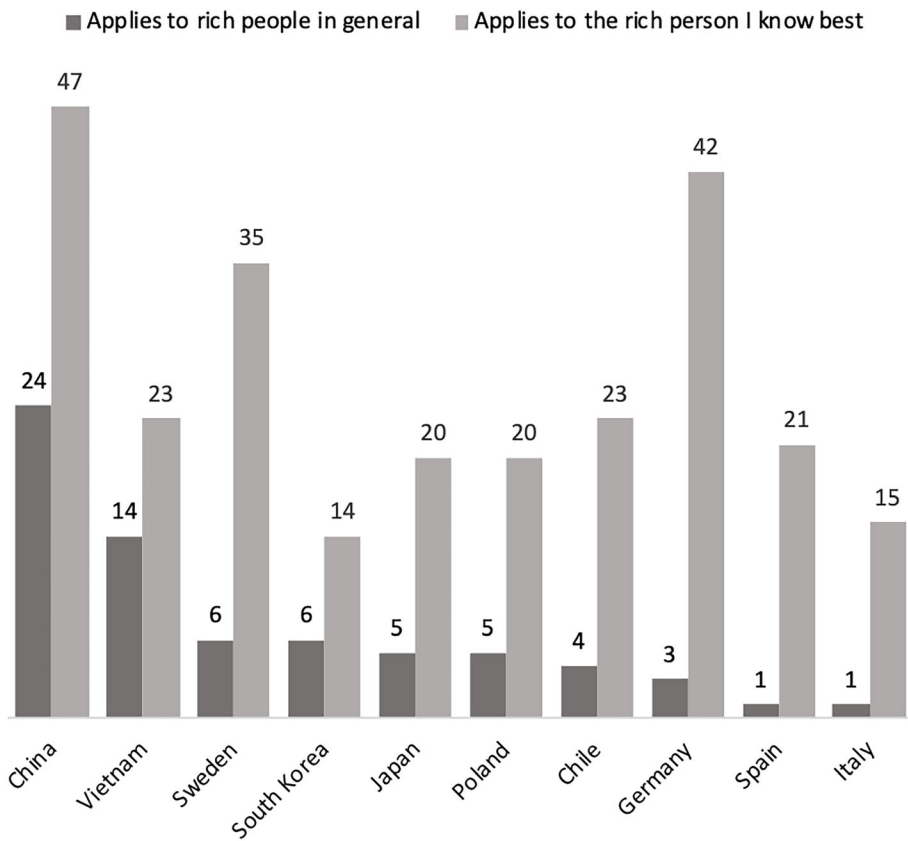


FIGURE 3 Are rich people honest?. Question: ‘Which, if any, of the following are most likely to apply to rich people?’ Supplemental question to respondents who personally know a millionaire: ‘Which, if any, of the following apply to the millionaire you know best?’ *Note:* All data as a percentage of respondents who selected ‘honest’. *Sources:* Allensbacher surveys 11,085 and 8,271, Ipsos MORI surveys J-18-031911-01-02, J-19-01009-29, J-19-01009-47, J-20-091774-05, and J-21-041026-01. © Rainer Zitelmann, 2023

the rich person they knew best was honest. In all countries the same pattern emerged (Figure 3).

3 | SOCIAL ENVY IN INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON

The survey also asked several questions designed to measure the extent of social envy of the rich in each country.

Lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy and pride are the seven deadly sins. Warren Buffett described envy as the dumbest and most futile of them all:

As an investor, you get something out of all the deadly sins – except for envy. Being envious of someone else is pretty stupid. Wishing them badly, or wishing you did as well as they did – all it does is ruin your day. Doesn’t hurt them at all, and there’s



zero upside to it. If you're going to pick a sin, go with something like lust or gluttony. That way at least you'll have something to remember the weekend for.

(*Social Media Today*, 2010)

Most people claim that they themselves are not envious, and that it is only other people who are envious. More than any other emotion, people deny that they are envious of successful people and psychologists can explain why. In his book *Egalitarian Envy*, Gonzalo Fernández de la Mora (2000, p. 73) noted that envy is a widely denied emotion:

One may admit to pride, avarice, lust, anger, gluttony and laziness, and one may even boast of them. There is only one capital sin no one admits to: envy. This is the dark, hidden, eternally masked sin. One tries to hide it from others with multiple disguises; its symbol ought to be a mask.

In 2005, 2009 and 2013, researchers interviewed 18,000 Australian adults. Using a scale from 1 ('Does not describe me at all') to 7 ('Describes me very well'), the survey's participants were asked how envious they were. Almost 54 per cent of respondents awarded themselves the lowest scores for envy, namely a 1 or a 2. And just over 72 per cent rated themselves with a score between 1 and 3. In contrast, just over 3.6 per cent scored themselves with a 6 or a 7, thereby admitting to being envious (Mujcic & Oswald, 2018, p. 104).

Such surveys are by no means proof that very few people are envious. In fact, they are an expression of a phenomenon that social researchers refer to as 'social desirability bias'. When it comes to taboo topics, people are unwilling to provide honest answers, even in anonymous surveys. In such cases, pollsters need to use indirect questions to unearth people's true opinions and feelings.

There is a field in psychology called 'envy research', and researchers agree that envy is by no means a rare phenomenon. It is widely accepted that envy has existed in all cultures and at all times – and that envy directed at successful people is extremely common. So why are people prepared to admit other negative emotions (e.g. anger), but not envy?

One reason for this is that when someone publicly admits to being motivated by envy, any actions they take to remove the cause of their envy would probably be deemed socially illegitimate. When envy becomes recognisable as such, or is openly communicated, then the envious person automatically disqualifies the intention of satisfying it or eliminating it. People who feel social envy avoid speaking of envy; instead they describe themselves as demanding 'social justice'. However, when they refer to social justice, what they really mean is 'equality', which they believe can be achieved only by taking from the rich.

The anthropologist George W. Foster asked why it is that people are able to admit to feelings of guilt, shame, pride, greed and even anger, without loss of self-esteem, but that it is almost impossible to admit to feelings of envy. Foster offered the following explanation: anyone who admits to themselves and others that they are envious is also admitting that they feel inferior. It is for precisely this reason that it is so difficult to acknowledge and accept one's own envy.

In recognizing envy in himself, a person is acknowledging inferiority *with respect to another*; he measures himself against someone else, and finds himself wanting. It is, I think, this implied admission of inferiority, rather than the admission of envy, that is so difficult for us to accept.

(Foster, 1972, p. 184; emphasis in original).

In citing the American psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan, Foster raises an issue which is of key significance in exploring the envy directed at rich people. Envy begins when one person recognises that another person has something that they would also like to have. This is a key insight: it helps us to understand why people are so vehement in denying their own feelings of envy. It also explains why most people do not want to admit that they are envious:

Envy is not pleasant because any formulation of it – any implicit process connected with it – necessarily starts with the point that you need something, some material thing that, unhappily, someone else has. This easily leads to the question, why don't you have it? And that is itself enough in some cases to provoke insecurity, for apparently the other fellow is better at assembling those material props of security than you are, which makes you even more inferior

(Harry Stack Sullivan, quoted in Foster, 1972, p. 184).

It is clearly not easy to deal with envy. In order to 'resolve' their feelings of envy, the envious (or inferior) person needs to shift the blame for their failings to circumstances beyond their control. As Foster (1972, p. 184) puts it:

Inferiority perceived as due to uncontrollable agents or conditions outside the individual, while unpleasant, may be at least bearable. Inferiority perceived as due to personal inadequacy, lack of competence, or poor judgment is much more difficult to accept, since it is so damaging to the self-image.

If the envious person can blame fate, luck or chance for the success of the person they envy, this places much less of a burden on their self-esteem. This is one reason why people who envy the rich frequently rationalise their feelings by attributing the success of rich people to factors such as luck, the use of morally deplorable methods, serendipity and unfair advantages.

Because social envy cannot be measured via direct questions, we have developed indicator questions based on a narrow definition of envy: envious people want to reduce the gap between themselves and the objects of their envy not by improving their own situations, but by worsening the situation of the people they envy.

The questionnaire on attitudes towards the rich contained three items that can be assumed to capture different aspects of envy and *Schadenfreude*. These three items are:

- (1) 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?: I think it would be fair to increase taxes substantially for millionaires, even if I would not benefit from it personally. Do you strongly agree, tend to agree, neither agree nor disagree, tend to disagree, or strongly disagree?'
- (2) 'To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with this statement?: When I hear about a millionaire who made a risky business decision and lost a lot of money because of it, I think: It serves him right. Do you strongly agree, tend to agree, neither agree nor disagree, tend to disagree, or strongly disagree?'

The third item was one of the options in a list:

- (3) 'I would favor drastically reducing those managers' salaries and redistributing the money more evenly amongst their employees, even if that would mean that they would only get a few more euros/dollars per month.'



Of course, it is possible that agreement with item (1) might not be based on envy. Other motives may well play a role in positive responses to this item. None of the three statements is in itself an absolutely certain indicator of envy. But if someone agrees with two or even three statements, it is much more likely that this person's image of the rich is shaped by envy than if someone agrees with none or only one of the statements. In order to categorise respondents, it may therefore be more useful in such cases to determine *how many* of these statements they agree with rather than which of these statements they *specifically* agree with.

In order to facilitate such an analysis, the three questions and statements mentioned were combined to form a quasi-scale. Each respondent was assigned a score based on his or her responses to these three questions. (For more on the methodology, see Zitelmann, 2020a, pp. 160–4.)

We distinguished between three groups: social envious, ambivalents, and non-envious. The Social Envy Coefficient compares the ratio of social envious to non-envious in each country. On this point, we detected significant differences: social envy is highest in France and Germany and lowest in Japan and Poland (Figure 4).

By combining the Social Envy Coefficient (triple weighted) and the Personality Trait Coefficient (single weighted), we arrive at the Rich Sentiment Index (RSI), which allows us to make an overall comparison of how people in a given country feel toward the rich (Figure 5).

The level of taxes levied on the rich people is a highly controversial issue in the public and political spheres in many countries. What do people in different countries think about taxes on the rich? Most respondents – in all countries – agree that the rich should pay higher taxes than those on lower incomes. But *how high* should taxes be for the rich? We gave respondents two alternatives to choose from:

- (1) 'The taxes on the rich should be high, but not excessively high, because they have generally worked hard to earn their wealth, and the state should not take too much away from them.'

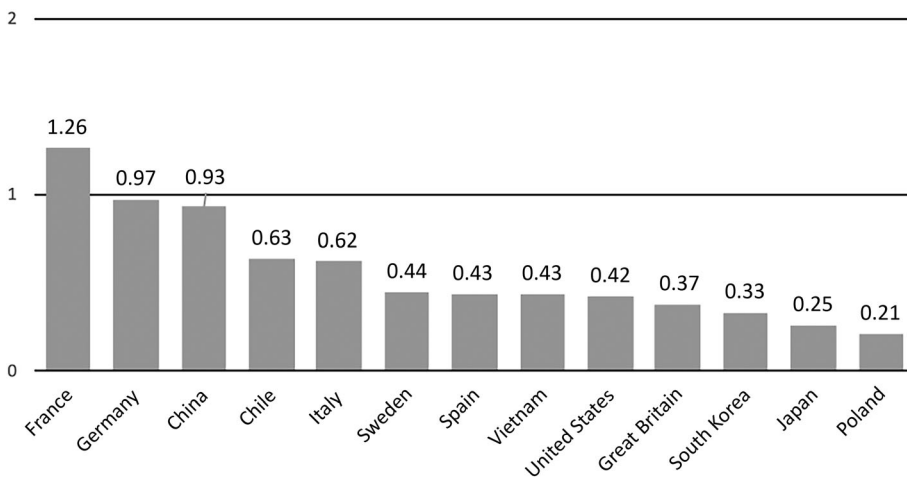


FIGURE 4 The Social Envy Coefficient in international comparison. *Note:* The higher the number, the more prevalent the envy of the rich in a country. *Sources:* Allensbach Institute surveys 8,271 and 11,085, Ipsos MORI surveys 18–031911–01–02, 19–01009–29, 19–01009–47, 20–091774–05, 20–09–1774–30 and 21–041026–01, and Indochina Research. © Rainer Zitelmann, 2023.

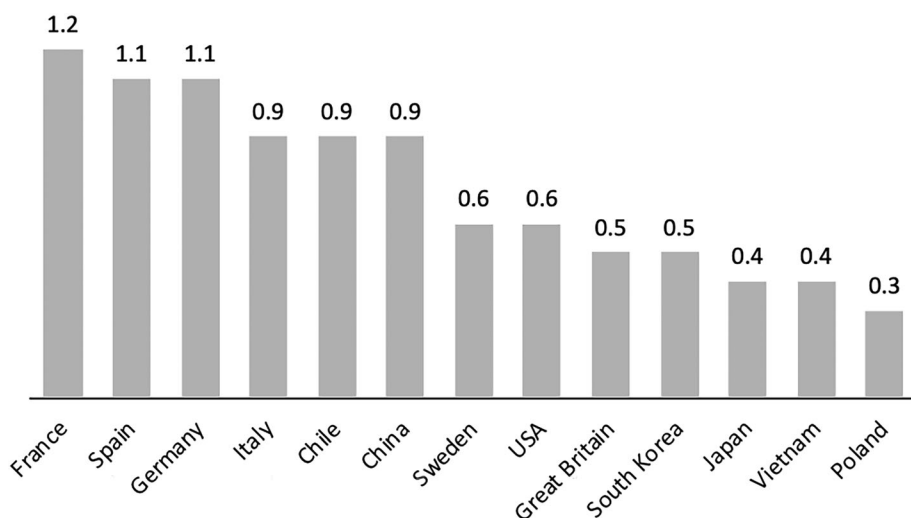


FIGURE 5 Rich Sentiment Index (RSI) in 13 countries. *Note:* The lower the number, the more positive the attitude toward the rich. *Sources:* Allensbach Institute survey 11,085, Ipsos MORI surveys J18–031911–01–02, J-19-01009-29, J-19-01009-47, and J-20-091774-05. © Rainer Zitelmann, 2023.

- (2) ‘The rich should not only pay high taxes, but they should pay very high taxes. In this way, the state can ensure that the gap between the rich and the poor does not become too great here in our country.’

The differences between countries that we have seen in other questions are also confirmed here. In Vietnam and Poland – but also in Sweden – most people are against extremely high taxes on the rich. In Sweden, income taxes are already very high by international standards, but they were much higher in the 1970s. The damaging effects of such extremely high taxes (a number of rich people emigrated from Sweden at that time) may still be vivid in the minds of the Swedes.

The extremes in Europe are Poland and France. In Poland, 27 per cent of respondents are in favour of extremely high taxes on the rich, while 51 per cent of Poles say taxes should not be too high. In France, the country with the highest levels of ‘social envy’ on our indicator, it is the other way around: 53 per cent of the French are in favour of extremely high taxes on the rich and only 19 per cent say taxes on the rich should not be too high (Figure 6).

To sum up: attitudes towards wealth and the rich vary greatly from country to country. Wealth seems particularly important to people in Asia, although this can only partly be explained by a strong economic need to catch up with other countries. After all, Japan is already a highly developed country, yet the pursuit of wealth is of far greater significance to people in Japan than is the case in Europe.

Social envy is least pronounced in Asian countries such as Japan, Vietnam and South Korea – with one exception being China, where social envy is similarly strong as in Europe. But also in Poland, the fastest-growing country in Europe since the transition from socialism to capitalism, social envy is low and attitudes towards the rich are very positive. At the other end of the scale are France and Germany, where social envy is strongest and attitudes towards the rich are generally negative.

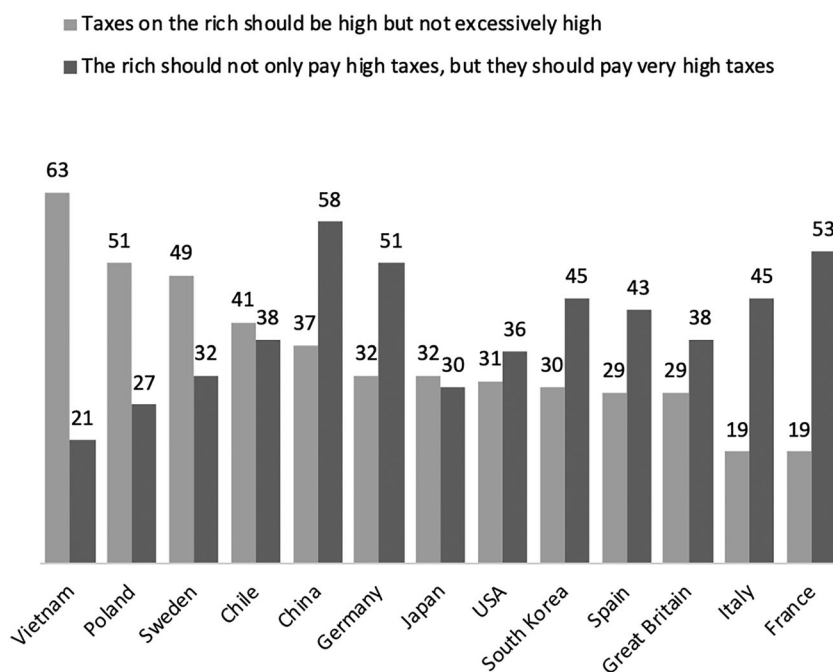


FIGURE 6 High taxes on the rich? Popular opinions in 13 countries. *Note:* All data as a percentage of respondents. *Sources:* Allensbach Institute survey 11,085, Ipsos MORI surveys J18-031911-01-02, J-19-01009-29, J-19-01009-47, and J-20-091774-05. © Rainer Zitelmann, 2023.

It remains a desideratum of research to explain the cultural and socio-economic causes of these differences and to analyse the impacts of attitudes towards the rich, for example on tax and economic policy. The international comparisons of attitudes towards the rich based on the surveys in 13 countries are just a start. I would like to see these studies conducted in other countries. Moreover, detailed analyses of the impact of attitudes towards the rich on the economy, society and politics in individual countries are important. Axel Kaiser and I recently attempted this kind of analysis for Chile (Kaiser & Zitelmann, 2023, 2024).

It is to be hoped that prejudice research will also increasingly focus on the one minority that has received little attention in this context to date: the rich.

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How to cite this article: Zitelmann, R. (2024). Popular perceptions of the rich in 13 countries. *Economic Affairs*, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ecaf.12633>