



Districts and Voter Mobilization Matter More

Jeffrey M. Stonecash, Syracuse University

In *White-Collar Government*, Nicholas Carnes presents an assessment of what shapes Congressional decision-making that is troubling. According to his analysis legislators' votes are shaped primarily by the jobs they held prior to being elected to Congress. Because very few of them come from working-class jobs, "America's class-imbalanced political institutions really are broken; they fail to deliver what most Americans expect from our political process. Our lawmakers do not serve the common good" Carnes concludes that "America's class-imbalanced legislative branch tends to favor economic policies more in line with the interests of the haves than with the needs of the have-nots." The consequence is "policies that make life worse for the classes of Americans who can least afford it."

Although this analysis may seem discouraging to those who support more liberal policies, Carnes offers additional evidence in an appendix that shows decision-making by Congressional representatives is influenced by far more than prior job experiences. Carnes's own detailed results (available in an online appendix accompanying his book) indicate that legislators are *heavily* influenced by the composition of their constituencies and how people in their districts vote. Members of Congress whose districts have few union members, and where voters leaned heavily toward Republican presidential candidates, ended up compiling conservative voting records in Washington DC. In contrast, representatives from districts with many union members and a low vote for Republican presidential candidates have liberal voting records. Carnes shows that the prior jobs of elected representatives have a marginal impact on their votes in office, and that legislators represent their districts in expected ways. From his analysis, we can hardly conclude that representation is not happening in U.S. democracy.

Furthermore, there is evidence that a bias toward the affluent in U.S. public policy is not as clear-cut as Carnes suggests. The bulk of federal income tax revenue comes from the most affluent Americans – the top 10% provide 71% of all federal income tax revenue. Overall, the federal income tax system is fairly progressive, and low-income people receive significant income transfers from the Earned Income Tax Credit. Although lower- and middle-income Americans do pay hefty payroll taxes, when the benefits of social programs are included in the analysis of who pays and who gets what from government there turns out to be quite a bit of redistribution toward the less affluent in American policy, according to the Tax Foundation's analysis in *Putting a Face on America's Tax Returns*.

U.S. politics may not be as liberal or as generous toward the less affluent as Carnes might wish. But there is plenty of evidence that elected representatives rely on much more than their own personal job experiences to make decisions about policies to push and support. Considerable electoral responsiveness is happening, as legislators vote roughly in line with the composition and voting patterns of their districts. Carnes is not optimistic that get-out-the-vote efforts will be sufficient to advance working-class concerns in legislation and policy debates, but the working class is steadily voting more Democratic over time, as I have detailed in my

chapter on "Class and Party in American Politics" in *New Directions in American Political Parties*. Increasing working-class turnout is likely to make Members of Congress more supportive of policies that help the working class.

American democracy and public policy may not be as upwardly biased as Nicholas Carnes's provocative book suggests. For those who want to see more done by government to advance the economic interests of the less affluent, the remedy may lie more in mobilizing voters and winning elections than in changing the job categories from which candidates are recruited.