



How Government by the Privileged Distorts Economic Policy

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At every level of government, the people who make the laws in the United States come from much more privileged backgrounds than Americans as a whole. Members of Congress, state legislators, even city council members – all tend to be significantly wealthier, more educated, and more often from white-collar occupations than the citizens they represent. Although observers routinely downplay this disconnect as insignificant, in reality the upward-tilted composition of our political institutions has serious consequences for the balance of power between the haves and the have-nots in our political process.

Lawmakers from privileged classes tend to think, vote, and advocate differently – especially when the economy and taxes are at issue. Any given legislator may take positions out of sync with his or her social background, of course, but in the aggregate, the unusually privileged backgrounds of most legislators skew the policymaking process on a wide range of economic issues. Business regulations are more relaxed, tax policies are more favorable to the well off, social safety net programs are thinner, and protections for workers are weaker than they would be if our political decision makers looked more like the nation as a whole.

Legislators from Different Backgrounds See the World Differently

Why should it matter whether the people who represent us come from one background or another? Why should we care whether they were elite professionals or blue-collar workers before they were elected? Politicians are supposed to do what's best for the country as a whole, or at least for their constituents. Our political institutions, elections, and media watchdogs are supposed to hold lawmakers accountable to voters from every walk of life.

Although these institutions often do just that, much of the work in our legislatures goes on behind closed doors, in settings or small steps not visible to most citizens. In these instances, legislators often base their choices on their own experiences, views, and personal preferences. It matters a great deal who a legislator is and from where a legislator comes. Those from manual labor and service industry jobs tend to bring the working class's economic perspective with them into office. The votes they cast and the bills they advocate are more in line with the interests and preferences of workers. Likewise, legislators from white-collar jobs – especially those from more privileged positions in the private sector – tend to bring more conservative economic perspectives to office and behave accordingly when voting or proposing new legislation.

This is not to say that our lawmakers are engaging in anything like the “class warfare” that political commentators sometimes lament. Legislators from different backgrounds have different beliefs about how the government ought to handle economic affairs – but they seldom express outright favoritism towards their own class or outright prejudice towards people different from themselves. The process is more subtle. As politicians often remind us during campaigns, former businesspeople who go on to hold public office tend to think like businesspeople, former doctors tend to think like doctors, former blue-collar workers tend to think like blue-collar workers, and so on. Legislators are not engaged in class war; they simply see the same issues through the prism of different life experiences and perspectives.

The Shortage of Working-Class Legislators Skews Policy

The different perspectives that legislators from different classes bring to public office ultimately have enormous impacts on the direction of economic policy in the United States. Across states and cities, governments with fewer working-class lawmakers devote much smaller percentages of their expenditures – billions of dollars less – to the social safety net. In the U.S. Congress, advanced statistical models suggest that about one in three of the landmark economic bills passed between 1999 and 2008 – including the 2001 Bush tax cuts that gave huge breaks to the wealthy – would not have passed if the class composition of Congress had reflected the make-up of the nation as a whole. The startlingly low share of people from the working class in our legislatures means that everything from routine spending decisions to historic revisions of the federal tax code are more favorable to professionals and businesses and less in line with the needs and preferences

of ordinary Americans.

Working-Class Americans are Ready to Lead

Why, then, are there so few working class people in political office? The answer doesn't seem to have much to do with a lack of qualifications. There are at least as many capable, politically-engaged blue-collar Americans as there are politically qualified white-collar people. The shortage of working-class citizens in political office seems to be driven largely by discouraging circumstances – such as the high cost of running a campaign, the practical burdens associated with holding office, and the gate-keeping decisions of party leaders and interest groups.

These obstacles are not insurmountable, however. Trailblazing efforts by labor unions in New Jersey and Connecticut have shown that programs to identify and train potential working-class candidates can be carried out at a low cost using many of the resources that working-class organizations already have: membership networks, newsletters, candidate endorsements, and so on. When it comes to recruiting and supporting working-class candidates, a little outreach seems to go a long way.

These programs are still in their infancy, but they hold tremendous potential for American democracy. The imbalance in the social makeup of our legislative institutions has serious consequences for the direction of economic policy. Electing more legislators from the working class will make our legislative process less beholden to the interests of the privileged and more responsive to the needs of ordinary Americans. Bringing government in the United States closer to realizing the cherished ideal of political equality for all may be as simple as giving working-class candidates a helping hand.

Based on a 2011 Ph.D. thesis at Princeton University. Nicholas Carnes, now at Duke University, is currently completing a book entitled *White Collar Government: How Class Imbalanced Legislatures Distort Economic Policymaking in the United States*.