

THE PROMISE OF UNION PROGRAMS THAT RECRUIT AND SUPPORT WORKERS TO RUN FOR PUBLIC OFFICE

by Nicholas Carnes, Sanford School, Duke University, and David Broockman, University of California, Berkeley

Most Americans depend on wages, salaries, and benefits from working-class jobs. But public offices are overwhelmingly occupied by people from very economically privileged backgrounds – officials who often set aside the concerns of working Americans when public policies are debated, enacted, and put into effect. Correcting this glaring imbalance in the backgrounds of officeholders requires many efforts – including programs to identify, recruit, and support political candidates from the working class.

Candidate outreach programs sponsored by labor unions already exist in many places – and they have demonstrated great promise. When candidates from blue-collar and middle-class backgrounds mount well-prepared election campaigns, they usually prove appealing to the general voting public. Once in office, working-class Americans are more likely than other elected leaders to fight for workers’ concerns about workplace protections, business regulation, tax policy, and educational and social safety net programs. Programs that recruit and support more of these working-class candidates represent an important opportunity to make government at all levels more democratically responsive.

What Candidate Outreach Programs Do

Labor unions currently sponsor a number of innovative candidate outreach programs. These efforts take many forms, but their basic features are similar. In most cases, labor groups identify politically talented workers, encourage them to run for office, train them, and then provide grassroots support during their campaigns. For example:

- In New Jersey, the state affiliate of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations runs a well-established “Labor Candidates School” that has backed working-class candidates in more than 700 state and local elections.
- In 2011, the union coalition known as UNITE-HERE recruited political newcomers to run for 17 seats on the 30-member Board of Aldermen in New Haven, Connecticut.
- New candidate recruitment programs are in the works in Oregon, New York, and Las Vegas.

These early programs have an impressive track record. Graduates of the New Jersey Labor Candidates School have won 75% of the elections they have run in and have gone on to have long and effective careers in public office. In New Haven, 16 of the 17 candidates recruited and trained in 2011 won seats on the Board of Aldermen, and the new union-majority board went on to change the face of the city’s politics. The bottom line so far is clear: when working-class

candidates with sustained backing run for public offices, they tend to win – and make a difference.

Why Active Outreach is Vital

Deliberate candidate outreach programs are essential. In their absence, people from working-class jobs almost never end up holding office in any level or branch of U.S. government. Presidents, Supreme Court justices, members of Congress, governors, state legislators, and even city council members all tend to come from more white-collar occupations like business and elite professions and tend to be considerably wealthier and more highly educated than most of the constituents they represent. Although more than half of all Americans work in blue-collar occupations, the typical member of Congress has spent only a tiny fraction of his or her pre-congressional career (less 2% of that time) in the kinds of working-class jobs most citizens currently hold.

Research has recently nailed down the serious consequences that follow from this disconnect between the life experiences of the public and their elected representatives. When politicians consider what issues to address or how to vote on legislation, they often base their decisions on their own views and values. Because so few politicians come from working-class jobs, they rarely bring a working-class person's priorities and perspectives to the table. Systematic data show that politicians from white-collar backgrounds tend to introduce and vote for more conservative economic bills and invest less energy in passing the kinds of economic reforms that most Americans care about. When wealthy white-collar professionals are in charge, everyone is affected. The economic policies our white-collar government ultimately produces tend to be good for wealthy white-collar professionals but often neglect the needs of everyone else.

Fulfilling the Promise

Candidate outreach efforts supported by unions and other pro-worker groups represent an extremely promising strategy for bridging the social and economic chasm between elected officeholders and the public they are supposed to represent. Existing efforts have shown that these kinds of programs can succeed. But there's a lot of work left to do.

According to the best research, many qualified middle- and working-class Americans have the potential to become appealing and successful candidates. Unfortunately, their potential often goes unrealized, because so many are discouraged by practical hurdles like the high cost of running an election campaign or difficulties in taking time away from their regular jobs. With the right kind of support, however, many promising candidates from working backgrounds can overcome these obstacles. As the accomplishments of candidates already supported by organized labor have demonstrated, a little outreach can go a long way. Organized labor should consider expanding and proliferating programs that have already proven their worth.

Helping a broader array of men and women win elected offices isn't just organized labor's fight. Every day, public interest activists and advocacy organizations identify capable people who are potentially interested in running for public office and help them overcome the hurdles of mounting a campaign. These groups should consider following organized labor's lead – or joining forces with labor groups – to recruit, train, and support the next cohorts of working-class politicians. If they do, elections and policymaking will become more responsive to the needs and values of the American majority.