



The Class Background of Legislators Counts, But It is Not the Basic Problem

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Nicholas Carnes names "an elephant in the room" of U.S. electoral politics, explicitly documenting what everyone knows: American politicians are very, very rarely from the working class, however much they may brag of their humble origins. And this is as much a donkey as an elephant problem. Before election to Congress, the average Democratic member spent only two percent of his or her years of working time in a manual or service sector job, which is not substantively different from the one percent of working time spent in such jobs by Republican members. So what? Carnes argues that this skewed makeup of those who are supposed to represent the American public influences their ability to hear effectively even those few working-class claims that manage to be voiced – for example, by unions – in the cacophony of interests voiced to Congress.

As Carnes rightly notes, the voting behavior of individual representatives is explained by a complicated mix of what they think their constituents want and what the legislator genuinely believes is best for them. Both are affected by the class backgrounds of representatives, according to the data Carnes presents on how Congressional decisions get made about such vital matters as taxation, business regulation, social spending and labor laws. When decision-makers are personally more attuned to the interests of the well-to-do and the "business community," our democracy fails to represent all of "the people" in such critical economic decisions. As Carnes puts it, "Government *by* the upper class promotes government for the upper class – and government for the upper class is often bad for everyone else."

Congenital deafness to the points of view of ordinary working people based on lack of personal experience in trying to live on the actual median income – let alone on minimum wage – makes it easier for Congressional representatives to credit the claims of business elites and technocratic professionals. Similarly, when it comes to discussion of raising the retirement age, the impact of different kinds of working careers on longevity and health really matter. If a person has only ever held desk jobs, working until at least age 70 sounds like no big deal. But what about 65 year olds with varicose veins from standing all day doing retail sales work? Or assembly line workers whose work-induced arthritis limits their manual dexterity? Higher levels of work-based disability are just a normal part of aging for most workers in manual or service jobs – as will be obvious to a representative who has experienced such jobs first hand, but may not dawn on representatives from much more privileged careers.

Discussions about "the rich," "the middle-class" and the "the poor" often ignore the real middle of the income and occupational distribution, with the "middle class" being imagined as people with earnings two or three times the actual median household income of \$51,000 (and the typical household relies on more than one earner to reach that level). All too often in U.S. public discussions today, the "real people" who attract journalistic attention are in the upper 20% of the income distribution (such as professional dual career families) or in the bottom 20% (the poor and working poor). This leaves 60% out of the definition of public interest and makes their struggles into "private issues."

So Carnes' focus on the occupations that legislators held before they entered politics – both at the state and federal levels – provides a reminder that the political imagination of America's elected representatives is dangerously skewed. His data show that the unusual minority of representatives who spent any time in working class jobs – merely 46 individuals out of the 783 who served in Congress between 1999 and 2008 – are atypically likely to introduce, sponsor and vote for legislation that is more progressive. Representatives with blue-collar job experience also work measurably harder than other legislators on such issues. They are actually trying to represent a more egalitarian vision of the American Dream. Job background can also make a difference in local and state governments, Carnes shows, even though the upward skew in class representation is less extreme at those levels of elected representation.

But Nicholas Carnes does not tell the whole story, because our current Tea Party era shows that representatives need to do more than just reflect or promote the views of constituents. Today, many elected politicians seem to be attending most closely to loud claims from misinformed constituents who reject the science of evolution or evidence about climate change, and are culturally intolerant and contemptuous of international norms and treaties. Would our politics really be more just, our decision-making more equitable, if more of our legislators were as willfully dismissive of science as some of the people they represent? Most Americans do not have passports or experience traveling abroad; would we want our political representatives to be similar insular? The issues that politics deals with are not all economic, and even economic concerns bump up against nativist, sexist and anti-intellectual biases that are not infrequently mobilized for political advantage.

In short, the links between political wisdom and social class position are more complicated, and the problems that plague U.S. politics are about more than the occupational tone-deafness of legislators. Although American policymaking is distinctively tilted toward the interests of the well-off, it also responds reflexively to populist demands couched in non-economic terms. Education is hardly a cure-all for social intolerance, but distrust of education and educated "elites" is no remedy for social injustice.

Finally, we should keep in mind that the framing of issues for public debate comes not only from legislators. Upward trends in the education and professional class status of journalists also contribute to lack of public attention to the experiences of working and lower middle-class people in the United States. Not just Fox News, but many media outlets contribute to economically ill-informed public discussions and to scapegoating of the poor and immigrants.

Although individual legislators surely bring personally relevant class background and biases to their work, they operate in a system already shaped by an organized misrepresentation of class interests. Public debates are skewed due to weak and declining unions and the actions of corporate interests with access to secret agenda setting organizations ranging from the overtly political American Legislative Exchange Council to "social welfare" groups that shovel money to pro-corporate candidates. Even if the occupational backgrounds of candidates changed in such a system, there would be no cure for class bias and the failure of U.S. democracy to respond to the values and interests of ordinary citizens. In *White-Collar Government*, Nicholas Carnes has identified a symptom rather than the overall cause of democratic failure.