



Life Experiences and Public Possibilities

Paul Pierson, University of California, Berkeley

At the core of Nick Carnes's fine book is a simple but fundamental observation: members of Congress are people too. They aren't just placeholders for the views of their districts, for the concerns of powerful interests, or for the priorities of party leaders. Legislators have some room to maneuver; and consequently their life experiences matter. Those experiences can shape what public officials care about and influence how they think the world works.

This is a hard thing for social scientists to study. As some of the other contributors to this discussion point out, it is really difficult to separate out the effects of something like work experience from all the other factors influencing how members of Congress behave. Still, Carnes does a great job of using lots of different kinds of evidence to convince readers (including me) that the social experiences of members of Congress before they took office influences their behavior after they arrive.

Carnes focuses on the prior work experience of elected officials, but the implication of his work is broader. Members of Congress need to be placed in a social context. They have a past, present and future. They come from particular places, and they're going places. To understand what they do, we need to pay attention to these realities of their lived experience.

In this brief commentary I would like to take that observation and suggest an important way we should extend it. Carnes focuses on something that has long been true: almost all elected officials are "white collar" rather than blue collar. I want to focus on something that is relatively *new*: elected officials are surrounded at all times by immense wealth. They raise most of their money from the wealthy, and spend more and more of their time doing that. They hear much more frequently from those advocating for the wealthy. They see their colleagues and staffers spin through the revolving door connecting public service to unprecedented pay-outs in the private sector. How can this lived experience not influence the way public officials behave?

Campaigns have become so expensive that raising money is a full-time job, and most of that money is being raised from "the one percent," the very wealthy. A recent study estimated that in the past twenty-five years the share of campaign contributions coming from the top .01% of donors has grown from around 15% to about 40%. In a candid and sobering speech earlier this year, Connecticut Senator Chris Murphy compared his job to that of a telemarketer. He reported that running for the Senate meant spending five hours a day shuttered in a call room, talking with those who could contribute \$1,000 or more to his campaign. "I talked a lot more about [the] carried interest [tax loophole] inside of that call room than I did in the supermarket," Murphy said. "In Connecticut especially you spend a lot of time on the phone with people who work in the financial markets. And so you're hearing a lot about problems that bankers have and not a lot of problems that people who work at the mill in Thomaston, Connecticut, have."

Another crucial aspect of the lived experience of public officials concerns the "revolving door" between government and posh private sector positions. Carnes focuses on the jobs people held before being in public service, but we need to think about the stunning shift in the kinds of jobs public servants hold *after* they serve. Revolving door shifts between public and private positions seemingly spin ever faster. Many shifts involve movement from Capitol Hill to lucrative lobbying positions on K-Street, but the truly extraordinary transformation involves movements between high finance and the pinnacles of economic policy-making in government. Today's revolving doors to Wall Street can open to penthouses far more lavish than the ones on offer three or four decades ago.

We know the stories. Focusing only on Democrats – because dealings involving vast wealth on the GOP side have a "dog bites man" quality to them – here is just a partial list of high-level officials who have moved in recent years from government to positions in the financial industry providing compensation in the millions of

dollars (often many millions): Rahm Emmanuel, Robert Rubin, William Daley, Larry Summers, Peter Orszag, and Timothy Geithner. Gene Sperling, a long-time protégé of Rubin's who is now head of the President's National Economic Council, has been praised for his relatively limited connections to Wall Street patron Goldman Sachs. After all, he accepted only about \$900,000 in pay over two years, and restricted his energies to the philanthropic aspects of the Goldman Sachs empire.

It is well worth asking how the profound changes in the social milieu of Washington DC impact the thinking and behavior of public servants struggling with issues related to economic life. It is here, arguably, that increasing economic disparities may have their biggest effects on the workings of American democracy. As Carnes notes, once the most intense phase of the economic crisis was behind us and the economy's big winners were back on their feet, policymakers were astonishingly quick to avert their eyes from ongoing economic hardships affecting ordinary Americans who work for wages and modest salaries. Even as true unemployment remains desperately high and wage stagnation or decline devastates the middle class, the attention of political elites has shifted to the imposition of austerity. Or rather, it has shifted to the imposition of austerity on the poor and the middle class – because officials in both parties regularly call for tax cuts and tax breaks benefitting the wealthiest to be extended or expanded.

None of this shift in focus during a national economic crisis matches up well with established scholarly or pundit views of the supposed importance of the mass public in U.S. democracy. Although popular concern about the deficit has grown – fueled in part by a steady and lavishly-financed drumbeat of elite messages designed to stoke such worries – Americans continue to stress the priority of creating more and better jobs. And when asked how best to achieve budget balance, mass opinion puts higher taxes on the wealthy at the top of the list. Needless to say, opinion in Washington differs. Policymakers who call for "tough choices" and "shared sacrifice" continue to support glaring tax loopholes for the wealthy, such as the "carried interest" provision Chris Murphy heard so much about, the one that allows some of the staggering incomes of those at the top of private equity and hedge funds to be taxed at 15%.

Washington has always been connected to economic power and opportunity – so there is nothing new about that basic reality. Yet to an astonishing degree, manifold and magnificent bridges now link the highest reaches of government and the looming summits of finance. It is impossible to prove exactly how decision-making in Washington would have proceeded differently in recent times had the inviting towers of Wall Street loomed less prominently for officials temporarily parked in public service. But even if we should avoid simplistic conspiratorial arguments, it would be equally naïve to suggest that such remarkable changes in opportunities for top policy-makers is inconsequential.

How officeholders experience economic life, past and future, is the broader issue *White-Collar Government* encourages us to consider. Personal experiences and prospects do make a difference. For officials and elected representatives as well as everyday citizens, they powerfully shape – and sometimes profoundly limit – civic imagination and sympathy.