



How Voters Evaluate the Class Backgrounds of Candidates

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Elected lawmakers mostly come from high status professions, hold advanced college degrees, and enjoy high salaries and considerable wealth – certainly compared to the vast majority of the voters they represent. Understandably, perhaps, candidates and officeholders do their best to distract public attention from their privileged standing. This may be wise, because media commentators and political competitors often pounce when officeholders allow opulence to become too visible.

Ambivalence about the Rich

Americans are ambivalent about the rich. On one hand, the upper class is lionized. Most Americans say that the wealthy have earned their resources primarily through hard work and effort. Well-to-do people are consistently viewed as more competent than people from other social class groups. Yet the rich also come in for harsh criticism. Media portrayals paint upper class people as out of touch, and a majority of Americans describe them as having relatively chilly attitudes toward others with fewer advantages. Most Americans return the favor. They express less warmth toward rich people than toward others.

These are views about the rich in general. Are voters equally ambivalent about wealthy, high-status political candidates? Do Americans punish candidates when their wealth or social advantages become obvious? Or are voters content to elect representatives who are much better off than they are – as long as politicians' lives and choices suggest they can understand the concerns of average citizens? To shed new light on these issues, my research uses experiments where people are asked to respond to candidates described in similar and slightly different ways. Does information on class standing and social origins make a difference for how potential voters respond?

Social Class and Life Stories

Experiments suggest that voters give upper-class candidates a lot of credit. They perceive them as much more competent and hard working than candidates whose current social class is not specified. These findings hold for candidates from both parties.

But what the voters know about the *current* class situation of a candidate is not all that matters. Usually, the life stories of candidates are part of the picture. The class *origins* of candidates are fodder for political pundits, and candidates routinely present narratives of their lives in stump speeches, on their websites, and in political advertisements. In fact, life stories are used very strategically in election campaigns. We can all verify this by thinking about ads produced by the recent presidential campaigns of Hillary Rodham Clinton, John McCain, Barack Obama, and Mitt Romney. All are currently very wealthy, but they portray their life stories very differently.

Biographies are dressed up for good reason. In my experiments, when citizens are told that a candidate was born to privilege, they become more ambivalent. People perceive candidates with upper class origins to be *less* hardworking, *less* understanding of voters' concerns, and *less* able to accurately represent citizens' views. Candidates who stress working-class origins are perceived more warmly. Americans are also *less* likely to say they will vote for a candidate who is known to have enjoyed privileged origins and upbringing. In the real world, a currently privileged candidate will do all possible to portray life struggles and accomplishments achieved through hard work.

Class and Party Cues

Citizens make assumptions about social origins and current social class regardless of the party affiliations of candidates. But in some realms both class and party matter:

- **Class information influences people's perceptions of a candidate's party.** In experiments, people given life stories for a working class Republican were more likely to report afterwards that he was a Democrat than those given the story of an upper class Republican. It worked the other way, too. Respondents more often mistakenly recalled the upper class Democrat as a Republican, whereas the story of a working class Democrat was more frequently recalled correctly.
- **Party cues also influence perceptions of a candidate's class.** Respondents told about a Republican candidate were more likely to assume that the candidate was upper class than respondents told about a Democratic candidate.
- **When people are told about a candidate's party and class, it affects their assumptions about how the candidate got to where he is today – and whether he got ahead in a fair way.** For instance, citizens presented with a Republican candidate were 50% more likely to attribute the candidate's success to coming from a wealthy family than those told about a candidate described in the same way but labeled a Democrat. Equally telling, presented with a Republican, a larger percentage of voters presumed that the candidate got ahead in unfair ways, compared to how they felt about a candidate described as a Democrat.

The Bottom Line for Voters

The bottom line is that the ambivalence Americans feel about the rich and privileged applies to electoral candidates as well. Yet it makes a big difference how life stories are told and perceived. Wealth and high status right now are not as problematic in the eyes of voters as the sense that a candidate was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, or attained wealth and privilege in unfair ways. Life story matters more than present social standing – and that leaves openings for campaigns to tell their own stories.