



## Politicians from Working-Class Families are More Likely to Support Policies to Expand Economic Opportunity

Jacob M. Grumbach, University of Washington

Politicians campaigning for office almost always wax eloquent about the American Dream, invoking tales of grandparents, parents, and families pulling themselves up by their bootstraps to work their way to economic prosperity. Candidates want voters to believe that they are eager to expand opportunities for others because they have climbed to success from humble beginnings.

But are politicians from working-class families really any different from those born with silver spoons in their mouths? Political scientist Nicholas Carnes has analyzed the influence of social class backgrounds on the policy agendas legislators pursue. His 2014 book *White Collar Government* shows that politicians who themselves held working-class jobs before entering Congress tend to be more supportive of policies to help working families. But Carnes also finds that politicians who had working-class parents but not working-class jobs of their own do not behave differently than politicians who previously held white-collar positions. “What really matters,” Carnes concludes, “is what politicians did for a living before getting into office.”

I returned to Carnes’ data to investigate the influence working-class upbringings have on what legislators do. Although Carnes is correct that members of Congress who have held working-class jobs themselves are more likely to sponsor and vote for policies to help working families, I find that *upbringings also matter*. Members of Congress with working-class childhoods are more likely to vote for policies that expand opportunities for low-income families in areas like health care, food assistance, higher education, and the minimum wage.

### Effects Previously Overlooked

Almost all members of Congress are upper class, but privileged legislators from humble class upbringings are more supportive of policies that support working-class families. In my statistical models, I find that a working-class upbringing is more influential than many other key factors known to influence the policy choices of members of Congress. Specifically, the influence of working-class family origins on a legislator’s votes is equivalent to the impact of a constituency that leans ten-percent more Democratic. And when economic policies as such are at issue, the impact of a working-class childhood is equivalent to having constituents who lean 31-percent more Democratic! Family backgrounds, in short, make a huge difference.

If this is true, why have scholars and pundits previously missed the fact that legislators from working-class families behave distinctively? Several subtle factors have masked important causal connections:

- Despite all the talk about the American Dream of rags to riches, Americans are actually more likely than people in most European and other developed nations to end up in the same class as their parents. With so many children remaining in the same social class as their parents, it is difficult for observers and analysts to distinguish the influence of holding a working-class job from growing up in a working-class family.
- Although members of Congress who previously worked in blue-collar or service jobs are likely to care about policies that help working-class people, it does not matter much if such politicians also started out in blue-collar families. But most members of Congress had elite careers before becoming politicians and the social background of their parents does matter. Legislators who were corporate lawyers with working-class parents approach policymaking differently than those who were corporate lawyers with corporate lawyer parents.
- Party affiliations interact with social influences. Between 1999 and 2008, Congressional Democrats from working-class families were more likely to vote for policies in support of working families than those with upper-class childhoods. Many fewer Republican legislators came from working-class families – and they actually tended to be slightly more conservative than others in their party. Very few Republicans

with any working-class experiences or ties get into office at all, and social origins make little difference. In primary elections, all Republicans are pressured to advocate tax cuts and reductions in public benefits and services that are likely to hurt working-class Americans.

## Why Working-Class Upbringings Matter for Democrats

Regardless of party affiliation, most members of Congress were lawyers or businesspeople before entering politics. Although their upper-class status in adulthood might lead them to be more supportive of the interests of the wealthy, their working-class origins can exert a countervailing influence – especially for Democrats.

- Like ordinary voters, politicians from working-class families are more likely to have gotten help from safety net programs or know people who have. Their social networks are more likely to include ordinary people, not just society's upper crust.
- In addition, politicians with working-class childhoods are probably more likely to attribute their own success not only to hard work but also to public policies and community support.

## Implications for Candidate Recruitment

In an era of sharply rising economic inequality, politicians hailing from working-class jobs can do a great deal to make American politics and policy more responsive to the needs of average citizens. But the obstacles to recruiting candidates from non-elite jobs are formidable. Because campaigns for state legislatures and Congress cost millions of dollars, party recruiters have incentives to seek out wealthy individuals to run for office.

But my results suggest the possibility of another route to making U.S. politics more representative. All else equal, privileged candidates from blue-collar families are likely to have had life experiences that sensitize them to the lives of ordinary Americans. Such politicians are worth supporting, because they will likely do more than other privileged officeholders to advocate policies that expand economic opportunities for all Americans.

**Read more in Jake Martín Grumbach, “Does the American Dream Matter for Members of Congress? Social Class Backgrounds and Roll-Call Votes.” *Political Research Quarterly* (June 2015).**