



Why Paying Legislators Higher Salaries Will Not Draw More Blue-Collar Workers into Office

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The number of white-collar professionals holding elected office in the United States dwarfs the number of blue-collar workers, even though workers greatly outnumber professionals in the general population. State legislatures are especially imbalanced. Over the past 36 years, the most class-diverse legislatures advantaged professionals over workers by four to one – and the ratio in the average state during this period was twenty to one.

The imbalance matters, because politicians are not impartial judges of the best public policies. Consciously and unconsciously, they rely on personal experience to decide which policies to support or oppose. Class background is one of many important life experiences they draw upon. Previous research has shown that, all else equal, wealthier legislators tend to support economic policies that benefit the privileged. If most lawmakers come from professional and upper class backgrounds, they will respond more readily to the preferences of the privileged than to those of most working Americans. Hoping to make lawmakers more democratically responsive, many reformers are looking for ways to encourage working-class men and women to run for office.

Would it Help to Pay Better Salaries to Elected Officeholders?

Advocates regularly tout the idea of increasing officeholder salaries as a means to boost working-class representation. Many elected offices in the United States do not pay well. Although the President, members of Congress, and most governors make six-figure salaries, pay is often paltry at lower levels of government, where people usually start political careers. In 2012, the average state legislature paid each member about \$28,000 annually – although salaries vary widely, from \$95,000 in California to just \$200 in New Hampshire, where legislators serve part-time. City councils often provide no more than nominal stipends or honorariums.

Those who want higher salaries argue that workers decline to run for office because they cannot afford to leave regularly paid jobs, while better-off people may be able to work for nothing or draw from savings while they serve in public office. This sounds logical. If a person lives from paycheck to paycheck, they are unlikely to be able to spend time and energy in public office for almost no pay. If holding office carried a livable wage, more workers might choose to serve.

But when my colleagues and I looked at the data, we found that raising salaries does not encourage more blue-collar workers to run for office. On the contrary, we found that better salaries lead to more affluent citizens holding office. Our research examined the salaries and occupational backgrounds of state legislators in 1979, 1993, 1995, and 2007. We found states that paid the highest salaries (like California, New York and Pennsylvania) had the lowest proportion of former blue-collar workers serving in office. Career politicians, business owners, and lawyers held the largest shares of seats in those states. By contrast, the states with the lowest salaries (like Montana, New Hampshire, and West Virginia) had higher proportions of legislators from blue-collar occupations (though blue-collar workers never held more than a fifth of the seats, even in the lowest paying states).

Who Really Worries about Salaries?

Why do professionals hold more seats in better-paying legislatures? The actual economic incentives for professionals and blue-collar workers play out differently than many reformers expect. Imagine two potential candidates who are considering running for a full-time elected office that pays \$30,000 a year (which is close to the average across state legislatures). Say Tina makes \$30,000 a year in her current job as a waitress, while Joan earns \$120,000 a year in her current job as a professor. If Tina won the race, she would break even,

making the same amount as she currently does; but Joan would have to sacrifice \$90,000 of her pay per year to serve in office. Clearly, it would be much more costly for Joan to serve than for Tina.

This fictional scenario fits the patterns we uncovered when we analyzed a nationwide 2012 survey that asked more than 2000 state legislative candidates about their fears and concerns in running for office. Specific questions probed to see how much candidates worried about income loss when they considered running. In low-paying states, white-collar candidates reported worrying a lot about income loss, while their counterparts in high-paying states reported worrying significantly less about income loss. Across all states, no matter what salaries they offered to legislators, blue-collar candidates worried about income loss – and said they were generally not very worried at all.

We can rule out alternative explanations for these differences. Our data show that blue-collar candidates enter races, win election, and run for reelection just as readily in high-paying as in low-paying states. Low salaries for legislators do not deter blue-collar candidates from running, and such candidates are no more likely than others to lose races for higher-paying offices. In addition, we found no indication that legislators from blue-collar backgrounds retire from their posts because they can't afford to remain in public service.

What Reformers Should Know

Citizens run for office because they are intrinsically motivated, not just for the money. Higher salaries can make the decision to run harder for some and easier for others. However, contrary to what some have presumed, our research shows that raising legislators' salaries only makes public service easier for more economically privileged citizens.

Further research may aid the quest to draw blue-collar citizens into public service. Some studies suggest that workers hold so few offices because political parties and civic and interest groups do not regularly recruit workers to run. Other discouraging factors could include workers' beliefs that they are not qualified, or a sense that, even if they would like to serve, they lack the necessary skills, information, and money to run successful campaigns. To address such barriers, unions in several states have begun to offer workshops to train blue-collar aspirants in campaign management, political messaging, and fundraising. It remains to be seen whether these efforts will be effective. In the meantime, reformers looking to draw more workers into U.S. public offices can safely cross salary hikes off their list of possible tactics.

Read more in Eric Hansen and Nicholas Carnes, "Does Paying Politicians More Promote Economic Diversity in Legislatures?" Midwest Political Science Association, April 2015.

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