

# **Casting a Wider Net**

The Untapped Potential of Programs to Increase the Economic Diversity of the Candidate Pool

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## **Executive Summary**

Most mainstream reforms aimed at addressing the oversized political influence of the rich attempt to reduce inequalities in political voice: they try to make the voices of the poor louder (by increasing voting and political participation) or try to make the voices of the rich quieter (by limiting lobbying and campaign donations).

But the rich aren't just the ones doing the talking in US politics—they're also the ones doing the listening. Politicians themselves tend to be vastly better off than the people they represent; millionaires make up less than 3% of the country but make up majorities in all three branches of the federal government. These inequalities in who governs have just as much of an effect on public policy as inequalities in who votes, lobbies, donates, and so on.

It may be time for political equality reformers to cast a wider net, to bring to the table new programs to increase the economic diversity of our governing institutions. There are many qualified lower-income and working-class Americans who would make great politicians, and when they run, they tend to do well. However, qualified workers face significant resource barriers, and traditional candidate gatekeepers seldom recruit them. Even the pro-equality reforms on the agenda today—like publicly financing elections and raising legislative salaries—may not be enough to spur more working-class Americans to hold office.

Reformers interested in increasing the economic diversity of the candidate pool may need to begin trying new and innovative interventions, like seed money and candidate recruitment programs that target lower-income and working-class people. Programs like these have never been attempted on a large scale in the US, but pilot efforts suggest that they hold tremendous promise as a means of increasing the economic diversity of our political institutions—and ultimately making new headway on the larger problem of political inequality.

Most reforms aimed at addressing the oversized political influence of the wealthy have historically tended to focus on inequalities in *political voice*, imbalances in the ways that citizens and groups pressure government from the outside. Politicians tend to be vastly more responsive to the preferences of the rich than to the views of middle- and lower-income Americans.<sup>1</sup> When activists and reformers have tried to do something about it, most have focused either on closing gaps in *routine forms of political participation* like voting and contacting elected officials or on addressing *biases in the organized pressure system* like the decline of labor unions, the growing sophistication of pro-business lobbying, and the increasing importance of wealthy campaign donors. We've heard the same basic ideas for decades: if we could reform lobbying and campaign finance and get a handle on the flow of money in politics, the rich wouldn't have as much of a say in government. If we could promote broader political participation, enlighten the public, and revitalize the labor movement, the poor would have more of a say.

In principle, these kinds of proposals often sound promising; most would almost certainly help to reduce the oversized political influence of the wealthy. In practice, however, they've been remarkably difficult to carry out. For at least the last half century, reformers have been trying to regulate lobbyists, combat soaring campaign spending, resuscitate the labor movement, educate the public, and rock the vote. But every major reform effort has eventually proven more technically and politically challenging than its supporters had initially hoped.<sup>2</sup>

This isn't to say that activists should give up on these worthy initiatives. But if reformers want to continue making headway on the problem of political inequality, it may be helpful to cast an even wider net. Most mainstream reforms aimed at addressing the oversized political influence of the rich attempt to reduce inequalities in political voice: they try to make the voices of the poor louder (by increasing political participation) or try to make the voices of the rich quieter (by limiting lobbying and campaign donations). But the rich aren't just the ones doing the talking, they're also the ones doing the listening: politicians in the US tend to be vastly better off than ordinary Americans. Why not try to address that inequality, too? In light of how hard it's been to close the gaps in who participates, organizes, donates, and so on, it may be worthwhile to begin exploring ways to close the gap in *who governs*.

### **Government *By* the Rich is Government *For* the Rich**

If millionaires formed their own political party, that party would make up about three percent of the general public, but it would have unified majority control of all three branches of the federal government. The Millionaires Party would be the majority party in the House of Representatives and would have a filibuster-proof super-majority in the Senate. It would have a majority on the Supreme Court. It would have a Commander in Chief in the White House. In contrast, *working-class Americans*—people employed in manual labor, service industry, and clerical jobs—almost

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Bartels (2008), Gilens (2005; 2013), Gilens and Page (2014), Hayes (2012), Jacobs and Druckman (2011), and Rigby and Wright (2013). See also Hill and Leighley (1992) and Schumaker and Getter (1977). And for a contrasting perspective, see Ura and Ellis (2008).

<sup>2</sup> One popular reform proposal argues that regulating campaign finance may ultimately require two-thirds of the states to convene a Constitutional Convention (see Lessig 2011), a procedure for amending the Constitution that has never been successfully executed in the United States.

never go on to hold political office any level or branch of government. If working-class Americans formed their own party, that party would have made up more than half of the country since at least the start of the twentieth century. But legislators from that party (those who last worked in blue-collar jobs before getting involved in politics) would never have held more than two percent of the seats in Congress.<sup>3</sup>

This economic gulf between politicians and the people they represent—what I call government by the privileged or *white-collar government*—has just as much of an effect on our democratic process as inequalities in who votes, lobbies, donates and so on. Like ordinary Americans, politicians from different classes tend to have different views, especially on economic issues. When it comes to things like the minimum wage, taxes, business regulations, unemployment, unions, the social safety net, and so on, working-class Americans tend to be more progressive or pro-worker, and more affluent Americans tend to want the government to play a smaller role in economic affairs. There are exceptions, of course—blue-collar workers who vote Republican and rich professionals who care deeply about progressive economic policies—but on average, working-class Americans tend to be more liberal on economic issues and professionals tend to be more conservative.

The same seems to be true for people who go on to hold public office. Like ordinary citizens, politicians from different social classes tend to bring different economic perspectives with them to public office. Former House Speaker John Boehner was fond of saying that he was a small-business man at heart and that “It gave me a perspective on our country that I’ve carried with me throughout my time in public service.” He doesn’t seem to be the only one: on average, former businesspeople in government tend to think like businesspeople, former lawyers tend to think like lawyers, and (the few) former blue-collar workers tend to think like blue-collar workers. And they often behave accordingly.

These divisions in how politicians think and act—coupled with the sharp underrepresentation of workers—ultimately have enormous consequences for economic policy. States with fewer legislators from the working class spend less money on social welfare, offer less generous unemployment benefits, and tax corporations at lower rates. Towns with fewer working-class people on their city councils devote smaller shares of their budgets to social safety net programs; an analysis I conducted in 2013 suggested that cities nationwide would spend approximately \$22.5 billion more on social assistance programs if their councils were made up of the same mix of classes as the people they represent. Congress has never been run by large numbers of working-class people, but if we extrapolate from the behavior of the few workers who manage to get in, it’s probably safe to say that the federal government would pass far fewer pro-business policies and far more pro-worker policies if its members mirrored the social class makeup of the public.

Having a seat at the table matters in US politics. The shortage of politicians from the working class ultimately makes life harder for the majority of Americans from the working class (and for many economically vulnerable white-collar professionals, too). Social safety net programs are

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<sup>3</sup> Carnes (2012; 2013). See also Beckett and Sunderland (1957), Domhoff (1967), Matthews (1954), Mills (1956).

stingier, business regulations are flimsier, tax policies are more regressive, and protections for workers are weaker than they would be if more lawmakers came from lower-income and working-class backgrounds.<sup>4</sup> Government *by* the rich is often government *for* the rich, and government *for* the rich is often bad for everyone else.

### **Increasing the Economic Diversity of Government**

Why, then, are we governed by the privileged in the first place? What exactly keeps lower-income and working-class Americans out of office?

According to my research, the shortage of politicians from the working class is primarily the result of qualified workers *running less often*, not workers being less qualified or less successful in elections.<sup>5</sup> Although working-class people tend to be slightly less likely to have some of the characteristics we might want in a leader (e.g., knowledge, tolerance, confidence, and so on), the gaps are small—differences in raw qualifications seem to explain less than one fifth of the overall shortage of politicians from the working class. Voter biases explain even less: in real-world elections, in surveys, and in hypothetical candidate experiments, voters consistently express no measureable biases against candidates from the working class.<sup>6</sup> Workers are less likely to hold office not because they're unqualified or because voters prefer more affluent candidates, but because qualified working-class Americans are less likely to run in the first place.

Why, then, do so few workers run? My research has tested three possibilities (inspired by scholarship on why people participate in politics in general and research on the shortage of women in public office), namely, that qualified working-class Americans seldom run for office because they can't (that is, they don't have the time, money, or other resources), they don't want to (they don't care about politics or don't feel intrinsically motivated to campaign or govern), and they aren't asked to (elite gatekeepers like party leaders seldom recruit them).

For qualified workers, resources and recruitment both seem to be important, but ambition doesn't: qualified working-class Americans seem just as interested in campaigning and governing as qualified white-collar professionals. They usually can't afford it, however. Qualified working-class Americans are less likely to say they have the time and resources to run for office. And important gatekeepers like party officials, politicians, and interest groups say they are less likely to recruit workers (often citing concerns about the same resources). Working-class Americans seldom hold office for some of the same basic reasons that they're less likely to participate in politics in other ways: because often they can't, and nobody asks them.

### **Casting a Wider Net**

Unfortunately, these resource and recruitment barriers probably wouldn't be mitigated by many of the political equality reforms that are on the agenda today. Reformers often claim, for

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<sup>4</sup> Carnes (2012; 2013; 2016), Griffin and Anewalt-Remsburg (2013), Kraus and Callaghan (2014); see also Carnes and Lupu (2015).

<sup>5</sup> Carnes (np, ch. 2).

<sup>6</sup> Carnes (2013, ch. 6), Carnes and Lupu (forthcoming), Sadin (2012).

instance, that *increasing the salaries paid to politicians* would make it so that more lower-income and working-class people could afford to quit their jobs and run for public office. However, data on politician salaries suggest that when lawmakers are paid more, working-class people actually run and hold office *less* often.<sup>7</sup> Higher pay seems to attract more affluent professionals to run—and many workers simply can't afford to take time off work to campaign regardless of how much they would earn once in office.

Likewise, some reformers argue that *publicly financing elections* would make it easier for more lower- and middle-income Americans to raise the money necessary to launch campaigns. However, in states with public financing, lower-income Americans still make up tiny percentages of politicians: in states with publicly financed legislative races, for instance, workers hold about 6 percent of seats—better than the 2 percent they hold in free-for-all campaign finance states, but still far less than what we would expect based on the number of qualified workers in the general public.

Increasing the economic diversity of our governing institutions will probably require interventions that aren't currently part of the standard political equality reform playbook, like *seed money* and *candidate recruitment* programs that target lower-income and working-class people. These kinds of interventions have never been attempted on a large scale in the US, and they are seldom supported by government funds, philanthropic gifts, or foundation grant portfolios. However, they have tremendous promise.

Labor unions and other pro-worker groups currently sponsor a number of innovative candidate outreach programs, mostly at the city and local levels. These efforts take many forms, but their basic features are similar. In most cases, labor groups identify talented workers, encourage them to run for office, train them, and then provide grassroots support during their campaigns. In New Jersey, for instance, the state affiliate of the AFL-CIO runs a well-established “Labor Candidates School” that has trained working-class candidates for more than 700 state and local elections. In 2011, the union coalition as UNITE-HERE recruited political newcomers to run for 17 seats on the 30-member Board of Aldermen in New Haven, Connecticut. Similar candidate recruitment programs are now under way in Oregon, New York, Las Vegas, and Maine. These early programs have an impressive track record: graduates of the New Jersey Labor Candidates School have won 75% of the elections they have run in and have gone on to have long and effective careers in public office. In New Haven, 16 of the 17 candidates recruited and trained in 2011 won seats on the Board of Aldermen, and the new union-majority board went on to change the face of the city's politics. Programs like these are currently limited in their geographic scope, but they seem to have tremendous potential as models for increasing the economic diversity of government.

Seed money programs targeting lower-income or working-class people might also prove effective. These kinds of programs have been dazzlingly successful at increasing the numerical representation of women in public office. Groups like EMILY's List emerged in the 1980s and have propelled the steady increase of women in Congress and other levels and branches of government ever since. Their basic model is straightforward: they collect donations year-round,

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<sup>7</sup> Carnes and Hansen (forthcoming).

then use their funds to support promising female candidates, which spurs more women to run and boosts their odds of winning. Although this approach has never been applied specifically to lower-income or working-class people, there are no obvious reasons to think the model wouldn't travel well. Gaps in resources and recruitment are among the main barriers keeping workers out of office; seed money programs could be powerful solutions.

As it stands, however, we don't know how seed money and candidate training programs that specifically target workers would perform on a large scale. Party and campaign leaders are often too focused on winning today's race to give serious thought to the long-term pipeline of new candidates. Politicians worried about tomorrow's challengers are loathe to use government funds to support *any* program that would recruit new candidates. Advocacy organizations fighting for political equality are often more focused on inequalities in who pressures government from the outside. Even labor unions have been slow to embrace these kinds of innovative programs on a national scale. Interventions to increase the economic diversity of government currently don't have a natural home in the larger community of pro-equality reformers.

But they probably should. The problem is real—the rich have more influence over our political process in large part because most politicians are rich themselves—and there are still high-potential reforms that have never been tried on a large scale. Programs that would support and encourage qualified working-class Americans to run for office hold tremendous promise as a means of increasing the economic diversity of our political institutions and ultimately making new headway on the larger problem of political inequality.

It's probably time to cast wider nets, both in how we think about political equality reforms and in who we recruit to run our country.

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