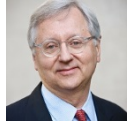


## A Case for Broadening the Class Origins of Legislators



Thomas E. Mann, Brookings Institution

Nicholas Carnes has written a powerful case for diversifying the socio-economic makeup of national, state, and local legislative bodies. Many decades ago, E. E. Schattschneider wrote about the chorus of interest groups in American democracy, noting that "the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent." Now Carnes suggests that legislators, the gods of the pluralist heaven, have a strong upper-class accent too. If American governments are more responsive to the wealthy than to working people who live paycheck to paycheck, Carnes argues that skewed pressures on government are not the only reason. Imbalanced public policymaking also happens because officials themselves come overwhelmingly from professional, managerial, and business backgrounds. Consequently, one important but under-recognized and underutilized lever for equalizing this imbalance is increasing the number of working people elected to local, state, and national governments.

Filling the void in scholarly research since Donald Matthews' 1954 classic *The Social Background of Political Decisionmakers* looked into whether it mattered that working-class Americans were all but absent from our political institutions, Carnes has taken on a herculean task of identifying and building data sets that can give him some purchase on the role of class in economic policy making – and then analyzing those data with sophistication and nuance. He is careful to qualify his findings and to acknowledge the assumptions behind his analysis and the inferential leaps involved in projecting policy changes that would flow from a larger presence of working-class representatives. But his bottom line is crystal clear: individuals with working-class experience have policy priorities and views distinctive from white-collar employees. Many people with working class experience have the requisite skills for public service, and on the rare occasions when they run and are elected, they are more responsive to fellow Americans with lower incomes and wealth. Making a vigorous case that recruiting and electing working people to public office is not a pipe dream, Carnes maintains that Americans who are concerned about political and economic inequality have good reason to turn their scholarly and advocacy energies to increasing the number of officials from working-class backgrounds who can serve at all levels of U.S. government.

Much of Carnes's argument and analysis is persuasive and compelling, but some readers will find reasons for questioning it. Most striking is the relative absence of working people in Congress, not just today but throughout our history. Two percent is the norm now just as it was 50 and 100 years ago. This is a sobering constant confronting those who aspire to increase their numbers five or ten-fold. In the face of such stable, low percentages of representatives from working class backgrounds, is it realistic to invest heavily in a strategy of greatly boosting the percentage? To be sure, the numbers are higher in some state legislatures and city assemblies, but can greater blue-collar representation at those levels be leveraged to expand such representation at the national level, where most major economic policies are formulated?

The very low two percent level of past blue-collar representation in Congress also poses an analytic problem, because the very small number of legislators from non-white-collar backgrounds weakens the significance and reliability of the statistical estimates of the impact of working-class backgrounds on attitudes, behavior, and policy outcomes in Congress. When Carnes controls for powerful independent variables such as legislators' party affiliations and the characteristics of their district constituencies, the causal strength and significance of the class backgrounds of legislators often weakens.

Looking at the matter more broadly, in the present-day Congress, it is hard to believe that adding working-class members irrespective of party would make a significant difference. Politics is team play. Party means everything. Republicans of working-class origin such as Chuck Grassley and Orrin Hatch, both of whom appear in one of the key Carnes data sets, have not resisted the ideological extremism of their party on economic or other issues in recent years. In this era of partisan polarization driven largely by the Republican Party's lunge toward the far right, a more explicit partisan counter-strategy for confronting economic inequalities strikes me as a better bet. Democratic team play to push back on Republican efforts that benefit the wealthy can, in short, do more to improve the representation of blue-collar values and need than sprinkling Congress with a few more representatives from working class backgrounds.

Carnes is a sophisticated analyst who is certainly well aware of the impact of hyperpartisanship and the radicalization of the Republican Party. I suspect his goal is more long term – to shift the sensitivities and priorities of both parties by adding more socio-economic diversity to representative bodies. It is an indirect and long-shot strategy to advance the values he holds dear, but by no means an inconsequential one.

## Districts and Voter Mobilization Matter More



Jeffrey M. Stonecash, Maxwell School, Syracuse University

In *White-Collar Government*, Nicholas Carnes presents an assessment of what shapes Congressional decision-making that is troubling. According to his analysis legislators' votes are shaped primarily by the jobs they held prior to being elected to Congress. Because very few of them come from working-class jobs, "America's class-imbalanced political institutions really are broken; they fail to deliver what most Americans expect from our political process. Our lawmakers do not serve the common good ...." Carnes concludes that "America's class-imbalanced legislative branch tends to favor economic policies more in line with the interests of the haves than with the needs of the have-nots." The consequence is "policies that make life worse for the classes of Americans who can least afford it."

Although this analysis may seem discouraging to those who support more liberal policies, Carnes offers additional evidence in an appendix that shows decision-making by Congressional representatives is influenced by far more than prior job experiences. Carnes's own detailed results (available in an online appendix accompanying his book) indicate that legislators are *heavily* influenced by the composition of their constituencies and how people in their districts vote. Members of Congress whose districts have few union members, and where voters leaned heavily toward

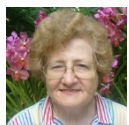
Republican presidential candidates, ended up compiling conservative voting records in Washington DC. In contrast, representatives from districts with many union members and a low vote for Republican presidential candidates have liberal voting records. Carnes shows that the prior jobs of elected representatives have a marginal impact on their votes in office, and that legislators represent their districts in expected ways. From his analysis, we can hardly conclude that representation is not happening in U.S. democracy.

Furthermore, there is evidence that a bias toward the affluent in U.S. public policy is not as clear-cut as Carnes suggests. The bulk of federal income tax revenue comes from the most affluent Americans – the top 10% provide 71% of all federal income tax revenue. Overall, the federal income tax system is fairly progressive, and low-income people receive significant income transfers from the Earned Income Tax Credit. Although lower- and middle-income Americans do pay hefty payroll taxes, when the benefits of social programs are included in the analysis of who pays and who gets what from government there turns out to be quite a bit of redistribution toward the less affluent in American policy, according to the Tax Foundation's analysis in *Putting a Face on America's Tax Returns*.

U.S. politics may not be as liberal or as generous toward the less affluent as Carnes might wish. But there is plenty of evidence that elected representatives rely on much more than their own personal job experiences to make decisions about policies to push and support. Considerable electoral responsiveness is happening, as legislators vote roughly in line with the composition and voting patterns of their districts. Carnes is not optimistic that get-out-the-vote efforts will be sufficient to advance working-class concerns in legislation and policy debates, but the working class is steadily voting more Democratic over time, as I have detailed in my chapter on "Class and Party in American Politics" in *New Directions in American Political Parties*. Increasing working-class turnout is likely to make Members of Congress more supportive of policies that help the working class.

American democracy and public policy may not be as upwardly biased as Nicholas Carnes's provocative book suggests. For those who want to see more done by government to advance the economic interests of the less affluent, the remedy may lie more in mobilizing voters and winning elections than in changing the job categories from which candidates are recruited.

## **The Class Background of Legislators Counts, But It is Not the Basic Problem**



Myra Marx Ferree, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Nicholas Carnes names "an elephant in the room" of U.S. electoral politics, explicitly documenting what everyone knows: American politicians are very, very rarely from the working class, however much they may brag of their humble origins. And this is as much a donkey as an elephant problem. Before election to Congress, the average Democratic member spent only two percent of his or her years of working time in a manual or service sector job, which is not substantively different from the one percent of working time spent in such jobs by Republican members. So what? Carnes argues that this skewed makeup of those who are supposed to represent the American public influences

their ability to hear effectively even those few working- class claims that manage to be voiced – for example, by unions – in the cacophony of interests voiced to Congress.

As Carnes rightly notes, the voting behavior of individual representatives is explained by a complicated mix of what they think their constituents want and what the legislator genuinely believes is best for them. Both are affected by the class backgrounds of representatives, according to the data Carnes presents on how Congressional decisions get made about such vital matters as taxation, business regulation, social spending and labor laws. When decision- makers are personally more attuned to the interests of the well-to-do and the "business community," our democracy fails to represent all of "the people" in such critical economic decisions. As Carnes puts it, "Government *by* the upper class promotes government for the upper class – and government for the upper class is often bad for everyone else."

Congenital deafness to the points of view of ordinary working people based on lack of personal experience in trying to live on the actual median income – let alone on minimum wage – makes it easier for Congressional representatives to credit the claims of business elites and technocratic professionals. Similarly, when it comes to discussion of raising the retirement age, the impact of different kinds of working careers on longevity and health really matter. If a person has only ever held desk jobs, working until at least age 70 sounds like no big deal. But what about 65 year olds with varicose veins from standing all day doing retail sales work? Or assembly line workers whose work-induced arthritis limits their manual dexterity? Higher levels of work-based disability are just a normal part of aging for most workers in manual or service jobs – as will be obvious to a representative who has experienced such jobs first hand, but may not dawn on representatives from much more privileged careers.

Discussions about "the rich," "the middle-class" and the "the poor" often ignore the real middle of the income and occupational distribution, with the "middle class" being imagined as people with earnings two or three times the actual median household income of \$51,000 (and the typical household relies on more than one earner to reach that level). All too often in U.S. public discussions today, the "real people" who attract journalistic attention are in the upper 20% of the income distribution (such as professional dual career families) or in the bottom 20% (the poor and working poor). This leaves 60% out of the definition of public interest and makes their struggles into "private issues."

So Carnes' focus on the occupations that legislators held before they entered politics – both at the state and federal levels – provides a reminder that the political imagination of America's elected representatives is dangerously skewed. His data show that the unusual minority of representatives who spent any time in working class jobs – merely 46 individuals out of the 783 who served in Congress between 1999 and 2008 – are atypically likely to introduce, sponsor and vote for legislation that is more progressive. Representatives with blue-collar job experience also work measurably harder than other legislators on such issues. They are actually trying to represent a more egalitarian vision of the American Dream. Job background can also make a difference in local and state governments, Carnes shows, even though the upward skew in class representation is less extreme at those levels of elected representation.

But Nicholas Carnes does not tell the whole story, because our current Tea Party era shows that representatives need to do more than just reflect or promote the views of constituents. Today, many elected politicians seem to be attending most closely to loud claims from misinformed constituents who reject the science of evolution or evidence about climate change, and are culturally intolerant

and contemptuous of international norms and treaties. Would our politics really be more just, our decision-making more equitable, if more of our legislators were as willfully dismissive of science as some of the people they represent? Most Americans do not have passports or experience traveling abroad; would we want our political representatives to be similar insular? The issues that politics deals with are not all economic, and even economic concerns bump up against nativist, sexist and anti-intellectual biases that are not infrequently mobilized for political advantage.

In short, the links between political wisdom and social class position are more complicated, and the problems that plague U.S. politics are about more than the occupational tone-deafness of legislators. Although American policymaking is distinctively tilted toward the interests of the well-off, it also responds reflexively to populist demands couched in non-economic terms. Education is hardly a cure-all for social intolerance, but distrust of education and educated "elites" is no remedy for social injustice.

Finally, we should keep in mind that the framing of issues for public debate comes not only from legislators. Upward trends in the education and professional class status of journalists also contribute to lack of public attention to the experiences of working and lower middle-class people in the United States. Not just Fox News, but many media outlets contribute to economically ill-informed public discussions and to scapegoating of the poor and immigrants.

Although individual legislators surely bring personally relevant class background and biases to their work, they operate in a system already shaped by an organized misrepresentation of class interests. Public debates are skewed due to weak and declining unions and the actions of corporate interests with access to secret agenda setting organizations ranging from the overtly political American Legislative Exchange Council to "social welfare" groups that shovel money to pro-corporate candidates. Even if the occupational backgrounds of candidates changed in such a system, there would be no cure for class bias and the failure of U.S. democracy to respond to the values and interests of ordinary citizens. In *White-Collar Government*, Nicholas Carnes has identified a symptom rather than the overall cause of democratic failure.

## Whites, Blacks, and the Morality of the Privileged



Michael Javen Fortner, Rutgers University-Camden

The extreme growth of economic inequality has forced political scientists to reassess the ways in which economic power shapes American politics and policy. In this vein, Nicholas Carnes's *White-Collar Government: The Hidden Role of Class in Economic Policy Making* convincingly documents how the "shortage of people from the working-class in American legislatures skews the policy-making process towards outcomes that are more in line with the upper class's economic interests." This contribution is timely and insightful, but it has only just scratched the surface.

This is not the first time wealthy individuals dominated the nation's political class. Since southern landed gentry and northern professionals and financial interests composed our founding documents and erected U.S. political institutions, governing has never been a working-class affair. Even so, the nation has witnessed moments of great reform. Though most were "of the manor born" and far from

working class in backgrounds or experience, President Theodore Roosevelt, the "trustbuster," and other early 20th-century progressives in both political parties were critical of the concentration of wealth and concerned about the economically disadvantaged. A leading historian of progressivism, George Mowry, points out that "few reform movements in American history have had the support of more wealthy men." Interestingly, the backgrounds of progressive reformers in general mirror those of the politicians Carnes discusses. In his canonical book, *The Age of Reform*, Richard Hofstadter sums up a survey of the careers and backgrounds of 260 Progressive Party leaders throughout the United States: "Almost entirely native-born protestants, they had an extraordinarily high representation of professional men and college graduates. The rest were businessmen, proprietors of fairly large enterprises."

To be clear, these men and women were not unaffected by the prejudices of their station. Still, despite their backgrounds, they became advocates for the poor and critics of unrestrained business power. So we may need to ask what has changed. How is it possible that a significant proportion of professionals and other elites in both parties worked on behalf of the interests of the working class at the beginning of the 20th century, while at the beginning of the 21st century a preponderance of such elites in both parties work on behalf of the interests of the upper class?

Deciphering the uniqueness of this historical moment requires unpacking the meanings and functions of class categories. Occupations primarily define Carnes' conception of class, and, as a result, he underestimates the cultural and moral features of an individual's social status. He rightly notes, "People in a given class tend to have similar interests because of their similar places in society. Some recognize these common bonds and consciously identify with their class. Others are driven by their social endowments to adopt certain habits without giving much thought to how their place in society influences their views and choices." But class does more than that. It also encompasses norms and values that define virtue and an individual's obligations to other members of their class and to people from different backgrounds. At one time, for example, the norms imbibed by many upper-class do-gooders impelled to them to understand "how the other half lives," even as they also judged the lifestyles of the poor.

Particularly instructive are the historical relationships between black political elites and the working-class African Americans they often come to represent. African American politicians have always come from the upper strata of black society and have always been interested in the plight of the poor. Popular theories of contemporary black politics suggests that successful blacks are more progressive than their white counterparts, because they still believe their own personal opportunities are fundamentally connected with the fate of disadvantaged blacks. Although this interpretation is persuasive in some ways, a new generation of scholars has been revising this traditional view by documenting the ways in which the actions of black political elites are shaped both by material interests and by class-based norms, particularly Christian values, American democratic principles, and remnants of Victorian ideology. My own research on the development of crime policy during the 1960s and 1970s chronicles the ways such norms shaped middle-class black understandings of their interests and their obligations to the urban black poor. Ultimately, a grasp of the content of middle-class moral views is essential to make sense of historical moments when successful African Americans judge and condemn the urban black poor, as well as to comprehend other moments when they care deeply and empathetically about "how the other half lives." What is more, it is clear that social institutions like the black church can reinforce shared class interests and inculcate ethically inclusive norms that emphasize Christian charity and the common good.

Returning to the issues Nicholas Carnes urges us to consider, I suggest that a full analysis of how the backgrounds and experiences of legislators steer contemporary U.S. economic policymaking towards the interests of the wealthy must consider waning ideals of reform among upper-income whites. It is important to trace the transformation of U.S. civil society and understand shifts in the norms that define the obligations felt by people of means toward those less privileged. Two quite ideologically opposed scholars, Theda Skocpol and Charles Murray, point to consequential shifts in ethical and civic outlooks among privileged whites. For Skocpol, the decline of mass-membership, cross-class, white voluntary associations has had an important effect on American elite morality, while Murray points to the ways in which white America is "coming apart."

In *White-Collar Government*, Nicholas Carnes sounds a wake-up call for anyone concerned about the health of American democracy and the fate of the working class majority. Following his example, scholars and commentators must expose the class influences so pervasively at work in contemporary U.S. politics. As this happens, due note must be taken of changing social moralities. Elites affiliated with both political parties used to exhibit a greater commitment to democratic reform, even white men and women originally born to the greatest privilege. But things appear to have changed at the top of American society, especially among the most privileged whites. In order to fully understand what has happened – and what may come next – analysts must probe not just occupational experiences, but also the moral understandings attached to privileged statuses and the impact – or perhaps increasing ineffectiveness – of societal institutions that can cultivate and reinforce ethical norms and social values. Even if more men and women from everyday occupations run for and attain public office, U.S. government will likely continue to be significantly influenced by privileged Americans. What such elites believe about their obligations to the poor and commitments to society as a whole has always mattered – and will continue to weigh in future national policymaking.

## 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.