Inequality, or Invisibility and Inaccuracy?

How Local Newspapers Cover the Occupational Backgrounds of Members of Congress

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Abstract

Working-class jobs make up over half of the labor force, but working-class Americans almost never go on to become politicians, let alone members of Congress. But how would citizens know that—or anything else about politicians’ economic backgrounds? Building on Arnold’s work in Congress, the Press, and Political Accountability, this paper reports the first systematic research on how local newspapers cover the occupational backgrounds of members of Congress. Whereas past studies have found that journalists cover women and politicians of color differently, my analysis of 1,200 articles written about 32 members of the 110th House finds no evidence of analogous coverage inequalities along social class lines. When it comes to members’ economic backgrounds, inequality is not the issue, but rather invisibility and inaccuracy: newspapers rarely cover the occupational backgrounds of members of Congress (and, for that matter, their education and wealth), and the little information newspapers provide is often shallow and incomplete.

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How often do journalists cover the economic backgrounds of politicians? When they do, are their stories thorough, accurate, and informative, or brief, incomplete, and slanted? Would a citizen who reads the local newspaper every day learn very much about the economic backgrounds of the people who represent her?

Research on how the media cover other aspects of politicians’ personal backgrounds has often reached alarming conclusions. Schaffner and Gadon’s (2004, 604) study of how local journalists cover Black members of Congress argues that “local television news stations may be partially responsible for the prevailing stereotype of African-American House members who are narrowly focused on race-oriented issues.” Conroy et al’s (2015, 573) analysis of news coverage of vice-presidential candidates over two decades finds “sex inequalities in coverage tone, type, and hard sexism (overtly gendered insults).”

To date, however, there hasn’t been analogous research on how the media cover the economic backgrounds of politicians, that is, how journalists report on things like how wealthy politicians are, how much formal education they have, and what kinds of occupations they had before holding office. Scholars and political observers occasionally point to individual examples of journalists neglecting or distorting candidates’ economic backgrounds, but political scientists have never systematically studied how the media cover the economic backgrounds of individual politicians or the economic makeup of political institutions.

There are good reasons to wonder how journalists cover these topics, however. Politicians’ economic backgrounds matter, after all. Scholars have found, for instance, that leaders from different occupations tend to bring different perspectives to public office, with consequences for everything from roll-call voting and bill introductions to agenda control and public policy (Carnes 2013; 2016; Eulau and Sprague 1964; Hansen et al forthcoming; Kirkland
And the economic makeup of political institutions in the United States is profoundly lopsided. Millionaires comprise around three percent of the public but majorities of every Congress since the 1980s (Eggers and Klašnja np). In contrast, working-class occupations—manual labor, service industry, and clerical jobs—make up most of the labor force, but people with significant experience in working-class jobs have never made up more than three percent of Congress (Carnes 2018; Chinoy and Ma 2019).

When citizens have access to information about the economic backgrounds of individual politicians, moreover, they seem to care. A growing body of experimental research argues that voters make inferences about candidates based on things like their wealth and past jobs (Byrne and Pueschell 1974; Campbell and Cowley 2014; Carnes and Lupu 2018; Carnes and Sadin 2014; Dubois 1984; but see Nakanishi, Cooper, and Kassarjian 1974), just as they do with other candidate traits. Voters seem especially keen to interpret candidates’ occupational histories as markers of issue expertise; they see candidates who were teachers, for instance, as better at handling problems related to education (Coffé and Theiss-Morse 2016; McDermott 2005).

But do the media actually provide citizens with good information about the economic backgrounds of politicians? Whereas voters can usually pick up on many of the consequential

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1 Class-related media can also influence voters’ general views (Kane and Newman 2017).
3 Some studies even treat occupational backgrounds as a proxies for the quality of candidates (Roberts and Roberts 2002) and potential candidates (Lawless and Fox 2005).
4 Research on how voters use information about candidates’ economic backgrounds usually provides that information on the spot in survey experiments that describe hypothetical candidates’ biographies—complete with information about wealth or occupation—then ask respondents to evaluate them. In real elections, however, there is no guarantee that campaigns,
characteristics of a politician—like race and gender—from just a photograph, campaign ad, or even a name or pronoun, a leader’s economic background is a “less visible” characteristic unless journalists, campaigns, or interest groups bring it to the forefront (McDonald, Karol, and Mason 2019). Are the details of a politicians’ economic backgrounds actually a part of the public conversation about them?

Building on Arnold’s (2004) research in Congress, the Press, and Political Accountability, this study reports the first systematic analysis of how local newspapers cover the economic backgrounds of members of Congress. I focus primarily on newspaper coverage of members’ occupational backgrounds, the economic background characteristic that seems to best predict legislators’ conduct in office (Carnes 2013).

My analysis is organized around three empirical questions: How often do local newspapers cover the occupational backgrounds of members of Congress? When they cover the occupational backgrounds of members, how accurate are they—specifically, how often do they omit certain occupations? And regardless of whether and how thoroughly newspapers cover members’ occupations, do newspapers report differently on candidates from historically underrepresented working-class occupations?

As a first cut at these questions, I analyzed over 1,200 newspaper stories written about a sample of 32 members of the 110th House of Representatives—the seven who had extensive experience in working-class jobs and a random sample of 25 other members—during the 10

interest groups, and journalists will provide biographical information so diligently, or accurately, or in an unbiased way, or prominently enough to make an impression on voters.

5 One notable exception is the state of California, which lists candidates’ self-reported occupations on the ballot. There, voters get at least one piece of information about a candidate’s economic background, although of course it may not be complete or accurate.
weeks prior to the 2010 election (or the last election the member ran in, if she did not run in 2010).

Although past research on how journalists cover women and politicians of color might lead us to suspect economic biases in the media, I find no evidence of coverage inequalities in this study. When it comes to members’ occupational backgrounds, inequality is not the issue, but rather invisibility and inaccuracy. Newspapers rarely report the occupational backgrounds of members of Congress (or, for that matter, their education or wealth), and the little information newspapers provide is often shallow and incomplete; many of the occupations listed in congressional almanacs do not appear in newspaper coverage, and the occupations that appear in the news mostly seem to track the stylized occupational histories members present on their own websites. Local newspapers aren’t usually good sources of information about the economic backgrounds of members of Congress, not because journalists are biased against politicians from underrepresented social classes, but because politicians’ economic backgrounds rarely make the news.

Inequality, Invisibility, and Inaccuracy

To date, most research on how the media cover politicians from different demographic backgrounds has focused on questions about coverage inequality, that is, whether journalists somehow differ in how they report on politicians from social groups that have historically been underrepresented in public office. The first wave of research in this literature focused on gender and race and argued that coverage inequalities were routine, that is, that women⁶ and people of

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color\textsuperscript{7} in politics receive less prominent coverage, less favorable coverage, and more coverage that aligns with gender and racial stereotypes (e.g., that portrays politicians of color as only interested in racial issues, or that reports on female politicians’ appearance, personality, and family roles but not on “masculine” characteristics or issues). More recent studies have begun to challenge these conclusions, however, arguing that female and minority candidates may not receive less coverage (Arnold 2004, 47; Hayes and Lawless 2016; Schaffner and Gadson 2004) or biased coverage (Atkeson and Krebs 2008; Hayes 2011; Hayes and Lawless 2016; Hayes, Lawless, and Baitinger 2014; Kahn 1994b; McIlwain 2011). Even so, the case is far from closed, and first-wave research on coverage inequality still looms large in the literature.

Against this backdrop, it might be tempting to focus on coverage inequalities in research on how the media report on politicians’ economic backgrounds. Perhaps news outlets pay more attention to politicians from unusual economic backgrounds because they seem novel, like leaders who worked as rocket scientists or professional athletes, or those who worked in blue-collar jobs. Or perhaps politicians from unusual economic backgrounds get less coverage, or less favorable coverage. Perhaps journalists invoke social class stereotypes (for a useful review, see Massey 2008) when they cover politicians; scholars have highlighted examples of news coverage that seems to, for instance, question the competence of politicians with less formal education, backgrounds in working-class jobs, and less money in the bank (e.g., Carnes 2018, 13-14; Carnes and Lupu 2015; Pramuk 2017). Just as journalists have been accused of covering male and female politicians differently and in stereotypical ways—and just as other institutional actors like

party leaders have been found to exhibit biases against candidates from the working class (Carnes 2018)—it may be that the media cover politicians from different economic backgrounds differently and in ways that reinforce social class stereotypes.

But coverage inequalities aren’t the only issues scholars need to be concerned about when they study the role of politicians’ economic backgrounds in the news. Politicians’ economic background characteristics are “less visible” traits, attributes that are less apparent to news audiences than traits like race or gender. Although people from different economic or social class backgrounds tend to differ in myriad ways—from clothing and speech to consumption and leisure choices—these differences are often imperceptible in routine news coverage of politicians, both because politicians tend to speak and dress in a homogenously professional manner regardless of class, and because news reporting often lingers only briefly on any given leader. A photograph might convey some information about a politician’s racial or ethnic background, and every pronoun reminds readers of a politician’s gender, but a news story that doesn’t explicitly mention a politician’s education, net worth, or occupational history might not contain any inadvertent clues about these characteristics. In this sense, the traits that make up a politician’s economic background are less visible.

And in the news, less visible characteristics can easily be overlooked or distorted, raising the possibility that those traits might not just trigger coverage inequalities, but might also be invisible or inaccurate in the news. If journalists don’t explicitly state a politician’s economic background, their audience might not know what it is. If they don’t interrogate what they hear about a politician’s economic background, they might spread misleading information. Whereas politicians almost never try to misrepresent their races and genders, many think carefully about whether to disclose information about their economic backgrounds and how to spin that
information to their advantage (Shyles 1984). One common practice—politicians downplaying economic privileges and exaggerating economic hardships—is so routine that there is actually a term for it: what the historian Edward Pessen (1984, 57, emphasis added) has dubbed the “classic tradition of . . . poor-mouthing.” If we care about how the media cover politicians’ economic backgrounds, we cannot simply focus on coverage inequality, that is, on whether journalists cover politicians differently depending on their economic backgrounds; we should also be concerned about invisibility and inaccuracy, that is, whether and how well journalists report on politicians’ economic backgrounds in the first place.

There are some reasons for hope on these fronts. Reporters have ample space to provide detailed and accurate information about politicians: cable news stations have 24 hours a day to devote to politics, online news outlets have limitless bandwidth, and even local newspapers have the space to cover politicians regularly and prominently (Arnold 2004, ch. 2). Reporters also have easy access to information about the economic backgrounds of leaders like members of Congress, which is readily available on campaign websites, in biographical almanacs, and in financial disclosure statements (all of which can be accessed online in a matter of minutes). And journalists are more than up to the task of providing detailed and accurate economic information. Arnold (2004, 65) finds, for instance, that local newspapers rarely simply parrot what members of Congress say about policy; it seems at least possible that journalists might also do more than just parrot what politicians say about their economic backgrounds.

However, there is one paramount reason to be concerned about invisibility and inaccuracy in news coverage of politicians’ economic backgrounds: static biographical facts aren’t usually news. For journalists, newsworthy information is “new information about a subject of some public interest” (Stephens 2014, xii, emphasis added). And a politician’s economic
background isn’t usually new information, especially if that politician is already an established officeholder. Citizens look to the media to learn what has changed in the world; when journalists cover politicians, they report on the positions they have recently staked out on major issues, the work they have recently done to pass public policy, and the election campaigns they have recently fielded (Arnold 2004). Journalists don’t have strong incentives to rehash biographical information (e.g., Hamilton 2003), and they have to make tough choices about how to spend their scarce time, energy, and investigative resources. The morning newspaper isn’t an encyclopedia.

Of course, there are a few situations in which the logic of news might drive journalists to cover the economic backgrounds of politicians. Journalists might report economic and other biographical information when politicians first run for office. A new entrant into the political arena is herself newsworthy, and journalists might report on a new candidate’s economic background as part of the larger process of introducing her to the community she hopes to represent. Journalists might also mention politicians’ economic backgrounds when they think doing so will provide some useful context for some newsworthy issue. Or, related, journalists might report on politicians’ economic backgrounds when people in and around government talk about them in connection to newsworthy issues. Politicians sometimes highlight their economic backgrounds to help explain their positions on relevant issues (e.g., “as a farmer, I understand the importance of agricultural subsidies”), claim credit for favorable policy outcomes (e.g., “as a farmer, I was proud to vote for these important new subsidies”), or advertise their positive qualities (“as a farmer, I know the value of hard work”). Likewise, opponents sometimes highlight a politician’s economic background in the hope of undermining the politician’s position (for instance, by portraying a wealthy politician as aloof and out-of-touch, or a working-class
politician as coarse and inexperienced). And observers sometimes comment on a politician’s economic background when it is relevant to a controversy or scandal, like a politician who is accused of hiding wealth in off-shore bank accounts or doing something unethical in a previous job. When people in and around government attempt to use a politician’s economic background to bolster a story—or when it is central to the story—journalists are likely to cover it.

It is difficult to know at the outset, however, whether these kinds of stories are common enough to make most politicians’ economic backgrounds visible to citizens. It is hard to say whether the media run a regular stream of stories that mention economic backgrounds, or whether those kinds of stories are just a trickle.

Whatever the visibility of politicians’ economic backgrounds, moreover, it seems unlikely that reporters will routinely cover politicians’ economic backgrounds accurately, that is, in a way that is thorough and detailed. Politicians have strong incentives to spin their economic backgrounds in ways that will favor them. But reporters don’t have similar incentives to fact-check them. When reporters mention economic information because others have tied it to a relevant issue, their focus is usually on the issue itself, not on interrogating the economic information in the narrative. When a politician says, “As a farm owner, I was proud to vote for these new subsidies,” the story is the subsidies, not the politician’s farm. When new candidates run, moreover, there is little reason to expect journalists to provide more than cursory information about their economic backgrounds; there’s a great deal more to say about new candidates, including their issue positions and the details of their campaigns. If journalists don’t think of a politician’s economic background as inherently newsworthy, we probably shouldn’t expect them to do much more than repeat what they hear.
And that, in turn, may be bad for political knowledge and representation. Americans are governed by the rich, but if the news doesn’t cover the economic backgrounds of their leaders, or if it simply repeats politicians’ self-styled economic narratives, most citizens might never know it. (And, indeed, there is evidence that citizens in the US vastly under-estimate how well off politicians are; Carnes and Lupu np.)

If there is a silver lining to this “economic backgrounds aren’t news” perspective, it might be that it raises doubts about traditional concerns regarding coverage inequality. In principle, a journalist could choose never to write about politicians’ economic backgrounds, but still ignore or disparage politicians the journalist knew to be less affluent. In practice, however, if economic backgrounds aren’t newsworthy, there is little reason to expect them to register with journalists in a way that subsequently affects their reporting. When it comes to how the media handle the economic backgrounds of politicians, coverage inequality might not be a problem at all; it might simply be that citizens don’t get much good information about the economic backgrounds of the people who represent them.

**Local Newspaper Coverage of Members of Congress**

To test these hunches, I studied how local newspapers covered a sample of members of the 110th Congress. Members of Congress were ideal for this study because they are more numerous and economically diverse than presidents (thereby providing more examples of politicians from the working class for my tests of coverage inequalities) and higher-profile than state or local leaders (which should help rule out invisibility and inaccuracy that occur simply because the leader isn’t politically influential). I focused on the 110th Congress (2007 to 2008) because in 2010 I compiled detailed occupational histories for each member who served during
that term from congressional almanacs (data that are useful as a benchmark for determining how thorough newspaper accounts are) and because in 2010 I also recorded how each member in the sample described their occupational history on their official website (data that are useful for assessing the extent to which newspaper accounts overlap with members’ own narratives about their economic backgrounds). As for the medium, I studied local newspaper coverage because local papers are numerous and consequential (as Hayes and Lawless [2016, 60] note, citizens are “more than four times as likely to get information about the House race in their district from a local newspaper than a national one”), because “local media outlets are better suited to cover individual members of Congress than the national media” (Arnold 2004, 3), because local newspapers are archived online in easy-to-use databases (unlike local television and radio coverage), and because systematic research on media coverage of members of Congress began with the study of local newspapers (Arnold 2004).

To ensure that I had as many members as possible from historically underrepresented economic backgrounds (to increase the odds of detecting any coverage biases that might exist), I started by identifying every member of the 110th House who spent at least one third of his or her pre-congressional career doing working-class jobs. (There were seven in all.) Then, following Arnold’s (2004) approach in his first dataset in Congress, the Press, and Political Accountability, I randomly selected 25 additional members of the 110th House.

My research design differed from Arnold’s in two important ways. First, whereas Arnold studied an entire congressional term, my analysis focused only on the 10 weeks leading up to election day. Although my approach did not capture all of the information voters received about a given member, I had to limit my data collection, and the 10 weeks prior to election day usually include both the bulk of campaign-related media and a steady flow of non-campaign coverage
(Arnold 2004, Fig. 6.1), thereby allowing me to study both campaign- and policy-related stories about the members in my sample.

Second, when Arnold collected his data, only 88 newspapers had high-quality online archives for the years he studied (1993 and 1994), so he selected 25 of the 88 at random, then matched each paper with a member it covered. In contrast, there are 7,765 local newspapers (an average of 155 per state) listed in the Newsbank online archive\(^8\) for the year I chose to study. As such, rather than selecting \textit{newspapers} at random, I randomly selected 25 \textit{members}, then searched Newsbank for the newspaper that ran the most stories about each member in the 10 weeks prior to the 2010 election.\(^9\) If the member didn’t campaign in 2010, I collected articles from the last prior election they ran in (and used the Internet Archive’s “Wayback Machine” to access archived copies of the member’s congressional website during that race). After identifying the newspaper that wrote the most stories that mentioned each member, if any member’s top newspaper produced fewer than 20 search results, I included results from the next largest newspaper (repeating until I exceeded 20 raw search results).

From there, my approach again resembled Arnold’s: I collected stories that mentioned the member’s name, removed duplicate and irrelevant stories, and coded each story with the help of

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\(^8\) For the sample I studied, the newspapers archived in Newsbank seemed to substantially overlap with the newspapers archived in Lexis-Nexis, but Newsbank uncovered a few more stories for several members.

\(^9\) My approach differed slightly from other recent studies, like Hayes and Lawless (2016), which proceeded by identifying the highest-circulation newspaper headquartered in the largest city in each congressional district. The problem with this approach is that one member in my sample—Dennis Moore (from Kansas’s third district)—was most often covered by a newspaper that was not located in his district or even his state (The Kansas City Star is the newspaper of record for most politicians in northeast Kansas, but it is based in Kansas City, Missouri). By simply identifying the newspaper that most often covered each member, I was able to capture newspapers that were headquartered outside of a congressional district but that still covered a given member extensively.
a research assistant. My coding process recorded any information about the member’s occupational background, education, and wealth (to test my invisibility and inaccuracy hypotheses) as well as the issues each story discussed in connection with the member and any positive or negative comments it reported about the member (to test the traditional coverage inequality hypothesis). I also recorded any economic background information the story mentioned about the member’s challengers, to test one of the corollaries of the invisibility hypothesis, namely, that journalists are more likely to cover the economic backgrounds of new candidates than existing officeholders.

The 25 members I randomly drew were generally representative of the 110th House. They were 48% Republican (the entire chamber was 46% Republican), the typical representative had served in the House for 12 years (the chamber average was 12), and 8% of the 25 were the chairs or ranking members of committees or subcommittees (compared to 9% in the entire chamber). Not surprisingly, my non-random sample of seven working-class members was far less representative; they were 14% Republican, they had served nine years on average, and 14% of them had committee leadership positions.

Overall, however, the media seemed to cover these 32 members at similar rates to what past research has found. In total, I collected 1,222 stories (articles, opinion pieces, letters to the editor, and other pieces), or about 3.8 stories per member per week. Reassuringly, this figure was similar to the coverage rates reported in other recent studies: Arnold’s (2004) first dataset included 8,003 articles written about 25 members over the course of a two-year congressional term, or around 3.1 stories per member per week. Hayes and Lawless’s (2016) analysis of stories published in the leading newspaper in every US House district in the month prior to the 2010 and 2014 elections yielded 10,375 stories, or about 3.0 stories per district per week.
Table 1 briefly summarizes my dataset. The 110th Congress convened from 2007 to 2008; of the 32 members I studied, 21 campaigned for re-election in 2010, six last ran in 2008, and five last ran in 2006. For six members, I studied multiple newspapers because no one newspaper produced at least 20 results when I searched for the member’s name during the relevant timeframe. And even when my search results exceeded 20 articles, the process of eliminating duplicates and irrelevant results sometimes left fewer than 20 relevant pieces. (In my analyses of coverage inequality below, I take this feature of the dataset into account.)

With these data, we can answer the three empirical questions at issue in this study: How often do local papers cover the occupational backgrounds of members of Congress (as well as their wealth and education)? When local papers cover the occupational backgrounds of members of Congress, is the information detailed and accurate (like the work histories I compiled from congressional almanacs) or does it simply restate members’ own narratives (like the data I compiled from members’ websites)? And regardless of whether and how newspapers cover members’ occupations, do newspapers report differently on candidates from historically underrepresented working-class occupations?

Invisibility

First, how often do local papers cover the economic—and, specifically, the occupational—backgrounds of members of Congress? Occupational backgrounds are “less visible” characteristics unless campaigns and journalists bring them to light. How often do they make the news?

On this point, my dataset painted a fairly bleak picture. Of the 1,222 articles I compiled, just 44 (3.6%) mentioned any of the occupations the member held prior to serving in Congress,
Table 1: Members and Newspapers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>% Career in Workclass Jobs</th>
<th>Party</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Dist.</th>
<th>Elec. Studied</th>
<th>Top Newspaper(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brady, Robert A</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>PA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Phil. Inquirer, Erie Times-News, Bucks County Courier Times, Times Leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carson, Julia</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>IN</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Post-Tribune, Jour. Gazette, Evansville Courier &amp; Press, News-Sentinel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynch, Stephen F</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>The Enterprise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michaud, Mike</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>ME</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Bangor Daily News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Napolitano, Grace</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>San Gabriel Valley Tribune, Whittier Daily News, La Opinion, Fresno Bee,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanchez, Linda</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Long Beach Press-Telegram, Whittier Daily News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davis, Jo Ann</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>VA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Free Lance-Star</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachmann, Michele</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>MN</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>St. Paul Pioneer Press</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachus, Spencer</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>AL</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Birmingham News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boustany, Charles</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>LA</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Advocate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brady, Kevin</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>TX</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Beaumont Enterprise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeney, Tom</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>FL</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Orlando Sentinel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnson, Sam</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>TX</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Dallas Morning News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LaHood, Ray</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>IL</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Peoria Journal Star</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucas, Frank D</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Oklahoman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peterson, John E</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>PA</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Centre Daily Times, Redding Record Searchlight, Rockford Register Star</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rogers, Hal</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>KY</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Lexington Herald-Leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thornberry, Mac</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>TX</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Wichita Falls Times Record News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walden, Greg</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>OR</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Bulletin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berkley, Shelley</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>NV</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Las Vegas Review-Journal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boyd, Nancy</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>KS</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Topeka Capital-Journal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohen, Stephen</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>TN</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Commercial Appeal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costello, Jerry</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>IL</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Belleville News-Democrat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emanuel, Rahm</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>IL</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Chicago Sun-Times, Daily Herald</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hooley, Darlene</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>OR</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Oregonian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lampson, Nick</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>TX</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Houston Chronicle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mahoney, Tim</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>FL</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>St. Lucie News Tribune</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moore, Dennis</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>KS</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Kansas City Star</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pelosi, Nancy</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>San Francisco Chronicle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rangel, Charles</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>NY</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>New York Daily News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scott, David</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>GA</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Atlanta Journal-Constitution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wasserman Schultz, Debbie</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>FL</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Sun Sentinel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
including military service and work in other levels or branches of government. For 16 of the 32 members—fully half of my sample—the newspapers that covered them most often didn’t run a single article that mentioned their occupational background during the ten weeks prior to election day. Information about members’ educational backgrounds and wealth were even scarcer: just seven (0.6%) of the 1,222 articles mentioned education, and just six (0.5%) mentioned wealth.

Table 2 lists the numbers of distinct paragraphs that referenced each member’s occupation, along with the total article counts for each member (from Table 1). For all but two of the 32 members, the newspaper(s) that covered them most often mentioned their occupational history in fewer than five paragraphs during the 10 weeks leading up to election day, that is, in less than one paragraph every other week. Although some papers occasionally mentioned members’ occupational backgrounds—and although the average paper in this sample ran almost four stories per week about the member of Congress in question—in the vast majority of papers, occupational background information was a trickle, or a dry riverbed.

Consistent with the idea that economic background information isn’t newsworthy in itself, when newspapers mentioned members’ occupational backgrounds, they often did so because the occupations related to some other newsworthy issue. Table 3 briefly summarizes the context of each paragraph that referenced a member’s occupational history. Across these 1,222 campaign-season articles, there were just 20 purely biographical references to members’ occupations (in just 15 articles, around 1.2% of the sample), that is, references that were part of a biographical narrative about the member or a “breakout box” that listed biographical facts. The other 34 references to members’ occupations were either brief asides or references to ongoing newsworthy issues like re-election campaigns and policy positions. (Paragraphs referencing
members’ occupations could be coded to more than one issue-related category, so the counts in Table 3 do not sum to 54.) In the articles I collected, journalists rarely talked about members’ occupational backgrounds for their own sake, and there weren’t many stories that linked members’ occupations to other newsworthy events, either. Politicians’ occupational histories just don’t seem to be news.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Occ. Refs.</th>
<th>Articles</th>
<th>Refs. / Article</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bachus, Spencer</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boustany, Charles W Jr</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brady, Kevin</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brady, Robert A</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carson, Julia</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costello, Jerry F</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emanuel, Rahm</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnson, Sam</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lampson, Nick</td>
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<td>45</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucas, Frank D</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Napolitano, Grace</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pelosi, Nancy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peterson, John E</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rangel, Charles B</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rogers, Hal</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scott, David</td>
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<td>37</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boyda, Nancy E</td>
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<td>75</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeney, Tom</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lynch, Stephen F</td>
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<tr>
<td>Berkley, Shelley</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohen, Stephen Ira</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wasserman Schultz, Debbie</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bachmann, Michele</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>49</td>
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<tr>
<td>LaHood, Ray</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michaud, Mike</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walden, Greg</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hooley, Darlene</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>0.11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mahoney, Tim</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>0.04</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sánchez, Linda</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thornberry, Mac</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davis, Jo Ann</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moore, Dennis</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Since all the members in my sample were incumbents, by definition none of them were running for the first time, so I couldn’t use the data in Tables 2 and 3 to test the hypothesis that newcomers’ occupational backgrounds were reported more often. Instead, as a simple test of this idea, I coded any reference to a challenger’s occupational background in my sample of 1,222 stories.

In all, 112 stories mentioned challengers’ occupations (compared to 44 that mentioned members’ occupational backgrounds), and there were a total of 171 unique paragraphs that referenced challengers’ occupations (compared to 54 for members). Consistent with the idea that a politician’s occupational background is more newsworthy the first time she runs, in a sample of stories selected because they mentioned members of Congress, a reader was two to three times more likely to hear about a challenger’s occupational history than a member’s.

Of course, all of this was a drop in the bucket relative to the other kinds of content in stories related to members. Figure 1 plots the numbers of stories that mentioned each member, the numbers of stories and paragraphs that mentioned the member in connection to some issue (which I defined as a public problem, an action taken by the member, or an action taken by the government), the numbers of stories and paragraphs that included a negative or positive evaluation of the member (specifically, an evaluation of their position on an issue, the likely effects of a proposal, a trait the member had, or the member’s involvement in a scandal), and the numbers of stories and paragraphs that mentioned a challenger’s or a member’s occupational background. Viewed this way, it is easy to see how issues and evaluations dwarf occupational information in local news coverage of members of Congress. For every paragraph that referenced
Table 3: The Context in Which Stories Mentioned Members’ Occupations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th># of refs.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Issue-related references</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>explaining an issue position</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>supporting a positive evaluation</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in a quote or paraphrase</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>explaining qualifications</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>refuting an issue position</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>accusation of corruption</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>elaborating a quotation</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biographical references</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bio sketch</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>breakout box</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other references</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aside</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a member’s occupation, there were 16 paragraphs that referenced a positive evaluation of the member, 22 that referenced a negative evaluation, and 49 that referenced an issue.

Simply put, politicians’ occupational backgrounds usually aren’t news. Local papers focus on the issues of the day, they cover evaluations of members, but they only rarely mention what members did for a living, or other information about their economic backgrounds. If we wanted citizens to know about the occupational backgrounds of their members of Congress, we
would want newspapers to provide a steady stream of relevant information (since readers often miss individual stories). They do not. Even to local news junkies, the occupational backgrounds of their members of Congress could easily be invisible.

**Inaccuracy**

Moreover, even a vigilant daily newspaper reader—one who catches every reference to what her member of Congress does for a living—still might not have a very complete picture of her member’s occupational background.

When politicians campaign and govern, they inevitably spin their economic backgrounds, playing up information that they want constituents to focus on and downplaying facts that they don’t. Newspapers could, of course, cut through the spin by presenting complete and detailed occupational histories. As the previous section noted, however, newspapers rarely cover
politicians’ occupational backgrounds in the first place. And if economic backgrounds aren’t newsworthy, when journalists occasionally cover them, it is difficult to imagine that they would spend a great deal of time fact-checking.

Indeed, in practice, the limited occupational information in my sample of news articles was often far from thorough. Of the 54 paragraphs that referenced members’ occupations, most (32, or 59%) didn’t include any information about when or for how long the member had worked in her prior occupations. Seven occupations were so vague that it was difficult to classify them.

For many members, moreover, journalists only told part of the story about their occupational histories. To find out how complete journalists’ coverage was, I compared the occupations reported for each House member in my sample of newspaper articles to the occupations they listed on their congressional websites and to the occupations listed in four prominent congressional almanacs. Did the news provide complete occupational histories—or at least occupational histories that were more complete than what members themselves provided? Or did local papers simply report members’ own self-styled versions of their work histories?

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10 Working with a team of research assistants, I gathered detailed information about each legislator’s occupational background from *The Congressional Biographical Directory*, Congressional Quarterly’s online *Politics in America* almanac, Lexis-Nexis Congressional, and the National Journal’s online *Almanac of American Politics*. No two had identical information about each member, so I collected data on each occupation listed for each legislator in each source and then combined that information, discarding duplicate entries and retaining the most detailed descriptions of each job each member worked. At the same time, I also worked with research assistants to record the occupations members listed in the biography or “about me” sections of their congressional websites. If a member in my sample (which spanned 1999 to 2008) was no longer in office when we conducted the research in 2010, we skipped them in the website data collection process, since their congressional websites were inactive; for the present analysis, I have filled in the website information for those members using the Internet Archive’s “Wayback Machine.”
Figure 2 plots the distribution of the numbers of occupations listed for members in almanacs, websites, and newspapers. For example, the almanacs I compiled listed between one and eight past occupations for each of the 32 members; the grey bars in the upper left panel report the numbers of members who had one occupation listed (3 members), two occupations listed (2 members), and so on, up to eight occupations (2 members). In Figure 2, the top two panels use my entire sample of 32 members, and the bottom panels focus only on members who had any occupational information listed in newspaper articles. The leftmost panels compare the
Collectively, the four congressional almanacs listed an average of 3.8 distinct occupations for each of the 32 members in my samples (top left panel, grey bars), including service in the military and work in other levels and branches of government (being a state legislator and a city council member would count as two separate occupations). Not surprisingly, members were more selective in what they reported on their congressional websites; the typical member listed just 1.8 occupations in the biography section of her website (top left panel, white bars; the difference in means was significant at $p < 0.001$ in a $t$-test). Newspapers reported even less, an average of just 1.0 past occupation (top right panel, grey bars), a value that was statistically distinct from the averages for almanacs ($p < 0.001$) and websites ($p < 0.01$).

Local papers’ lousy showing on this measure was partly driven by the fact that many newspapers didn’t report any occupational information during the 10 weeks leading up to the election (as the previous section noted). Even among the 16 members whose occupations were mentioned in the local news at least once, however, newspapers mentioned an average 2.1 occupations (bottom right panel, grey bars), still slightly less than what those 16 members shared on their websites (bottom right panel, white bars), which listed 2.5 occupations on average ($p < 0.56$), and significantly less than the 3.6 occupations listed for the average member in almanacs ($p < 0.001$; bottom left panel, grey bars). That is, even the newspapers that provided information about members’ occupations did not provide any more information than members themselves.

Did members downplay any particular types of occupations, especially those associated with affluence? Figure 3 plots the odds that any one of the 121 occupations recorded in almanacs for these 32 members would appear on the member’s website and in the news coverage of the
member. In the figure I have grouped occupations using a simple coding scheme that I have used elsewhere and that predicts differences in floor voting and bill introductions (e.g., Carnes 2012; 2013; 2016).

The most pronounced pattern in Figure 3 is that members and newspapers alike only occasionally mentioned members’ past government experience (top pair of bars); two thirds of members’ jobs in government were not mentioned on websites or in newspapers during campaign season. Moreover, consistent with the idea that members downplay economic privileges and play up hardships, members only mentioned jobs as business owners or executives on their websites about half of the time, but members mentioned working-class occupations about 80% of the time. There were too few cases in each occupation category in Figure 3 to distinguish these rates statistically, but the patterns in the data were generally consistent with the
idea that members strategically downplay some occupations and play up others, as scholars of “poormouthing” have long argued.

As for local newspapers (grey bars), however, there were no obvious patterns in the types of occupations that were more and less likely to be covered. Most kinds of jobs in Figure 3 had a 20 to 40 percent chance of appearing in the local paper.

What seemed to predict whether a given job was mentioned in the paper wasn’t the type of job, but whether the job appeared on the member’s website. If a given occupation wasn’t listed on a member’s website, there was only an 11% chance that it was listed in a newspaper article. In contrast, if a member’s website listed an occupation, there was a 47% chance that it was mentioned in the news (and this difference was significant at $p < 0.001$). Out of the 121 occupations recorded in almanacs for these members, only seven appeared in newspapers but not on members’ websites. For the most part, what readers saw in the papers looked like a random sample of what members themselves chose to highlight about their occupational backgrounds.

What did this mean in practice? As the previous section noted, there were 16 members for whom newspapers reported no occupational background information whatsoever. Among the other 16 members, local papers left out at least some occupational information for 10 of them. That means, of course, that newspapers provided complete occupational histories for six of the 32 members in my sample, almost one in five. Hawkeyed daily newspaper readers would have had complete pictures of the work histories of Mike Michaud, Linda Sánchez, Jo Ann Davis, Tim Mahoney, Dennis Moore, and Michele Bachmann.

Overall, however, these data were consistent with the idea that journalists don’t consider occupational information important and don’t usually report on it thoroughly. For half of my sample, newspapers were silent about members’ occupational histories, and in the other half,
more than 60% of the time a reader who caught every reference to a member’s occupation in the local newspaper still wouldn’t have the entire story.

Equality

If journalists don’t devote much energy to covering politicians’ economic backgrounds, it may be that they simply don’t care all that much, that is, that they have something of a blind spot when it comes to politicians’ economic backgrounds. However, from the standpoint of traditional academic concerns about coverage inequality, that might be a good thing. Scholars often worry that journalists give politicians from historically underrepresented social groups (like women or politicians of color) different levels of coverage—either ignoring them because they seem less credible or exoticizing them because they seem different—and that the coverage they get might be more negative or somehow reinforce stereotypes about the underrepresented group. But if journalists really don’t pay all that much attention to politicians’ economic backgrounds, if they don’t “see” class when they report on politicians, the processes that give rise to the invisibility and inaccuracy documented in the previous sections may have a surprising side-effect: coverage equality.

The newspaper data I analyzed suggested that members of Congress with significant experience in working-class jobs were covered at about the same rates as white-collar candidates. My research design produced slightly fewer articles for the average working-class member in my sample (31.7) than the average white-collar member (40.0), but the difference was not statistically significant ($p < 0.46$), and it wasn’t any different when I adjusted the data to account for members for whom I had to search multiple newspapers to get 20 search results. (Taking out
the “backup” papers, the averages were 29.3 and 39.4, and a \( t \)-test produced a non-significant \( p < 0.39 \).

And even this not-statistically-significant 10-article difference seemed modest compared to other differences in coverage. Figure 4 plots the numbers of articles that I collected for each member against the share of each member’s career spent in working-class jobs (left panel) and the vote margin each member earned in the general election (right panel). Members from working-class backgrounds are denoted with “w”s and those from white-collar backgrounds are denoted with dollar signs. Viewed this way, it seems clear that coverage rates in this sample had a great deal more to do with whether a member was at risk of losing her re-election bid—the traditional horse race—than her economic background. A member who spent 40% of her career in a working-class job was covered in about six more articles over 10 weeks (about one every other week) than a member who spent 70% of her career in a working-class job. A member who lost with 40% of the vote was covered in 28 more articles (almost three per week) than a member who won with 70% of the vote. Even if members from working-class backgrounds are covered at
slightly lower rates, the differences in this sample were substantively small by the standards of newspaper coverage.¹¹

When it came to how members were evaluated in the news, moreover, the trends non-significantly favored working-class politicians. For each of the 1,222 articles I collected, I recorded whether each paragraph included a negative and/or positive evaluation of the member. I defined an evaluation as (1) a statement (made by anyone) that a proposal or action associated with the member has done or will do good or bad things, (2) a favorable or unfavorable statement about the member’s traits or personal characteristics, (3) a favorable or unfavorable statement about the member’s position on an issue, (4) or any reference to a scandal involving the member (all references to scandals were counted as negative).

On average, the articles about members from working-class backgrounds contained more paragraphs with positive evaluations (37.3 across the 10 weeks, vs. 25.2 for white-collar members; \( p < 0.344 \)) and fewer paragraphs with negative evaluations (20.9, vs 42.8 for white-collar members; \( p < 0.438 \)), although the differences were not statistically significant. If anything, in these data, reporters were biased in favor of leaders from the working class.¹²

¹¹ When I regressed coverage rates on a larger set of district-level characteristics, the differences between workers and professionals were even smaller. In one model (available on request), I related the numbers of articles about each member to an indicator for members from working-class jobs, the member’s share of the vote in the general election, the average political ideology of the district (computed from Annenberg surveys), and several district characteristics (percent white, land area, urbanization, presidential vote shares, average age, percent without a high school diploma, and percent working class). In this simple model, there was only a (non-significant) two-article difference between members who were workers and those who were not, and the significant predictors of higher coverage rates were a poor showing in the general election, racial diversity in the district, an older population of constituents, and a less urbanized district (consistent with Arnold’s finding that big-city newspapers have more members to cover and therefore devote less attention to each one).

¹² I also found no evidence of explicit social class slights or stereotypes in any of my 1,222 articles. I attempted to code these occurrences, but found none.
I also didn’t find evidence of anti-worker biases in the volume\textsuperscript{13} of issue-related content associated with each member. As I read each article, I coded paragraphs that mentioned the member in connection with any issue, which I defined as a public problem, an action taken by the government, or an action taken by the member. In my sample, local newspaper readers were exposed to roughly the same volume of issue-related content about members from working-class backgrounds (75.7 paragraphs across 10 weeks) and members from white-collar backgrounds (84.8 paragraphs across 10 week; difference non-significant at $p < 0.809$).

Whereas past research has found troubling evidence of coverage inequalities, my analysis did not produce any compelling evidence that journalists reported differently on the seven members of the 110th House of Representatives who came from working-class jobs than they did a random sample of 25 members from white-collar jobs. (When I re-ran the analyses in this section dividing the sample by race and gender, I also failed to find any statistically significant differences.) Members from the working class were covered in about as many articles and issue-related paragraphs as members from white-collar jobs and were mentioned in about as many paragraphs with positive and negative evaluation statements. There were differences, but they were substantively small, not statistically significant, and not consistently in the same “direction” (members who were workers were a little less likely to appear in stories or issue-related paragraphs, but a little more likely to be evaluated favorably and a little less likely to be evaluated negatively). Overall, I didn’t find that journalists exoticized politicians from the working class or shut them out, and I didn’t find that journalists praised or punished them excessively. To the contrary, journalists seem to cover members from historically

\textsuperscript{13} In a future iteration of this paper, I will analyze data on the content of issues-related references, that is, not just how many issues are mentioned in connection with each member, but which issues.
underrepresented occupations about the same as other members—consistent with the larger idea that journalists simply don’t pay that much attention to the economic backgrounds of politicians.

**Summary of Empirical Findings**

Building on Arnold’s research in *Congress, the Press, and Political Accountability*, this paper reported the first systematic analysis of how local newspapers cover the occupational backgrounds of members of Congress. The principal conclusions are these.

- Members’ occupational backgrounds were largely invisible in local newspapers during the 10 weeks leading up to election day. Only 44 of the 1,222 articles in my sample included occupational information about members. For half of the members I studied, the newspapers that covered them most often during campaign season did not run any articles that mentioned their occupational backgrounds.

- My data were generally in line with the idea that static biographical facts aren’t news. Most references to members’ occupational backgrounds related them to some other newsworthy issue; just 15 articles included purely biographical references to members’ occupational backgrounds. The articles I studied were two to three times more likely to mention the occupational backgrounds of challengers than members. And for every paragraph that referenced a member’s occupational background, there were 49 that referenced a contemporary issue or policy.

- The newspapers that covered members’ occupational backgrounds were not usually thorough. Most references to members’ past occupations did not include information about how long they had worked in a given job, and most newspapers only reported on a fraction of the occupations listed in congressional almanacs and on members’ websites.
The occupations newspapers covered tended to track members’ own narratives about their economic backgrounds.

- My analysis did not find evidence of coverage inequalities disadvantaging members from historically underrepresented working-class occupations. Members from the working class were covered in about as many articles and issue-related paragraphs as members from white-collar jobs, and were mentioned in about as many paragraphs with positive and negative evaluation statements.

**The Press and Political Representation**

When political scientists have discussed what journalists *should* report about politicians, they haven’t typically assigned much importance to economic background information. Arnold’s (2004, 17) study of how the press covers Congress focused on whether “the media report the kinds of information that citizens would need to hold representatives accountable for their actions in office” – not just “peripheral matters that entertain, amuse, or enrage citizens without conveying much information about legislators’ actual performance,” but the meat of policy making: “bill introductions, roll-call votes, leadership activities, and constituency service.” Likewise, when Zaller (2003) outlined his Fire Alarm and Full News Standards for evaluating the quality of news coverage, neither required journalists to cover candidates’ biographies, so long as they reported on the major issues of the day, the behavior of public officials, ethical transgressions, and re-election races.

Citizens need to know about these subjects if they wish to hold politicians accountable, of course. But they also deserve to know about the personal backgrounds of the people who represent them, including their economic backgrounds. Politicians regularly make decisions
about scores of economic issues, and when they do, their own economic backgrounds seem to influence their choices. The kinds of jobs politicians had before they held office can affect the problems they focus on and the expertise they bring to them. A politician’s economic background can also drive her to behave in a self-interested manner; if a politician votes to protect the industry she worked in or the tax bracket she belongs to, citizens can only see that self-interested behavior for what it is if they know what the politician did for a living or how wealthy she is.

And citizens seem to want to know these kinds of details. The week of this writing, a Democratic presidential candidate made headlines by bowing to pressure to release his tax returns, which revealed him to be far wealthier than many supporters realized, and a Republican president ordered the Director of the Treasury to withhold the president’s tax returns from Congress. Although information about the economic backgrounds of politicians is usually not essential to issue-based notions of political accountability, citizens often see it as essential to other important normative ideals like fairness, transparency, and representation.

Even so, local journalists have to make tough choices—they have limited time, energy, and resources to devote to their work—and they usually don’t have strong incentives to cover politicians’ economic backgrounds, except perhaps when candidates first run, when journalists wish to provide contextual information, or when people in and around politics link a politician’s economic background to a newsworthy issue. These things rarely occur in practice, at least in the local newspapers where citizens often get their news about members of Congress. Local papers rarely mention members’ occupational backgrounds (or education and wealth), and when they do they often leave out many occupations (especially those that members themselves don’t highlight). Although past research on media and candidate demographics might lead us to worry
that journalists are somehow biased against working-class candidates, it seems that journalists rarely think politicians’ occupational backgrounds are newsworthy, especially after leaders have held office for some time.

Of course, this study has several important limitations. It focuses on just one sample from 2006, 2008, and 2010; perhaps newer or larger datasets will support different conclusions. This study also cannot test the possibility that citizens get information about politicians’ economic backgrounds from other sources, like interest groups, campaign ads, or coverage in other media like television and the internet. And this study cannot rule out the possibility that candidates from working-class backgrounds face some sort of coverage inequality when they first run that dissipates as they hold office. Breaking in could be an uphill battle, but after a while, politicians from the working class may simply blend in with the crowd. I cannot test these possibilities with my data—which only include local newspaper coverage and only focus on incumbent House members and their opponents (and none of those opponents had working-class backgrounds), but I hope that future studies will do better than I have on these points.

Overall, however, it seems clear that local newspapers are not good sources of information about the economic backgrounds of politicians. This is not to fault reporters or papers themselves; they serve audiences that prefer new information to encyclopedic facts (and, often, entertainment over news itself; Hamilton 2003). Many local journalists are, as one reader recently noted, “overworked, underpaid, often having to post multiple stories every day.” It is nonetheless remarkable, however, how little information about politicians’ economic backgrounds citizens encounter in local papers. And that may, in turn, have more significant effects that are worthy of future research. In a 2016 survey, the average respondent estimated that more than a quarter of members of Congress come from working-class jobs (Carnes and
in reality, fewer than three percent do. This may well be a downstream consequence of the pressure journalists face to focus on current events and not biographical facts.

The media’s near-silence about the economic backgrounds of politicians might also have an even more profound effect on the scope of the American political imagination. Citizens who never read about politicians’ economic backgrounds might not just be unaware of where their representatives come from, they might not think to ask.
Bibliography


