

# Do Voters Dislike Working-Class Candidates? Voter Biases and the Descriptive Underrepresentation of the Working Class

NICHOLAS CARNES *Duke University*

NOAM LUPU *Vanderbilt University*

*In most democracies, lawmakers tend to be vastly better off than the citizens who elect them. Is that because voters prefer more affluent politicians over leaders from working-class backgrounds? In this article, we report the results of candidate choice experiments embedded in surveys in Britain, the United States, and Argentina. Using conjoint designs, we asked voters in these different contexts to choose between two hypothetical candidates, randomly varying several of the candidates' personal characteristics, including whether they had worked in blue-collar or white-collar jobs. Contrary to the idea that voters prefer affluent politicians, the voters in our experiments viewed hypothetical candidates from the working class as equally qualified, more relatable, and just as likely to get their votes. Voters do not seem to be behind the shortage of working-class politicians. To the contrary, British, American, and Argentine voters seem perfectly willing to cast their ballots for working-class candidates.*

*Pobre não vota em pobre.* (Poor people don't vote for poor people.)

—Brazilian saying

Politicians the world over are vastly better off than the citizens they represent. In both developing and advanced democracies, the available data suggest that elected officials are almost always wealthier, more educated, and more likely to come from white-collar jobs than the citizens who elect them (e.g., Best 2007; Best and Cotta 2000; Matthews 1985). In the United States, *working-class* citizens<sup>1</sup>—people employed in manual labor, service industry, clerical, or

informal sector jobs—make up over half of the labor force, but the typical member of Congress spent less than 2 percent of his or her pre-congressional career in working-class jobs. Across Latin American democracies, workers make up between 60 and 90 percent of the general public, but legislators from those occupations make up just 5 to 25 percent of national legislatures (Carnes and Lupu 2015). In Europe, blue-collar workers make up large proportions of the electorate but have rarely made up more than 10 percent of national legislatures (Best and Cotta 2000).<sup>2</sup>

Recently, political scientists have started paying renewed attention to these economic and social class gaps between politicians and citizens (partly in response to growing interest in the larger phenomenon of political inequality; e.g., Bartels 2008; Beramendi and Anderson 2008; Gilens 2012; Hacker and Pierson 2011; Iversen and Soskice 2015; McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2006). One emerging body of research has found that government by the privileged has significant consequences: lawmakers from different classes tend to bring different perspectives to the political process. Just as the shortage of women or racial and ethnic minorities in office seems to affect policy outcomes on issues related to gender and race (e.g., Berkman and O'Connor 1993; Bratton and Ray 2002; Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004; Franck and Rainer 2012; Pande 2003; Swers 2002; Thomas 1991), the shortage of working-class politicians—who tend to be more leftist on economic issues in most countries—appears to bias policy on issues like wage supports, taxation, and social

Nicholas Carnes is Assistant Professor of Public Policy and Political Science, Sanford School of Public Policy, Duke University ([nicholas.carnes@duke.edu](mailto:nicholas.carnes@duke.edu)).

Noam Lupu is Associate Professor of Political Science, Department of Political Science, Vanderbilt University ([noam.lupu@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:noam.lupu@vanderbilt.edu)).

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, we refer to a person as belonging to the *working class* (or as simply a *worker*) if he or she is employed in manual labor jobs (e.g., factory worker), service industry jobs (e.g., restaurant server), clerical jobs (e.g., receptionist), or union jobs (e.g., field organizer). Likewise, we define a person as having a white-collar job if she is not a part of the working class. Of course, there are other ways to disaggregate occupations (e.g., some people might not classify clerical jobs as working class), and other ways to measure class (e.g., education, income, wealth, family background, subjective perceptions, etc.). Most modern class analysts agree, however, that any measure of class should be rooted in occupational data, that is, information about how a person earns a living (e.g., Hout, Manza, and Brooks 1995; Weeden and Grusky 2005; Wright 1997). And the distinction between working-class jobs and white-collar jobs seems to be the major class-based dividing line in political institutions (Carnes 2012; 2013; Carnes and Lupu 2015). Lawmakers from working-class

occupational backgrounds tend to vote differently than legislators from white-collar backgrounds; however, legislators with higher net worths, more formal education, or well-to-do parents tend not to behave as differently (Carnes 2013; Carnes and Sadin 2015). There are also important differences within the working-class and white-collar categories (e.g., between manual laborers and clerical workers), of course, but the major dividing line seems to be between workers, who tend to support more interventionist economic policies, and professionals, who tend to support a more conservative role for government in economic affairs.

<sup>2</sup> There is less research on the class backgrounds of leaders in African and Asian democracies.

welfare towards the more conservative positions typically favored by affluent citizens. In the United States (Carnes 2012; 2013; Grose 2013; Griffin and Anewalt-Remsburg 2013) and in other democracies (Carnes and Lupu 2015), the economic gap between politicians and the people they represent appears to significantly tilt policy outcomes on issues of paramount significance.

Building on these findings, related research has begun to investigate the *causes* of government by the privileged. To date, however, only a handful of studies have explored this important topic, and most have focused on either the hypothesis that workers are less qualified—which has not found much empirical support—or on the idea that unions increase the numerical representation of particular occupational groups (e.g., Carnes 2013; Sojourner 2013).

In this article, we test another potential explanation for the shortage of working-class people in political office: that voters dislike working-class candidates. This hypothesis squares with psychological research suggesting that middle-class people have subtle prurich biases (e.g., Horwitz and Dovidio forthcoming), and it is often invoked in both scholarly and popular discussions about the skewed makeup of democratic institutions. Political observers often argue that “the voters tend to elect wealthy politicians” because “the electorate seems to want a mix of personality and power, but only if they come with a pedigree and bank account to match” (Abdullah 2012, 1), or that “[v]oters repeatedly reject insurrectionist candidates who parallel their own ordinariness, even candidates who vow to further the individual voter’s interests, in favor of [more affluent] candidates” (Henry 1995, 21). Why are politicians so much better off than the people they represent? One common idea is that voters simply dislike candidates from the working class.

To test this hypothesis, we conducted candidate choice experiments embedded in nationally representative surveys in Britain, the United States, and Argentina, three countries where working-class people make up a majority of the labor force but less than 5 percent of the national legislature (Carnes 2013; Carnes and Lupu 2015; Cracknell and McGuinness 2010; Office of National Statistics 2012). Using conjoint designs, we asked voters in these different contexts to choose between two hypothetical candidates, randomly varying several of the candidates’ personal characteristics, including whether they had worked in blue-collar or white-collar jobs.<sup>3</sup> This study represents the largest and most rigorous experimental analysis ever conducted on the role that voters play in the descriptive underrepresentation of the working class in the world’s democracies.

Contrary to the idea that voters prefer affluent politicians, our candidate choice experiments found that voters across these three very different countries all

viewed working-class candidates as equally qualified, more relatable, and just as likely to get their votes. Voters may not be to blame for the global phenomenon of government by the privileged. To the contrary, British, American, and Argentine voters seem perfectly willing to cast their ballots for working-class candidates.

## VOTER BIASES AND WORKING-CLASS POLITICIANS

When it comes to holding political office, the numerical or descriptive representation (Pitkin 1967) of any social group may be reduced by one of several factors. Some people from the group will not be qualified for office, either because they are not legally eligible or because they do not have the skills necessary for campaigning, governing, and performing the functions of political office. Of those who are qualified, most will choose not to seek public office, either because they lack political ambition, because they are not interested, or for some other reason. And, of those who seek office, many will lose. If a given social group is disproportionately screened out at any of these stages—if people from that group are less likely than others to be qualified, if those who are qualified are less likely to run, or if those who run are less likely to win—the group will be numerically underrepresented in public office relative to its numbers in the population as a whole.

In places where working-class citizens seldom hold political office, political observers often attribute the shortage of workers to the last stage, that is, to voters and elections. Voters prefer white-collar candidates, the argument goes, and qualified workers therefore either choose not to run for elected office as often as white-collar professionals, or qualified workers run and simply lose more often.

On its face, this line of reasoning has a certain intuitive appeal. For one, elections are sometimes responsible for keeping historically underrepresented groups out of office. Around the world, voters have often exhibited biases against female and racial or ethnic minority candidates that help to explain why so few women and minorities hold office (Aguilar, Cunow, Desposato, and Barone 2015; Citrin, Green, and Sears 1990; Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1994; Dolan 2004; Fisher et al. 2015; Fulton 2014; Horowitz 1985; Morgan and Buice 2013; Norris and Lovenduski 1995; Paxton and Hughes 2007; Philpot and Walton 2007; Sanbonmatsu 2003; Schwindt-Bayer, Malecki, and Crisp 2010; Seltzer, Newman, and Leighton 1997; Welch and Studlar 1988).<sup>4</sup> These biases appear to be fading in some contexts (Aguilar, Cunow, and Desposato 2015; Campbell and Cowley 2014b; Inglehart and Norris 2003; Lynch and Dolan 2014; McElroy and Marsh 2010; Norris, Vallance, and Lovenduski 1992; Smith and Fox 2001), but female and minority candidates have often faced discrimination in the past, and in many places they still do.

<sup>3</sup> As we explain below, this approach is a substantial improvement over the few prior studies on this topic, which have focused exclusively on the United States and have relied on either observational data or experiments in which voters only evaluate a single hypothetical candidate (Carnes 2013; Carnes and Sadin 2015; Sadin 2011).

<sup>4</sup> For useful reviews of these bodies of research, see Dolan and Sanbonmatsu (2011), Lawless (2015), and Wängnerud (2009).

It is easy to imagine that voters might exhibit similar biases against candidates from the working class. Prejudice against the less fortunate is common (Baron, Abright, and Malloy 1995; Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, and Tagler 2001; Fiske et al. 1999). And even voters who are not prejudiced per se might engage in a sort of “statistical discrimination” — that is, voters who are uncertain about a candidate’s abilities or personal qualities might make guesses based on the candidate’s economic or social class background (e.g., Darley and Gross 1983; Phelps 1972). Indeed, political philosophers have often assumed that voters prefer to be represented by the well-to-do (see Ferejohn and Rosenbluth 2009; Manin 1997). In *Federalist 35*, Alexander Hamilton wrote that “Mechanics and manufacturers will always be inclined, with few exceptions, to give their votes to merchants in preference of persons of their own professions or trades. . . . They know that the merchant is their natural patron and friend; and they are aware that. . . their interests can be more effectually promoted by the merchants than by themselves” (Hamilton 1982 [1788]: 166). If voters are prejudiced against the working class, or if they guess that working-class candidates are less qualified, or if they simply like affluent candidates better, voting and elections might indeed be responsible for the shortage of working-class people in political office.

Then again, there are also reasons to be skeptical that voters are to blame. For one, there are many other plausible explanations: voter biases are by no means *necessary* to explain the shortage of candidates from the working class. Workers might be less qualified. Those who are qualified might be less likely to run; they might have less political interest or ambition, less free time and slack income, and/or less encouragement from gatekeepers like political parties and interest groups. And these differences in qualifications or candidate entry might themselves be driven by larger structural phenomena like high campaign costs, the strength of labor unions, political party configurations, institutional rules, or the interest group landscape. Voters might help to explain why so few workers hold office, but they are not the only possible suspects: it is easy to imagine a host of factors that could be screening working-class people out of the candidate pipeline long before voters ever have a say.

There are also reasons to doubt that voters truly prefer more affluent candidates. Voters might assume that any candidate who stands for office has already been vetted by party leaders, funders, and other gatekeepers regardless of their class. And like the less fortunate, there are also prejudices and negative stereotypes about the privileged that might come into play during an election. The rich are often seen as out-of-touch, cold, and aloof (e.g., Fiske et al. 1999).

Much of what we know about elections, moreover, should give us some pause on this point. Voters tend to prefer politicians who they feel understand their problems and who share their views about public policy (e.g., Jacobson 2012). If people feel a sense of shared identity with candidates from the same social class, or if they worry that candidates from other social classes do

not understand their problems, share their concerns, or support their preferred policies, voters might not exhibit a blanket bias against working-class candidates. To the contrary, voters might be divided along ideological or social class lines — more conservative or affluent voters might tend to oppose working-class candidates, and more liberal or working-class voters might tend to support them.

For their part, candidates in many countries often behave as though they think economic or social class privilege is not an electoral slam dunk. Many work hard to downplay their advantages, sometimes going so far as to engage in what the historian Edward Pessen (1984) refers to as “poor-mouthing” — deliberately exaggerating the economic adversities they have faced. There are good reasons to suspect that voter biases might be responsible for the worldwide shortage of politicians from the working class, but there are also good reasons to doubt that voters are really to blame.

As it stands, there is little direct evidence on this question. Only a handful of studies have ever examined how voters feel about working-class candidates. And to date, all of them have focused exclusively on the United States, which raises obvious questions about whether their findings generalize to other countries where workers are similarly underrepresented.

Moreover, the few previous studies on this topic have had important methodological limitations. Some have used observational data, which suffer from obvious selection bias problems. Carnes (2013), for instance, finds that members of the U.S. Congress who spent more time in working-class jobs receive about as many votes as members who worked in white-collar professions. But it might be that members of Congress from the working class face biases at the polls but overcome them somehow: perhaps, for instance, only the very best working-class candidates run, which gives the appearance that working-class candidates do about as well as others. Other research has avoided this selection problem by asking voters to evaluate hypothetical candidates, which allows the researcher to randomize the candidate’s class while holding other candidate attributes constant. To date, however, the candidate evaluation experiments that have included working-class candidates (e.g., Sadin 2011; Carnes and Sadin 2015) have relied on experiments that ask respondents to evaluate just one hypothetical candidate, not experiments that ask respondents to choose between multiple candidates, the way voters do in real elections.<sup>5</sup> When they are not presented with other options, the voters in these studies seem comfortable with working-class candidates, but voters may behave differently when they have choices.

<sup>5</sup> Campbell and Cowley’s (2014b) recent work in Britain included an evaluation of whether voters viewed candidates from different occupations differently. However, their work compared voter attitudes about candidates from different white-collar jobs (like attorney and career politician); their study did not include a hypothetical candidate from the working class. The same was true for Hainmueller et al.’s (2014) recent work on voters in the United States; they compared hypothetical candidates from different white-collar jobs but did not include working-class candidates.

Voter biases could be responsible for the shortage of politicians from the working class, but scholars simply do not have much hard evidence on this point. To our knowledge, there have never been any studies on this topic outside of the United States, and even in the United States we know of no causally identified research on how working-class candidates perform in contested elections. If we want to know whether voter biases are responsible for the global descriptive underrepresentation of the working class, we need to start studying how voters around the world think about working-class candidates when they make choices on Election Day.

## EVIDENCE FROM CANDIDATE CHOICE EXPERIMENTS

To that end, we fielded a series of candidate choice experiments embedded in nationally representative surveys in Britain, the United States, and Argentina. The British experiment was fielded in the May/June 2014 wave of the 2015 British Election Study, a large survey administered online by YouGov UK to a representative sample of over 30,000 British citizens. Our questions were administered to a random subset of 5,552 respondents. The United States experiment was fielded in May 2015 to a random subset of 1,000 U.S. respondents in the Cooperative Congressional Election Study, a 50,000-person national stratified sample survey administered by YouGov/Polimetrix. And the Argentina experiment was fielded to 1,149 respondents in June and July of 2015 in the first wave of the 2015 Argentine Panel Election Study, a face-to-face survey administered by MBC MORI.<sup>6</sup>

Candidate choice experiments are useful because they avoid the pitfalls of examining observational data on elections, where a candidate's social class background might be correlated with many other factors that influence the results of the election. If we want to know whether voters are really biased against candidates from the working class, we need to be sure that those other factors are not confounding our analysis. Conjoint candidate choice experiments—in which researchers ask voters to choose between two hypothetical candidates, randomizing certain aspects of the candidates' backgrounds or positions—give us one way to identify the causal effect of a candidate's class on how voters evaluate the candidate (Hainmueller et al. 2014; 2015).

And Britain, the United States, and Argentina were ideal settings for carrying out these experiments. In all three countries—like in most democracies—working-class people are numerically underrepresented in political institutions by several orders of magnitude. As Table 1 shows, in the United States, working-class people make up over half of the labor force, but the average member of Congress spent less than 2 percent of his or her precongressional career in working-class jobs.

In Britain, manual labor, service industry, and clerical occupations make up roughly half of the labor force as well, but just 4 percent of Members of Parliament are drawn from similar jobs. In Argentina, only 5 percent of national Deputies in 2000–2001 came from working-class backgrounds, compared to roughly 70 percent of the general public. In all three countries, some political or social process is leading workers to be drastically underrepresented in public office.

More importantly, these three countries differ substantially in terms of socioeconomic and political factors that may condition how voters behave. As Table 1 illustrates, Argentina is a much newer democracy than Britain or the United States. The political systems of these countries run the gamut from presidential to parliamentary, majoritarian to proportional, and two-party to multiparty systems. Partly as a result of these systemic differences, these countries also use very different methods to select political candidates, which can in turn affect candidate entry and vote choice (e.g., Carey and Shugart 1995; Katz 2001; Norris 1997). While British candidates are selected almost exclusively by party leaders, political candidates in the United States typically have to win an open primary to run for office on a major party ticket, and Argentina employs a mixed system. The three countries also vary substantially in socioeconomic terms. Unionization rates are far higher in Britain and Argentina than in the United States, one likely reason that class is more politically salient in Britain and Argentina. Obviously, Argentina is also less developed in economic and human development terms. And workers are also a much larger proportion of the labor force in Argentina than in the other two countries.

Taken together, these three cases cover a wide range of the variation on these political and socioeconomic variables that might affect how voters respond to candidate' class backgrounds. If we find similar results across these very different contexts, we can be fairly confident that those results are not just unique to one country, one region, or one set of political institutions (Slater and Ziblatt 2013). We can also be confident that it is not these contextual differences that are driving our results (Gerring 2007).

Cooperative election surveys were also conducted in 2014 and 2015 in all three of these countries, which made it possible for us to carry out reliable, context-appropriate studies of voters' political attitudes. The United States, Britain, and Argentina were methodologically convenient places to conduct survey experiments, and collectively they were also a substantively ideal sample for exploring whether voter biases are behind the shortage of working-class politicians in the world's democracies.

In our candidate choice experiments, we presented survey respondents with short vignettes about two hypothetical candidates running for a local political office. Unbeknownst to the respondents, within each candidate's biography, we randomly varied four characteristics: the candidate's gender (male or female), occupation (working-class or white-collar), education level (secondary school or college in the United States

<sup>6</sup> In all of our analyses, we reweighted respondents using the weight variables created by the survey firms.

**TABLE 1. Class and Politics in Britain, the United States, and Argentina (c. 2014)**

	Britain	United States	Argentina
<b>Worker representation</b>			
Working-class proportion of adult population	50	54	73
Proportion of national legislators drawn from working class	4	2	5
<b>Political variables</b>			
Years of democracy (since 1800)	131	206	35
Political system	Parliamentary	Presidential	Presidential
Electoral system	Majoritarian	Majoritarian	Proportional
Average district magnitude, lower house	1	1	10.7
Legislative fractionalization	0.62	0.49	0.77
Candidate selection	Party	Open primary	Mixed <sup>†</sup>
<b>Socioeconomic context</b>			
Economic development (ranking)	23	11	51
Human Development Index (ranking)	14	8	40
Unionization rate	25.4	10.8	28.9

*Sources:* Carnes 2013; Carnes and Lupu 2015; Cracknell and McGuinness 2010; Database of Political Institutions; International Labour Organization; Office of National Statistics 2012; OECD; Polity IV; United Nations Development Programme.

*Notes:* Years of democracy is measured as the total number of years with a Polity score greater than 5. Some of the figures for Britain refer to the entire United Kingdom.

<sup>†</sup>Since 2009, Argentina has held mandatory primary elections. Primary candidates for executive offices appear individually, but legislative primaries are contested by competing lists drawn up by party officials.

and Britain<sup>7</sup>; primary school or secondary school in Argentina), and party affiliation (Labour or Conservative in Britain; Democrat or Republican in the United States; Peronist (PJ) or Radical (UCR) in Argentina). In the United States version of the study, we also varied each candidate's race (white or black) and the office the two candidates were competing for (city council, state legislature, mayor, or governor). And in the Argentina version of the experiment, we varied the amount of prior political experience the candidate had (no experience or three years holding an appointed office). The complete text of the three experiments is provided in the Appendix.<sup>8</sup>

In our conjoint experimental design, we randomly varied each of these attributes independently for each of the two candidates.<sup>9</sup> This allowed us to simultaneously measure (and compare) the independent effect

<sup>7</sup> Of course, respondents who hear that a candidate completed secondary school could still wrongly infer that the candidate later went on to complete college (and that the vignette simply omitted that information), thereby obscuring any effects of education. To check that this was not affecting our findings, we reran our main models for the United States and Britain using only cases in which the two candidates had different education levels (and in which respondents are therefore most likely to interpret the experimental manipulation on education the way we intended). The results—reported in Table A9 in the Online Appendix—were substantively similar to our main findings.

<sup>8</sup> The nonrandomized text in each experiment was not exactly symmetric across candidates (e.g., in Britain, the first candidate's last name was always Simmons, and the second candidate's last name was always Allen). These nonsymmetric profiles more closely mirror the real world of campaigns (when voters learn demographic information about candidates, it is usually nested in larger narratives that usually are not symmetric, which we have tried to mimic here) but do not affect our estimates (since each trait—e.g., being a factory worker—was equally likely to be randomly assigned to each profile).

<sup>9</sup> In other words, the Britain experiment had eight random variables (four characteristics for each candidate), the United States experiment had 11 (five characteristics for each candidate plus the level of

of each characteristic (Hainmueller et al. 2014). That is, by randomizing each candidate's occupational background *and* the candidate's gender, education, party, race (United States only), and experience (Argentina only), we can compare the effect of having a working-class job to the effect of being a woman, more educated, a Tory/Republican/Radical, a black candidate (United States only), and a novice politician (Argentina only). Moreover, by randomizing each attribute independently, we could ensure that our respondents were not conflating different attributes, e.g., that respondents hearing about a business owner were not inferring (or being told) that she was a Republican, too.

After showing respondents the two candidate vignettes, we then asked four questions: (1) which candidate the respondents would vote for, (2) which candidate they would expect to be more leftist, (3) which candidate they thought better understood the problems facing people like themselves, and (4) which candidate they thought was more qualified for political office.<sup>10</sup> Above all, we were most interested in knowing whether respondents were more likely to vote for a candidate who was randomly portrayed as coming from a working-class job or a white-collar job. Political observers routinely argue that working-class citizens seldom hold office because voters prefer more affluent candidates (and would-be candidates know it). Our subsequent questions also allowed us to measure the effect of class on three other important aspects of

office), and the Argentina experiment had 10 (five characteristics for each candidate).

<sup>10</sup> Specifically, the questions asked, "If you had to make a choice without knowing more, which of the two do you think you would be more likely to vote for?", "Which of the two would you guess is more left-wing?", "Which of the two would you guess better understands the problems facing people like you?", and "Which of the two would you guess is more qualified for local office?"

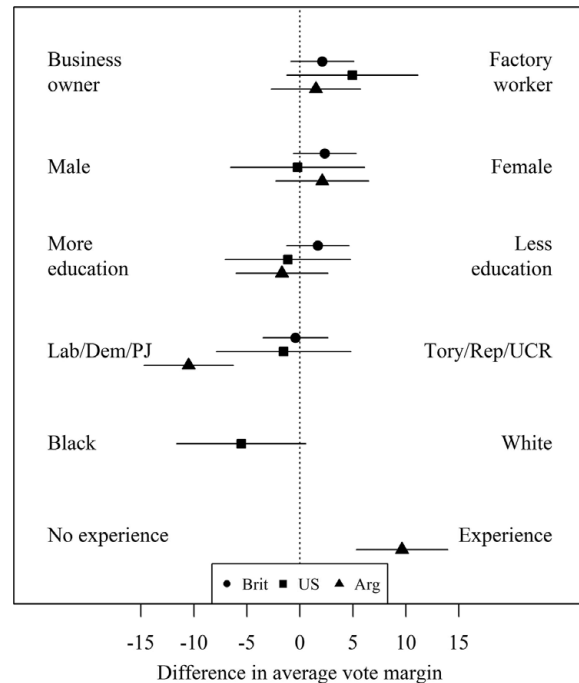
voters' opinions: how they perceive a candidate's ideological orientation, whether voters think a candidate cares about their concerns, and whether they think a candidate is qualified to hold political office.<sup>11</sup>

## DO VOTERS DISLIKE WORKING-CLASS CANDIDATES?

Were citizens in Britain, the United States, and Argentina more likely to vote for white-collar candidates? And how exactly did they think white-collar and working-class candidates differ? To find out, we treated each hypothetical candidate in each experiment (that is, two candidates for every one survey respondent) as a unique case, following the recommendation of Hainmueller et al. (2014).<sup>12</sup> We then estimated ordinary least squares regression models<sup>13</sup> relating our outcome variables—for instance, whether a candidate got the respondent's vote—to indicators for whether the candidate was randomly assigned to be a worker, a woman, less educated, a Tory/Republican/Radical, black (in the United States), or an experienced politician (in Argentina). (Because each candidate was nested within a two-person election, we used standard errors clustered by election.)

Figure 1 plots the difference in the probability that a typical citizen in Britain, the United States, and Argentina would vote for a candidate described as a business owner and a (on average otherwise identical) candidate described as a factory worker (the first set of dots). For comparison, the figure also plots the difference when the candidate was described as a woman versus a man, more versus less educated, a member of the Labour/Democratic/Peronist Party versus the Conservative/Republican/Radical Party, white versus black (in the United States), or a political novice versus an experienced politician (in Argentina). (Table A1 in the Online Appendix reports the complete results from the models these figures are based on.)<sup>14</sup>

**FIGURE 1. Candidate Characteristics and Voting in Britain, the United States, and Argentina**



*Sources:* 2015 British Election Study, 2015 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, 2015 Argentina Panel Election Study. *Notes:* Values represent the difference in respondents' propensity for supporting a hypothetical candidate based on the candidate's occupation, gender, education, party, race (United States only), and experience (Argentina only). Lines represent the 95% confidence interval estimated using standard errors clustered by unique election. Estimates are based on ordinary least squares regression models reported in Table A1 in the Online Appendix.  $N = 7,558$  (Britain), 1,356 (United States), and 2,000 (Argentina).

Many of the findings in Figure 1 were not surprising (and helped increase our confidence in our research design). Candidates described as having more experience were more likely to get votes. Argentine voters were unenthusiastic about the UCR; Peronist candidates tended to do better. Consistent with recent studies showing that gender and racial biases are declining or nonexistent in many modern elections (Aguilar, Cunow, and Desposato 2015; Campbell and Cowley

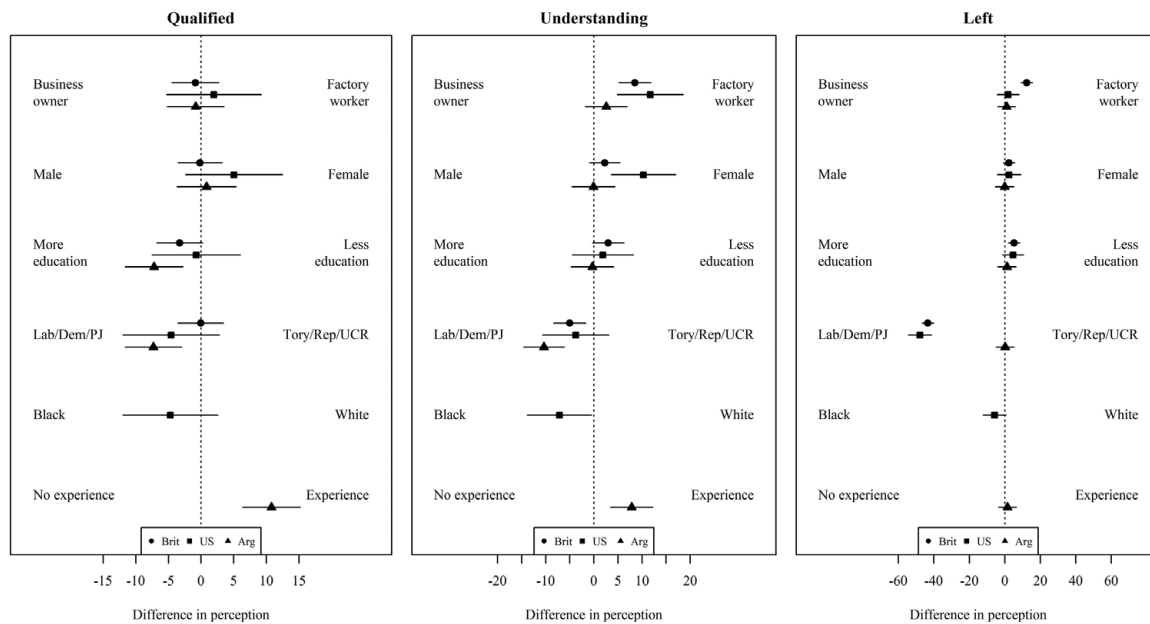
<sup>11</sup> Our Argentina experiment also asked respondents, "Which of the two would you guess is more corrupt?" Argentine voters did not evaluate candidates from the working class differently on this item (see Table A4 in the Online Appendix). Since the question was only asked in Argentina, we do not include it in the figures below.

<sup>12</sup> Our results were similar when we treated elections as the unit of analysis, rather than candidates. Consistent with our findings in Figure 1, in hypothetical elections that pitted a working-class candidate against a white-collar candidate, respondents reported that they were more likely to vote for the worker 53 percent of the time in our British study, 54 percent of the time in our U.S. study, and 51 percent of the time in our Argentina study (excluding respondents who said "don't know").

<sup>13</sup> Our main results were substantively identical when we switched from ordinary least squares regressions to logistic regression models (see Table A10 in the Online Appendix).

<sup>14</sup> Following Hainmueller et al. (2014), we conducted several diagnostic checks on our experiments. To check for *profile order effects*, we reran our analysis interacting each candidate characteristic with a variable indicating whether the candidate appeared first or second (see Table A11 in the Online Appendix). Only the positive effect of past experience seems partly to be an artifact of profile order. We also verified *random assignment* by regressing some respondent demographics (gender, age, and education) on the candidate characteristics they received (see Table A12 in the Online Appendix). And

we checked for *atypical profiles* effects, which we discuss below in more detail, in Table A8 in the Online Appendix. The other diagnostic checks described in Hainmueller et al. (2014) were not applicable to this research design: our study could not exhibit *carryover effects* (since our experiments presented each respondent with only one pair of candidates, not multiple back-to-back pairs as in Hainmueller et al. 2014), and we could not test for *attribute order effects* the way Hainmueller et al. (2014) proposed (since our experiments use a pair of fixed-format vignettes, not tables listing candidate attributes side by side in a random order), nor do we expect attribute order effects to bias our results (since respondents had to read through all of the attributes of the first candidate, then separately read through all of the attributes of the second).

**FIGURE 2. Do Voters View Candidates Differently Based on their Backgrounds?**

*Source:* 2015 British Election Study, 2015 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, 2015 Argentina Panel Election Study. *Notes:* In each panel, values represent the difference in respondents' perception of a hypothetical candidate based on the candidate's occupation, gender, education, party, race (United States only), and experience (Argentina only). Lines represent the 95% confidence interval estimated using standard errors clustered by unique election. Estimates are based on ordinary least squares regression models reported in Table A2 in the Online Appendix. Panel 1:  $N = 5,438$  (Britain), 1,022 (United States), and 1,916 (Argentina). Panel 2:  $N = 6,208$  (Britain), 1,152 (United States), and 1,968 (Argentina). Panel 3:  $N = 5,814$  (Britain), 940 (United States), and 1,476 (Argentina).

2014b; Lynch and Dolan 2014; McElroy and Marsh 2010), female candidates tended to do about as well as male candidates and (in the United States) black candidates performed (nonsignificantly) better than white candidates. Consistent with research finding few differences between candidates with more and less education (Campbell and Cowley 2014b; Carnes and Lupu 2016), candidates with more formal education fared about as well as those with less.

For our purposes, however, the most striking feature of Figure 1 was how unremarkable working-class candidates seemed. The average respondent in Britain and Argentina was essentially indifferent about candidates from the working class and candidates from white-collar jobs. The average U.S. respondent was actually slightly more likely to prefer the working-class candidates in our experiments over the white-collar ones (although the gap was just shy of conventional levels of statistical significance).<sup>15</sup> In sharp contrast to the idea that voters prefer affluent candidates, citizens in these three democracies did not seem to be even remotely biased against working-class candidates.

They clearly noticed candidates from the working class, however—and it affected how they perceived

some things about them. The left panel in Figure 2 plots the probability that a survey respondent would rate a given candidate more qualified for office, again averaging across candidates who were described as business owners or factory workers, men or women, more or less educated, members of the two parties, white or black (in the United States), and experienced candidates or novices (in Argentina). The middle and right panels in Figure 2 likewise depict the probability that respondents would rate a given candidate more likely to understand the problems facing people like themselves and the probability that respondents expect a given candidate to be more left wing.

On these important measures of voters' impressions, candidates from the working class did well. Voters in all three countries were almost exactly as likely to rate a business owner and a factory worker as qualified to hold office—the effect of the candidate's class was statistically insignificant and substantively miniscule. In Britain (where class consciousness is stronger), voters were significantly more likely to see working-class candidates as leftist. And in sharp contrast to the idea that voters prefer more affluent candidates, voters in the United States and Britain were significantly more likely to see a hypothetical candidate from the working class as someone who understood the problems facing people like themselves. On this last point, the effect of class in the United States and Britain was larger than

<sup>15</sup> As Figure 3 shows, what really seemed to drive vote choice was whether the candidate shared the respondent's party affiliation and had prior political experience.

the effect of gender, education, race, experience, or even political party. Far from being a liability or a mark of incompetence, being a candidate from the working class appears to have complex—and sometimes highly positive—effects on voters' perceptions.

Other candidate characteristics also predicted sensible differences in Figure 2. Voters in Britain saw candidates with less formal education as slightly less qualified for office, slightly more likely to understand their problems, and slightly more leftist. In Britain and the United States, voters saw candidates from the more leftist political party as more likely to be left wing. Unsurprisingly, it was more difficult for Argentine voters to guess a candidate's ideology from her party affiliation (see Lupu 2014; 2016). And consistent with recent research that finds little voter discrimination against women, a candidate's gender did not have significant negative effects on any of the variables we examined in Figures 1 or 2; to the contrary, in the United States, female candidates were seen as more understanding.

Of course, if voters see working-class candidates as more leftist (as British voters did), the effect on their ultimate vote choice will probably depend on whether the voters are themselves more leftist. In Figure 3 below, we replicated Figure 1—which examined differences in whether respondents said they would vote for each candidate—this time, splitting each country's respondents by their own stated party affiliations. That is, the top panel presents results among respondents who identified with the Labour Party in Britain, the Democratic Party in the United States, or the Peronist Party in Argentina; and the bottom panel presents results among respondents who identified with the Conservative Party, the Republican Party, or the Radical Party.<sup>16</sup>

Not surprisingly, when we limited our attention to respondents from just one political party,<sup>17</sup> they tended to enormously favor candidates from their own party over candidates from the other.<sup>18</sup> Strikingly, however, separating voters by party did little to change our finding that voters do not dislike candidates from the working class. Conservative voters in Britain, Republican voters in the United States, and Radical voters in Argentina were slightly less likely to say that they would vote for a candidate described as a factory worker, but the

difference was never statistically significant (even in sizeable experimental samples of over 300 Republicans and 2,300 Tories). And left party respondents in the United States and Britain were significantly *more* likely to report that they would vote for a working-class candidate—Labour voters were five percentage points more likely, and Democrats in the United States were ten percentage points more likely to say that they would vote for a candidate who was randomly described as a factory worker. Far from being an electoral liability, in our survey experiment, working-class candidates seem to do fine with right party supporters and especially well with left party supporters.

To check that these findings were genuine, we also carried out several additional robustness tests. In Britain, we were able to subset respondents by their own occupations. White-collar respondents were about as likely to vote for working-class candidates; working-class respondents were somewhat more likely to vote for them (see Table A5 in the Online Appendix). In the United States, we randomized the level of the office the hypothetical candidates were running for. Whether the survey respondent was asked about a race for city council, mayor, state legislator, or governor, we never found a substantively large or statistically significant bias against working-class candidates (see Table A6 in the Online Appendix). In the U.S. experiment we also asked respondents not just which candidate they were most likely to vote for, but how likely they were to vote for them (extremely likely, very likely, somewhat likely, not too likely, or not likely at all). The effects of candidate attributes on these ordinal scales were very similar to our results with the dichotomous vote choice question (see Table A7 in the Online Appendix).

We also reran our main vote choice models with three additional modifications. First, we recoded our dependent variable so that respondents who said they were “not sure” which candidate they preferred took an intermediate value (0) between supporting a candidate (1) and opposing her (−1).<sup>19</sup> In a second analysis, we focused only on respondents who were presented with working-class candidates who were also less educated men (a common way that workers are depicted in the media; in the United States, we focused in particular on white men) and white-collar candidates who had more formal education (but who could be either male or female and, in the United States, either white or black). That is, we excluded *atypical candidate profiles* that might not conform to social class stereotypes—e.g., college-educated female factory workers—which might make the experiment seem artificial to some survey respondents. In a final robustness check, we limited our analysis to respondents who were given a choice between two candidates with different class backgrounds (that is, excluding cases in which both candidates were either business owners or factory workers). None of these changes altered our basic findings (see Table A8 in the Online Appendix). Even when we modified

<sup>16</sup> Only 60 respondents in the Argentine sample identified with the Radical Party—the result of that party's national collapse in the early 2000s (see Lupu 2016)—so our estimates for that group are quite imprecise.

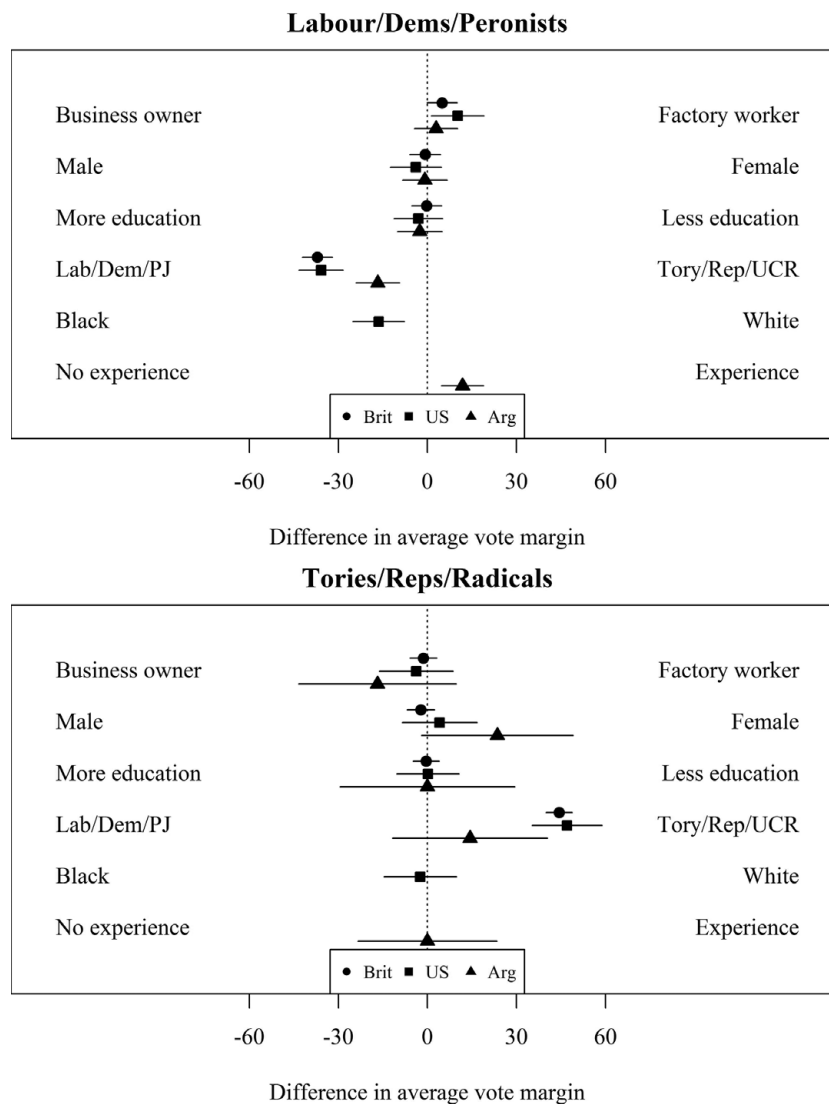
<sup>17</sup> We identify partisans using the standard item employed in each study. In Britain, the question asked, “Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat or what?” In the United States, the question asked, “Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Democrat, a Republican, an Independent or what?” In Argentina, the question asked, “Setting aside which party you voted for in the last election and which party you plan to vote for in the next election, in general, do you identify with a particular political party?” In Argentina, we coded as Peronists those respondents who said they identified with Peronism, the Justicialist Party, the Front for Victory, or the Renovation Front.

<sup>18</sup> This also reassures us that the null findings in Figures 1 and 2 are not the result of respondents simply not paying attention to the vignettes.

<sup>19</sup> In our main analysis, we used a simple vote choice indicator and treated respondents who said “not sure” as missing data.



**FIGURE 3. Candidate Characteristics and Voting, by Respondent Partisanship**



Sources: 2015 British Election Study, 2015 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, 2015 Argentina Panel Election Study. Notes: Values represent the difference in respondents' propensity for supporting a hypothetical candidate based on the candidate's occupation, gender, education, party, race (United States only), and experience (Argentina only). Lines represent the 95% confidence interval estimated using standard errors clustered by unique election. Estimates are based on ordinary least squares regression models reported in Table A3 in the Online Appendix. Panel 1: N = 2,390 (Britain), 578 (United States), and 694 (Argentina). Panel 2: N = 2,326 (Britain), 300 (United States), and 60 (Argentina).

our analysis, voters seemed perfectly willing to support working-class political candidates.

Together, these findings also helped assure us that our main result—that voters are just as likely to cast their ballots for hypothetical working-class candidates—was not simply an artifact of respondents overlooking the information we provided about each candidate's social class or not paying attention to our vignettes more generally (e.g., Berinsky, Margolis, and Sances 2014). Respondents seemed to notice a candidate's class in many of our analyses: voters in the United States and Britain saw workers as more likely

to understand their problems (Figure 2, center panel), voters in Britain saw working-class candidates as more leftist (Figure 2, right panel), Labour and Democratic voters in Britain and the United States were significantly more likely to vote for a working-class candidate (Figure 3, top panel), and working-class respondents in Britain were significantly more likely to say they would vote for working-class candidates (Table A5 in the Online Appendix). We did not have access to “screener” questions or other attention checks in our online surveys in Britain and the United States, but our experiments in those countries yielded the

same general findings as our experiment in Argentina, which was conducted in a face-to-face survey (where attention is less of a problem). Voters seemed to be paying attention to our vignettes and seemed to notice candidates' social classes. They simply did not seem to weigh class all that heavily when deciding how to vote.

Across all of the outcomes and subgroups we considered, working-class candidates simply seemed unremarkable—and sometimes seemed to do slightly better than white-collar candidates. In sharp contrast to the idea that voters dislike candidates from the working class, voters in Britain, the United States, and Argentina seemed perfectly willing to cast their ballots for them.

### VOTERS AND THE DESCRIPTIVE UNDERREPRESENTATION OF THE WORKING CLASS

Political observers often argue that the shortage of working-class people in political institutions reflects the will of the voters. As one comment in response to an online article documenting class-based inequalities in office-holding in the United States scolded, “we have this little problem called free elections. . . . I just don't see any way you can do any 'bias correction' that doesn't violate the constitution [sic].”<sup>20</sup>

That idea has wide reach and an understandable intuitive appeal. In political systems where voters are free to choose just about anyone to hold office, if the working class is numerically underrepresented in public office, is that not just an expression of what voters want?

Although the argument seems sensible on its face, a closer look at the evidence suggests that voters themselves may not be responsible for the shortage of workers. In the first-ever experimental study of whether voters choose candidates from the working class in competitive races—and the first study on this topic conducted outside of the United States—we find that voters in Britain, the United States, and Argentina viewed working-class candidates as equally qualified, more relatable, and just as likely to get their votes. Contrary to the idea that voters prefer affluent politicians, these findings suggest that the shortage of working-class people in political offices in these countries—and probably elsewhere—may not be an expression of the popular will after all. Across very different contexts—majoritarian and proportional electoral systems, places where unions are more or less widespread—our results are remarkably consistent. Something important is keeping workers out of office in these countries—they are numerically underrepresented by 45 to 65 percentage points in each country—but it does not appear to be voters.

Of course, our study used data from surveys in just three countries. And our experiments also compared just two occupations. We need more research to ensure that the patterns documented in this article are not limited to the specific countries and occupations we chose. And although asking voters about hypothetical candidates allowed us to control confounding factors, our results were still based on simulated choices, not real ones, and on reading vignettes, not exposure to the many messages, cues, and signals voters receive in actual campaigns. The case is far from closed on this question, and in future work we intend to study more countries—less industrialized contexts, less polarized party systems, and newer democracies—as well as a wider range of occupations (e.g., Campbell and Cowley 2014a; 2014b; Hainmueller et al. 2014). We also intend to use more data, including experiments that more closely mimic real elections and observational data on how actual candidates perform.

Even so, this study has important implications for scholars interested in why there are so few working-class people in political office in democracies around the world. Any given social group will tend to be numerically underrepresented in public office if people from that group are less likely to be qualified, less likely to run, or less likely to win. The findings presented in this article suggest that winning may not be the determining factor for the working class.

This finding suggests that scholars interested in the shortage of working-class people in public office may benefit from shifting their attention to the earlier stages of the candidate entry process, as scholars of women's representation began doing over a decade ago (e.g., Crowder-Meyer 2010; Lawless and Fox 2005; 2012; Niven 1998; Pimlott 2010; Sanbonmatsu 2002; 2006). Voter biases undoubtedly help to explain the shortage of some social groups in some times and places, but they have seldom been the whole story. Research on the shortage of women and other social groups in public office quickly moved its focus from voters to other potential explanations; research on the working class may do well to follow suit.

For instance, workers may not be less likely to win elections, but they might *believe* they are less likely to win—and therefore choose not to run. Pundits and reporters often argue that voters prefer affluent candidates. By doing so, they may be giving would-be candidates from the working class the faulty impression that they would not stand a chance, discouraging them from running in races they might actually win. This study's findings suggest that voters themselves are not keeping working-class citizens out of office, but elite perceptions of voters may be part of the explanation.

A host of other factors may matter, too: resources like time and money, attitudes like cynicism and efficacy, encouragement by political gatekeepers, institutional rules, organized interest groups, political parties, and so on. If we want to know why the world is run by politicians who are much more affluent than the people they represent, there are still many possible explanations we need to consider. But voter biases probably are not chief among them.

<sup>20</sup> Available online from < <http://fivethirtyeight.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/12/social-status-ofmembers-of-congress-shifts-policy-toward-rich/> > (December 21, 2011).

## APPENDIX: EXPERIMENT WORDING

### Great Britain vignettes

Suppose you were asked to choose between two candidates for a local political office.

[John / Jane] Simmons is a [business owner / factory worker] who has lived in your town for 20 years. [He / She] [graduated from university / completed secondary school] and is a member of the [Labour Party / Conservative Party]. Simmons was appointed to a position in the local government three years ago, and has been endorsed by several local political organizations and newspapers. [His / Her] campaign has focused on the problems facing local schools, in particular a shortage of qualified teachers.

[Nigel / Emma] Allen is a [business owner / factory worker] who grew up in your town. [He / She] [graduated from university / completed secondary school] and is a member of the [Labour Party / Conservative Party]. Allen has worked in local government for the last five years, and is widely respected in the community for [his / her] volunteer work for several prominent local charities. [His / Her] campaign has stressed the importance of improving local waste management services, like sewers and garbage pickup.

### US vignettes

Suppose you were asked to choose between two candidates for [city council / mayor / state legislature / governor].

[John / Jane] Simmons is a [black / white] [business owner / factory worker] who has lived in your town for 20 years. [He / She] [graduated from college / started working after high school] and is a member of the [Democratic Party / Republican Party]. Simmons was appointed to a position in the local government three years ago, and has been endorsed by several local political organizations and newspapers. [His / Her] campaign has focused on the problems facing local schools, in particular a shortage of qualified teachers.

[Tom / Tammy] Allen is a [black / white] [business owner / factory worker] who grew up in your town. [He / She] [graduated from college / started working after high school] and is a member of the [Democratic Party / Republican Party]. Allen has worked in local government for the last five years, and is widely respected in the community for [his / her] volunteer work for several prominent local charities. [His / Her] campaign has stressed the importance of improving local infrastructure, like roads and highways.

### Argentina vignettes

Imagine that you are voting in an election for mayor with two candidates.

[Juan / María] Alberti is a [business owner / factory worker] who has lived in your neighborhood for 20 years. [He / She] [finished high school / did not finish high school] and considers [himself / herself] a [Peronist / Radical]. Alberti [has no prior political experience / was appointed to a position in the municipality three years ago] and is close to local political organizations. [His / Her] campaign has focused on the problems facing schools in the neighborhood, particularly the shortage of teachers.

[José / Valeria] Jiménez is a [business owner / factory worker] who has lived in your neighborhood for 20 years. [He / She] [finished high school / did not finish high school] and considers [himself / herself] a [Peronist / Radical]. Jiménez [has not been involved in politics up until now / has been working in the municipality for five years] and is highly respected in the neighborhood for [his / her] volunteer work with several organizations. [His / her] campaign has focused on the importance of improving local sewers and garbage pickup.

## SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055416000551>.

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