

Economic Inequality and White-collar Government

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If millionaires were a political party, that party would make up just three percent of American families (Deloitte 2011), but would have a filibuster-proof super-majority in the U.S. Senate (Center for Responsive Politics 2012). If working-class Americans—those in manual labor and service industry jobs—were a political party, that party would have made up more than half of the country since the start of the 20th century, but would never have held more than two percent of the seats in Congress during that time (Carnes 2012a).

Congress is arguably the most extreme example of what I call white-collar government—political institutions made up of people who are significantly better off than the citizens they represent—but it is by no means alone. In every level and branch of government in the United States, our policymakers tend to be vastly more privileged than the rest of us: they are wealthier, more educated, and more likely to have come from a white-collar job. Even at the local level, the makeup of our political institutions is sharply slanted. Fewer than ten percent of city council members come from the working-class occupations that make up a majority of our labor force.

Class-imbalanced political institutions have always been a sore spot in scholarly thought about democratic government. Political scientists (Matthews 1954) and sociologists (Mills 1956; Domhoff 1967) have been speculating about their effects for decades. Political theorists have been talking about them even longer (Aristotle [350 BC] 1953). During the ratification of the U.S. Constitution, debates about the consequences of government by the upper class grew so intense that Madison and Hamilton eventually had to devote significant portions of *The Federalist Papers* to arguments about how the Constitution would restrain lawmakers' impulses towards class-based factionalism (Federalist #10) and how a white-collar government could still represent the interests of working-class citizens (Federalist #35)—how, as Hamilton put it, “the merchant [would] understand and be disposed to cultivate . . . the interests of the mechanic and manufacturing arts to which his commerce is so nearly allied.”

Although it's easy to understand the appeal of the old idea that politicians pursue the common good regardless of their personal stakes in issues of the day, research on how legislators actually think and behave hasn't been kind to Hamilton's hypothesis. Quite the contrary: the data suggest that, like the rest of us (Hout 2008), lawmakers from different classes tend to think, vote, and advocate very differently, especially on the economic issues that have historically divided Americans along social class lines (Carnes 2011; 2012). Former lawyers in public office tend to think like lawyers, former farmers tend to think like farmers, former blue-collar workers tend to think like blue-collar workers, and so on. As House Speaker John Boehner said while campaigning in 2010, “I'm a small businessman at heart. Always will be. . . . [I]t gave me a perspective on our country that I've carried with me throughout my time in public service.”

Merchants and mechanics, it turns out, have different views about the government's role in economic affairs.

These differences have been remarkably stable over time and across different levels of government. Even controlling for party, constituency, and a host of other factors, lawmakers from the working class tend to be more progressive on economic issues—that is, less pro-business and more pro-worker—than lawmakers from white-collar jobs and especially those from the private sector, who tend to bring more conservative economic views to office. These differences in perspective in turn have enormous consequences for economic policy. Business regulations are more relaxed, tax policies are more generous to the rich, social safety net programs are thinner, and protections for workers are weaker than they would be if our political decision makers came from the same mix of classes as the people they represent. Government *by* the upper class is often government *for* the upper class.

And government for the upper class may be part of the explanation for the enormous increase in economic inequality in the United States since the 1970s. After World War II, forces like globalization, de-industrialization, and technological change created tremendous pressure for wealth and income to concentrate in the hands of the most privileged Americans. The legislators who crafted the political response to these changes, however, were drawn overwhelmingly from the classes that stood to benefit from this seismic upward shift in economic resources. Our political institutions probably would have done more to fight inequality if the classes that suffer when inequality rises had had a seat at the table. Class-balanced state legislatures and city councils probably would have directed more of their resources to social safety net programs. A Congress where working-class people made up their fair share of seats probably wouldn't have passed policies that made inequality worse, like the 2001 Bush Tax Cuts (Carnes 2011, ch. 5). Many other political factors were certainly important as well, including party politics (Bartels 2008, ch. 2), the decline of unions (Western and Rosenfeld 2011), and changes in the pressure system in Washington (Hacker and Pierson 2010). But imbalances in the social class makeup of government also played an important (and often overlooked) role. In an age of soaring inequality, our white-collar government often sat on its hands—and sometimes made matters worse.

These arguments—which essentially boil down to a claim that political power affects a group's economic well-being—will come as no surprise to students of political sociology. Marshall ([1950] 1992) argued over five decades ago that a group's political rights, including holding office, were an important step towards social rights and material well-being.

What might be more surprising—and potentially troubling—is the possibility that economic inequality may be undermining the working class's political power, that the slow progress that Marshall anticipated from civil and political rights to material security and dignity may actually be reversing for blue-collar Americans. As inequality rises, the path to public office (and, therefore, the path to the kind of influence needed to combat rising inequality) may be getting harder for working-class citizens. As American workers lose ground economically, they may also be losing ground politically.

It was never easy for working-class citizens to run for office, but as wealth becomes more concentrated and as campaign spending becomes more lavish, the odds against candidates of normal means are becoming steeper and steeper. Marshall was acutely aware of the possibility that “wealth can be used to influence an election,” but he was unconcerned about it in mid-twentieth-century England, where “a series of measures was adopted to reduce this influence” and where “working-class candidates [could] get financial support from party and other funds” (230). In twenty-first-century America, campaign donations and campaign spending are at all-time highs. Working-class citizens struggled to get elected when unions were strong, campaigns were cheap (by today’s standards), and parties had more clout in the electoral process. As wealth becomes more concentrated—and as the legal and political environments become more favorable to mega-spending by candidates and interest groups—working-class people are finding it harder than ever to get elected. The erosion of blue-collar Americans’ economic resources and political influence may be creating a sort of positive feedback loop: working-class people seldom hold office, so government lets economic inequality skyrocket, which makes it harder for working-class people to hold office

This vicious cycle isn’t invincible, however. Although scholars don’t know much about the factors that discourage working-class people from holding office (Is it a difference in ambition? free time? recruitment by political gatekeepers?), what little we know is very encouraging. There are at least as many capable, politically-engaged blue-collar Americans as there are politically qualified white-collar people (Carnes 2012b). And when they can muster the resources to run for office, working-class candidates tend to do well at the polls (Sadin 2012). Trailblazing efforts by labor unions in New Jersey and Connecticut have shown that qualified potential candidates from the working class can be identified, recruited to run for office, and supported in their campaigns at a relatively low cost using many of the resources that working-class organizations already have: membership networks, newsletters, candidate endorsements, and so on. When it comes to helping working-class Americans hold office, a little outreach seems to go a long way.

Programs like these are a rare bright spot in the recent history of working-class representation, and expanding them will probably be, as Marshall said of most efforts to promote the rights of the less fortunate, “a slow and difficult process, which presupposes a change in the climate of thought throughout the upper ranks of society.” People who care about the upper class’s oversized influence in American political life are currently fixated on two culprits: inequalities in routine forms of political participation like voting or contacting elected officials (e.g., “If we could get the working class to vote more, they would have more of a voice in government”) and, more often, lobbying and campaign donations from well-heeled interest groups. (The day I wrote this paragraph, Paul Krugman published an op-ed that made exactly this familiar argument: “money buys power,” he wrote, “and the increasing wealth of a tiny minority has effectively bought the allegiance of one of our two major political parties”). These are both extremely important points, and addressing them would undoubtedly bring us closer to the ideal of government that represents everyone’s needs and interests. But even if we somehow equalized routine forms of political participation, even if we somehow stopped wealthy special interests from buying political influence, the laws that affect how millionaires are taxed would still be decided in political institutions made up of mostly millionaires. The laws that govern blue-collar workers’ wages, bargaining power, health care, and workplace safety would still be made by

white-collar professionals. We would still be led by a white-collar government, and public policy would still be skewed in favor of the interests of white-collar Americans.

Those of us who care about economic and political inequality need to start talking about the underrepresentation of the working class in public office—and we need to start asking what we can do about it. If we don't, the millionaire party's policies will probably keep it in office for a very long time.

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