

Debate

White-Collar Government in the United States

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If millionaires in the United States formed their own political party, that party would make up just three percent of the country, but it would have a majority in the House of Representatives, a filibuster-proof super-majority in the Senate, a 5:4 majority on the Supreme Court, and a man in the White House. If working-class Americans—people employed 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 twentieth century. But legislators from that party (those who last worked in blue-collar jobs before getting into politics) would never have held more than two percent of the seats in Congress.

In the last few years, scholars of US politics have started taking a renewed interest in what I call *white-collar government*,¹ the disproportionate numerical representation of wealthy people and white-collar professionals in our political institutions. Political scientists are once again asking how government by the upper class affects public policy in the United States. And they're starting to ask why our representative process consistently gives us such economically unrepresentative slates of politicians.

Government by the Privileged in the United States

By virtually any measure of class or social attainment, the average policy maker in the United States is vastly better off than the average citizen. The size of the social gap between citizens and their representatives varies somewhat across different political institutions and depends in part on how we measure class or economic standing. In general, though, politicians tend to be drawn overwhelmingly from the top strata of American society.

For example, members of Congress—the branch of the federal government often touted as most closely reflecting the nation's diversity—are considerably more privileged than the people who elect them. Lawyers and business owners make up approximately 10 percent of the population but constitute at least half of both chambers. Almost every member today is a college graduate, a distinction held by just one in three Americans (Ruggles et al. 2009). And the median net worth of members of Congress is approximately \$1.5 million (Center for Responsive Politics 2014), roughly eleven times the median net worth of American families.

These imbalances are by no means recent developments (e.g., Domhoff 1967; Matthews 1954a; 1954b; 1985; Mills 1956; Pessen 1984; Zeller 1954). They have persisted, moreover,

¹ Scholars of comparative politics have, too: In this debate, see Lupu's contribution on Latin America; Pilotti and Lloren, Rosset, and Wuest's on Switzerland; and Hakhverdian's essay on the Netherlands.

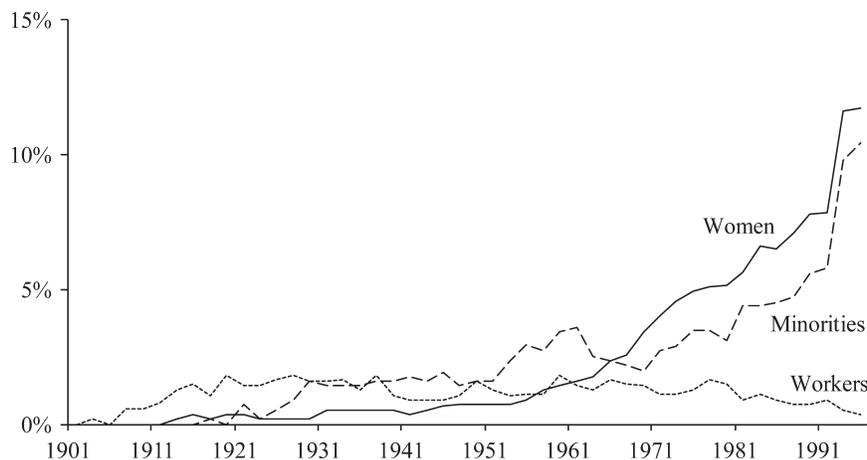
even as other underrepresented groups have begun to break through the glass ceiling. Figure 1 plots the percentage of members of Congress who served between 1901 and 1996 who were women, racial or ethnic minorities, and who were from the working class (that is, who last worked as manual laborers, service industry workers, or union officials before entering politics). Although women and minorities were still underrepresented at the end of the twentieth century, both groups gained considerable ground during the postwar period. In sharp contrast, working-class Americans—who have made up more than half of the labor force for at least the last hundred years (even after that Information Revolution of the late-20th century)—have never held more than two percent of the seats in Congress.

This long-standing feature of American political life doesn't seem to be going anywhere any time soon. Data on the makeup of state and local institutions—which tend to foreshadow demographic changes in national offices—suggest that, if anything, working-class representation may decline even further in the short term. In state legislatures, for instance, women's representation skyrocketed from 8 percent to 24 percent between 1976 and 2007, and the share of lawmakers who were Black or Latino grew from 9 percent to 11 percent. During the same period, the share of state legislators from blue-collar jobs fell from 5 percent to 3 percent (National Conference of State Legislatures 2011). The path to political office has always been difficult for the working class, and it doesn't seem to be getting any easier.

So What?

The Framers of the U.S. Constitution were skeptical about the importance of a politician's economic or social class background. In *Federalist #35*, Alexander Hamilton defended government by the privileged (see, for instance, Lewis 1961; Manin 1997), arguing that blue-collar workers “know that the merchant is their natural patron and friend; and they are aware that however great the confidence they may justly feel in their own good sense, their interests can be more effectually promoted by the merchant than by themselves.” Why should it matter whether the people who represent us come from one background or another? Workers and business owners both want economic prosperity, so what's the harm in letting the upper class call the shots?

Figure 1: The Demographic Makeup of the United States Congress, 1901–96



Source: Carnes 2012.

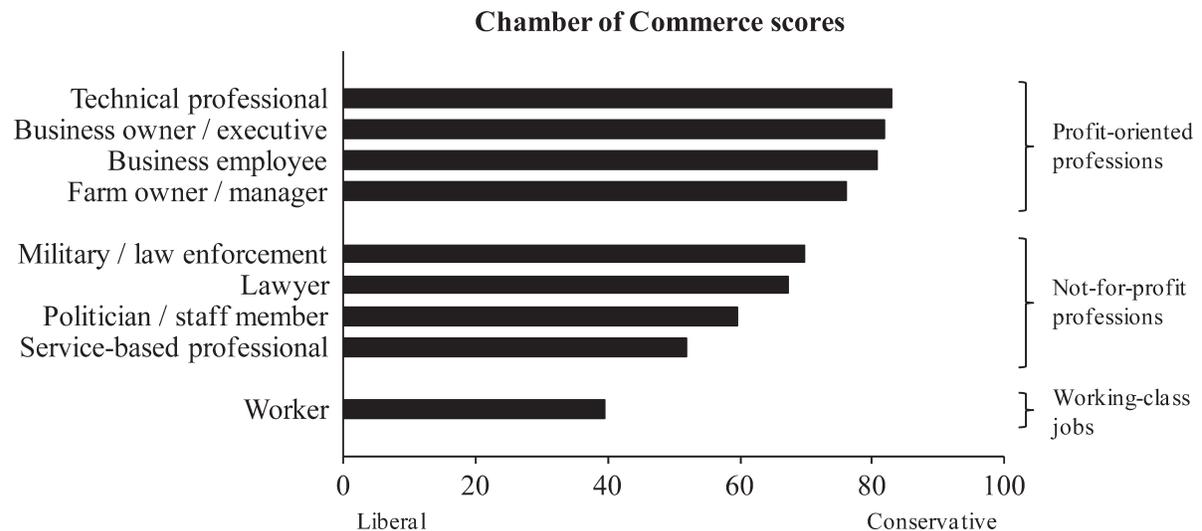
This rosy take on government by the privileged has been an important part of American political thought ever since. Campaigns and candidates routinely invoke “slogans such as president Calvin Coolidge’s ‘the business of the nation is business’ or Charles E. Wilson’s (Eisenhower’s secretary of defense and a former executive at General Motors) statement that ‘what was good for the country was good for General Motors and vice versa’” (Witko and Friedman 2008, 72).

Unfortunately, the idea that class doesn’t matter in our political institutions appears to be flat wrong. Scholars of public opinion have known for decades that Americans from different classes have different views about economic issues, that working-class Americans tend to be more progressive, and that the wealthy tend to want government to play a smaller role in economic affairs (e.g., Gilens 2009; Hout 2008; Keely and Tan 2008; Manza and Brooks 2008; Rehm 2010). Politicians seem to be no exception.

Like ordinary citizens, politicians from different classes tend to have different personal views about economic issues. And because politicians often have some discretion—their hands aren’t always tied by parties, citizens, and interest groups (Burden 2007)—they sometimes base their choices in office on their own views about the issues before them. In Congress, for instance, legislators who had working-class jobs before being elected tend to have more progressive personal views about economic issues, tend to introduce more progressive economic proposals and work harder to pass them, and tend to cast more progressive votes on economic bills (Carnes 2012; 2013).

Figure 2 plots data from the Chamber of Commerce (America’s largest business association) on how frequently members of Congress sided with business interests when voting on major economic proposals. The figure divides legislators according to the main occupations they held before serving in Congress: average voting scores for members who worked in profit-oriented white-collar jobs (like owning a business) are graphed at the top, service-oriented white-collar jobs (like teaching, law, or social work) are plotted next, and working-class jobs appear at the bottom. The pattern in the data is unmistakable. Like ordinary citizens, lawmakers from the working class tend to be more pro-worker, and lawmakers from white-collar jobs—especially profit-oriented jobs in the private sector—

Figure 2: Class and Roll Call Voting in Congress, 1999–2008



Source: Carnes 2013.

tend to be more pro-business (even when I control for a wide range of constituency and legislator characteristics).

These social class divisions are remarkably consistent across different datasets. They appear in voting scores computed by other organizations, in data from different periods of American history, in data on other forms of legislative conduct like introducing bills, and in surveys of state and federal legislators' personal beliefs (Carnes 2013). They are also mirrored in other studies that use different measures of class and privilege. Members of Congress from specific white-collar occupations like business (Witko and Friedman 2008) and law (Eulau and Sprague 1964; Miller 1995) tend to vote differently on legislation that affects their industries. Legislators who have more money invested in stocks are more likely to vote to protect the markets (Grose 2013). Wealthier legislators are more likely to vote against the estate tax (Griffin and Anewalt-Rensburg 2013). Legislators with more wealth and education are more likely to support bills that increase economic inequality (Kraus and Callaghan 2014). However we define class or privilege, it seems to matter in our legislatures. Like ordinary citizens, lawmakers who are well off themselves are more likely to support policies that protect the well off.

And these class-based differences in individual legislative conduct can have dramatic consequences in the aggregate. Figure 3 plots data from 1993 and 1995 on the social class makeup of state legislatures against data on the percentages of states' budgets devoted to social welfare programs (top panel), the generosity of unemployment benefits in each state (middle panel), and the tax rate on corporations in each state (bottom panel). State legislatures with more working-class members devote more of their resources to social safety net programs and tax corporations at higher rates. States with more business owners and executives in their legislatures spend less on welfare, provide lower levels of unemployment benefits, and tax companies at lower rates (Carnes 2013, ch. 5).

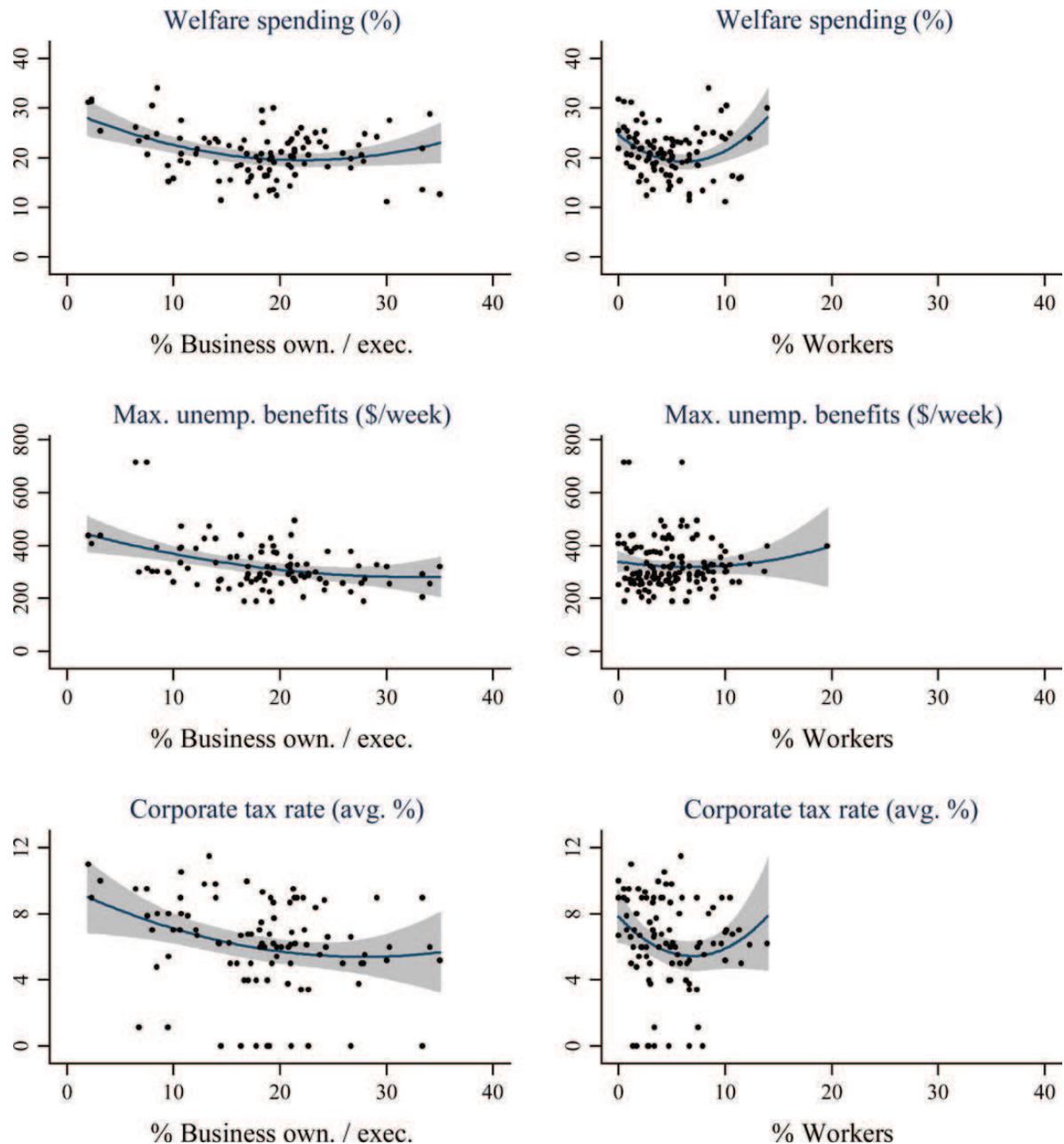
Of course, many other features of US politics mute our government's response to the needs of the working class, like the decline of labor unions and the recent and unprecedented surge in campaign spending (see Gilens in this debate). White-collar government isn't the only barrier to pro-worker policy in the United States—but it certainly belongs on the list.² The rosy notion that lawmakers from business and professional backgrounds want what's best for everyone is seriously out of line with the realities of legislative decision making in the United States. The economic issues at stake in American politics often involve difficult trade-offs between the material well-being of different classes of citizens. And the scarcity of lawmakers from the working class ultimately tilts decisions about the distribution of economic resources, protections, and burdens in favor of the more conservative policies that affluent Americans tend to prefer. Government *by* the upper class promotes government *for* the upper class—and government *for* the upper class is often bad for everyone else.

Why Does the U.S. Have a White-Collar Government?

Why, then, are there so few working-class people in our political institutions in the first place? If the policy stakes are so high, why does our representative process consistently yield such an unrepresentative group of decision makers? Political scientists currently

² And as Mansbridge notes in this debate, when other features of the representative system (like money in politics or the decline of unions) drown out workers' interests, the working class may have a greater need for other forms of representation, including descriptive representation in our political institutions.

Figure 3: Economic Policy and the Social Class Makeup of State Legislatures, 1994–1996



Source: Carnes 2013, ch. 5.

Note: Lines represent quadratic best-fit estimates (with 95 percent confidence intervals shaded gray). Welfare spending and corporate tax rate data are from 1994 and 1996; maximum weekly unemployment benefits data are from 2001.

know more about the *effects* of government by the privileged in the United States than they do about the *causes*. However, a growing body of research seems to be ruling out several potential culprits—and implicating others.

Probably the most common view among pundits and political observers is that white-collar government is something of a practical necessity in the United States. One popular

version of this argument holds that government by the privileged is what Americans want, that white-collar professional rule in the U.S. because American voters prefer white-collar candidates. Another common and related view is that government by the upper class is what Americans need, that working-class people don't have the skills or qualifications required for holding office. The Pulitzer-prize-winning journalist William A. Henry III (1995, 21) summarized both when he wrote that "voters repeatedly reject insurrectionist candidates who parallel their own ordinariness [...] in favor of candidates of proven character and competence." Why are we governed by the rich? Many observers believe it's because the rich make better politicians—and voters know it.

These arguments have deep historical roots in the United States. However, they've never found much support in hard data on U.S. politics. There has never been an empirical study that has shown that American voters prefer white-collar candidates. And there has never been a single study—not one—that has concluded that working-class people are underrepresented in public office because they are less qualified for the job.

On average, members of Congress from the working class do almost exactly as well in elections as members from white-collar professions (Carnes n.d.). Experiments comparing hypothetical candidates from different classes reach identical conclusions. Sadin (2011) finds, for instance, that voters randomly assigned to evaluate a hypothetical candidate from the working class are just as likely to report that they would vote for him as those randomly assigned to evaluate an otherwise identical hypothetical candidate from an elite professional background. Far from "reject[ing] ... candidate[s] who parallel their own ordinariness," voters seem to like working-class candidates just fine.

A shortage of qualified workers doesn't seem to be to blame, either. It's true that *on average* working-class Americans are less likely to have many of the personal qualities that promote success in politics or that we might want in our leaders: knowledge about public affairs, confidence that the political process can be used to achieve real change, "tolerance [ce] of unpopular voices" (Verba 2003, 669), and so on. However, there are many more working-class people than there are white-collar professionals—so many more, in fact, that *there are actually more blue-collar workers with many of these desirable characteristics than there are white-collar professionals* (Carnes 2013, ch. 6). If even just half a percent of the blue-collar workers in the United States have the skills required for holding office, there would be enough of them to fill every seat in Congress and in every state legislature *more than 40 times*—with enough left over to run a few thousand city councils.

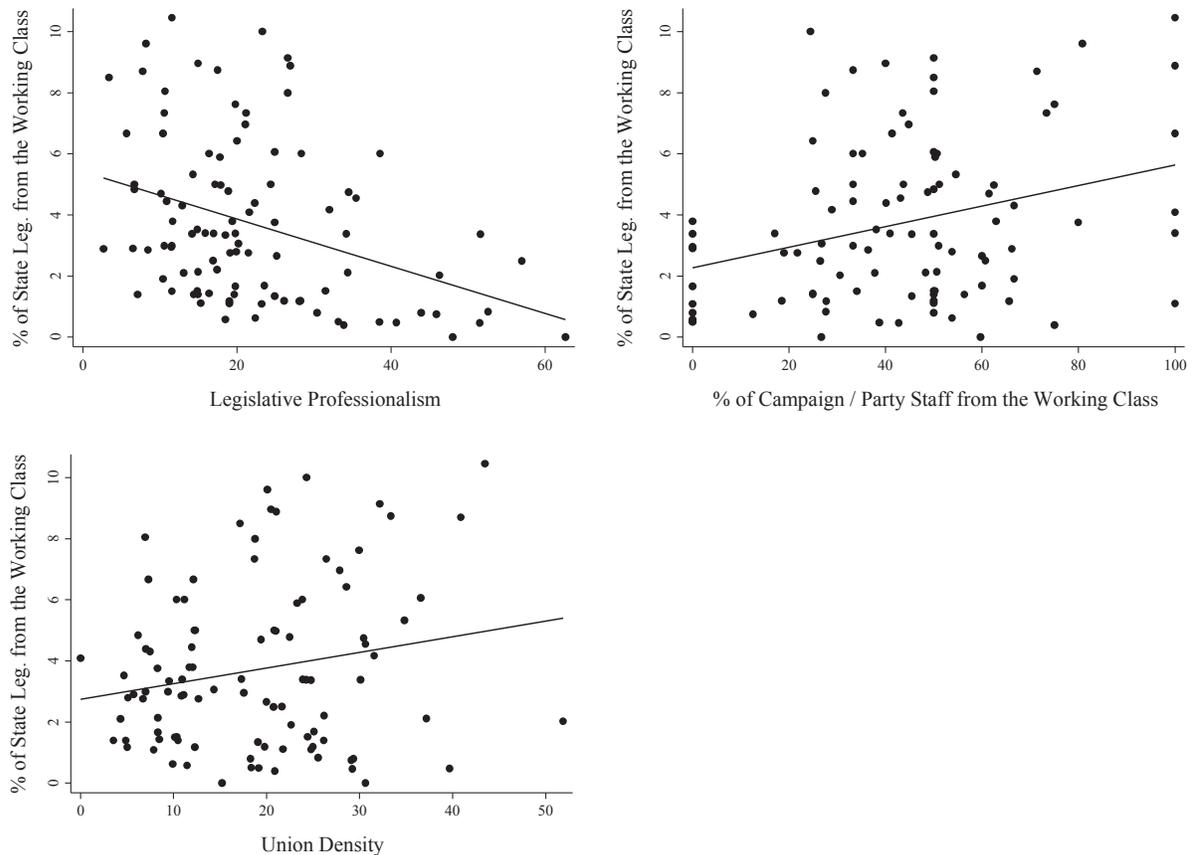
Something other than voters and qualifications seems to be responsible for the shortage of working-class citizens in American political institutions. Scholars haven't yet confirmed exactly what that is, but we're starting to make some headway. Building on research on other historically underrepresented groups like women (e.g., Crowder-Meyer 2010; Lawless and Fox 2005; 2010; Sanbonmatsu 2002; 2006), the nascent scholarship on the shortage of working-class Americans in public office is beginning to find evidence that workers are underrepresented not because of some deficiency on their part, but because of discouraging circumstances, like the practical burdens associated with holding office and the gatekeeping decisions of party leaders and interest groups.

In places where holding office is less burdensome and in places where workers are better integrated into parties and interest groups, workers tend to hold office in larger numbers. Figure 4 illustrates this point with data on the share of working-class Americans in state legislatures (from Figure 3). In states with more professionalized legislatures—that is, where holding office takes more time and energy—fewer workers hold office. In states where working-class citizens make up larger shares of party and campaign volunteers,

workers tend to hold office in larger numbers. And in states where unions are stronger, workers are more likely to lead (Carnes n.d.; see also Carnes forthcoming; Sojourner 2013). The factors that keep workers out of office don't seem to have to do with voters or with the supposed shortcomings of the working class itself. They seem to have far more to do with the structural features of the political landscape that have captivated scholars of U.S. politics for decades: parties, institutions, and interest groups.

These findings are still preliminary, of course—there simply hasn't been much research on this topic yet. Scholars still need to develop a complete account of the individual behavioral or psychological factors keeping workers from running and winning (e.g., differences in resources, ambition, recruitment, etc.). We need to link those factors to the structural features of the political environment that give rise to them, like the high cost of running an election, the weakness of labor unions in the US, and so on. We need to think through and identify the causal relationship between these factors and working-class representation. And we need to think about change over time. Many of these structural factors are changing in ways that probably discourage working-class office holding—elections are getting more expensive and unions are getting weaker. Holding office was always challenging for workers (see Figure 1), but it may be getting even harder. Scholars need to understand how these changes are affecting the already difficult process of transitioning from a working-class job to a career in politics.

Figure 4: What Predicts Working-class Representation in State Legislatures?



Source: Carnes n.d.

Reformers do, too. In the last few years, activists have started taking an unprecedented interest in government by the privileged. In the 1990s, the New Jersey AFL-CIO launched a “candidate school” to identify, recruit, and train working-class citizens to run for public office. Since then, similar working-class candidate training programs have been launched in California, Connecticut, Maine, Nevada, New York, and Oregon—and more are on the way (Carnes 2013, ch. 6). Programs like these are premised on the same basic ideas that are emerging from the scholarly research on the factors keeping working-class Americans out of office, namely, that there are many qualified working-class Americans out there, that workers do well in elections when they run, and that electing more workers will tilt economic policy toward the progressive policies that workers tend to support and away from the conservative policies favored by America’s rich. However, scholars and practitioners still have a lot to learn about why the United States has a white-collar government—and what we can do about it.

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