

**“A Great Opportunity for America’s Wealthiest Undergrads”?  
Reform Narratives about Affluent Staffers and the 2017 Congressional Capacity Survey**

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\*\*\*Rough Draft – Suggestions Welcome\*\*\*

In general, congressional staffers tend to come from money. To get a foot in the door on Capitol Hill, young people often have to accept low-paying jobs or even unpaid internships—in one of the most expensive cities in the country, no less. Against this backdrop, a silver spoon becomes a de facto prerequisite; the only people who can afford to work as staffers are the well-off and the well-connected. And that in turn has real consequences for public policy. If we want to understand Washington’s tin ear when it comes to the needs of working Americans, we need look no further than the “interns sporting Brooks Brothers suits and Louis Vitton clutches” (Lehman 2016, 1).

Narratives like these are a common refrain in discussions about congressional reform. Activists argue that unpaid congressional internships “effectively block . . . college students who can not afford to work for free” and that “the voice of the average American is muffled when the only people entering politics are the economically privileged” (Vera and Jenab 2017, 18, 16). Writers for *The Atlantic* and *Washington Monthly* worry that “[t]his sort of system . . . excludes those who can’t afford to take the unpaid work” (Greenfield 2012, 1) and that “Capitol Hill internships are increasingly opportunities that only young people from affluent families can afford to take” (Desai 2018, 1). Headlines in *The Hill* and *Vox* skewer working for Congress as a “great opportunity for America’s wealthiest undergrads” (King 2015, 1) and prescribe that “If Congress really wants to become more diverse, it should pay staffers more and stop unpaid internships” (Drutman 2017).

These kinds of concerns about congressional staff diversity have emerged as a sort of pillar of the larger case for increasing staff pay and congressional capacity. Drutman (2017, 1) notes that “because staff salaries are so low, typically only people who can afford to take low-paying jobs accept a position on the Hill in the first place”—but situates this concern alongside

other important pay-related issues, like high turnover (poorly paid staffers tend to leave) and the effects of turnover on political accountability (green staffers are less capable watchdogs of the executive branch) and lobbyist influence (high turnover means more impressionable rookies coming in and more seasoned veterans leaving to take jobs on K Street). Without better compensation, the argument goes, congressional offices will be packed with out-of-touch trust fund types—who don't even stick around long enough to develop the expertise Congress needs.

Are congressional staff really as economically privileged as the reform narrative suggests? When Washington is slow to respond to the needs of the less fortunate (e.g., Bartels 2009; Gilens 2013), are staffers from privileged backgrounds part of the problem? And is low compensation—in particular, the unpaid internship—the root cause of the affluent staffer phenomenon on Capitol Hill? This brief essay uses data from the 2017 Congressional Capacity Survey (Drutman et al 2018) to test the central claims of this “low pay leads to rich out-of-touch staffers” narrative, or what I sometimes just call *the reform narrative* or *the stafffluence narrative*.

At bottom, this narrative consists of three related empirical arguments. The first is that congressional staff tend to be disproportionately economically privileged relative to some (usually unspecified) benchmark. The second is that privileged staffers are somehow different from staffers from more humble origins; two common concerns are that affluent staffers are less attuned to the needs of the less fortunate, and that affluent staffers are less racially diverse.<sup>1</sup> The third is that staffers tend to be so affluent because staff positions—especially entry-level jobs like

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<sup>1</sup> As Drutman (2017, 1) explains, “Because staff salaries are so low, typically only people who can afford to take low-paying jobs accept a position on the Hill in the first place. And often, only people who can intern for free to get their foot in the door at all get those jobs. Unfortunately, a disproportionate percentage of people of color do not have independent family wealth that allows them to take low-paying jobs for an extended period of time, or intern for free.”

internships—pay so little (or nothing, in the case of unpaid internships), which discourages less affluent people from applying or sticking around long.

Although these claims seem intuitive on their face, there are still good reasons for scholars to test them. The third claim—that low staff salaries create barriers for the less fortunate—hasn't fared well in other contexts; at the state level, higher salaries for elected officials are *not* associated with greater economic diversity among candidates or officeholders (Carnes and Hansen 2016). And there are plenty of other obstacles that might keep people from lower-income and working-class backgrounds out of staff positions besides just the pay. There are also reason to question some of the concerns reformers raise about the effects of affluent staffers (the second claim). In general, a political actor's personal background only matters when he or she has some *leeway or discretion* (Burden 2007). If staffers “work in close consultation with their members of Congress and take direction from their members regarding goals” and only have significant autonomy “in deciding how to accomplish the goal” and “choosing the means to solve problems” (Romzek and Utter 1997, 1260), the demographic makeup of congressional staff may matter far less than the demograhpic makeup of Congress itself (which is heavily slanted towards the affluent—and which in turn tilts policy in favor of what the affluent want; Carnes 2012; 2013; 2016; Grose 2013; Griffin and Anewalt-Remsburg 2013; Kraus and Callaghan 2014). If we wish to understand why Congress sometimes turns a blind eye to the needs of the less fortunate, congressional staff may not be the right people to focus on.

Indeed, the 2017 Congressional Capacity Survey raises serious questions about the conventional staff diversity reform narrative. Like members of Congress, staffers report that they come overwhelmingly from white-collar professions—but congressional staff tend to be far more economically diverse than Congress itself; more than half of staffers say they have at least some

experience in working-class jobs (compared to just six percent of members of Congress). On average, moreover, staff members who have experience in working-class jobs don't seem to behave all that differently from staffers who have never worn blue collars, at least in the ways we can observe in the Congressional Capacity Survey, and affluent staffers are about as racially diverse as others. Staffers with working-class experience, moreover, are just as likely as those from white-collar backgrounds to say that they got their start in an unpaid internship.

Of course, these findings are based on just one survey, and a deeper dive into any of these topics could uncover evidence more in line with the conventional stafffluence narrative. And there are still good reasons for reformers to fight for higher staff compensation and an end to unpaid internships, chief among them the effects of low pay on staff turnover and the misfortunes that befall Congress when working on the Hill is a stepping stone and not a calling. But as far as the 2017 Congressional Capacity Survey survey is concerned, there simply isn't much evidence that *staff economic diversity* should be a part of the case for increasing congressional capacity. There are better arguments for increasing congressional capacity, and more pressing economic diversity problems in Congress.

### **Work works for Congress?**

First, just how well off are congressional staffers? Is working on Capitol Hill really only a “great opportunity for America’s wealthiest undergrads”?

The Congressional Capacity Survey gives us a rare window into the personal backgrounds of congressional staffers. For outsiders, obtaining systematic data on the personal backgrounds of Hill staff can be difficult. Chuck Schumer made headlines in 2017 just by

releasing basic descriptive statistics on the racial and gender makeup of Democratic Senate staff (O’Keefe 2017). Individual-level data are even harder to come by.

The Congressional Capacity Survey represents a unique opportunity to answer questions about who actually works on Capitol Hill. In addition to asking about race and gender, the survey included an item that asked staffers about their employment histories. “Thinking back on your entire adult life,” the question asked, “what kinds of jobs have you had other than working in Congress since you turned 18? (select all that apply).” Respondents could choose from 19 broad categories<sup>2</sup> that included lawyer, state government employee, issue advocacy organization employee or executive, service sector worker, and manual labor. The question also included an open-ended “Other” option.<sup>3</sup>

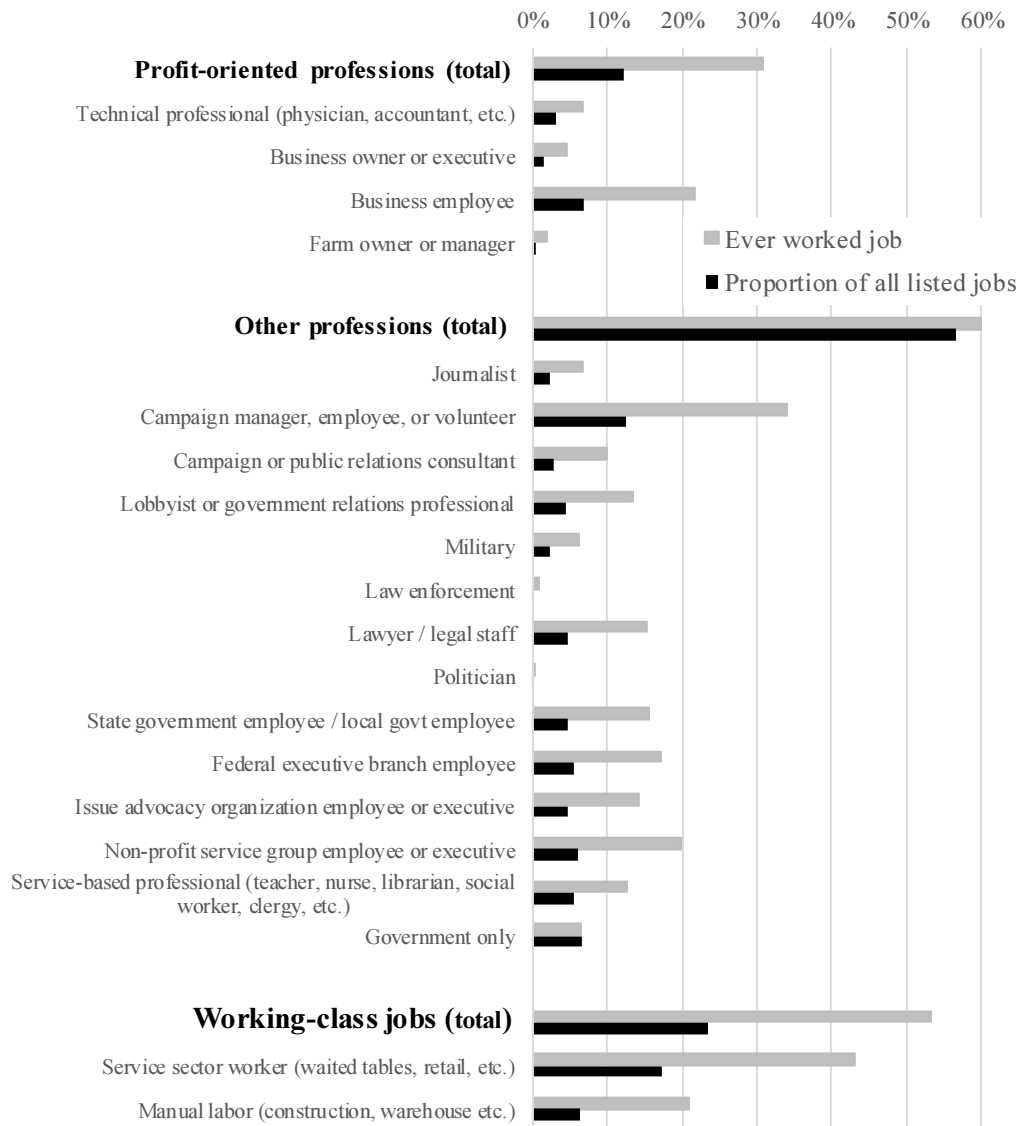
With these data, we can begin to test the stafffluence narrative by separating staffers into those who had at least some experience in *working-class jobs*—manual labor jobs like construction worker, service industry jobs like restaurant server, and clerical jobs like receptionist—and those who had only ever worked white-collar jobs. Of course, many observers who write about the privileged staffer phenomenon focus more on staffers’ parents’ wealth, a measure that was not included on the survey. But parental wealth and occupational history should be closely related: “America’s wealthiest undergrads” don’t usually take on manual labor, service-industry, and clerical jobs in order to pay the rent. With the Congressional Capacity

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<sup>2</sup> The options were as follows: Technical professional (physician, accountant, engineer, etc.), Journalist, Business owner or executive, Business employee, Campaign manager, employee, or volunteer, Campaign or public relations consultant, Lobbyist or government relations professional, Farm owner or manager, Military, Law enforcement, Lawyer, Politician, State government employee, Federal executive branch employee, Issue advocacy organization employee or executive, Non-profit service group employee or executive, Service-based professional (teacher, nurse, librarian, social worker, clergy, etc.), Service sector worker (waited tables, retail, etc.), Manual labor (construction, warehouse etc.), and Other.

<sup>3</sup> I double-checked open-ended responses; many fit into existing categories, so I simply re-coded them.

**Figure 1: What Kinds of Jobs Did Staffers Have Before They Were Staffers?**



Survey, we can at least separate staffers who have some experience in working-class jobs from those who have never worked a day in their lives, as it were.

The survey’s work history question allowed staffers to select as many occupational categories as they wanted; some checked as many as eight. Figure 1 plots how they answered. In the figure, I’ve grouped occupations into larger categories that have tended to be ideological dividing lines among legislators: those who worked in profit-oriented professions tend to be the

most conservative (as a whole, and within parties, and controlling for constituent and legislator characteristics), those from working-class jobs tend to be the most liberal, and those from other professional jobs tend to fall in between (e.g., Carnes 2012; 2013). The figure graphs both the percentages of staffers who reported ever working in a given occupation (in grey) and the average proportion of all the jobs a member listed that each occupation made up (in black; so if a staffer checked three boxes, each one would count as one third of the staffer's overall career).

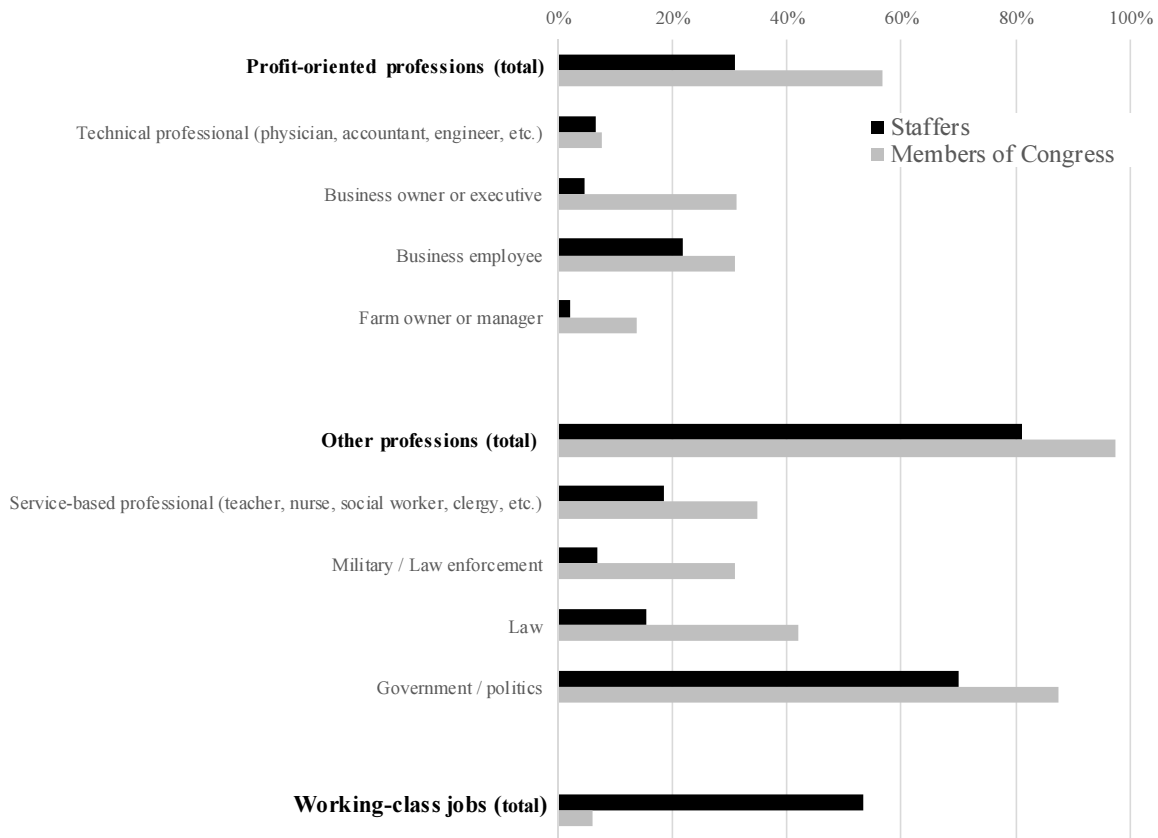
Viewed this way, congressional staffers seem far more diverse than the jet set envisioned in some of the more alarmist reform critiques. Less than 10 percent of staffers report that their first job was in Congress. Among the rest, their occupations run the gamut from business to state government work to nonprofit work to waiting tables.

What is especially striking is the sheer number who report having worked in the service and manual labor sectors: more than half reported at least some experience in these kinds of jobs (the grey bars), and manual labor and service industry jobs made up one in four of the boxes that the average staffer checked (the black bars). Of course, staffers' experiences in working-class jobs may have been brief part-time or summer jobs. But the fact that they reported *any* experience in the working class sets them apart from their bosses in a very significant way.

Figure 2 plots the average share of staffers' who said they had ever worked in each category (what was graphed with grey bars in Figure 1) alongside analogous estimates for members of Congress from my own detailed data on the complete work histories of the members who served between 1999 and 2008, which I compiled from



**Figure 2: Occupational Diversity among Staffers and Members**



*Note:* Bars report the percentages of staffers and legislators who reported or were found to have any experience in the occupational category in question. Totals for larger categories (bold) will not equal sums of smaller categories (unbolded), since some individuals had prior experience in multiple smaller categories.

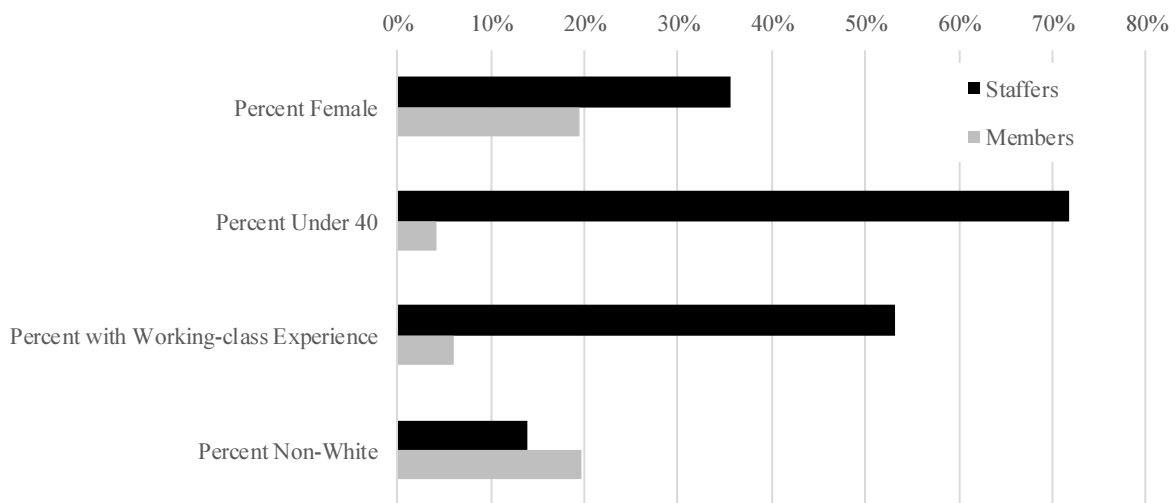
biographies, member directories, member websites, and news stories. (To align the two datasets, I have collapsed several Congressional Capacity Survey occupational categories into the less-fine-grained categories I used in my data on members.) Staffers are less likely than members to have owned or managed farms or businesses. They are also less likely to have worked in government, law, or other professions. Many members run for Congress after long and varied work histories; many staffers are just beginning their careers.

The notable exception in Figure 2 is working-class jobs. When I explored the life stories of members of Congress, I could only find evidence that just six percent of members had any

experience in a working-class job. In contrast, more than half of congressional staffers say they've worked in these kinds of jobs. Compared to their bosses, staffers seem to have far more in common with the American workforce (where working-class jobs as I've defined them make up a little more than half of employment).

Of course, in some sense, this may not be all that surprising. Figure 3 plots data from the Congressional Capacity Survey on gender, age, occupation, and race. Consistent with what

**Figure 3: Congressional Staffers are More Diverse than their Bosses (Except on Race)**



Chuck Schumer reported about Democratic Senate staffers in 2017, the staff surveyed here were more likely than their bosses to be women, and staffers were far more likely to be under 40. In keeping with the alarm about Schumer's report, moreover, the one dimension on which staffers were less diverse than Congress was race: non-white members make up almost 20 percent of Congress, but non-white staff make up just 14 percent of the congressional workforce. Staff jobs aren't *always* more inclusive than Congress itself—although in most respects, staffers tend to look more like the country as a whole than their employers do.

Work histories seem to be one dimension on which staff actually bring much-needed diversity to the institution they serve. They may still be privileged relative to the average

American of course—by definition, they have professional jobs, and most won't spend their lives in working-class occupations. But contrary to reform narratives that paint staffers as part of a larger culture of extreme affluence in Congress, staff jobs may actually be some of the only jobs in the larger congressional ecosystem in which employees routinely have at least *some* experience in the working class.

But—perhaps unfortunately in light of these findings, and in contrast to the second empirical claim in the conventional reform narrative—staffers' economic backgrounds may not matter all that much.

### **Does it matter who works for Congress?**

From a reform standpoint, affluent staffers are only a problem if they are somehow different from the counterfactual less-affluent staffers who would otherwise be working the same jobs. Reformers often suggest that affluent staffers differ in two ways. The first is that “the voice of the average American is muffled when the only people entering politics are the economically privileged” (Vera and Jenab 2017, 16). According to this line of reasoning, less affluent staffers would bring different policy preferences or concerns or expertise to the job that would ultimately move public policy towards outcomes more in line with what citizens want. The second is that affluent staffers are more often white. In this view, less affluent staffers would more often be people of color, and they would bring more racial diversity to the congressional workforce.

Of the two, the concern about racial diversity is probably the easier to square with what scholars already know. The racial wealth gap is real, and stubborn (e.g., Darity 2009). On average, the typical wealthy American is more likely to be white than the typical poor American. Reformers are right to worry about what happens to racial diversity in institutions where wealth

is a prerequisite; they are right that “a disproportionate percentage of people of color do not have independent family wealth that allows them to take low-paying jobs for an extended period of time, or intern for free” (Drutman 2017, 1).

The concern about muffling the voice of the average American is less straightforward. Scholars have amassed a great deal of research on how the personal backgrounds of politicians affect their choices in office (for a useful review, see Burden 2007). According to this work, politicians from different backgrounds tend to bring their groups’ unique perspectives to public office; just as men and women in the general public have different views on wage equality, male and female politicians tend to have different personal beliefs about wage equality, too. Those differences only tend to matter, however, when politicians have *discretion*, when they have the leeway to consult their own judgment about the issues before them, when their hands aren’t tied by other actors (like constituents, colleagues, party leaders, interest groups, and so on).

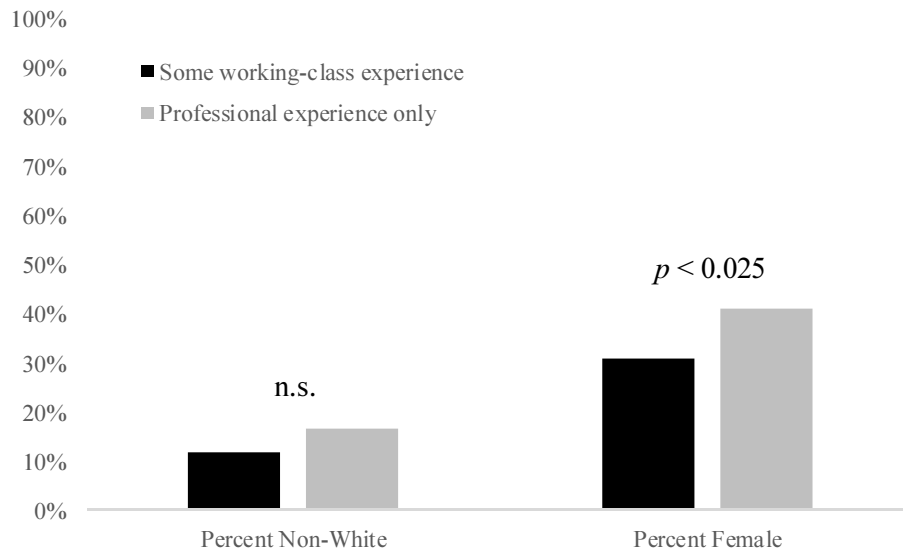
The question, then, is whether staffers have discretion. Early research depicted staffers as having a sort of constrained autonomy: most staff were thought to “take direction from their members regarding goals,” but some also developed “reciprocal relationships, where . . . staff can influence their members’ goals.” Staff were thought to have far more leeway in deciding how to carry out goals: “What staff lack in autonomy in setting overall legislative goals and missions, they more than make up for during implementation, their accepted sphere of activity” (Romzek and Utter 1997, 1259). The extent of this autonomy was thought to vary depending on the member and the staffer’s standing and expertise. In this view, staff discretion is somewhat varied; it is higher for some tasks, members, and staffers than for others.

Consistent with this observation, research on the personal characteristics of staffers has tended to find that staffers from different backgrounds only seem to affect legislative outcomes

when the conditions are just right. Of course, there can be little doubt that staff matter in general and that they influence the members they work for in important ways (e.g., Montgomery and Nyhan 2017). But *staff demographics* only seem to affect legislative conduct—numerical or descriptive representation at the staff level only seems to translate into active or substantive representation of a group’s interests—when staff members from a given social group have the necessary resources (status, expertise), when those staffers also have discretion (their members trust them or delegate to them), and—according to some scholars—when outside organizations pressure the staffer to act on behalf of their social group. For staffer demographics to matter, the staffer needs to have discretion and influence, and status within the organization, *and* some kind of push from their social group of origin to help them link their background to the issues of the day. Staffers are busy people taking orders from members while simultaneously trying to influence those members. In this kind of environment, we would only expect to see staff-demographic-driven differences in member behavior when an issue is demographically charged, and when staffers from that demographic group have some authority. As Rosenthal and Cohen Bell (2003, 65) note, this is a high bar: “When these conditions are less than optimal, active representation will not occur.” In other words, substantive representation is difficult to achieve through descriptive representation among staffers. Reformers may not need to worry so much about the economic backgrounds of staffers—because staffer demographics only seem to matter in rare instances.

What does the Congressional Capacity Survey say? Figure 4 deals first with the question of diversity. The figure plots the percentage of non-white and female staffers, dividing the sample between those who reported some experience in

**Figure 4: Affluent Staffers Are Not Less Diverse in Other Ways**



working-class jobs and those who reported only working in professional jobs. The professional-only group is actually *more* diverse on both measures: they were slightly (but not statistically significantly) more likely to be people of color, and they were ten percentage points more likely to be women.

Of course, the Congressional Capacity Survey is a study of people who overcame the barriers and became staffers. In principle, it could still be true that if fewer affluent people got staff positions, the congressional workforce would become more racially diverse or more diverse along gender lines. But from what we can tell looking at the more and less affluent people who currently land staff jobs in Congress, there simply isn't any evidence to support the idea that affluent staffers are driving down diversity. Some people who have to wait tables and hang sheet rock make it into congressional staff positions, but those people aren't any more diverse than other staffers.

Likewise, they don't seem to behave differently in any way that would lead us to expect a strong connection between the economic makeup of staffers and the substantive representation of

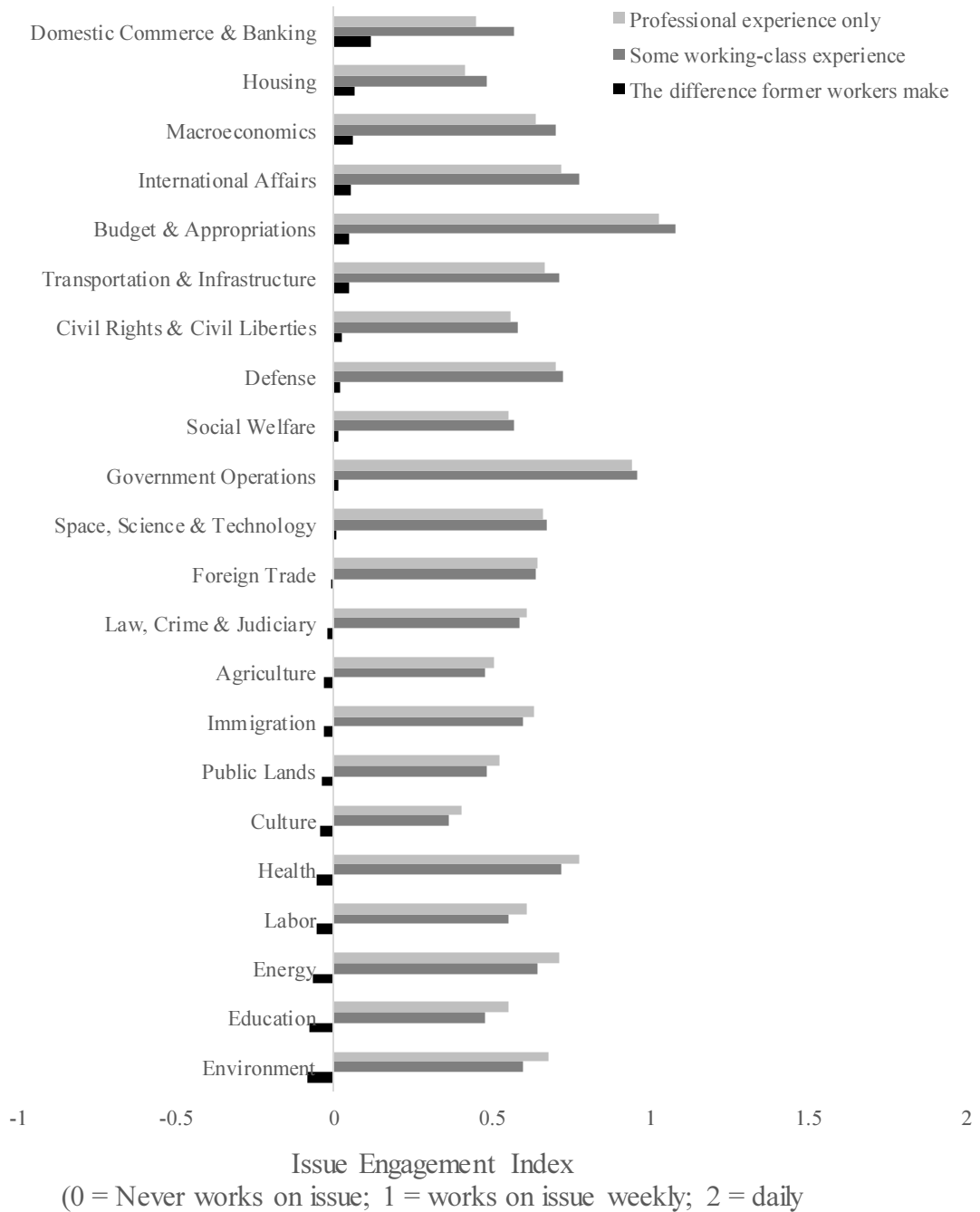
different social classes' interests. The Congressional Capacity Survey didn't include items that asked staffers about their personal views about economic issues (the topics that tend to divide public opinion most sharply along social class lines)—or any issues at all, for that matter.

However, the survey asked a series of questions about the issues that staffers spend the most time working on. For the purposes of determining whether staffers from different classes behave differently, this is an extremely useful measure. Research on members of Congress finds clear differences in the amount of legislative effort members from different social classes devote to economic issues (Carnes 2013, ch. 3); those from the working class tend to expend more effort on issues like social welfare spending and unemployment, and tend to be less engaged on issues like agriculture and banking.

The same does not seem to be true among congressional staffers, however. Figure 5 plots how staffers responded to a series of questions that asked, "Please indicate how frequently you work on each of the following issues for your boss in a typical week when Congress is in session . . . Never, Occasionally, [or] Daily." For each issue, the grey bars plots the average responses given by staffers with some experience in working-class jobs (light grey) and those with none (darker grey), and the black bar plots the difference between the two (with larger values signifying that staffers with working-class experience were more engaged on that issue).

In the figure, I've sorted the 22 issues the survey asked about according to the size of the gap between staffers with working-class experience and those without it. Looking from top to bottom, however, there is no discernable pattern that would lead us to think that staffers from the working class do more work on the issues that affect working-class people. Just 1 of the 22 differences documented in the figure is statistically significant, and only marginally (the gap in domestic

**Figure 5: Work on Different Issues Doesn't Seem to Vary by Class**



banking is significant at  $p < 0.082$ ). And the issues with the biggest gaps are, in fact, the opposite of what past research on members of Congress would lead us to expect. Legislators from the working class don't tend to devote much legislative effort to passing banking bills; staffers from



the working class differ most from other staffers in their higher level of work on banking and domestic commerce. Members from the working class are exceptionally active on issues related to labor; staffers from the working class are (non-significantly) *less* engaged on that issue. (And the results are substantively similar when I switch from studying whether staffers ever had working-class jobs to the proportion of all checked jobs that were working-class jobs.)

Even when I examined staffers with status, I could not find evidence of the kinds of differences in issue effort scholars have observed among lawmakers themselves. Of the 61 staffers in the sample who reported that they worked as Legislative Directors or Chiefs of Staff, 29 had working-class experience and 32 did not. Within this group of higher-status (and, presumably, higher-discretion) staffers, the patterns in issue attention were more or less unchanged from what Figure 5 reported. Most of the differences between staffers from working-class jobs and others were substantively small; the largest were around 0.2—the equivalent of moving just one fifth of the way between “weekly” and “daily”—and were the opposite of what we would expect based on research on members of Congress. As in Figure 5, for instance, high-level staffers from the working class were less likely to work on labor issues.

Importantly, staffers with working-class experience didn’t seem to differ as a group in other ways that might influence their involvement in the issues listed in Figure 5. They scored slightly (but not statistically significantly) higher on a seven-point party identification scale. They scored about the same as other members on political knowledge questions, with the exception of national security questions, on which they performed slightly better than members from exclusively-professional backgrounds. They reported doing slightly more casework than other members, and doing slightly less work with the press, but the gaps were small. There

simply wasn't anything remarkable about congressional staffers from the working class that might help to explain why their issue work was so unremarkable.

The overall picture that the Congressional Capacity Survey leaves us with seems less in line with research on the descriptive representation of social classes in legislatures themselves and more in line with research on the difficulty of achieving substantive representation through staffer representation. Unless the conditions are just right, "active representation will not occur." A 30,000-foot view of congressional staffers from different classes would seem to confirm this intuition. Maybe there are unusual circumstances where influential staffers from the working class convince members to change course in some important way. But the day-to-day work of staffers—the things we can observe in questions about how often they work on various issues for their bosses—doesn't seem to depend at all on staffers' economic backgrounds.

As with the analysis of racial diversity, caveats abound here, of course. It could be that we haven't asked the right questions—maybe staffers from different classes work on the same problem but focus on different solutions. It could be that staffer affluence matters in a narrow set of situations (per existing theories about staff demographics and active representation) that the survey questions didn't tap into. It could be that the presence of staffers from the working class has some effect on the larger culture. It's still possible that future research will uncover evidence that the economic or social class makeup of congressional staff affects substantive representation.

Until then, however, the burden of proof should be on those who claim that affluent staffers muffle the voices of ordinary Americans, or that affluent staffers are less racially diverse. Nothing in the Congressional Capacity Survey supports either of these common concerns. The

second piece of the larger “low pay leads to affluent out-of-touch staffers” narrative just doesn’t find much support here.

What about the third claim, about the important role of low salaries and unpaid internships in all of this? Is there at least evidence that “because staff salaries are so low, typically only people who can afford to take low-paying jobs accept a position on the Hill in the first place.”

### **Does Low Pay Ensure that Only the Affluent Work for Congress?**

The relationship between politician compensation and the economic diversity of political actors is a tricky subject. It is tempting to think that when a political job doesn’t pay well, the only people who will bother taking it are those who are independently wealthy. There are two important problems with this causal story, however. The first is that low pay isn’t the only factor that might discourage the less fortunate from pursuing work in politics. To the contrary, outsider groups face a wide range of obstacles, including not having personal networks that link them to those in charge of the hiring process, not seeing political work as a desirable career move, or simply not considering a political job at all. Even if congressional internships and staff positions paid well, many qualified working-class people still might not apply or make the cut.

The second complication is that as the wage paid for a job goes up, competition for that job goes up, too. If affluent people pursue congressional staff jobs when the pay is low, they will still tend to pursue those same jobs when the pay is high—and might even fight harder to get them.

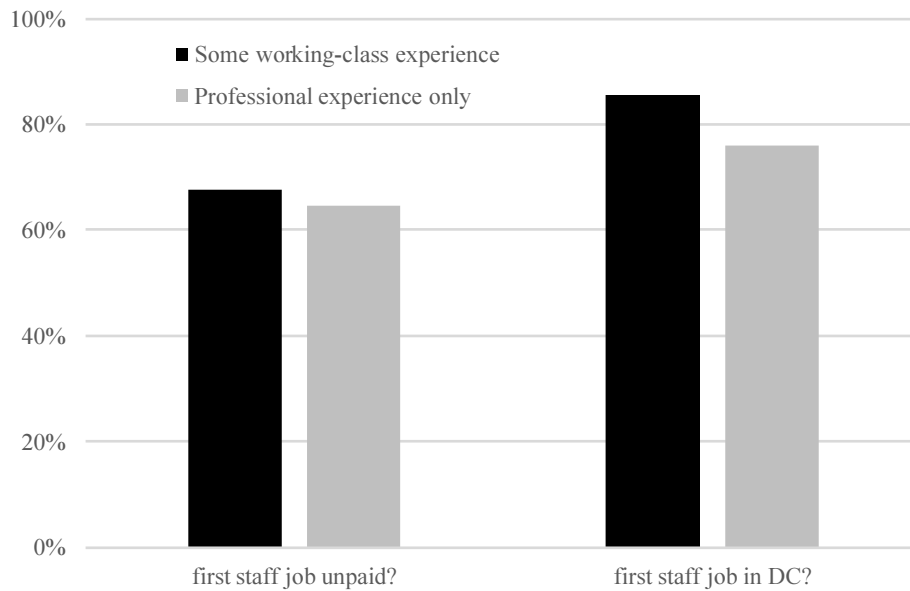
Indeed, that’s exactly what happens in state legislatures. Reformers often complain that low state legislative salaries make holding office impossible for all but the very rich. But in

states where legislators are compensated more generously, lawmakers actually tend to be *more affluent*, not less so (Carnes and Hansen 2016). There are many factors besides politician compensation that prevent qualified working-class Americans from running for public office (Carnes forthcoming). As such, raising salaries doesn't attract more lower-income people, it just seems to make holding office more appealing to the rich (by reducing the opportunity cost associated with holding office). Although reformers often speculate that increasing compensation would increase economic diversity, the available empirical evidence says the opposite.

What about congressional staff? Would increasing compensation really change the economic makeup of interns and employees? Or would it just make staff positions more comfortable for the kinds of people who already get them (which might actually be a worthy goal in itself, of course)?

One item on the Congressional Capacity Survey seems to shed some light on this point. "Thinking back to how you got your start working in Congress," the question asked, "was your first position an internship (either paid or unpaid)?" The response categories also allowed staffers to specify whether their first job was in Washington, DC, or in their member's district office. If unpaid internships and low compensation screen out less affluent staffers, we would expect the

**Figure 6:** Many Staffers from the Working Class Got their Start in Unpaid DC Internships



few who make it to Congress to come through paid staff positions, or perhaps through positions in district offices rather than in DC.

They do not, however. Figure 6 plots the percentages of staffers who reported that their first job was an unpaid position, and the percent who said their first job was in a Washington office. On both items, I have once again divided staffers into those who had at least some experience in working-class jobs and those who did not (although studying the proportion of staffers' past jobs that were working-class jobs produces the same basic finding).

There are no obvious differences. If anything, staffers with working-class experience were slightly more likely to get their starts in unpaid internships and in DC offices. Of course, these data only reflect the experiences of the potential staffers who made it through. It's always possible that the pool of potential staffers was far more economically diverse, but the low pay and unpaid internships drove away disproportionate numbers of less affluent potentials. But, again, the burden of proof going forward would seem to be on those who support the

conventional reform narrative. If it's really the case that unpaid internships and low salaries keep Congress's staff workforce as affluent as it is—and not the myriad other potential barriers that might keep the less fortunate from pursuing careers in Congress—it's time for reformers to provide some systematic data. The Congressional Capacity Survey simply doesn't provide any evidence to support the conventional narrative about staffer affluence.

But where does that leave us? What should we think about congressional staff compensation, the economic makeup of congressional staffers, and the political influence of the less fortunate in Washington?

### **Congress's *Real Economic Diversity Problem***

It is worth reiterating the many caveats that accompany this brief analysis. This research is based on just one survey of staff members. Staff are difficult to study systematically—they do leave behind tidy trails of data on roll call votes, bill sponsorships, and so on. This paper has tried to make the most of the opportunity represented by the Congressional Capacity Survey. But, of course, this analysis is limited to the data available in that survey. Future research may find better measures of staffer affluence, better measures of staffer attitudes or conduct or impact, or better measures of how people become staffers—and may find that those measures produce results that are more in line with the staffluence narrative.

What we can say for now is that the case for the “low pay leads to rich out-of-touch staffers” narrative is weak. It does not find any support in the Congressional Capacity Survey.

The weakness of these findings is especially stark compared to the research on the economic backgrounds of members themselves. Differences between legislators from different social classes have been evident in every dataset I've examined since I started studying the

economic backgrounds of politicians a decade ago. In Miller and Stokes's 1958 survey of US House Members, legislators from the working class were more likely to report holding progressive views on the economic issues of the day and more likely to vote that way on actual bills. The same kinds of social class gaps were evident in data on how members of Congress voted from the 1950s to the present. And in data on the kinds of bills they introduced from the 1970s to the present. And in public surveys of the views and opinions of legislative candidates in recent elections (Carnes 2012; 2013; 2016). The gaps are often considerable in magnitude: according to how the AFL-CIO and the Chamber of Commerce rank the voting records of members of Congress, for instance, legislators from the working class differ by 20 to 40 points (out of 100) from members who were business owners, even in statistical models with controls for partisanship, district characteristics, and other factors. The ease with which we can observe substantial social class differences in the conduct of elected legislators stands in sharp contrast to the blood-from-a-turnip task we encounter when we try to find support for the staffer affluence narrative in the 2017 Congressional Capacity Survey.

The reform community can do better. Popular narratives about staffer affluence may add some punch to the larger congressional capacity call-to-arms, but that arrow should probably go back into the quiver until someone finds real evidence to support it. There are many other good reasons to support increasing congressional staff pay and congressional capacity more generally.

Just as important, the staffer affluence narrative distracts from Congress's real affluence problem: members themselves. If millionaires formed their own political party, that party would make up less than three percent of the general public, but would have a majority in the House of Representatives and a super-majority in the Senate. Forget staffers—half of whom have had to wait tables, answer phones, or swing a sledgehammer outside of Congress—and all of whom

only have as much influence as they can wrestle from their bosses. Descriptive representation at the staff level is difficult to translate into substantive representation. If we want to understand the culture of affluence in Washington, we need to keep our sites clearly set on the truly privileged people. And they aren't the ones answering the phones.



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