



**Why Are There So Few Working-class People in Political Office?
Evidence from State Legislatures***

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*****WORKING DRAFT*****

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Abstract

Why is the working class numerically underrepresented in political offices in the United States? This paper outlines several possibilities and tests them using aggregate-level data on state legislatures, which tend to vary considerably in their class compositions. Although observers have long maintained that working-class people are less likely to hold office because they are less qualified, I find no evidence of a link between the political capabilities of blue-collar workers and their representation in state legislatures. To the contrary, the shortage of the working class in office appears to have far more to do with the characteristics of the political environment: parties, interest groups, and institutions. Those who wish to understand class-based inequalities in office holding—and those who wish to do something about them—would do well to focus on these contextual factors, not on the supposed shortcomings of the working class.

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Working-class citizens have been numerically underrepresented in political office throughout most of American history. By virtually any measure of class or social attainment, lawmakers in every level and branch of government in the United States tend to outrank the citizens they represent: they are wealthier, more educated, and more likely to have come from a white-collar occupation.

There has always been a school of American political thought that has questioned the significance of these inequalities (Manin 1997). Recently, however, empirical research on legislative decision making has uncovered evidence that the class compositions of our political institutions have important consequences for the kinds of policies our government enacts (Carnes 2011; 2012). Like ordinary Americans, lawmakers from different classes tend to think, vote, and advocate differently on economic issues. The shortage of people from the working class in political office consequently tilts the policymaking process in favor of outcomes more in line with the interests and expressed preferences of professionals, businesses, and the upper class. Social safety net programs are stingier, business regulations are flimsier, tax policies are more regressive, and protections for workers are weaker than they would be if our political decision makers' class backgrounds were more like those of the people they represent.

Given the enormous stakes involved in these kinds of policies, it is natural to wonder why the working class is so sharply outnumbered in the first place. Why does our system of representation consistently yield such an un-representative group of decision makers? Although this question has important implications for our understanding of legislative politics, candidate emergence, and political inequality, scholars of U.S. politics have all but ignored it, even as they have made significant headway in understanding the challenges facing other historically underrepresented groups like women and racial minorities.

This study uses aggregate-level data on state legislatures to carry out the first systematic analysis of the factors that may discourage working-class people from holding office. I focus here on both the characteristics of blue-collar citizens and the characteristics of the political landscape. My findings shed new light on the underrepresentation of the working class and suggest several new directions for those who wish to understand this enduring and consequential feature of America's political process—and for those who wish to do something about it.

What (Little) We Know

At least since the start of the twentieth century, *working-class Americans*—people employed in manual labor or unskilled service industry jobs¹—have consistently made up between 50 and 60 percent of the labor market in the United States. In political offices, however, policymakers from these blue-collar occupations are rare. For over a century, no working-class person has gone on to become president. The average member of Congress spent just 1.5 percent of his or her pre-congressional career in working-class jobs. Even as other historically underrepresented groups have gained significant ground in our political institutions, the working-class has been almost entirely excluded from most political offices in the United States.

Figure 1 plots the percentages of congressional seats held by women, racial and ethnic minorities, and lawmakers from the working class (that is, who last had blue-collar jobs before getting involved in politics) in each Congress between 1901 and 1996. Although women and racial minorities were still underrepresented at the end of the twentieth century, their gains

¹ There are both practical reasons for defining policymakers' classes in terms of their occupational backgrounds (data on their previous occupations are far more widely available than data on other common measures of class such as wealth and education; occupations are excellent indicators of a person's place in our society's economic and status structure) as well as substantive reasons (scholars of class stratification regard occupations as the most politically relevant features of a person's place in society). For a more detailed discussion of these points, see Carnes (2011, ch. 1).

during the postwar period sharply contrasted the stable underrepresentation of the working class, which never made up more than two percent of Congress. The same has been true in other branches and levels of government. Between 1976 and 2007, women's representation in state legislatures skyrocketed from 8 percent to 24 percent, and the share of state lawmakers who were Black or Latino grew from 9 percent to 11 percent. During the same period, the share of state legislators from the working class fell from 5 percent to 3 percent.²

[Figure 1]

Scholars know a great deal about the factors that have discouraged women and racial and ethnic minorities from holding office and the factors that have contributed to their success in the last few decades. They have investigated a wide range of both *supply-side explanations*, which “suggest that the outcome reflects [some quality of the] applicants wishing to pursue a political career” (Norris and Lovenduski 1995, 15), and *demand-side explanations*, which emphasize the role that various external factors such as political institutions and party stakeholders play in encouraging certain kinds of candidates to run and win. On the supply side, they have examined how characteristics like resources (Clark 1994), ability (Gaddie and Bullock 1995; Palmer and Simon 2001), aspirations, and self-perceptions (Lawless and Fox 2005) affect the representation of these groups. On the demand side, they have show how voters (Citrin, Green, and Sears 1990; Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1994; Dolan 2004; Seltzer, Newman, and Leighton 1997), party leaders (Crowder-Meyer 2010; Niven 1998), interest groups (Pimlott 2010), and institutional arrangements (Trounstine and Valdini 2008) have contributed to the political fortunes of female and minority candidates.

² The occupation and race/ethnicity estimates are from the National Conference of State Legislatures and the gender estimates are from Equal Representation in Government and Democracy, <http://www.ergd.org/StateLegislatures.htm> (January 5, 2011).

In sharp contrast, political scientists have all but ignored the causes of class-based inequalities in political office holding. Many scholars—including those who study the underrepresentation of other groups—seem to simply take the underrepresentation of the working class for granted. Work on the shortage of women in office, for instance, routinely cites the fact that women “are not found in the professions from which politicians inordinately are chosen—the law and other broker-type businesses” (Clark 1994, 106) and expresses concern that “[f]ull integration of women into all of the pipeline professions . . . may take decades” (Lawless and Fox 2004, 26). However, these studies never ask why politicians are inordinately drawn from those white-collar professions in the first place, why so few working-class Americans have a seat at the table in our political institutions.

As a result, we presently know little about the numerical underrepresentation of the working class. Evidence from experimental (Sadin 2012) and observational (Carnes 2011, ch. 6) studies suggests that voters themselves are not directly responsible. When working-class citizens run for office, they do about as well as other candidates. Descriptive research also suggests that political offices at the local level are more accessible to the working class: former blue-collar workers currently make up roughly two percent of Congress, while people employed in blue-collar jobs make up three percent of state legislatures and nine percent of city councils (Carnes 2011, ch. 1). These findings provide interesting clues about the factors that may discourage working-class people from holding office. Unfortunately, these two insights together constitute the entire body of scientific knowledge about the causes of this defining feature of America’s democratic process.

In the absence of any hard evidence, many political observers have simply assumed that the shortage of working-class Americans in political office reflects some deficiency on the part

of blue-collar citizens. The idea has old roots. In “Federalist #35,” Alexander Hamilton ([1788] 1961, 214) argued that class-based inequalities in office holding were inevitable because

Mechanics and manufacturers will always be inclined with few exceptions to give their votes to merchants in preference to persons of their own professions or trades. . . . They 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.

Modern scholarship on “elite theory” makes essentially the same case, arguing that “all social order is necessarily hierarchical, and . . . leadership is a specialization necessitated by the division of labor in all societies” (Cohen 1981, 5). In this view, the shortage of working-class people in political office simply reflects the fact that professionals have more of the skills and characteristics that make for good candidates and good lawmakers: resources, interest, ability, confidence, and so on. This argument is sometimes cast in supply-side terms—i.e., the working-class is less likely to have the traits that make for good leaders—and sometimes in demand-side terms—i.e., voters prefer professionals because they know that the working class is less likely to have the traits that make for good leaders. At bottom, however, both variants of this old idea rest on the same assumption, namely, that the working class does not govern because it is less capable of doing so.

At first glance, this explanation seems to square with much of what we know about American politics. Working-class people have fewer resources, know less about politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, ch. 4), and are less politically engaged (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, ch. 7) than white-collar professionals. Figure 2 plots the distributions of four supply-side characteristics among white-collar professionals (professionals and managers) and working-class

people (clerical, labor, and semi-skilled workers) in the National Election Study (NES) Cumulative Data File (American National Election Study 2010). The measures used here capture differences in material resources (the percentages of respondents who reported family incomes in the top third of the national distribution), political interest (the percentages who claimed to follow public affairs regularly), ability (the percentages with bachelor's degrees), and aspirations or self-perceptions (the percentages who responded "no" when asked whether they felt that politics or government affairs were sometimes too complicated for people like themselves). The patterns in these data are unmistakable. Compared to the average working-class American, the average professional has more material resources, pays more attention to public affairs, has more formal education, and is more likely to see himself as capable of understanding politics.

[Figure 2]

However, averages like these overlook the fact that there are many more working-class people than there are white-collar professionals—so many more, in fact, that the total number of blue-collar workers with many supply-side characteristics is actually higher than the total number of professionals. Figure 3 plots estimates of the four characteristics considered in Figure 2, this time displaying the *number*—rather than the *percentage*—of blue-collar and white-collar respondents in the NES sample who had each trait. Although the characteristics associated with office holding are less common among working-class Americans, working-class Americans are so numerous that there are actually more blue-collar workers with high family incomes, high levels of political interest, and high levels of political confidence. These facts are difficult to square with the notion that white-collar professionals govern because they are the only ones who fit the bill. The supply-side version of Hamilton's hypothesis seems suspect on its face.

[Figure 3]

The demand-side version of the argument—the notion that voters perceive the working class as less qualified to hold office—seems fishy, too. While it is true that ordinary Americans exhibit prejudices against the working class in many settings (e.g. Fiske et al 1999), no study to date has been able to find evidence that they do so in the voting booth. Members of Congress who spend more of their pre-congressional careers in blue-collar jobs fare about as well in elections as members who worked in white-collar professions (Carnes 2011, ch. 6). Experimental subjects who are randomly assigned to evaluate hypothetical candidates from the working class evaluate them about as favorably as subjects who are randomly assigned to evaluate otherwise-identical candidates from professional backgrounds (Sadin 2012). Although the preferences of voters and the supply-side characteristics of working-class Americans still warrant further investigation, their weak initial showings suggest that we should also entertain other possibilities.

There are many demand-side mechanisms besides voters that could limit the working class's role in government. The political gatekeepers and party leaders who recruit, train, and promote new candidates may underestimate working-class candidates' chances of winning office and consequently ignore them when reaching out to potential candidates, as they often do with women (Crowder-Meyer 2010). They may not even think to reach out to them in the first place. Or they simply may not know many working-class people; recruiting blue-collar workers may be a harder, more time-consuming task. If political gatekeepers look to their personal or professional networks for potential candidates and if most gatekeepers are themselves white-collar professionals, the ongoing underrepresentation of the working class could simply be the result of features of the candidate recruitment process that reinforce existing biases in the composition of political stakeholders.

Interest groups could also play a role. Labor organizations, the groups that have

traditionally claimed to represent blue-collar workers, have been declining in membership and political influence for decades (Clawson and Clawson 1999). Where they have a meaningful presence, however, they may help to encourage working-class people to run for office.

The institutional environment may also affect the amount of demand for working-class people in campaigns and elections. Holding office in many political institutions requires substantial time, energy, and resources. Above the local level, holding office may require taking time off work and paying out of pocket for lodging in a distant capital city. Simply running for many offices is itself a part- or full-time job. Political observers have long worried that these features of large, “professionalized” political institutions could discourage even the most qualified working-class people from pursuing careers in public office (Manin 1997).

Table 1 summarizes the explanations for the shortage of working people in political office that seem most promising given what we currently know. These explanations may not exhaust the entire universe of potential causes, but they represent a solid starting point for empirical work and a substantial improvement over the current state of scholarly thinking about this question. For too long, political scientists have been content either to ignore inequalities in the class composition of government or to attribute them (without much evidence) to the alleged shortcomings of working-class Americans. The available evidence suggests that we should be skeptical of these kinds of explanations—and that we should consider other possibilities.

[Table 1]

Learning from State Legislatures

State legislatures are an ideal laboratory in which to begin doing so. At the national level, lawmakers’ class backgrounds vary so little (see Figure 1) that it can be difficult to isolate the

factors that influence whether working-class people hold office. At the local level, lawmakers' class backgrounds vary a great deal, but the sheer number of local governments and the difficulty of generating county- or city-level measures of many potentially interesting variables make studying local politics challenging. States strike an ideal balance. Information about citizens and political institutions is far easier to compile at the state level. And the class compositions of state legislatures vary considerably: Figure 4 graphs data from the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) on the percentages of lawmakers in each state employed in working-class jobs³ in 2007. Sixteen state legislatures fell in the 0 to 2 percent range, but another sixteen were made up of 4 to 10 percent working-class lawmakers, far more than we would observe in a study of any recent Congress.

Although individual-level data on the occupational or social class backgrounds of state lawmakers (and lawmakers in other levels of government) are scarce, the NCSL has compiled aggregate data on the occupational compositions of state legislatures in 1993, 1995, and 2007. Since the compositions of state legislatures were nearly identical in 1993 and in 1995, I focus only on 1993 in this analysis. I also draw on a dataset compiled in the same fashion by the Insurance Information Institute in 1979. Together, these three aggregate datasets provide 150 state-year observations staggered at 14-year intervals: 50 cases in 1979, 50 in 1993, and 50 in 2007. (I have chosen to omit one extreme outlier—Maine in 1979, which reportedly had a 20-percent working-class legislature—out of concern for both data reliability and the case's potential statistical leverage, although doing so did not alter my results in any meaningful way.)

To test the supply-side explanations summarized in Table 1, I have relied on surveys

³ I define state lawmakers as working class if they were listed in the NCSL's Labor Unions category or in its Business (Non-manager) category, a category that was defined as "blue collar; other white collar (clerical, sales etc.) and personal services (barbers, hairdressers, cashiers, etc.)" in the first study of the occupational profiles of state legislatures (Insurance Information Institute 1979, 6).

from the NES's Cumulative Data File, which includes nationally representative data on a wide range of supply-side characteristics for most election years since World War II. Unfortunately, the NES survey in any single year often had too few cases to allow me to generate reliable state-level estimates of the characteristics of working-class people. As such, for each of the three years for which I have aggregate legislator class data (1979, 1993, and 2007), I pooled data from the four prior waves of NES surveys (e.g., for 1979, I pooled surveys conducted in 1972, 1974, 1976, and 1978). I ignored any state and year for which this process yielded fewer than 20 surveys with working-class people, which reduced my sample size to 99 state-year observations (but preserved at least one observation for each of 41 states).

Using these pooled surveys, I created several measures that tapped the supply-side factors outlined in Table 1. If working-class citizens are less likely to hold office because they simply make up a smaller share of the pool of “suitable” candidates—candidates with the right supply-side characteristics—then blue-collar workers should be more likely to hold office in states where they make up larger shares of that pool.⁴ To estimate working-class respondents' share of the citizens with *resources* in each state, I computed the percentage of working-class people among the survey respondents who reportedly fell in the top third of the distribution of family income. To measure *political interest*, I computed the working class's share of respondents who said that they follow public affairs most of the time and (separately) who reported that they were very much interested in elections, who reported that they routinely consume campaign-related media from two or more sources, and who reported that they attended a campaign rally or meeting during the last election. As a rough measure of *ability*, I computed the percentage of

⁴ Alternatively, one might argue that it is not workers' relative share of this pool but simply the percentage of blue-collar workers with good characteristics that determines the rate at which working-class people hold office. This alternative approach yields the same basic findings.

working-class people among the survey respondents in each state who held college degrees, who reported that they had attempted to influence how others vote in a recent election, and whose levels of political knowledge were rated “fairly high” or “very high” by the interviewer after their surveys. And as a rough measure of *aspirations* and *self-perceptions*, I computed the working class’s share of respondents who disagreed when asked whether they felt that politics and government were too complicated for people like themselves.⁵

I was also able to test several demand-side explanations with the NES data. If *voters* are behind inequalities in working-class representation, it may be because white-collar professionals—who vote at disproportionately high rates—prefer white-collar candidates. Or it may be because the working class’s political views are too far outside of the mainstream for voters. As a simple test of these ideas, I computed the working class’s share of voters in national elections in each state and the difference between the percentage of working-class people who identify as Republican and the percentage of voters state-wide who identify as Republican. If white-collar voters prefer white-collar candidates, places where working-class people make up larger shares of the electorate should elect more working-class lawmakers. If working-class people are politically out of step with the electorate, they should tend to fare better in places where the working class’s politics are more like those of the state as a whole.

I also generated a rough measure of the extent to which working-class citizens were enmeshed in *political gatekeepers’ social networks* by computing the percentage of people from the working class among those respondents who reported that they had worked for a party or candidate in the last election. Formal campaign organizations are a common point of entry into the political process for many Americans and provide ready access to other volunteers and staff

⁵ The texts of the survey items used to create these state-level averages are listed in the Appendix.

members who are socially and professionally connected to political gatekeepers. Of course, this measure also reflects the supply-side characteristics of working-class people: just as attending a campaign or rally signals political interest, working or volunteering for a campaign is a clear indication of engagement with elections and public affairs. Working for a campaign, however, involves direct contact with formal political organizations in a way that simply attending a rally does not. If there is any benefit to contact with electoral and partisan institutions over and above what can be attributed to the political interest necessary to initially make that contact, it should be captured by this measure.

Likewise, to measure the importance of *interest groups*, I computed the percentage of citizens in each state who belonged to labor unions. Again, union density may itself be an indication of political interest or engagement on the part of the working class, but to the extent that unions provide some external assistance to politically attentive workers, there should be a unique association between union membership and office holding over and above what can be attributed to the working class's political interest.

Finally, as a simple measure of the importance of *institutional demands*, I relied on an index of state legislative professionalism estimated using Squire's (1992) method. This index combined information about the time and energy involved in legislative service—factors that should make holding office more difficult for individuals in working-class jobs—and about the salaries, benefits, and staff resources legislators enjoy—factors thought to “attract better qualified members” (Squire 2007, 213), that is, factors that make legislative service more attractive to white-collar professionals. Composite measures of professionalism are widely used in the study of legislative politics and are correlated with many other features of the institutional environment that may make office holding prohibitive to working-class people, like the

competitiveness (and therefore costliness) of elections. Although they undoubtedly miss many aspects of the institutional contexts in state legislatures that might affect working-class citizens' chances of holding office, they usefully summarize the amount of time and resources that campaigning and holding office in a state typically require, that is, the extent to which serving on the state legislature is a personally disruptive experience.

Unfortunately, I was not able to test hypotheses about *prejudices or biases on the part of political gatekeepers*. Data on the behaviors and attitudes of gatekeepers are rare, and generating them from scratch requires heroic efforts (Crowder-Meyer 2010). Biases in political gatekeeping may well discourage working-class citizens from holding public office, but they deserve more careful attention than I can give them in a first pass at this question.

It is also important to note up front that the aggregate-level data I have assembled for this analysis inherently overlook or “black box” the processes that link the explanatory variables I have measured and working-class office holding. Simply knowing that a given characteristic is associated with representation in the aggregate is not the same as observing the underlying processes behind that association at the individual level. Aggregate-level data provide us with a useful starting point, a way to sort through many feasible explanations. They are especially important given that there individual-level data on the class backgrounds of state officeholders are scarce. Before we can collect those data, we need to know what we should be looking for. Aggregate-level analyses usefully summarize the end results of the processes that give rise to inequalities in the class composition of government and, in doing so, provide guidance for future individual-level analyses. They give us a bird's-eye view of the forest that can help guide us as we begin examining the trees more closely.

The Empirical Evidence

What does that bird's-eye view reveal? Do any of the explanations summarized in Table 1 hold up in analyses of data on state legislatures?

Figure 5 consists of eight panels, one for each of the supply-side characteristics I have measured using NES surveys. In each panel, the vertical axis on the graph represents the percentage of state lawmakers from the working class, the horizontal axis records the characteristic in question, and I have added best-fit lines from simple linear regression (dashed when the relationship is not statistically significant). All eight of the characteristics examined in Figure 5 have been hypothesized to be positively associated with working-class representation. If resource disparities are behind the shortage of working-class people, workers should be more likely to hold office in states where the working class makes up a larger percentage of high-income families. If disparities in political interest are responsible, workers should hold more offices in states where the working class makes up a larger share of politically interested citizens. And so on.

[Figure 5]

The most striking feature of Figure 5 is how little the representation of the working class in state legislatures appears to depend on the representation of the working class among people with the right supply-side characteristics. Nearly all of the traits measured here are essentially uncorrelated with office holding: meeting attendance, media consumption, education, attempting to influence others' votes, political knowledge, and political confidence. Only one—the working class's representation among wealthy families—was positively and significantly associated with office holding, about what we would expect by chance alone. When it comes to explaining the aggregate-level shortage of working-class people in political office in the United States, at first

glance, supply-side explanations focused on the characteristics of the working class seem not to matter all that much.

Of course, two important caveats should be noted here. First, even after pooling multiple waves of NES surveys, my sample sizes were often small. As a result, many individual estimates of the working class's share of people with supply-side traits were moderately imprecise; it is doubtful, for instance, that there is any state where working-class people make up 0% of the citizens who attend political meetings or rallies, or any state where they make up 100% of attendees. Second, the measures used in Figure 5 are by no means a complete or perfect list of the characteristics that we might think "good" office holders should have. The ANES cannot measure honesty or compassion or bargaining skills or backbone.

Even so, the supply-side characteristics that it can measure—albeit it somewhat imprecisely—should be correlated with working-class representation, at least if the conventional wisdom is correct. If working-class people are less likely to hold office because they are less well-suited for the job, we would expect some of measures in Figure 5 to be associated with the working class's share of the state legislature. However, they are not (even if we ignore obvious outliers and states with small sample sizes). The most these data on supply-side characteristics allow us to say about the working class's suitability for officeholding is that workers might hold more offices if they made more money.⁶

This is not to say that supply-side characteristics are unimportant at the *individual level*. Working-class people who are more knowledgeable, more interested in politics, and so on are

⁶ Moreover, the causal processes underlying this finding could run in either direction. It could be that workers hold more offices because they have more resources, or it could be that states where workers govern enact policies that support working class incomes (or both). The one supply-side characteristic that predicts working-class representation is among the most likely to be a *product* of working-class representation, not simply a driver of it.

probably more likely to run for office. But a collective deficit of these traits among working-class Americans does not seem to be responsible for the aggregate-level shortage of working-class people in our state legislatures.

Nor does the demand-side variant of the conventional wisdom, the notion that voters prefer candidates from white-collar backgrounds to those from the working class. Figure 6 plots the five demand-side measures I created for this analysis in the same fashion as Figure 5. The top two frames display the associations between working-class representation and the working class's share of the electorate (top left) or the working class's partisan congruence with the state as a whole (top right). Neither association is substantively large or statistically significant. Whether the working class makes up one quarter of a state's electorate or more than two thirds, on average, blue-collar citizens make up about the same share of seats in the statehouse. In most states, the working class tends to identify more with the Democratic party than the state as a whole does (as Bartels 2006 and others have argued, in contrast to journalistic accounts like Frank 2004), but whether the working class's political views are squarely in line with those of the state or farther to the left seems to have little bearing on the numerical representation of the working class in state legislatures.

[Figure 6]

The other demand-side characteristics summarized in Figure 6 appear to matter far more. Workers are more likely to hold office in states where they make up a larger share of party or campaign staff (my rough measure of their connection to political gatekeepers' networks), where unions are stronger (my measure of interest group support), and where the legislature is less professionalized (my measure of the institutional demands associated with office holding). The simple linear regression coefficients for each of these variables are substantively large and

statistically significant. In places where working-class citizens are more likely to belong to formal organizations that represent their interests, where workers are more likely to play a role in the formal organizations from which many political gatekeepers recruit potential candidates, and where serving in the state legislature is a less prohibitive activity, the working class plays more of a role in legislative institutions.

Regression analyses reach the same basic conclusions. Table 2 reports a series of ordinary least squares models that relate the percentage of working-class people in each state's legislature to (1) the supply-side characteristics in Figure 5, (2) the demand-side characteristics in Figure 6, (3) both the supply- and demand-side characteristics, and (4) the three demand-side characteristics that stand out in Figure 6, the working class's share of party and campaign staff, the state's union density, and the state legislature's professionalism score.

[Table 2]

In model 1, the coefficients for each of the supply-side factors are comparable to those in the simple regression summarized in Figure 5. Only the income measure is significant and in the expected direction. Whether examined on their own or as a group, the supply-side characteristics of workers that are often the subject of defenses of government by the upper class are, in reality, mostly uncorrelated with whether workers actually hold office.

Likewise, the results of model 2 largely confirm what the simple scatterplots in Figure 6 illustrated. Considered together, the demand-side characteristics of a state—at least those pertaining to its institutional arrangements—are strongly associated with working-class representation. As in Figure 6, the characteristics of voters appear unrelated to the class compositions of legislatures. The share of working-class people is about the same in states where workers make up large shares of the electorate and in states where they make up small shares. It

is about the same where the working class is ideologically in step with the state and where it is not. However, in states where more workers play an active role in party or campaign organizations, where more people belong to labor organizations, and where legislative service is less demanding, working-class people lead in greater numbers. The association between working-class representation among campaign and party staff and working-class representation in the statehouse was substantially weaker in this analysis: a 10-percentage-point increase in the share of the working class involved in formal campaign or party organizations was associated with a marginally significant 0.2-percentage-point increase in the share of state legislators from the working class. However, the associations between working-class representation and union density or legislative professionalism remained strong. A 10-point increase in the percentage of the state that belonged to labor unions was associated with a 1-point increase in the percentage of state lawmakers from the working class, as was a 10-point decrease (on a scale of 0 to 100) in legislative professionalism.

These associations did not appear to be the spurious products of correlations between the supply-side characteristics of the working class and the (admittedly imperfect) demand-side measures available for this analysis. As model 3 illustrates, two of the three demand-side measures that were significantly associated with working-class representation in model 2 remained significant when controls were added for the supply-side characteristics in model 1. In model 3, the coefficient for working-class involvement in campaigns and parties was slightly smaller than in model 2 and fell short of statistical significance ($p < 0.236$), although this reduction in significance is hardly surprising in a model with 96 observations 15 control variables. Otherwise, the results were essentially the same.

Together, the three factors highlighted in models 2 and 3—the social class makeup of

party and campaign staff, union density, and legislative professionalism—appear to be strongly associated with the representation of the working class. Model 4 regressed the percentage of state lawmakers from the working class on just these three variables. The R^2 estimate was high, and the model's standard error was low: these three factors alone are good predictors of working-class representation. Taken at face value, the coefficients in model 4 can account for much of the shortage of working-class people in state legislatures: supposing, for instance, that 60% of party and campaign staff were blue-collar workers (one standard deviation above the mean in this sample, and a number not far off from the representation of the working class in the population as a whole), that 52% of people lived in union households (the highest of any observation in this sample), and that the state's legislative professionalism score was 2.7 out of 100 (the lowest in this sample), model 4 suggests that the working class would make up close to 10% of state legislative seats—almost triple the current rate—a difference that would close roughly one fifth of the gap between workers' numbers in the population as a whole and workers' representation in political office. The supposed shortcomings of blue-collar Americans appear to have little to do with their underrepresentation in our state legislatures. Working-class representation appears to depend far more on the extent to which the political environment in a state harnesses or inhibits the potential of the working class.

What We Still Need to Know

In his widely-cited book *In Defense of Elitism*, Pulitzer-Prize-winning journalist William A. Henry III (1995, 21) briefly discusses the shortage of working-class people in political office:

Can democracy be reconciled with elitism? The answer is that in our society, it already has been. . . . Voters repeatedly reject insurrectionist candidates who parallel their own

ordinariness, even candidates who vow to further the individual voter's interests, in favor of candidates of proven character and competence.

Why are there so few working class people in political office in the United States? In this view, white-collar professionals simply have more character and more competence, and voters know it.

Henry is by no means alone in attributing our white-collar government to voters' alleged preferences or to professionals' alleged virtues. As one comment in response to an online article documenting class-based inequalities in office holding put it, "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."⁷

The findings reported in this paper join a growing body of evidence suggesting that the views embodied in these kinds of statements are seriously out of step with the realities of American politics. Regardless of how similar blue-collar workers are to voters—how much of the state electorate the working class constitutes or how mainstream the working class's political views are—this study finds that workers remain underrepresented in state legislatures. Regardless of how much education they acquire, how interested they are in politics, how attentive they are to current events, how much they participate in the political process, how knowledgeable they are about politics, or how confident they are in their political abilities, this study finds that workers make up far less than their fair share of the seats in our state legislatures. Like others before it, this study finds no evidence that the shortage of people from the working class in political offices in the United States has anything to do with the voters' preferences or with the working class's "character and competence."

⁷ Available online from < <http://fivethirtyeight.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/12/social-status-of-members-of-congress-shifts-policy-toward-rich/> > (December 21, 2011).

Quite the contrary, this study provides the first hard evidence of the factors that *are* associated with the representation of the working class in American political institutions, and they bear little resemblance to those envisioned by proponents of the view that “[v]oters . . . reject insurrectionist candidates who parallel their own ordinariness.” The working class’s representation seems to have far more to do with the characteristics of the political environment than the characteristics of voters or workers. In places where the working class has ties to labor unions or to electoral institutions—to parties or political campaigns—workers make up greater shares of the legislature. In places where holding office is a less disruptive experience, where legislatures more closely resemble city councils than Congress, the working class holds more seats. These findings are a far cry from a complete answer to the question of why there are so few working class people in political office, but they clearly suggest that demand-side, institutional explanations hold far more promise than those centered on voters or on the working class itself.

They also suggest that those interested in increasing the working class’s representation would do well to focus on finding ways to compensate for the barriers that more professionalized legislatures create⁸ and on building ties between the working class and the parties and interest groups that typically recruit political candidates. The North Carolina Center for Voter Education has long lobbied to increase state lawmakers’ compensation—currently around \$13,000 for up to six months of full-time work—in an effort to offset the opportunity costs associated with holding office (Heagarty 2007). The New Jersey AFL-CIO actively works to identify, recruit, and train union members to run for political office; each year, it hosts a “candidate school” for working-class citizens. In 2011, the New Haven, CT, chapter of the union UNITE HERE recruited and

⁸ De-professionalizing legislatures—reducing the frequency with which they meet or decreasing staff support for lawmakers, etc.—is probably not feasible or desirable.

trained 16 of its members to run in municipal government elections, where they won 15 of those races and thereby gained majority control of the New Haven Board of Aldermen (Smith 2011). My findings suggest that efforts like these, efforts that focus on reducing the barriers to office holding and actively recruiting politically capable working-class candidates, hold far more promise than the kinds of programs we might envision if we believed that voters preferred affluent candidates or that the working class was unfit to govern.

Of course, this analysis is only a first cut at a complex problem. This study's findings are consistent with the idea that parties, interest groups, and political institutions influence the representation of the working class, but we have yet to directly observe the processes by which that influence plays out. We have yet to see when in the candidate emergence process (e.g., the decision to run, the election, etc.) these factors screen out working-class people. We have only observed associations; we have yet to explore the potentially complex causal relationships between the political environment and the representation of the working class. And there are still other explanations we have yet to study, most notably the role of class-based biases on the part of political gatekeepers.

We have to start somewhere, though. Despite its limitations, this study represents an important first step into an "undertilled field" (Arnold 1982) in the study of representational inequality. Scholars have rightly devoted a great deal of time and energy to questions about the representation of women and racial and ethnic minorities. With few exceptions, however, they have ignored the working class. They are not alone. Political observers routinely lament class-based inequalities in routine forms of political participation like voting or donating money to campaigns but ignore class-based inequalities in office holding itself.

Research on the consequences of class-based inequalities in political office holding

suggests that those who care about political equality should care about the factors that keep the working class from holding office. The findings presented in this paper suggest that understanding those factors will require scholars and political practitioners to focus on our political institutions and to relinquish the old idea that the working class can't govern.

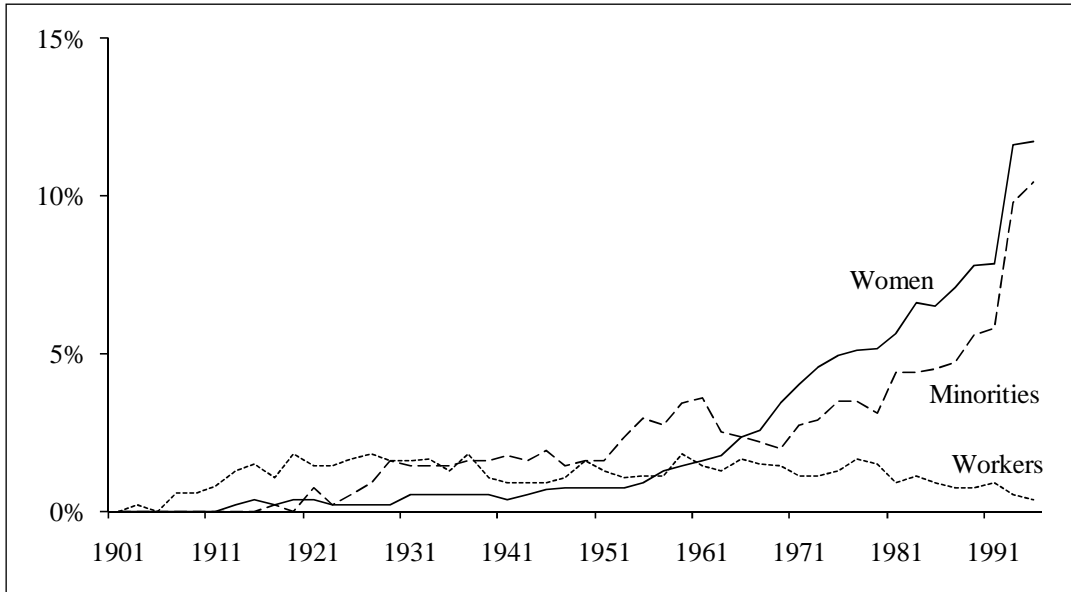
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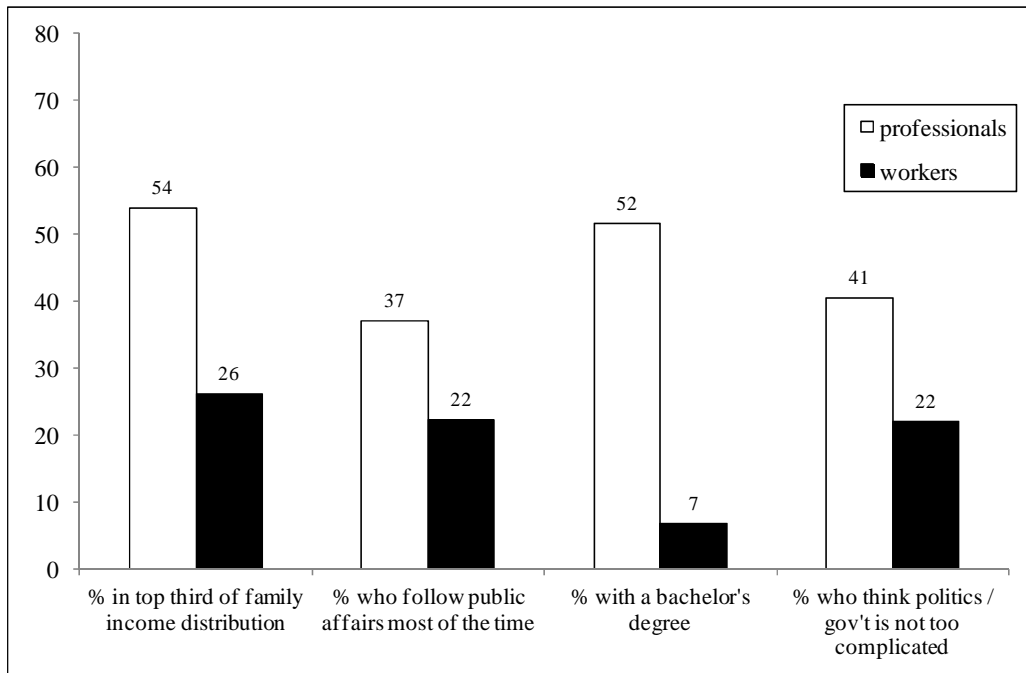
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Figure 1: The Demographic Composition of Congress, 1901–1996



Source: ICPSR and McKibbin (1997).

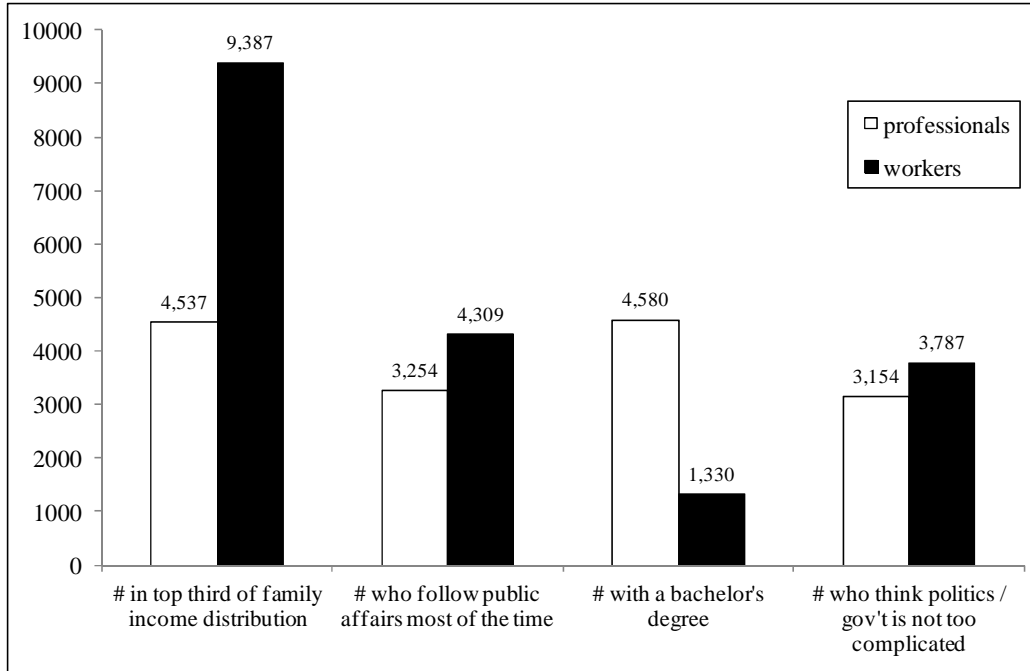
Figure 2: Social Class Biases in Four Characteristics Associated with Officeholding



Source: American National Election Study (2010) Cumulative Data File.

Note: Estimates are based on surveys conducted from 1960 to 2008, the years when all four measures were included.

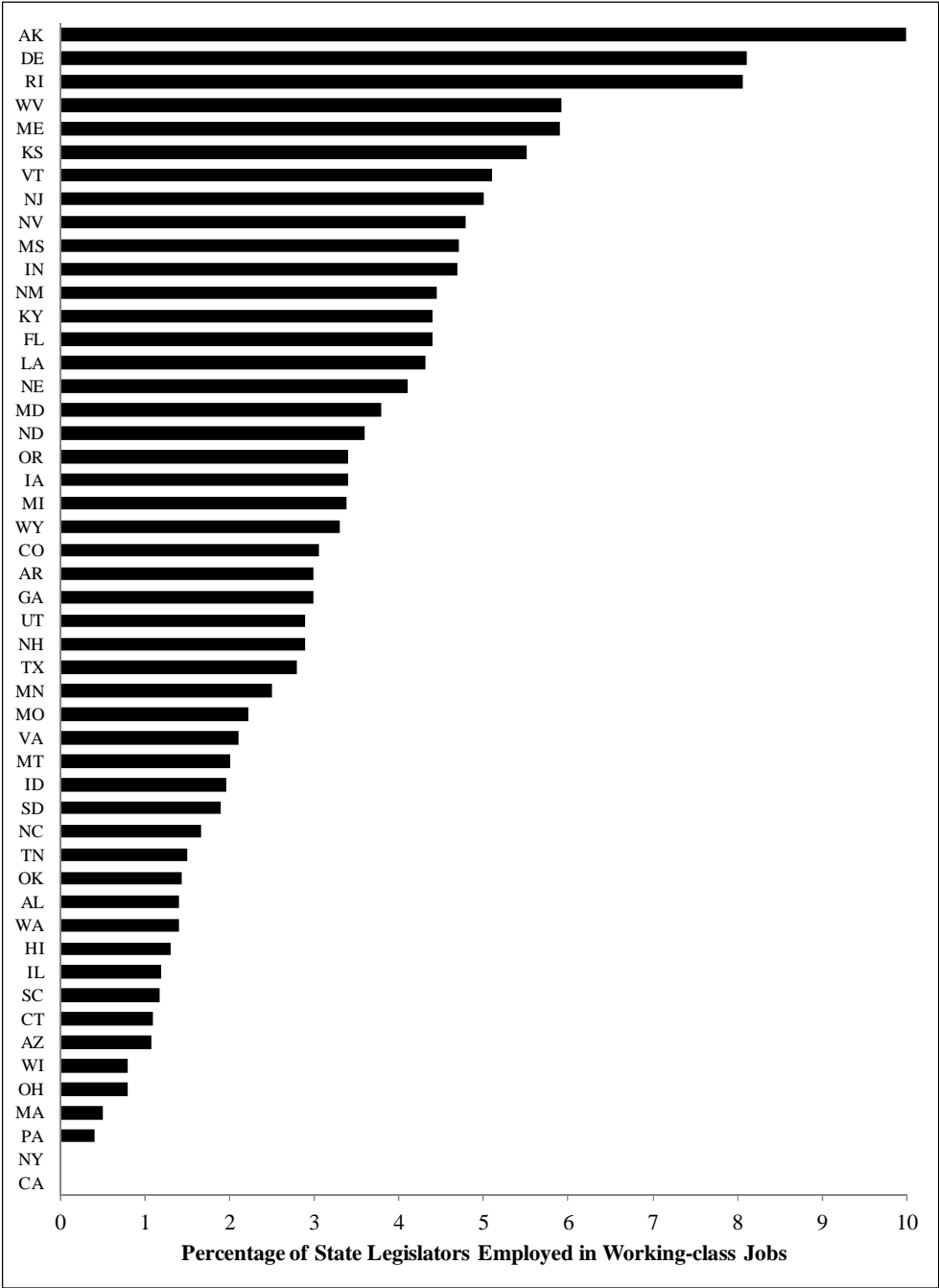
Figure 3: Social Class Biases Revisited



Source: American National Election Study (2010) Cumulative Data File.

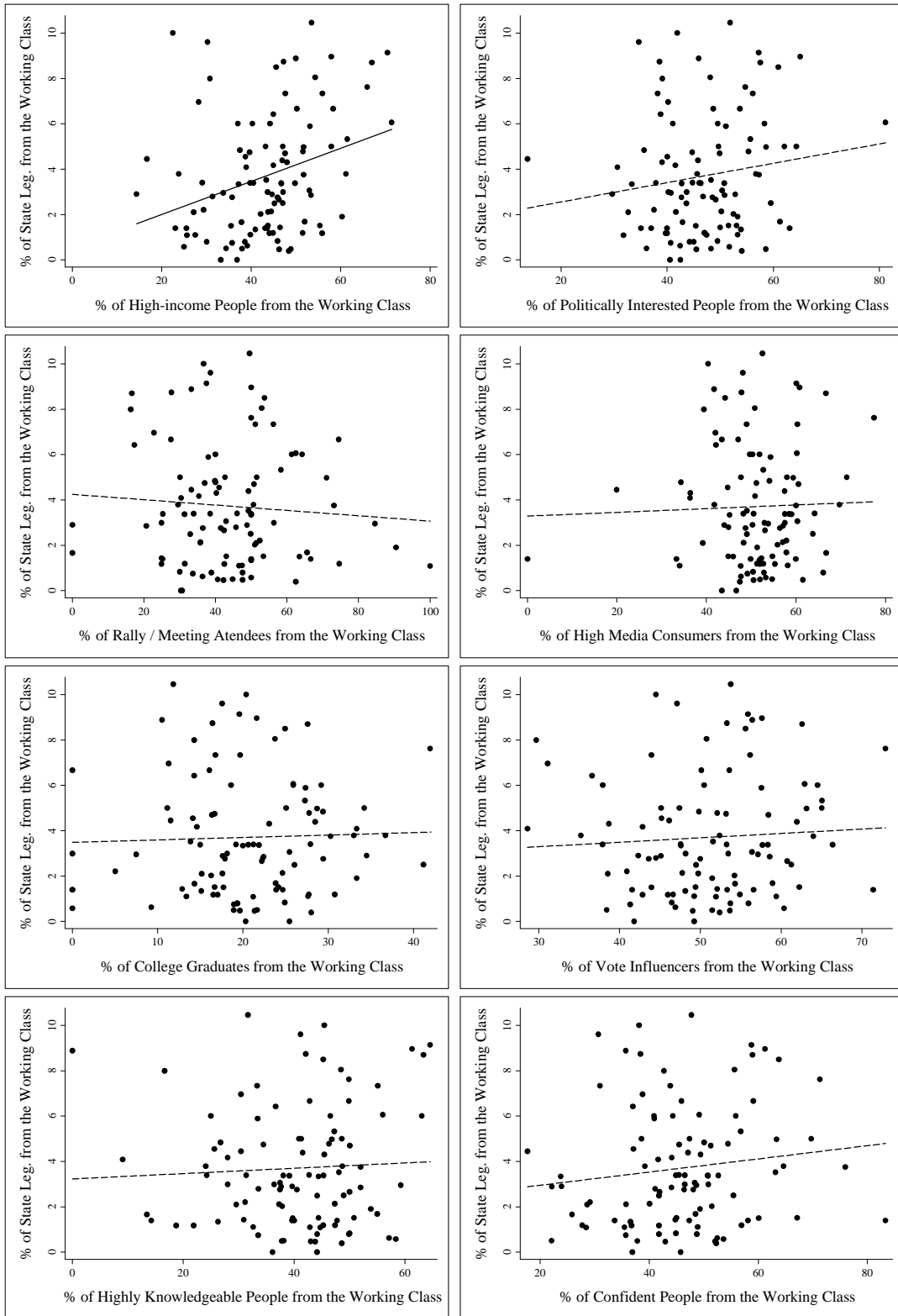
Note: Estimates are based on surveys conducted from 1960 to 2008, the years when all four measures were included.

Figure 4: Working-class Representation in State Legislatures, 2007



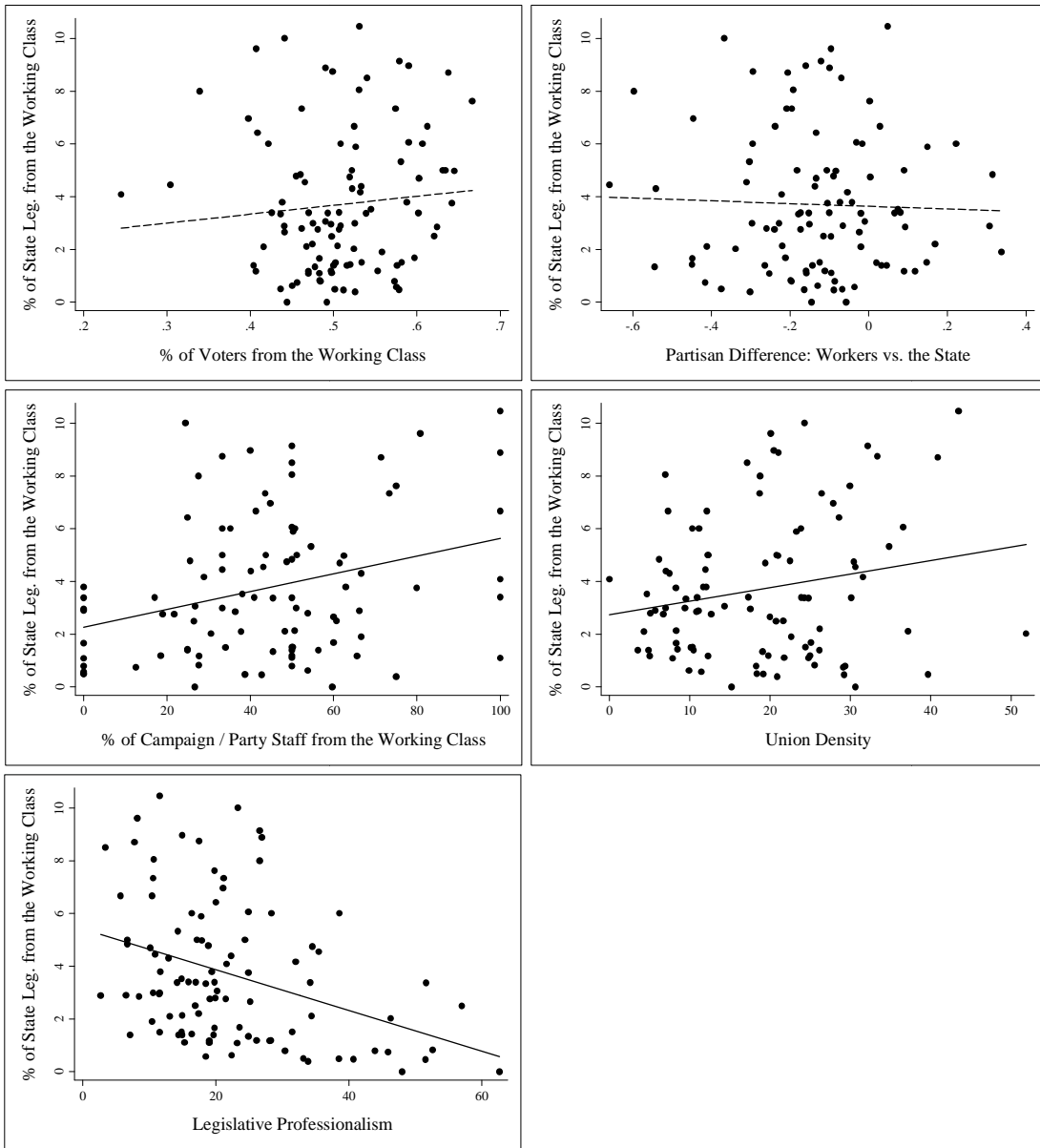
Source: National Conference of State Legislatures

Figure 5: Supply-side Explanations



Sources: NCLS, Insurance Information Institute (1979), and ANES (2010) Cumulative Data File.

Figure 6: Demand-side Explanations



Sources: NCLS, Insurance Information Institute (1979), ANES (2010) Cumulative Data File, and Squire (1992).

Table 1: Why Are There So Few Working-class People in Political Office?

Supply-side explanations

- | | |
|---------------------|---|
| 1. Resources | Working-class people have fewer resources like money and free time. |
| 2. Interest | Working-class people are less interested in politics and government. |
| 3. Ability | Working-class people are less likely to have the skills needed to run and win. |
| 4. Aspirations | Working-class people are less likely to want to hold political office. |
| 5. Self-perceptions | Working-class people are less likely to see themselves as qualified to hold office. |

Demand-side explanations

- | | |
|------------------------|--|
| 6. Voter biases | Voters prefer candidates from white-collar professions. |
| 7. Gatekeeper biases | Political recruiters see working-class people as less likely to run and win. |
| 8. Gatekeeper networks | Political recruiters are less likely to know and interact with working-class people. |
| 9. Interest groups | Interest groups are less likely to support working-class candidates. |
| 10. Institutions | Institutional arrangements make it hard for working-class people to hold office. |
-

Table 2: Supply- and Demand-side Explanations and Working-class Representation

	1	2	3	4
<i>Supply-side Explanations</i>				
% high-income people from the working class	0.09* (0.04)	—	0.06+ (0.03)	—
% of pol. interested people from the w. class	0.00 (0.04)	—	-0.02 (0.03)	—
% of rally/meeting attendees from the w. class	-0.02 (0.02)	—	-0.02 (0.02)	—
% of high media consumers from the w. class	-0.07* (0.03)	—	-0.04 (0.04)	—
% of college graduates from the working class	-0.02 (0.03)	—	0.00 (0.02)	—
% of vote influencers from the working class	0.00 (0.04)	—	-0.03 (0.05)	—
% of knowledgeable people from the w. class	0.00 (0.03)	—	0.00 (0.04)	—
% of confident people from the working class	0.03 (0.03)	—	0.04 (0.03)	—
<i>Demand-side explanations</i>				
% voters from the working class	—	-3.02 (2.49)	-1.99 (5.12)	—
partisan difference: voters vs. workers	—	-0.90 (1.46)	-0.86 (1.41)	—
% campaign / party staff from the w. class	—	0.02+ (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)
union density	—	0.11** (0.03)	0.10** (0.027)	0.10** (0.02)
legislative professionalism	—	-0.11** (0.02)	-0.11** (0.022)	-0.11** (0.02)
intercept	3.40+ (1.75)	4.77** (1.50)	5.872** (1.679)	3.43** (0.73)
<i>N</i>	98	96	96	96
<i>R</i> ²	0.1472	0.3220	0.3898	0.3100
Standard Error	2.5701	2.2748	2.2609	2.2697

Sources: NCLS, Insurance Information Institute (1979), ANES (2010) Cumulative Data File, and Squire (1992).
Notes: Cells report coefficients (with clustered standard errors in parentheses) from models relating the percentage of working-class people in the state legislature to the variables in question.
+ $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$, two tailed.

Appendix: Survey Questions Used to Create State-level Measures

% high-income people from the working class

Of the respondents who reported that their family incomes fell into the categories “68 to 95 percentile” or “96 to 100 percentile” when prompted with the ANES family income question (VCF0114), I computed the proportion who were working class. The wording varied from year to year:

About what do you think your total income will be this year for yourself and your immediate family? (1952, 1956-1960)

Would you tell me how much income you and your family will be making during this calendar year, 1962. I mean, before taxes. (1962)

About what do you think your total income will be this year for yourself and your immediate family. Just give me the number/ letter) of the right income category. (1964, 1968)

Many people don't know their exact (1966/1970) income yet; but would you tell me as best you can what you expect your (1966/1970) income to be--before taxes? You may just tell me the letter of the group on this card into which your family income will probably fall. (1966,1970)

Please look at this card/page (2000 FTF: the booklet) and tell me the letter of the income group that includes the income of all members of your family living here in [previous year] before taxes. This figure should include salaries, wages, pensions, dividends, interest, and all other income. (IF UNCERTAIN:) What would be your best guess? ((1972-1990, 1992 long form, 1994 later exc., 2000 telephone)

Can you give us an estimate of your total family income in 1991 before taxes? This figure should include salaries, wages, pensions, dividends, interest and all other income for every member of your family living in your house in 1991. First could you tell me if that was above or below \$24,999? (IF UNCERTAIN: what would be your best guess?) (IF ABOVE/BELOW \$24,999:) I will read you some income categories, could you please stop me when I reach the category that corresponds to your family situation? (1992 short form)

I am going to read you a list of income categories. Please tell me which category best describes the total income of all members of your family living in your house in 1999 before taxes. This figure should include salaries, wages, pensions, dividends, interest, and all other income. Please stop me when I get to your family's income. (2000 telephone)

Response Categories:

1. 0 to 16 percentile
2. 17 to 33 percentile
3. 34 to 67 percentile
4. 68 to 95 percentile
5. 96 to 100 percentile

% of politically interested people from the working class

Of the respondents who reported that they follow public affairs “most of the time” when prompted with the ANES’s interest in public affairs question (VCF0313), I computed the percentage who were from the working class.

Some people seem to follow (1964: think about) what’s going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there’s an election going on or not. Others aren’t that interested. Would you say you follow what’s going on in government and public affairs most of the time, some of the time, only now and then, or hardly at all?

We’d also like to know how much attention you pay to what's going on in politics generally. I mean from day to day, when there isn't any big election campaign going on, would you say you follow politics very closely, fairly closely, or not much at all? (1960, 1962)

Response Categories:

1. Hardly at all (1960,1962: not much at all)
2. Only now and then
3. Some of the time (1960,1962: fairly closely)
4. Most of the time (1960,1962: very closely)
9. DK

% of rally / meeting attendees from the working class

For those who responded “yes” to the ANES’s question on whether respondents attended campaigns or rallies (VCF0718), I computed the percentage from the working class.

Did you go to any political meetings, rallies, (1984 AND LATER: speeches,) (1978,1980,1982: fund raising) dinners, or things like that (1984 AND LATER: in support of a particular candidate)?

Response categories:

1. No
2. Yes
0. DK; NA; Inap.; missing; question not used

% of high media consumers from the working class

For those respondents who reported that they had consumed campaign-related news from two or more media according to the ANES’s composite media exposure count (VCF0728) or whose composite media exposure count indicated that they had consumed news from one source and who separately indicated that they had also read about the campaign on the internet (VCF0745), I computed the percentage who were from the working class.

% of college graduates from the working class

For respondents who reported that they held at least a bachelor's degree using the ANES's 6-category education question (VCF0140), I computed the percentage from the working class.

How many grades of school did you finish? (1952-1972)

What is highest grade of school or year of college you have completed? Did you get a high school diploma or pass a high school equivalency test? (1974 AND LATER)

(1974,1976: Do you have a college degree? IF YES: What degree is that?)

(1978-1984: Do you have a college degree? IF YES: What is the highest degree that you have earned?)

(1986 AND LATER: What is the highest degree that you have earned?)

Response Categories:

1. 8 grades or less ('grade school')
2. 9-12 grades ('high school'), no diploma/equivalency
3. 12 grades, diploma or equivalency
4. 12 grades, diploma or equivalency plus non-academic training
5. Some college, no degree; junior/community college level degree (AA degree)
6. BA level degrees; advanced degrees incl. LLB
8. DK
9. NA; RF; Inap.; missing; question not used

% of vote influencers from the working class

For those who replied "yes" when the ANES asked whether they had attempted to influence how someone else voted in the last election (VCF0717), I computed the percent from the working class.

(1952, 1956, 1960-1964: I have a list of some of the things that people do that help a party or a candidate win an election. I wonder if you could tell me whether you did any of these things.)

(1968, 1972 and later: Now I'd like to find out [1990 AND LATER: We'd/we would like to find out] about some of the things that people do to help a party or candidate win an election.) During the campaign, did you talk to any people and try to show them why they should vote for (1984 and later: or against) one of the parties or candidates?

Response Categories

1. No
2. Yes
0. NA; RF; Inap.; missing; question not used

% of highly knowledgeable people from the working class

For respondents whose general level of political knowledge was deemed “fairly high” or “very high” by their ANES interviewers (VCF0050b), I computed the percent from the working class.

Respondent's general level of information about politics and public affairs seemed:

Response Categories:

1. Very high
2. Fairly high
3. Average
4. Fairly low
5. Very low
9. NA
0. Inap.; missing; question not used

% of confident people from the working class

For those respondents who replied “disagree” when asked whether they agree that politics and government seem too complicated for someone like themselves (VCF0614), I computed the percentage from the working class.

“Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on.”

Response Categories

1. Agree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree (1988 and later only)
9. DK; depends; not sure; can't say; refused to say
0. NA; inap.; missing; question not used

% voters from the working class

Using the ANES's standard voter turnout question (VCF0702), I computed the percentage of voters from the working class.

In the election, about half the people voted and about half of them didn't. Did you vote? (1948)

One of the things we need to know is whether or not people really did get to vote this fall. In talking to people about the election we find that a lot of people weren't able to vote because they weren't registered or they were sick or something else came up at the last minute. Do you remember for sure whether or not you voted in the November election? (1962)

In talking to people about the election we (1972 AND LATER: often) find that a lot of people weren't able to vote because they weren't registered or they were sick or they just didn't have time. (1956-1960: How about you, did you vote this time?) (1964-1970: How about you, did you vote this time, or did something keep you from voting) (1972-1976: How about you, did you vote

in the elections this fall?) (1978 and later: How about you, did you vote in the elections this November?) (1952-1960,1964-1998, 2002 version 1, and 2004 version1)

In talking to people about elections, we often find that a lot of people were not able to vote because they weren't registered, they were sick, or they just didn't have time. Which of the following statements best describes you:

- One, I did not vote (in the election this November);
- Two, I thought about voting this time - but didn't;
- Three, I usually vote, but didn't this time; or
- Four, I am sure I voted?

(2000, 2002 version 2, 2004 version 2, 2008 version 'old')

Which one of the following best describes what you did in the elections that were held November 4th?

- 1. Definitely did not vote in the elections
- 2. Definitely voted in person at a polling place on election day
- 3. Definitely voted in person at a polling place before election day
- 4. Definitely voted by mailing a ballot to elections officials before the election
- 5. Definitely voted in some other way
- 6. Not completely sure whether you voted or not

(IF NOT COMPLETELY SURE:) If you had to guess, would you say that you probably did vote in the elections, or probably did not vote in the elections? (2008 version 'new')

Response Categories:

- 1. No, did not vote
- 2. Yes, voted
- 0. DK; NA; refused; Washington D.C. (presidential years only); inap.; question not used

Partisan difference: voters vs. workers

I computed the average score on the ANES 7-point party identification scale among the working class and subtracted it from the average score among the state as a whole, then took the absolute value of that difference to compute the magnitude of the partisan gap between the working class and the state as a whole. I rescaled this measure so that its feasible range was 0 to 100 (that is, a state where the working class had an average score of 1 and the state had an average score of 7 would be a 100, and a state where the working class's partisanship was identical to that of the state as a whole would be a 0).

Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what? (IF REPUBLICAN OR DEMOCRAT) Would you call yourself a strong (REP/DEM) or a not very strong (REP/DEM)? (IF INDEPENDENT, OTHER [1966 AND LATER: OR NO PREFERENCE]:) Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or Democratic party?

Response Categories

- 1. Strong Democrat
- 2. Weak Democrat
- 3. Independent - Democrat
- 4. Independent - Independent

5. Independent - Republican
6. Weak Republican
7. Strong Republican
9. Apolitical (1966 only: and DK)
0. DK; NA; other; refused to answer; inap.; question not used

% campaign / party staff from the working class

For those respondents who replied “yes” when asked whether they had worked for a part or candidate during the last election (VCF0719), I computed the percentage from the working class.

Did you do any (other) work for one of the parties or candidates?

Response Categories

1. No
2. Yes
0. DK; NA; inap.; question not used

union density

I computed the percentage of respondents who reported that they or someone in their household belonged to a labor union (VCF0127).

Does [the head of the household] belong to a labor union? (1948)

Do either you or the head of your household belong to a labor union? Who is it that belongs? (1952, 1954)

(1956-1984, 2002: Does anyone) (1986 and later, excluding 2002: Do you or [1988: does] anyone else) in this household belong to a labor union? (IF YES:) Who is it that belongs? (1956 and later)

Response Categories

1. Yes, someone (1948: head) in household belongs to a labor union
2. No, no one in household belongs to a labor union
0. DK; NA; inap.; question not used