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GOVERNMENT BY THE PRIVILEGED

In 2014, something historically unprecedented almost happened in the state of Maine. Representative Mike Michaud—who had been a factory worker when he was first elected to public office—announced that he was retiring from the House of Representatives to run for governor. Soon after, a state senator named Troy Jackson launched a campaign to fill Michaud’s House seat. Jackson seemed like a natural choice: like Michaud, he was a Democrat, he had served in the state legislature, and he was endorsed by many of the state’s major progressive organizations. Jackson was even a blue-collar worker: when the state legislature wasn’t in session, he worked full-time as a logger upstate.

And that’s what would have made the election historic. If Jackson had won, he would have become the first blue-collar worker in American history to succeed another former blue-collar worker in the same congressional seat. From 1789 to the present day, seats in the House of Representatives have changed hands more than fourteen thousand times. Former lawyers have taken over for other former lawyers. Former business owners have succeeded other former business owners. But two former blue-collar workers have never served in the same U.S. House seat back-to-back.

Despite Troy Jackson’s best efforts, however, that record still stood after the 2014 election. In early May of that year, a Wall Street-backed interest group began making aggressive independent expenditures against Jackson, and in June he lost the Democratic primary. When voters in Maine’s second district went to the polls in November, their choices for the U.S.

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House were a university administrator and a businessman. They didn't have the option to send someone from the working class to Congress.

And, chances are, neither did you.

Working-class Americans—people employed in manual labor, service industry, or clerical jobs¹—almost never go on to hold political office in the United States. If millionaires formed their own political party, that party would make up about 3 percent of the general public, but it would have unified majority control of all three branches of the federal government. The Millionaires Party would be the majority party in the House of Representatives and would have a filibuster-proof supermajority in the Senate. It would have a majority on the Supreme Court. It would have a record-setting majority in the president's cabinet. And it would have a commander in chief in the White House—not just a millionaire but a full-fledged *billionaire*.

If, on the other hand, working-class Americans formed their own party, that party would have made up more than half of the country since at least the start of the twentieth century. But legislators from that party (those who last worked in blue-collar jobs before getting involved in politics) would never have held more than 2 percent of the seats in Congress.²

This economic gulf between politicians and the people they represent—what I call *government by the privileged* or *white-collar government*—has serious consequences for our democratic process. Like ordinary Americans, politicians from different classes tend to have different views, especially on economic issues. Former workers in office tend to be more pro-worker in how they think and act, former business owners tend to be more pro-business, and so on. These differences—coupled with the fact that working-class people almost never go on to hold public office—ultimately have dramatic consequences for public policy. 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 more

lawmakers came from lower-income and working-class backgrounds.³ Government by the rich is often government for the rich, and government for the rich is often bad for everyone else.

Why, then, do we have a white-collar government in the first place? Journalists and scholars have always had hunches about what keeps working-class Americans out of office—money, ambition, free time, qualifications, and so on—but to date there’s been almost no actual research on why the United States is governed by the privileged or what reformers might do about it.

This book tries to change that.

BY THE RICH, FOR THE RICH

On January 19, 2012, there was an unusual demonstration in the Moroccan Parliament. Protestors had lined up outside with signs, as groups often did on the first day of the legislative session. But this time, the demonstration had also recruited allies *inside* the building. When the prime minister took the podium and began his inaugural address, a dozen sitting members of Parliament—including some from his own party—jumped to their feet and hoisted banners denouncing one of his government’s first decisions.

Their complaint? Just before the session started, the prime minister had gutted the number of women in public office.⁴

In Morocco, one of the first responsibilities of a newly elected prime minister is to appoint roughly thirty people to fill cabinet-level positions in the national government. Morocco has long been a leader in women’s representation in the Arab world,⁵ and the previous government’s cabinet had included seven women, a record for the country. When Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane took office in 2012, however, he announced that his cabinet would include just one female minister, Bassima Hakkaoui, who would head the Department of Women, Family, and Social Development. The news sent shock waves through the Moroccan political community. On the first day of the new legislative session, protestors both outside

and inside Parliament hoisted signs reading, “Women 1, Men 30. Is that really fair?”

At bottom, concerns about the demographic backgrounds of politicians are rooted in a principle that is probably familiar to anyone who has participated in some form of group decision making, namely, that *having a seat at the table matters*. When people get together to make important choices—whether it’s a government cabinet or a corporate board or a faculty hiring committee—who gets included can often powerfully affect the outcome. When a person or a social group is left out, their views and needs are often left out, too. Legislators in the Moroccan Parliament staged a protest because being included in important decision-making bodies is worth raising hell over sometimes, especially when it comes to politics.

Inclusion in political offices is so important that scholars have developed an entire subfield devoted to studying the numerical or *descriptive representation*⁶ of social groups in governing institutions. Some of this research has focused on the *causes* of descriptive representation, that is, on the factors that influence how many people from a given social group go on to hold important positions in government. Other studies have focused on the *effects* of descriptive representation, in particular on how a social group’s presence in a political institution influences the group’s *substantive representation*, the extent to which the group’s interests are advanced in that institution.⁷

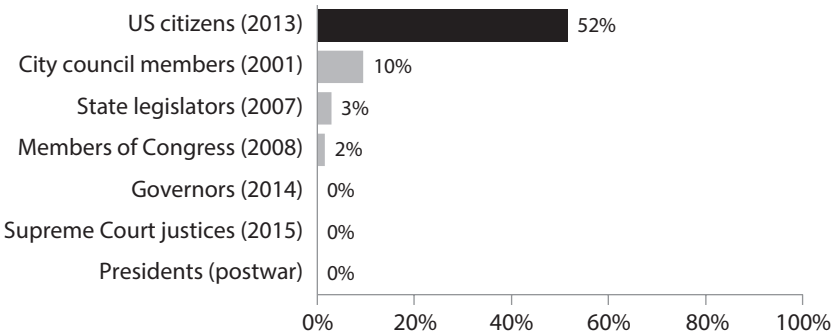
In principle, descriptive and substantive representation don’t have to go hand in hand. It’s at least possible that a male-dominated cabinet might still protect the interests of women or that an all-white legislature might promote the well-being of racial and ethnic minorities. In practice, however, it often matters who has a seat at the table in government. Although politicians are usually constrained by external pressures (from constituents, party leaders, interest groups, donors, and so on),⁸ they often have some leeway when they make decisions. Voters, party leaders, and interest groups often have conflicting demands that leave lawmakers without clear guidance. Constituents are chronically inattentive to what policymakers do; much of the actual work involved in lawmaking happens behind the scenes, where

citizens have little oversight; and lawmakers are adept at crafting legislation so that blame is difficult to trace to specific politicians. Incumbent reelection rates are high, and most officeholders feel secure enough in their positions to risk angering constituents, party leaders, or interest groups, at least some of the time.⁹ In those instances, their choices often reflect their own views and opinions, which in turn tend to reflect their own lives and experiences—including the social groups they come from.

Politicians from different racial groups, for instance, tend to make different choices on race-related issues, even after controlling for other things that might influence their decisions, like the parties they belong to or the views of their constituents. Likewise, even after accounting for other factors, male and female politicians tend to make different choices on women's issues (members of the Moroccan Parliament were right to protest!); veterans and nonveterans tend to make different choices on defense issues; and religious people, parents of schoolchildren, and smokers tend to make different choices on religious issues, educational issues, and smoking issues.¹⁰ Who wins and who loses in politics depends on many factors—who votes, who lobbies, who funds campaigns, and so on. But it also depends to a large extent on *who governs*.

And one group that almost never governs is the working class. Figure 1.1 plots the most recent and detailed data available on the percentage of working-class people in the U.S. labor force (the first bar, which was computed using data from a 2013 Census Bureau survey) and in every level and branch of government for which people keep records on the occupational backgrounds of politicians.¹¹ Even after deindustrialization and the information revolution, people with *working-class jobs*—which I define as manual labor, service industry, and clerical jobs—still make up a majority of the labor force. But people who work primarily in these kinds of jobs make up less than 10 percent of the average city council and less than 3 percent of the average state legislature. The average member of Congress spent less than 2 percent of his or her adult life doing the kinds of jobs most Americans go to every day. None of America's governors were blue-collar workers when they got into politics (in Maine, Michaud lost in the 2014 general

FIGURE 1.1. The Shortage of Politicians from the Working Class

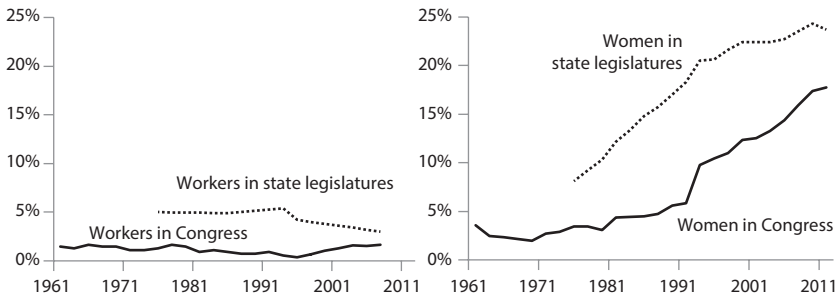


Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2013; International City/County Management Association 2001; National Conference of State Legislatures 2015; Schwarz 2014; Carnes 2011. The figure is based on data on the *primary* occupations of employed citizens, city council members, and state legislators; the *proportion* of prior occupations that were working-class jobs for members of Congress; and the *most recent* nonpolitical occupations of governors, Supreme Court justices, and presidents. For additional information, see note 11.

election), no one on the Supreme Court came from a working-class job, and at least since World War II no one from the working class has gotten into politics and gone on to become president. In most levels and branches of government in the United States, workers are as sharply underrepresented as women were in the “30 to 1” Moroccan cabinet.

This phenomenon is a remarkably durable feature of American politics. The left panel of Figure 1.2 plots the numerical representation of working-class people in Congress and state legislatures between 1961 and 2011. For comparison, the right panel plots data on the descriptive representation of *women*, another important and historically underrepresented group that makes up about 50 percent of the country. For at least the last half century, the representation of working-class people in Congress has been hovering around 2 percent; far from being a recent phenomenon, government by the privileged appears to be a rare historical constant in the United States. And it probably won’t be going anywhere any time soon: as the dotted line in Figure 1.2 illustrates, the number of workers in state legislatures (which tend to foreshadow changes in federal offices) has actually fallen slightly—from 5 percent to 3 percent—over the last half century. These trends stand

FIGURE 1.2. Representation Is Improving for Some Groups, but Not the Working Class



Source: ICPSR and McKibbin 1997; Carnes 2011; National Conference of State Legislatures 2015; Desilver 2015; Center for American Women and Politics 2012.

in sharp contrast to the fortunes of other historically underrepresented groups like women and racial or ethnic minorities, who have made steady progress in American political institutions over the last few decades, first at the state and local levels, then increasingly in federal offices. We've been governed by the economically privileged for generations, and that doesn't seem to be changing, even during a period of progress for other social groups that overlap substantially with the working class (compared to professionals, workers are more likely to be female and non-white).¹² To borrow a British expression, our government is getting less male and less pale, but it isn't getting less stale.

Of course, there have always been people who have argued that government by the privileged is inevitable (for instance, because voters prefer affluent candidates) or that government by the rich is necessary because the rich are better qualified. To date, however, there has never been any solid research to back these claims. (I'll return to these points in more detail in chapter 2.)

The other major argument offered in support of government by the privileged is that it doesn't matter what class of people governs. In *The Federalist* #35, Alexander Hamilton argued that workers in the United States would come to see business owners as "their natural patron[s] and friend[s]; and [workers] 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.”¹³ The idea has been with us ever since: every election cycle, candidates from privileged backgrounds tell voters that they want what’s best for the country as a whole, that a rising tide lifts all boats, that the business of the nation is business, and so on. We all want economic prosperity, the argument goes, so what’s the harm in letting affluent people call the shots?

On this point, there is actually a great deal of research, and unfortunately it’s all squarely at odds with the rosy notion that a politician’s social class doesn’t matter. For one, Americans from different classes usually don’t have harmonious views about the government’s role in economic affairs. Pollsters have known for decades that public opinion is often sharply divided by class, especially on economic issues.¹⁴ When it comes to things like the minimum wage, taxes, business regulations, unemployment, unions, the social safety net, and so on, working-class Americans tend to be more progressive or pro-worker, and more affluent Americans tend to want the government to play a smaller role in economic affairs.¹⁵ There are exceptions, of course—blue-collar workers who vote Republican and rich professionals who care deeply about progressive economic policies—but on average, working-class Americans tend to be more liberal on economic issues and professionals tend to be more conservative. On economic policy, workers and merchants are seldom the natural friends that Hamilton hoped they would be.

The same seems to be true for people who go on to hold public office. Like ordinary citizens, politicians from different social classes tend to bring different economic perspectives with them to public office. Former House Speaker John Boehner was fond of saying that he was a small business owner at heart and that “it gave me a perspective on our country that I’ve carried with me throughout my time in public service.” He doesn’t seem to be the only one: on average, former businesspeople in government tend to think like businesspeople, former lawyers tend to think like lawyers, and (the few) former blue-collar workers tend to think like blue-collar workers. And they often behave accordingly.

These kinds of differences between politicians from different social classes have been evident in every data set I’ve examined since I started

studying this phenomenon a decade ago. In Miller and Stokes's 1958 survey of U.S. 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 candidates in recent elections.¹⁶ 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 same models find that the gap between workers and business owners is comparable to the gap between legislators who represent the most liberal and conservative districts and larger than the gap between male and female or white and black legislators.)¹⁷ Social class divisions even span the two parties: among Democratic and Republican members of Congress alike, legislators from working-class jobs are more likely than their fellow partisans to take progressive or pro-worker positions on major economic issues.¹⁸

Other recent work on the descriptive representation of social classes has reached the same basic conclusions as my own research. Members of Congress who are wealthier have been found to be more likely to oppose the estate tax. Mayors from business backgrounds have been found to shift city resources away from social safety net programs and toward business-friendly infrastructure projects. Legislators with more education and income are less likely to support policies that would reduce economic inequality. Lawmakers with more money in the stock market are more likely to vote to raise the debt ceiling (and thereby protect the stock market).¹⁹

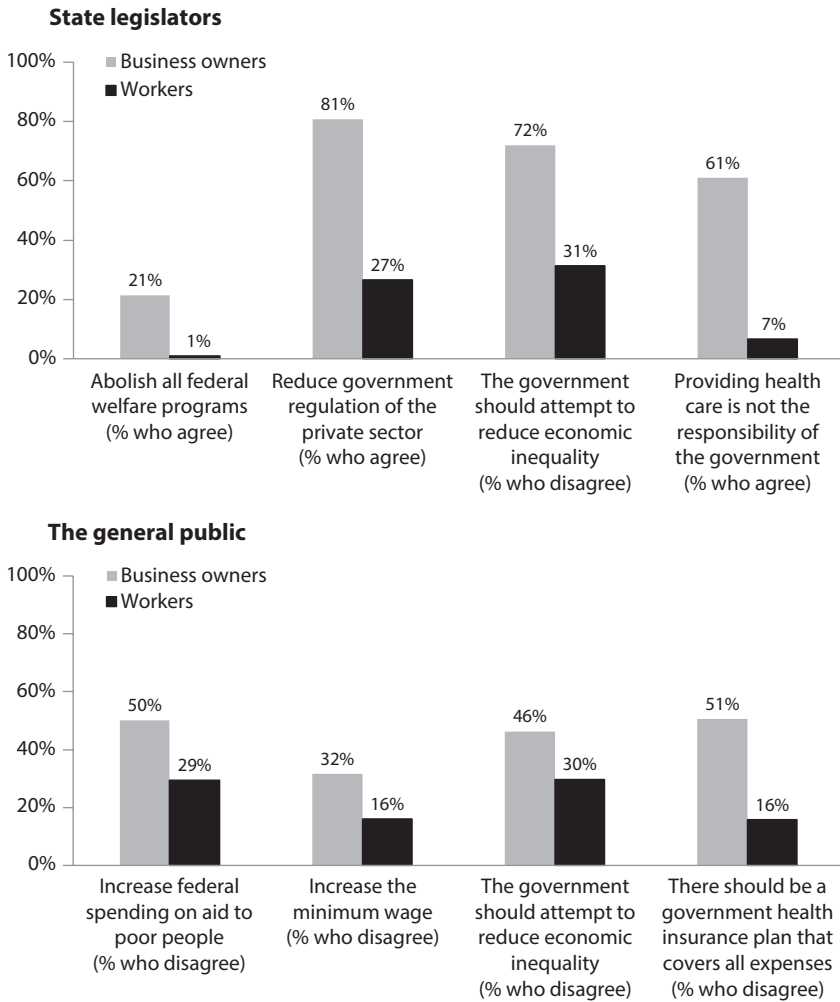
Social class divisions even show up in confidential studies of politicians' private views and beliefs. The top panel of Figure 1.3 plots data from a survey of state legislative candidates that I conducted with a team of researchers in August 2012. The survey (which was administered to each of

the roughly 10,000 people running for state legislature that year and completed by close to 2,000 of them) asked a variety of questions about candidates' personal views, including several that asked whether the candidates agreed or disagreed with various statements about the government's role in economic affairs. (Readers interested in the technical details can find them in the appendix, under "Survey Details.") Figure 1.3 plots how eventual winners (that is, candidates who went on to win in November) responded to questions about four paramount economic issues: social welfare spending, government regulation of the private sector, economic inequality, and universal health care. (On all four, the graph plots the percentage of candidates who took the conservative side, whether that meant agreeing with a conservative statement or disagreeing with a liberal one.)

Viewed this way, it's easy to see that politicians from different classes truly bring different perspectives to public office: on all four issues, former workers in state legislatures were 20 to 50 percentage points more likely to take the progressive side compared to former business owners (a group that was easy to identify in surveys of both politicians and citizens—and that was generally representative of other white-collar professions).

Of course, politicians from business and working-class backgrounds differ in other ways, too; two-thirds of the workers in this sample were Democrats, for instance, compared to only one-third among the business owners. However, the gaps documented in Figure 1.3 were not simply a matter of partisanship: *within* both parties, workers were uniquely committed to policies that help the less fortunate. Republicans from the working class were 30 percentage points more likely than Republican business owners to support welfare programs, 35 percentage points more likely to support business regulations, 30 percentage points more likely to oppose economic inequality, and 65 percent more likely to support government health care. The gaps were smaller for Democrats on most items due to ceiling effects; on three of the questions, almost every Democrat in the sample took the liberal position. On the one question that generated some disagreement among Democrats, however—the item about business regulations—Democrats from the working class were 30 percentage points

FIGURE 1.3. Like Ordinary Citizens, Politicians from Different Classes Think Differently



Source: Broockman et al. 2012; American National Election Studies 2014; Annenberg Public Policy Center 2004.

more likely to support business regulations than Democrats who were business owners.

The differences in Figure 1.3 were also large and significant in statistical models that controlled for a host of other characteristics of the legislator and the district, including the legislator’s party, age, race, education, and

gender; the state's level of legislative professionalization; and the legislative district's median income and partisanship (see Table A1.1 in the appendix). In fact, a legislator's occupation was among the best predictors of his or her views on most items, second only to party (and far better as a predictor than the district's income or the legislator's other personal characteristics like race or education). Relative to otherwise-similar politicians, elected officials from the working class really do tend to bring a more pro-worker perspective with them to public office.

Politicians aren't unique in this respect, of course. The bottom panel of Figure 1.3 plots data on how the general public answered similar questions in two 2004 surveys, the most recent I could find that asked about these issues and that also asked respondents what they did for a living (a question that many political surveys—even the American National Election Studies—stopped including on questionnaires and public data files in the early 2000s). The first and last items are from the National Election Studies, and the middle two are from the Annenberg National Election Study. Scholars have known for decades that blue-collar workers tend to be more liberal on economic issues. The same seems to be true for politicians.

These differences in how politicians think and act—coupled with the sharp underrepresentation of workers—ultimately have enormous consequences for economic policy. States with fewer legislators from the working class spend billions less on social welfare each year, offer less generous unemployment benefits, and tax corporations at lower rates. Towns with fewer working-class people on their city councils devote smaller shares of their budgets to social safety net programs; an analysis I conducted in 2013 suggested that cities nationwide would spend approximately \$22.5 billion more on social assistance programs each year if their councils were made up of the same mix of classes as the people they represent. Congress has never been run by large numbers of working-class people, but if we extrapolate from the behavior of the few workers who manage to get in, it's probably safe to say that the federal government would pass far fewer pro-business policies and far more pro-worker policies if its members mirrored the social class makeup of the public.²⁰

Having a seat at the table matters in U.S. politics. The shortage of politicians from the working class ultimately makes life harder for the majority of Americans from the working class (and for many economically vulnerable white-collar professionals, too).²¹

But no one really knows what's keeping the working class out of office.

BLINDED BY WEALTH

In 2010, researchers at a Delaware-based financial news firm called 24/7 Wall Street conducted a study to determine how much personal wealth each of the U.S. presidents had when they first took office. The researchers combed the historical record for data on the presidents' assets, property, and financial liabilities, adjusting their estimates along the way to account for inflation. In the end, their findings suggested that thirty-five of the forty-four individuals who had been president of the United States at that time—80 percent of commanders in chief—were millionaires by today's standards when they were sworn in.²²

Since only a small percentage of Americans are millionaires, it would have been understandable if the authors of the study had speculated about why so many presidents were so wealthy, or contemplated how the presidents' privileged backgrounds influenced their choices in office, or even simply expressed surprise that our presidents have tended to be so much better-off than the average citizen.²³

However, the staff of 24/7 Wall Street had a different take on their findings. In an article on *Atlantic Monthly's* business website, the authors of the study expressed amazement that so few presidents were millionaires: "One of the most important conclusions of this analysis," they wrote, "is that the presidency has little to do with wealth." In the face of crystal-clear evidence that politicians in the United States are vastly better-off than the people they represent, the authors concluded that there wasn't much reason to worry about government by the privileged.

Journalists and pundits—even those who write about the demographic makeup of American political institutions—often overlook the fact that

we're governed by the privileged. Groups like *Roll Call* and *OpenSecrets* occasionally run one-off stories about the average wealth of members of Congress, and individual politicians sometimes come under fire for extreme displays of privilege, like when Senator John McCain couldn't remember how many houses he owned or when Senator John Edwards paid \$400 for a haircut. But, in general, most media coverage of candidates and elected officials glosses over the fact that politicians are so much better-off than the people they represent. When the 113th Congress took office in January 2013, it was among the most diverse ever in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, and religion—but also one of the least diverse in terms of occupational backgrounds and formal education, and it broke the record for the wealthiest Congress in American history.²⁴ The headline on CNN simply read, "Meet the 113th Congress: More Diverse than Ever."²⁵

Some journalists express outright amazement that working-class Americans *ever* run for office: when a truck driver won the Democratic gubernatorial primary in Mississippi in 2015, the *New York Times* devoted an entire long-form story to his nomination, calling it a "bizarre" and "stun[ning]" development that "illustrates . . . the forlorn state of affairs for Democrats in the South."²⁶ In the news, white-collar government is usually taken for granted as the norm in American politics.

Unfortunately, that's how it's often treated in academic research, too. Scholars of U.S. politics have known for decades that politicians in every level and branch of government tend to outrank the people they represent by enormous margins on virtually any measure of class or social attainment. We've been urged to conduct follow-up studies on the causes and effects of white-collar government; the congressional scholar Donald Matthews was writing about the need for more research on this topic thirty years before I was born.²⁷ But until recently, scholars of U.S. politics—like journalists and other political observers—have tended to turn a blind eye to this important feature of the American political process.

That's beginning to change now that scholars have started to recognize the serious consequences that government by the economically privileged has for public policy in the United States (and now that more scholars have

started to focus on the larger problem of political inequality). As it stands, however, we still don't know much about the *causes* of white-collar government. Why do rich people run the country? Why is it that working-class Americans almost never hold office in the United States? Why does our system of representation consistently yield such an unrepresentative group of policymakers?

To date, only a handful of studies have asked questions like these, and most have come up empty-handed. In the concluding chapter of my last book, I used public opinion data to see whether gaps in skills or qualifications could explain the shortage of workers in office. I didn't find any evidence to support that hunch. In a series of experiments embedded in public opinion surveys, Meredith Sadin tested the hypothesis that voters are biased against candidates from blue-collar jobs. She found that they weren't.²⁸ These kinds of studies are a start, but we're still a long way from real answers to the question of why working-class people almost never hold office in the United States.

And that represents a serious oversight in the academic literature on U.S. politics. White-collar government is a defining feature of American politics. It has major consequences for public policy and for the quality of representation in our country. We should understand where it comes from. Scholars have produced impressive research about most aspects of the democratic process in the United States, but if we can't explain why an entire class of people—the class that makes up most of the labor force—is all but excluded from every level and branch of the government, we're still missing something important.

Understanding why working-class Americans seldom govern in the United States can shed light on a host of important topics. It can help us better understand the causes of descriptive representation, that is, why some social groups hold office in large numbers and others don't. It can shed light on *candidate emergence*, the process by which people decide to run for political office.

It can also help us understand some of the most dramatic changes that are occurring in contemporary American politics. Campaign spending is soaring.

Unions and other organizations that encourage working-class political engagement are declining. These sea changes in the political landscape could have far-reaching consequences, and scholars and political observers are just beginning to understand their effects. One outcome that needs to be a part of the conversation is how these developments affect who holds office.

Understanding why so few workers govern may even help us understand what is arguably one of the most important and urgent issues in research on U.S. politics, namely, the oversized influence of the rich in American political life. In the last decade, scholars have started paying renewed attention to a wide range of economic or social class biases in the political process, thanks in large part to new evidence that politicians in the United States are vastly more responsive to the interests of affluent Americans than to the needs of the less fortunate.²⁹ To date, however, most of this new work on political inequality has focused on three topics. Some studies have analyzed *biases in routine forms of political participation* (e.g., how the less fortunate are less likely to follow the news and turn out to vote, or whether the public is concerned about rising economic inequality).³⁰ Others have focused on *inequalities in the organized pressure system* (e.g., how unions are declining, the wealthy are spending more on campaigns, and business-backed interest groups are becoming more numerous and sophisticated).³¹ And a third body of research has examined *rules and strategic incentives that discourage political institutions from supporting the less fortunate* (e.g., how rules that encourage gridlock make it difficult for government to respond to rising economic inequality, or how parties have strategic incentives to direct resources to affluent constituents).³²

Unfortunately, political inequality in the United States seems to take another important form. Whether the political process listens to one voice or another depends not just on who's doing the talking, how loud they are, or the rules of the game; it also depends on *who's doing the listening*. It's important to pay attention to inequalities in who pressures government from the outside—either through routine forms of political participation or through larger organized efforts—and to institutional rules that bias what the government does. But inequalities in who runs government can

bias public policy in favor of what the rich want, too. If we want to understand why affluent Americans wield more political influence than lower-income and working-class citizens, we won't have the whole story until we understand why so few lower-income and working-class citizens go on to hold public office.

Perhaps most importantly, understanding what keeps workers out of office may help reformers actually *fight* political inequality. Like scholars, most activists who care about the oversized political influence of the wealthy have historically tended to focus either on routine forms of political participation like voting or on biases in the organized pressure system. We've heard the same basic ideas for decades: if we could reform lobbying and campaign finance and get a handle on the flow of money in politics, the rich wouldn't have as much of a say in government. If we could promote broader political participation, enlighten the public, and revitalize the labor movement, the poor would have more of a say. These proposals sound great in principle; they would almost certainly help reduce the disproportionate political influence of the wealthy. In practice, however, they've been remarkably difficult to actually carry out. For at least the last half century, activists have been trying to regulate lobbyists, combat soaring campaign spending, revitalize the labor movement, energize the public, and rock the vote. But every major reform effort has eventually proven more technically and politically challenging than its supporters had initially hoped. This isn't to say that activists should give up on these worthy initiatives. But if reformers want to continue making headway on the problem of political inequality, it may help to add some new arrows to the quiver. As Jane Mansbridge (former president of the American Political Science Association) recently noted, "When unions and parties representing the working class become less able to represent working-class interests, descriptive representation becomes correspondingly more important."³³ In light of how hard it's been to correct biases in who participates, organizes, and donates, it may be time to try correcting the bias in who governs.

But before we can do that, we need to know what's keeping working-class people out of office in the first place.

THE CASH CEILING

Since I started working on this book, many people have shared with me their personal theories about why so few working-class Americans hold office. One of the most common explanations I've heard is *money*; people will sometimes cut me off mid-sentence to complain about how expensive elections have become. I've heard other theories, too. It's all about the decline of unions. Working Americans don't have the time or resources to run. Voters prefer affluent candidates. Working-class people aren't smart enough to govern. It's all the Republicans' fault. It's all the Democrats' fault.

These kinds of explanations are a good starting point, but none of them tells the whole story. Some are simply incorrect. Workers were underrepresented in both parties long before campaign costs skyrocketed and unions declined (see Figure 1.2). Voters don't seem to be biased against workers, and workers don't seem to suffer from serious political qualification deficits. And some forces that people almost never talk about—like biases in the largely overlooked work of *candidate recruitment*—seem to matter a great deal. Simply put, the factors keeping workers out of office are often very different from what people imagine.

In this book, I analyze every source of systematic data that I know of that can shed light on why so few working-class people run for political office, including several original surveys of candidates, party officials, and ordinary citizens, which I've been conducting over the last few years with my co-investigators David Broockman, Melody Crowder-Meyer, and Chris Skovron. My analysis also draws heavily on decades of trailblazing research on the factors that keep women and racial or ethnic minorities out of public office in the United States (although my findings suggest that the factors that keep workers out of office differ in important ways from the obstacles facing other historically underrepresented groups).

My argument in this book is that workers are less likely to hold office not because they're unqualified or because voters prefer more affluent candidates, but because workers are simply less likely to run for public office in the first place. Part of the explanation is that—as people often

suspect—workers are less likely to be able to shoulder the many practical burdens associated with running, to give up the time and resources that campaigning requires. But another important piece of the puzzle is a feature of the political process that people almost never talk about, namely, that workers are less likely to be recruited and encouraged by important political elites like party officials, politicians, and interest groups. Working-class Americans are less likely to hold office for some of the same basic reasons that they're less likely to participate in politics in other ways: because often they can't, and nobody asks them.³⁴

These individual-level obstacles in turn share a common—and perhaps surprising—root cause: *electoral democracy*. In the United States, elections are always costly for everyone involved, and not just in monetary terms. Voters have to get informed and show up at the polls, volunteers have to knock on doors and make phone calls, candidates have to manage complex campaigns, and political and civic leaders have to recruit and support candidates. Those most directly involved—candidates and the people who support them—shoulder the greatest personal burdens. Even simple elections require huge amounts of time and energy and take significant physical, emotional, and personal tolls on those who are brave enough to throw their hat into the ring.

As a result, resources like time, energy, and money are essentially de facto prerequisites for running for public office in the United States. People can't launch campaigns—or even be seen by political and civic leaders as serious *potential* candidates—unless they can give up hundreds of hours of their time, focus most of their energy on campaigning, and accept significant uncertainty about their future. And that, in turn, powerfully disadvantages working-class Americans, who tend to have less money, less flexible schedules, fewer well-resourced friends, and less of an appetite for taking risks. Workers seldom run for public office in the United States because they can't and no one asks them—and those outcomes are in turn the natural consequences of elections themselves.

In short, this book argues that the American political process has a built-in *cash ceiling*, a series of structural barriers and corresponding

individual-level attitudes and behaviors that keep qualified working-class citizens out of our political institutions. Elections (the root cause) are inherently burdensome and uncertain, especially for candidates and the people who support them (the structural or institutional obstacles; the macro-level forces). As a result, workers find it hard to run, and elites tend not to recruit workers (the attitudinal or behavioral responses; the individual-level forces). It should come as no surprise that workers have been all but absent from public office throughout our nation's history, even as politics and society have changed in significant ways, and even as social groups that overlap substantially with the working class like women and racial minorities have begun to hold office in larger numbers. Elections naturally discourage the less fortunate. The cash ceiling—the set of structural obstacles and behavioral responses that keep working-class Americans out of office—is part of the very DNA of American politics.

But DNA isn't destiny. Workers seldom have the time and energy to run for public office and political and civic leaders seldom encourage them, but these symptoms of America's cash ceiling can be treated. In the long run, many of the familiar pillars of the progressive reform agenda would probably help: if we could get the money out of politics, promote broader political participation, and revitalize labor unions, workers might hold office in larger numbers. However, understanding how the cash ceiling works also suggests several possibilities that could deliver results much faster, ideas like *political scholarships* targeting workers and *candidate recruitment and training programs* for qualified working-class Americans. These kinds of interventions aren't on many reformers' radars right now, but pilot efforts suggest that they have tremendous potential. The cash ceiling is probably here to stay—campaigns and elections will always be uniquely challenging for working-class Americans—but there are many promising new options on the horizon for reformers who want the working class to have a seat at the table in American government.

In the chapters that follow, I lay out the evidence for each part of this argument. In chapter 2, I begin by identifying the stage in the candidate entry process that screens working-class people out. Along the way, I also

test two common ideas about the underrepresentation of workers, namely, that workers seldom hold office because they aren't fit to govern and because voters prefer affluent candidates. Chapter 2 shows that these ideas don't hold water: workers aren't underrepresented in public office because they're less qualified or because voters dislike them, they're underrepresented because they just don't run in the first place.

But why? Chapter 3 begins to answer this question by exploring the personal or micro-level factors that discourage qualified workers from running for public office. Using surveys of citizens, candidates, and political party leaders, I show that workers are less likely to run for public office because they don't have the free time or the economic security to do so and because they're seldom encouraged by political and civic leaders. These factors differ from what we often hear: for instance, it isn't just the high monetary costs of campaigns that discourage workers (those costs deter workers and professionals alike, actually), it's the high *personal* costs associated with campaigning—burdens like taking time off work and losing out on income during the race—that seem to make running for elected office impossible for many qualified workers.

Chapter 4 then asks where these patterns come from, that is, it explores the structural features of our political process that drive the individual-level differences documented in chapter 3. Elections themselves appear to be the root cause. Workers' personal anxieties about campaigning are understandable responses to the challenges inherent in modern campaigns; using aggregate-level data on who runs and wins in states and cities, I show how the burdens associated with large-scale elections make it all but impossible for working-class people to hold office. Elections take a toll on the political and civic leaders who recruit and support new candidates, too; using data on county-level party leaders, I show how the challenges associated with modern campaigns force many elites—Republicans and Democrats alike—to fall back on social shortcuts that lead them to pass over qualified workers. These findings illustrate the serious hurdles that workers are up against in the twenty-first century: campaigns are becoming more complex and time-consuming, unions and other worker-oriented

organizations are declining, and that's making it even harder for workers to run for office and to be taken seriously by political and civic leaders.

So what can reformers do? Chapter 5 discusses the practical implications of these findings; it uses what we've learned about America's cash ceiling to sort through the various reform proposals that observers have floated throughout the years. Some are essentially pipe dreams: they would work, but they are completely infeasible (like quotas for working-class politicians or replacing democratic elections in the United States with government by lottery). Others are long shots, ideas that would probably help, but would take decades to execute and would require massive changes to American society (like revitalizing the labor movement, reducing economic inequality, or expanding access to higher education). And some seem sensible at first but don't actually square with what we know about America's cash ceiling or with data on what happens when they've been attempted (like raising politicians' salaries—workers seldom run because of the burdens associated with *campaigning*, not the salaries associated with holding office—or publicly financing elections—which helps professionals just as much as workers, and doesn't fundamentally change how time-consuming and burdensome it is to run for public office). The interventions that seem to have the most promise are reforms that *specifically target working-class people* and that *directly address the resource and recruitment gaps* that elections naturally create—reforms like political scholarships, seed money programs, and candidate training programs. If activists want to do something about America's cash ceiling, the best approach seems to be to recruit qualified workers, help them overcome practical hurdles, train them, support their campaigns, and send them on their way.

Programs like these seem to have more potential than many reformers realize, both as ways to address America's cash ceiling and also as rare opportunities to make forward progress on the larger problem of political inequality. Chapter 6 discusses the growing body of research on the oversized political influence of the upper class in American politics and the somewhat checkered recent history of conventional political equality reforms like campaign finance laws, lobbying regulations, and programs

to increase voter turnout. Whereas these kinds of programs have encountered numerous practical and political roadblocks, pilot efforts to recruit and support working-class candidates have been remarkably successful. Activists who want to give the less fortunate more of a say in American politics have always had a curious blind spot when it comes to helping the less fortunate *hold office*. It may be time for that to change. If reformers want to continue moving the needle on the problem of political inequality, one of their best bets may be to start paying attention to America's cash ceiling.

Before going any further, however, a few brief observations about this book are in order. First, although this research draws a great deal of inspiration from the literature on the shortage of other historically underrepresented social groups, especially women, my argument about America's cash ceiling differs significantly from what scholars have found when they've asked why so few politicians are women, people of color, and so on. In sharp contrast to research on the gender gap in political ambition, for instance, there doesn't seem to be a social class gap in ambition; workers seldom run not because they don't want to, but because they lack the resources and because political and civic leaders are less likely to see them as viable candidates (see chapter 3). The structural forces behind these individual-level outcomes are different, too; the barriers that keep workers out of office are fundamentally different from the legal prohibitions and voter prejudices and socialization experiences that have kept women and racial or ethnic minorities out of our political institutions (see chapters 2 and 4). For qualified workers, there is another obstacle in the path to office, namely, the natural burdens associated with how democratic elections work. The contrast between the representation of workers and other underrepresented groups is itself quite telling: although most women and people of color have working-class jobs, the recent increase in officeholding among women and people of color has not been accompanied by an increase in working-class officeholding (see, for instance, Figure 1.2). That is, women and minorities are going on to hold office in larger numbers, but only if they come from white-collar backgrounds.³⁵ There is something

unique about the working class that discourages officeholding, and the goal of this book is to understand what it is. This book draws on and attempts to engage with research on women and people of color, but of course class isn't gender and class isn't race. It should come as no surprise that our political process's cash ceiling has different contours than its glass ceiling.

What may be more surprising is that, second, this book's core argument doesn't have much of a place for ideology or partisanship. Parties and other civic *organizations* play an important role; political elites often have a hard time seeing qualified workers as viable candidates. But it is a role they play regardless of where they fall on the ideological spectrum: Republican and Democratic party leaders alike tend to have dim views about working-class candidates (see chapter 3). Although it might be tempting to imagine that Democratic voters or leaders would be more favorably inclined toward working-class candidates—because the Democratic Party has historically been the party of unions and workers—this book doesn't find any evidence to support that hunch. Qualified workers do, in fact, tend to more hold progressive views (see Figure 1.3) and more often identify as Democrats (see chapter 3), but the Democratic Party writ large is not a uniquely favorable environment for working-class candidates—Democratic voters (see chapter 2) and elites (see chapter 3) aren't any more likely than Republicans to support working-class candidates. The factors that keep workers out of office run deeper than partisanship and ideology; they are a part of the basic fabric of American democracy, the realities of campaigns and elections that affect every candidate, regardless of party or ideology.

Third, so far this chapter has discussed wealthy or affluent politicians and white-collar or professional politicians more or less interchangeably (and, likewise, sometimes alternated between talking about lower-income and working-class Americans). In the chapters that follow, my data and analysis will focus primarily on *occupation-based* measures of social class—what a person does for a living—not on measures based on income or wealth. (I typically focus on the main occupation a person has outside of politics, or in the case of full-time elected officials, the last occupation they had when they first ran for public office.) Occupation, income, and wealth

are highly correlated, of course: white-collar professionals tend to be richer and tend to take home higher salaries. However, there are a few important reasons to focus on occupational data in this analysis. Income and wealth can sometimes be misleading. A cashier at Walmart and a PhD student at Princeton earn about the same annual salaries, but it probably wouldn't be right to say that they belong to the same social class. Likewise, wealth data can lead us astray, especially when people with significant financial resources put up their assets as collateral in order to take out new loans, which can make someone who lives a luxurious lifestyle appear on paper to have low or even negative net worth. Most scholars who study class recommend simply focusing on what people do for a living, which is a highly reliable way to gauge their place in the economy, their expected lifetime earnings, and how they tend to feel about a wide range of economic policies (see also note 1). Throughout this book, I focus not on low-income or low-wealth Americans, but specifically on working-class Americans, people employed in manual labor, service industry, or clerical jobs³⁶—although obviously there is a great deal of overlap between these groups.

Fourth, this book's arguments are not limited to any one level or type of elected office in the United States. The nature of elections discourages working-class Americans from running, and that reality matters at the federal level, the state level, and the local level. Of course, elections for higher offices tend to be more burdensome and should therefore be *more* discouraging to workers—and this variation gives us opportunities to test this book's arguments (see chapter 4). But the basic features of America's cash ceiling are present in elections for every level and branch of government, even in races for offices like school board and city council.

As such, and fifth, in an effort to leave no stone unturned, the analysis in this book draws on every available source of relevant federal, state, and local data. Information about the occupational backgrounds of politicians and candidates and the qualifications and aspirations of ordinary citizens can be hard to come by, but each chapter of this book makes the most of what's out there, drawing on multiple data sets and sometimes moving quickly between them. Chapter 2, for instance, analyzes national surveys

that measure the political qualifications of workers, then complements that analysis with data on the performance of cities governed by large numbers of workers (because city councils are the only political institutions in the United States where workers make up majorities). Chapter 2 goes on to study voter preferences at the national, state, and local levels (finding the same thing at all three), then shows that workers seldom run at the state and local levels (because these are the levels for which reliable data on candidates' social classes exist). The remaining chapters follow a similar approach: they use every available source of data on citizens, candidates, and civic leaders. Chapter 3's analysis of the role of practical resources and political ambition draws on national surveys of workers and data on state legislatures; its analysis of recruitment, however, focuses on both the local and state levels (finding the same thing in both). Chapter 4 uses data on federal, state, and local officials (finding the same basic patterns across all three). Chapter 5 focuses primarily on state-level data, since many of the reforms that have been attempted (like campaign finance regulations) have happened at the state level. To help readers keep track of the many data sets in this book, Table 6.1 reviews the book's main arguments, summarizes the data sets used most often in the book, and lists the figures that correspond to each argument and data set to provide a sort of bird's-eye view of the many analyses presented here. The "Survey Details" section of the appendix also provides detailed information about each of the original surveys conducted for this book.

Finally, my primary focus in this book will be on contemporary U.S. politics, that is, on the question of why so few working-class Americans hold office today. The historical antecedents of the modern cash ceiling are important, too, of course. But as a first cut at this question, this book will focus on the causes of government by the privileged in the present day.

The first step is understanding where, exactly, working-class Americans are screened out of the pipeline of new politicians.

CHAPTER 1 SUMMARY

Politicians in the United States are much better-off than the people they represent.

- *If millionaires formed their own party, the Millionaires Party would control all three branches of the federal government.*

Our white-collar government biases economic policy in favor of what the privileged want.

- *It matters who governs—so much, in fact, that Moroccan politicians protested attacks on women’s representation.*

Scholars and journalists almost never ask why we’re governed by the privileged, though.

- *One study found that 80 percent of U.S. presidents were millionaires and concluded that they weren’t that rich.*

This book uses data to shed light on the *cash ceiling*, the individual attitudes and behaviors that keep working-class Americans from holding office and the larger structural forces behind them.

- *People have lots of pet theories, but many of them are wrong or incomplete. If we want to understand this phenomenon, we need to look at real data.*

My findings suggest that so few workers hold office simply because so few run. Elections are by their very nature extremely personally burdensome for candidates and those around them. Qualified workers often can’t afford to launch campaigns and aren’t seen by political and civic leaders as serious potential candidates.

- *Why do so few workers hold office? Because many qualified workers can’t run, and because nobody asks them.*

The bottom line: Politicians in the United States have always been vastly better-off than the people they represent, and that has serious consequences for public policy. This book asks why we’re governed by the privileged. It outlines the factors that keep working-class Americans out of our political institutions—what I call the *cash ceiling*—and describes the reforms that could help get more workers into office.