

AMERICAN ACADEMY
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How to Elect More Working-Class Americans and Why It Matters

Nicholas Carnes and Noam Lupu



A REPORT FROM THE **WORKING-CLASS CANDIDATES STUDY GROUP**
COMMISSION ON REIMAGINING OUR ECONOMY

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Executive Summary

September 2026

Working-class jobs—manual labor, service industry, clerical, and informal sector jobs—make up more than half of the U.S. labor force, but people from those jobs almost never go on to hold elected office in the United States. Their absence from the halls of power harms trust in government, runs contrary to our most cherished ideals, and diminishes our government’s capacity to understand and respond to the needs of working-class people. The barriers keeping workers out are inherent to nearly all elections: running for office is personally burdensome, working-class people are less likely to be able to shoulder those burdens, and political gatekeepers know it and pass over potential working-class candidates. The time is right for party and interest-group programs to identify, recruit, train, and support working-class candidates; for campaign finance reforms that help workers pay personal expenses while running for office; and for new institutions that ensure that people from working-class jobs always have a seat at the table in our government. This report outlines reform blueprints for parties, unions, interest groups, funders, and policymakers.

The Problem: Working-Class Americans Almost Never Go on to Hold Elected Office

In the United States, about half of all jobs are *working-class jobs*: manual-labor jobs like construction worker, service-industry jobs like home health care worker, clerical jobs like receptionist, and informal-sector jobs like day laborer. These jobs are held by men and women, young and old, from every race and religion, across every part of the country. (For more on how researchers define *working class*, see the Frequently Asked Questions section at the end of the report.) Working-class jobs are occupations that don't provide employees with much material security, that don't require capital or extensive formal education, and that don't give employees much autonomy. These working-class jobs are indispensable to the economy and to our society: modern life in the United States is unthinkable without the people who pave roads, repair electrical lines, style hair, move freight, work in factories, deliver packages, stock shelves, build houses, repair cars, clean hotel rooms, answer phones, dig trenches, cook and serve food in restaurants, clean hospitals, ring up groceries, fix pot-holes, and empty garbage.

Although working-class jobs are essential to our way of life, **people from working-class jobs almost never go on to hold elected political office.** A 2013 study found that working-class jobs made up 52 percent of the labor force, but fewer than 10 percent of city council members had working-class jobs, fewer than 3 percent of state legislators held or had come from working-class jobs, and the typical member of Congress had spent less than 2 percent of their entire precongressional career doing the kinds of jobs that employ most Americans.¹

Similar patterns have been documented in every systematic study that has ever been conducted on this topic. In 2025, researchers found that fewer than 2 percent of U.S. state legislators had working-class jobs as their main or most recent occupations.² A 2019 analysis in *The New York Times* found that only 12 of the 535 members of Congress serving at that time had ever held a working-class job.³ A 1979 study by the Insurance Information Institute, an advocacy group

for the insurance industry, found that just 5 percent of U.S. state legislators had working-class jobs.⁴ A 1954 study by a political scientist at the University of North Carolina found that just 2 percent of members of Congress had been low-salary workers, wage earners, servants, or farm laborers.⁵ Throughout all of U.S. history, there has never been a session of Congress in which more than 2 or 3 percent of legislators had a working-class job when they first got into politics.⁶

Figure 1 compares the share of working-class jobs in the U.S. labor force to the most recent data we have on the rates at which people from working-class jobs become city council members, state legislators, members of Congress, governors, Supreme Court justices, and presidents. Viewed this way, it is clear that people from working-class jobs are rare in the halls of power in the United States. If working-class people were a political party, that party would make up about half of the electorate but just tiny percentages of our political institutions.

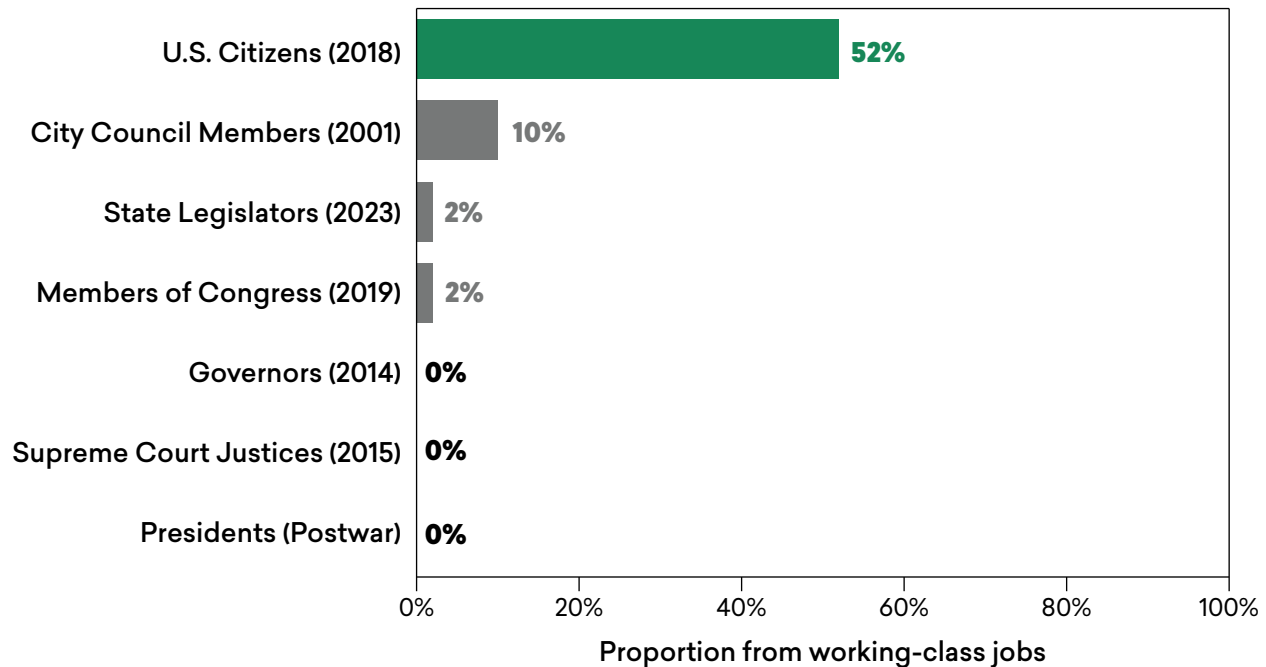
The Problem: Working-Class Americans Almost Never Go on to Hold Elected Office

The shortage of workers in office is especially striking in light of how intensely scholars, journalists, parties, political observers, and politicians focus on working-class voters. During campaigns, parties and candidates of all ideological stripes work hard to convey their commitment to the interests of working-class people. And rightly so: Pundits routinely argue that working-class voters can swing the results of major elections, and research suggests that the working class is not monolithically attached to

one major party or the other.⁷ As a group, workers are a consequential—sometimes pivotal—electoral “prize” for candidates and parties. But for all their rhetoric about working-class voters, politicians and pundits seem not to appreciate that running working-class candidates might help parties appeal to working-class voters.

The shortage of workers in office is also surprising given how much more inclusive our political

Figure 1: Working-Class Americans Rarely Hold Public Office in the United States



Notes: Gray bars represent the proportion of officeholders who last held working-class jobs prior to holding public office. Data for each office come from different years, which are noted in parentheses.

Sources: U.S. citizens: Nicholas Carnes, *The Cash Ceiling: Why Only the Rich Run for Office, and What We Can Do About It* (Princeton University Press, 2018); city council members: Nicholas Carnes, *White-Collar Government: The Hidden Role of Class in Economic Policy Making* (University of Chicago Press, 2013); state legislators: “Study: Only 2% of State Lawmakers Come from Working Class,” *Carolina Journal*, September 17, 2025; members of Congress: Sahil Chinoy and Jessia Ma, “Paths to Power: How Every Member Got to Congress,” *The New York Times*, January 27, 2019; governors and Supreme Court justices: Carnes, *White-Collar Government*; presidents: Carnes, *White-Collar Government* and authors’ data collection.

institutions have become in recent decades. Progress has been slow and sometimes halting, but for the last half-century, women and racial and ethnic minorities have made up growing shares of elected institutions like Congress and state legislatures.⁸ Because women and people of color are overrepresented in working-class jobs in the general public (that is, white-collar and professional jobs disproportionately go to men and white people), we might expect the increasing gender or racial diversity in our political institutions to be accompanied by increasing worker representation. In practice, however, the women and people of color who have been elected have been disproportionately drawn from professional occupational backgrounds. In state legislatures, for instance, women's representation skyrocketed from 8 percent to 24 percent from 1976 to 2007, and the share of lawmakers who were Black or Latino grew from 9 percent to 11 percent—but the share of lawmakers from working-class jobs decreased from 5 percent to 3 percent.⁹ Reformers have devised blueprints for making our political institutions more inclusive on some dimensions, but so far those efforts haven't increased the representation of working-class Americans.

The Exceptions That Prove the Rule

Of course, there are exceptions to these broad patterns, rare politicians from working-class jobs who go on to have successful careers in electoral politics. Former Providence, Rhode Island, city councilwoman Carmen Castillo worked as a hotel housekeeper while serving in office. Maine Democratic gubernatorial candidate (and former state senate president) Troy Jackson worked as a logger for most of his life before and during his service in the state legislature. Former Republican Senator Orrin Hatch spent almost half of his precongressional career working as a janitor and security guard to support his family and pay his way through college and law school.

Examples like these are rare, and because they are so unusual, they often receive outsized attention in our political process, which can make working-class politicians seem more common than they really are.¹⁰

The rare candidates from the working class often showcase their work experience as part of their campaign; for instance, U.S. Representative Mike Michaud—a former forklift operator—featured forklifts on his campaign bumper stickers. Journalists rarely say much about the occupational backgrounds of most politicians, even in high-profile races, but they often devote significant attention to the jobs of politicians from the working class.¹¹ Councilwoman Castillo, for instance, was the subject of a documentary film.¹² Many Americans know that Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez worked as a bartender, but far fewer know what Nancy Pelosi did for a living before she entered politics.¹³

Keeping Workers Out Is Bad for American Democracy

The shortage of politicians from working-class jobs is bad for our country and strains democracy in the United States. It harms trust in government, runs contrary to our country's core values, and diminishes the capacity of our political institutions to address the real problems facing working-class people.

- Symbolically, political institutions that all but exclude working-class people send the message that workers are not valued or included in meaningful ways in our political process. They subtly convey that government is by and for the privileged. Citizens take note. According to cross-national research, when politicians from working-class jobs are rare in public office, citizens are less likely to trust their government and to have faith in democracy.¹⁴
- Ethically, the shortage of working-class people represents a break from our country's core values of representation and access. In a democracy, the links between citizens and their lawmakers should be strong; democracy should be of, by, and for the people. When less powerful groups have a place in a political system, it marks equality of opportunity in that system. When people from a class of jobs that makes up over half of the labor force almost never go on to hold public office—and when no

The Problem: Working-Class Americans Almost Never Go on to Hold Elected Office

other mechanisms exist to ensure that they have an equal place in our political system—we have departed from the basic promise of democracy.¹⁵

- Practically, when workers don't hold office, policy-makers are less likely to understand and respond to the problems workers face. Politicians bring occupation-specific expertise to public office: doctors and nurses better understand the problems facing the medical profession, teachers and principals better understand the challenges facing our schools, police officers and firefighters better understand the problems facing first responders, and so on.¹⁶ When people with working-class jobs almost never go on to hold office, our political institutions are less likely to recognize and

understand the problems facing working-class Americans, tilting the policy agenda in favor of the interests of the most privileged and against the needs of workers,¹⁷ while also depriving institutions of the diversity of perspectives they need to respond to a dynamic and complex economy. Of course, politicians from white-collar backgrounds often care deeply about workers and work hard to promote policies that support the American working class. But there is simply no substitute for firsthand experience. Without former and current workers, our political institutions are cut off from the grounded knowledge they need to best serve working-class Americans. As the old adage goes, if you're not at the table, you're on the menu.



Tulare County, California

The Causes: What Keeps Workers Out of Office?

If it matters that working-class people so rarely go on to hold office, what exactly keeps workers out?

Observers have sometimes speculated that there is something wrong with working-class people themselves: that workers are less qualified, less interested in running, or less appealing to voters. These kinds of explanations might ease concerns about the lack of workers in public office by portraying the shortage as an unavoidable practical necessity, a “necessary evil.” **But there has never been much concrete evidence that workers themselves are to blame for their near absence in our political institutions.** Working-class Americans are not measurably less qualified to serve their communities, and when they hold office they tend to be about as effective as other leaders and about as likely to win reelection.¹⁸ In national surveys, qualified working-class people are about as likely to say that they have considered running for office.¹⁹ And in hypothetical candidate experiments as well as actual elections, working-class candidates are about as likely to win over voters.²⁰

Another common strain of thought blames the shortage of workers on recent changes in U.S. politics, like the rising cost of campaigns and elections or the decline of labor unions. However, workers have always been numerically underrepresented in American institutions, even during eras when unions were stronger and campaigning was less expensive. Looking across modern democracies around the world, moreover, workers are similarly underrepresented in countries with stronger labor unions and less-expensive campaigns.²¹

By far the most important reason so few workers hold office is simply that so few run in the first place. One recent study found that people from working-class jobs made up just 1 percent of the candidates who ran in U.S. House primary elections from 2008 to 2016.²²

Why do so few workers run? The first reason is that **running is personally burdensome, and people who have working-class jobs are the least well-**

positioned to take on those burdens.²³ Although many jobs are extremely demanding, working-class jobs are also uniquely precarious: they pay less, offer less certainty about the future, and provide less flexibility. Not surprisingly, in national surveys about running for office, one of the biggest dividing lines between people in working-class jobs and others is that workers are more likely to say that they can’t run for office because they can’t give up their income or job. (In contrast, other concerns tend to be universal; for instance, similar percentages of workers and white-collar professionals say they dread the thought of campaign fundraising.)

Workers face a harder road, and the party elites who could help them know it. This is the second major obstacle that keeps working-class people out of office. In surveys, qualified workers are far less likely than equally qualified white-collar professionals to say that they have been encouraged to run for office by party leaders, interest groups, sitting politicians, journalists, and other political insiders. Party leaders

The Causes: What Keeps Workers Out of Office?

say the same. Many express a desire to run more candidates from the working class but admit that they hesitate because they fear workers will have a harder time. Gatekeepers have limited resources and naturally prioritize candidates who will have an easier time running. As a result, **party leaders and other gatekeepers—even those who care about worker representation—tend to pass over qualified workers in favor of professionals who will have an easier time running.**²⁴

Labor unions have sometimes been able to help workers overcome some of these challenges. In countries like Germany and the United Kingdom, unions formed close alliances with strong political parties in the early twentieth century, allowing them to support working-class candidates and to ensure that gatekeepers prioritized them. Unions have sometimes played a similar role in the United States, at least at the local level, but these efforts have often been short-lived. The United States has never had a German- or UK-style partnership between unions and national party organizations to promote working-class officeholding.²⁵

Current Reform Proposals Miss the Problem

Unfortunately, some reform proposals that are commonly linked to worker representation don't address the key barriers that keep workers out of office.

For instance, the National Conference of State Legislatures advocates increasing salaries for lawmakers and lists as one benefit that higher salaries will “attract highly qualified candidates with a variety of diverse backgrounds and experiences, while also ensuring that everyone—rich or poor—can afford to serve.”²⁶ In reality, however, workers don't run or hold office at higher rates in states that pay their lawmakers higher salaries.²⁷ Raising salaries might make running more appealing to working-class people, but it makes running more appealing to professionals, too. If workers have concerns about the size of the prize for winning, they are decidedly secondary to

the impossibility of running the race in the first place and the lack of support from elite gatekeepers who could help. Raising legislative salaries might be a good idea for many other reasons, but there is currently no empirical research to suggest that this approach will increase worker representation by itself (or at all).

Another common claim is that implementing systems of public financing in U.S. elections would increase worker representation. Again, these kinds of interventions may have many important benefits for our democracy, but public financing doesn't seem to address the key problems that keep workers out of office (the inherent burdens and uncertainty associated with running, regardless of the financing system, and the lack of support from political gatekeepers). When public financing systems have been implemented in U.S. states, worker representation does not seem to have improved,²⁸ and worker representation differs only marginally in other countries with more extensive public financing systems.²⁹

Likewise, reformers sometimes argue that changing our electoral system to a proportional representation system (in which parties receive seats in Congress, for instance, in proportion to their share of the vote) would promote worker representation better than the single-member-district majoritarian system we currently use (in which the candidate who receives the most votes in a given state or district wins the seat). However, cross-national research suggests that proportional representation would do little to increase worker officeholding; countries with proportional representation systems do not have more working-class people in their national legislatures.³⁰

None of these approaches address the core obstacles facing workers: Running for office is personally burdensome, and so party leaders and other elites who could help instead tend to pass over qualified workers in favor of professional candidates who will have an easier time running.

The Solutions: Blueprints for Action

The time is right for new approaches that tackle the barriers that keep working-class people out of office. Both major parties are searching for ways to appeal to working-class voters. Running more working-class candidates should be a high priority.

Evidence-based blueprints for change already exist. Cross-national research has uncovered combinations of factors that encourage working-class people to hold office in larger numbers.³¹ In the United States, activists and organizations have rolled out scores of successful models for recruiting underrepresented groups, including working-class people. These models can be easily adopted, supported, or funded by political parties, unions, interest groups, philanthropists, and reformers. The blueprints for a more class-inclusive democracy already exist.

The Essential Prerequisite: Adopt a Sensible Definition of the Working Class—and Stick to It

Progress will be slow, however, if reformers don't begin with—and adhere to—a sensible definition of who counts as a member of the working class.

There are many definitions of the working class in use today that are not suitable as a basis for meaningful reform efforts. If we define the working class to mean people employed in manual labor, service industry, clerical, and informal-sector jobs (for more on this, see the FAQ section), it is true that working-class people are sharply numerically underrepresented and that their absence has real consequences for our democracy. If, however, we define the working class in other ways, this is no longer true. Pundits often characterize all Americans without college degrees as “working class,” for instance, but there is no credible evidence that the shortage of people without college degrees in our elected institutions has a meaningful impact on our democracy.³² Scores of wealthy professionals in the United States don't have college degrees;

if an organization supported these kinds of candidates, they could claim to increase “working-class” representation while actually increasing the share of wealthy professionals in our political institutions.

Likewise, reformers sometimes stretch the definition of working-class jobs to include adjacent occupations like nursing, teaching, and policing. These are all worthy occupations, but in the United States, these jobs provide a great deal more security and stability than most working-class jobs. (They are usually stable, salaried positions with benefits, although of course in many places these kinds of jobs often deserve better compensation.) More importantly, people who hold these kinds of jobs are not numerically underrepresented in elected office. Increasing the share of nurses, teachers, and police officers in office might actually reduce the representation of people from working-class jobs.

Many reformers—especially those in political parties and interest groups—will be tempted to classify favored candidates from white-collar professions as “working class,” essentially tinkering with the definition of the term to match a favored candidate's current occupation. Reformers must resist the temptation to shoot first and then draw the target where their arrow has landed. **Changing the definition of working class is no substitute for changing the system.**

Researchers who study working-class representation have generally defined working-class jobs as those that do not pay well; do not require more schooling than the minimum compulsory formal education in a society; do not require prior wealth, capital, or privately owned equipment; are less prestigious; expose employees to more abuse, exploitation, and physical

danger; and offer less job security. Our FAQ section outlines a more detailed definition of working-class jobs that can be used by any organization as a starting point for a fixed definition.

If organizations claim to support working-class candidates, funders and activists should hold them accountable to this definition or to some other clear benchmark that is based in actual research on the numerical representation of workers and the effects on the quality of democracy, not ad hoc decisions made in the interest of fitting popular narratives or counting particular individuals.

A Blueprint for Organizations: Political Parties, Unions, and Interest Groups

Qualified working-class Americans are less likely to be encouraged to run for office by party leaders, civic organizations, and interest groups. Those groups could easily change that, especially at the state and local levels, which tend to be the starting points for most candidates who go on to hold national office. Some have already started.

1. *Institutionalize partnerships focused on recruiting and supporting candidates and politicians from working-class jobs.* Historically, working-class people have held office in the highest numbers when organizations that support workers—typically labor unions—have formed institutional partnerships with political parties for the purpose of supporting working-class candidates.³³ This configuration seems to be the key to significant gains in working-class representation around the world. Of course, every country and electoral context is different, and partnerships like these inevitably develop context-specific programs to elect more workers. But if one broad type of intervention has empirical support, it is this: Unions or interest groups that represent working-class people should create institutionalized partnerships with political parties that include formal mechanisms for recruiting and supporting working-class candidates.

What else can organizations do? With or without partnerships like these, political parties, interest groups, and labor unions have many tools for addressing the obstacles that keep working-class people out of office.

2. *Recruit working-class candidates.* Interest groups, unions, and political parties should create candidate training programs that identify, recruit, train, and support people who have working-class jobs as they consider and launch bids for elected office. Programs like these have a strong (if limited) track record in the United States. Unions in Nevada, Oregon, and Maine have recently run programs to recruit workers, and the Working Families Party in New York has had success with a pipeline program for working-class people. The oldest such program is probably the New Jersey AFL-CIO Labor Candidate School, which has existed for almost three decades and boasts a 78 percent win rate for graduates of its signature candidate school.³⁴ Organizations that do not focus exclusively on workers can also develop programs that recruit working-class people. Advance Native Political Leadership, for instance, supports Native American candidates, many of whom come from working-class jobs. Other groups that serve specific populations can likewise create programs that encourage working-class members of those populations to run for office.
3. *Create seed money programs for workers.* The most successful candidate recruitment programs also provide seed money, early campaign donations intended to help candidates raise even more later on. With seed money, candidates can hire the staff needed to support continued fundraising and other basic campaign operations. Early money is also an important signal of candidate viability, and candidates who raise large sums early on are more likely to attract donors and media coverage and deter challengers.³⁵ Perhaps most importantly, fundraising is the reason many candidates decide that running is not for them; targeted early money support can keep more working-class Americans in the candidate pipeline at this crucial stage. There is ample precedent



for this approach; when it was founded, the organization EMILY's List raised money year-round, then recruited and trained pro-choice women and offered them substantial seed money. Interest groups, unions, and political parties should create and support similar seed-money programs for working-class candidates.

4. *Offer targeted political scholarships or fellowships.* Workers find it hard to run for office and pay the bills. Organizations should create targeted programs that provide funds to cover the basic cost of living for working-class candidates while they run for office. This can be done through political scholarships or, where those are not permitted, through fellowship programs that provide working-class candidates with salaries in exchange for research or other political work that still leaves ample time for campaign activities.
5. *Collect and publicize information about candidate occupational backgrounds.* An easy way to raise awareness about the lack of occupational diversity in our political institutions is to document it locally. Organizations can create voter guides that include information about individual candidate occupations and about the occupational makeup of the candidate pool as a whole. These

kinds of reports can help dramatize the shortage of politicians from working-class jobs.³⁶

6. *Reserve seats on organizational leadership committees for working-class people.* Just as the shortage of workers in elected office affects how political institutions behave, the shortage of workers in leadership positions in political parties, unions, interest groups, and other civil-society organizations can limit how well those groups understand and respond to the challenges that working-class Americans face.³⁷ Political parties and advocacy organizations should create formal rules that ensure that key leadership positions include at least some people from working-class occupations.
7. *Think short- and long-term.* Whatever strategies organizations adopt, they should consider both short- and long-term time horizons. In the short term, candidates often find local and nonpartisan races like school boards easier to run in. These kinds of elections can be training grounds for future races. Once elected, candidates will also need ongoing support in the form of advice, guidance, and help as they consider running again or running for higher office.

The Solutions: Blueprints for Action

Of course, these kinds of interventions will only work if they create a meaningful pipeline of working-class candidates. Some reformers may be tempted to stretch the definition of *working class* to include favored candidates. A second potential pitfall is the temptation to select only “the cream of the crop,” people in working-class jobs who seem the most like existing white-collar candidates. Research suggests that working-class people are well-qualified to run for and hold office; organizations would do well to remember that training, support, and empowerment should be offered broadly to workers. Real pipeline work will involve convincing workers who are estranged from the political process that people in power truly care about their views, not just promoting the workers who are already interested in running for office. The goal is not to co-opt a small subset of well-positioned workers but to create meaningful pathways for large numbers of working-class people.

A Blueprint for Politicians: Reform Campaign Finance Regulations to Help Candidates Pay the Bills, and Create Your Own Pipeline of Working-Class Talent

Workers in the United States rarely run for elected office, in part because they simply cannot afford to take time away from work and they worry about returning to their jobs afterward. Many candidates are unable to pay themselves a salary or use their campaign funds to cover personal and family expenses while campaigning. Others are unaware of federal rules allowing candidates to pay themselves reasonable and limited salaries from campaign funds and to petition the Federal Election Commission to cover child- and elder-care expenses.

8. *Reduce restrictions on pay.* Policymakers should make it easier for candidates to pay for their personal expenses using campaign funds. As one recent report argues, “The federal government should pass legislation that would allow candidates to use campaign money for clearly defined and limited personal expenses, such as

childcare and housing (with sufficient restrictions to prevent fraud and misuse).” State and local governments should follow suit.³⁸

9. *Offer a cost-of-living stipend for candidates.* Governments could also offer cost-of-living stipends to candidates, with simple means tests and adequate safeguards to prevent abuse.

Candidates who campaign in good faith should also have some assurance that they can return to work afterward, regardless of the outcome of the election. Just as we grant jurors the right to return to their jobs after a trial ends, candidates should have the right to return to work after election day.

10. *Ensure a right to return to work.* Lawmakers should require businesses to permit employees reasonable leave to run for and hold public office, with an assurance that they can return to their jobs after campaigning and/or serving their communities (again, with sufficient restrictions to prevent fraud and abuse). In the name of ensuring equal access, some states require businesses to permit employees to take unpaid time off from work to vote on election day; businesses should be required to do the same for the rare employees who run for elected office.

A Blueprint for Structural Reform: Adding Institutions That Are Inclusive by Design

Finally, reformers should also consider more significant changes to institutional structures to ensure that working-class people are well-represented by design. Some of these may require amendments to state or federal constitutions, but creating institutions that are inclusive by design will ensure that workers have a seat at the table for generations to come.

11. *Create and empower citizen advisory committees.* Local governments regularly turn to citizen advisory boards, deliberative bodies that are open to participation by any citizen or are made up of randomly selected citizens. These groups are often organized around a particular issue

(like the fifteen-member Historical Affairs and Landmark Review Board in Arlington, Virginia), but they can easily be adapted to focus on broader topics or to provide accountability and feedback to elected officials on a regular basis.³⁹ In Lisbon, Portugal, for instance, when the city council is elected, a government agency selects a random group of citizens to form a “citizen assembly” that meets for facilitated sessions to discuss general issues facing the city.⁴⁰ Like other random processes (for example, jury duty), advisory programs like these tend to attract a more economically diverse group of citizens than the mix of people who run for elected office. Of course, open calls for citizen input often tend to favor the kinds of citizens who already participate at high rates, who tend to be disproportionately well-off. However, citizen advisory committees can easily be designed to be demographically representative on numerous dimensions, either through reserved seats or by using stratified random selection to choose participants. Well-constructed citizen advisory councils can also be expensive to administer—the best approaches will provide trained facilitators and compensate participants for their service. But compared to the scope of government activities in a given locality or the expenses associated with the operation of elected institutions (such as the facilities and staff that support state legislators or members of Congress), the expenses associated with inclusive institutions will often be manageable and reasonable.

12. *Shorten campaigns.* By law, campaigns in Japan only last about two weeks. This significantly reduces the personal burdens associated with campaigning, while still allowing time for voters to learn about the candidates on their ballots. In the United States, working-class people are more likely to hold office at the state and local levels, where running for office is less burdensome. Shorter campaigns at all levels of government would likely make running for office more feasible for people from working-class jobs.

13. *Reserve seats for working-class people.* Most democracies guarantee that women will hold at least 30 percent of the seats in the national legislature, either by designating that certain seats can only be held by women or by requiring parties to run slates of candidates that include at least 30 percent women. The United States is one of the only exceptions in the world.⁴¹ Even so, the idea is worth considering. City councils, state legislatures, or even the U.S. Congress could adopt reserved seat policies that would ensure that working-class representation meets some minimal threshold.

A Blueprint for Researchers: Support Evaluation Throughout the Reform Process

14. *Build in evaluation.* We currently know more about *why* we have a shortage of working-class people in elected office than we know about *how* to address the shortage. This is partly a result of inaction; with so few programs to elect working-class people, we have had few opportunities to measure their impacts. Going forward, interventions designed to increase worker representation should be implemented cautiously, with ample allowance for pilot periods and well-designed impact evaluations, including randomized controlled trials whenever possible. Implementing organizations should partner with researchers to rigorously evaluate which programs succeed at increasing worker representation and which do not.

The United States is long overdue to reckon with the near-total exclusion of working-class people from our elected institutions. The blueprints above represent the best evidence-based approaches to the problem. They are worth pursuing. Electing more working-class Americans will better align our country with its democratic values, restore the faith of cynical and disaffected citizens, and ensure that working-class Americans take their rightful seat at the table in our political institutions.

Frequently Asked Questions

How do you define the working class? Is there a fixed definition of working class that can guide reform efforts?

There is no universally agreed-upon definition of the working class. With three exceptions, we define working-class jobs as those belonging to categories 400–900 in the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO): clerical support workers, service and sales workers, craft and related trades workers, skilled farm workers, plant and machine operators and assemblers, and elementary occupations.⁴² The ISCO classification system provides detailed lists of the many specific occupations that fall within these categories.

We make three exceptions to this approach: We do not count as working class (1) police officers (who have historically been treated as a separate category in research on working-class representation, because in the United States most police officers have education and training requirements and stable, salaried positions); (2) farm owners and farm managers (because those positions entail owning or managing commercial enterprises, more like business owners and managers); and (3) sole proprietors or small-business owners in working-class trades (for example, the owners of plumbing companies, because owning a business requires significant training and capital beyond what is required in most working-class jobs).

This definition is consistent with most research to date on the political officeholding among working-class Americans, and it is sufficiently detailed to serve as a basis for evaluating reform efforts and specific candidates.

We strongly recommend that reformers adopt a definition of *working class* that is rooted in empirical research on working-class officeholding, and we urge reformers to resist the temptation to change the definition of *working class* to include favored candidates.

Why do you define the working class in terms of occupation? What about other definitions that focus on income, education, or the kind of family someone grew up in?

Our definition of the working class focuses on occupations, first, because a person's occupation is a more plausible basis for the formation of political views and identities than other common measures. There is little evidence, for instance, that simply having money or earning a college degree changes people's political values; in contrast, the workplace is a site of important professional, personal, and political socialization.⁴³ Research on politicians has found that their past occupations—far more so than traits like income, education, wealth, or the economic status of their parents—are important dividing lines that predict consequential differences in how they behave and the kinds of policies they support.⁴⁴

Second, although traits like income and education are important (and often highly correlated with occupations), data on income and education can sometimes conflate people with very different experiences and life chances. A person with a college degree earning \$40,000 a year could be a Wal-Mart cashier, a public-school teacher, or a Ph.D. student in computer science at an Ivy League university. In most contexts, it would not make much sense to say that these individuals all belong to the same social class.

The third reason we use occupations to define the working class is practical. When studying politicians, it is far easier to obtain information about their past occupations than it is to obtain information about their past income or wealth.

Many studies approach this differently, of course.

- Survey researchers often define the working class using income and education because surveys

frequently do not ask about people's occupations.⁴⁵ When researchers have the opportunity to collect occupational data, they should do so.

- Some researchers argue for a more expansive definition of the working class, often citing positions like police officer or teacher, jobs that scholars usually do not count because they often require postsecondary degrees and provide far more job security than the jobs labeled "working-class" here.
- Observers often argue that politicians raised by working-class *parents* should be counted as belonging to or being from the working class.⁴⁶ However, studies find that a politician's own occupation is a stronger predictor of their choices in office. Just as a doctor tends to be better suited to perform medicine than the child of a doctor, a worker tends to be better suited than the child of a worker to understand and represent the views of working-class people.
- Politicians are often labeled (or label themselves) "working class" not because of the jobs they held before they held office but on the basis of their mannerisms, their clothing (like Senator John Fetterman's trademark hoodie), their past experiences of short-term economic adversity, their personal connections to working-class people, their support from working-class voters, and other factors. Each of these practices has some precedent in the larger academic research on social stratification. But these kinds of approaches can be difficult to replicate across different populations of politicians and to measure in the general public.

These are all important considerations, but none of them address the fundamental fact that the people who do essential-but-precarious working-class jobs make up half of our labor force but almost never go on to hold elected office themselves.

Are working-class politicians disproportionately male or white?

No. Women and people of color are slightly overrepresented in working-class jobs and among politicians

from working-class jobs. There is no evidence that increasing the number of people from working-class jobs who hold office would cause a decline in the representation of women or people of color.⁴⁷

Are people who hold working-class jobs less qualified to be politicians?

There is no widely accepted definition of what it means to be qualified to hold office (beyond meeting basic legal requirements like filing for the election on time and being old enough to serve). When scholars in the United States and in other democracies have attempted to measure qualifications, they have not found large or meaningful differences between people in working-class jobs and others.⁴⁸ Some studies have also noted that this argument bears an uncomfortable resemblance to historical efforts to disenfranchise marginalized groups.⁴⁹ At this time, there is no real evidence to suggest that working-class people are less likely to hold office because they are less qualified.

Is a college degree required to be a politician?

No. There is no requirement that political candidates must hold a college degree. And there is no reason to think that people without a college degree are any less intelligent.⁵⁰ Research on politicians shows that those with and without college degrees tend to perform similarly in office.⁵¹

Is the shortage of politicians from working-class jobs due to the decline of unions, the rising cost of elections, party polarization, or some other recent phenomenon?

No. Broad trends like these may add additional obstacles that discourage working-class people from holding office, but the near absence of politicians from working-class jobs in the United States predates all of these phenomena.⁵²

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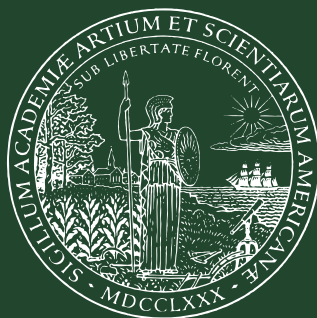
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