

AMERICAN ACADEMY
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

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

Executive Summary

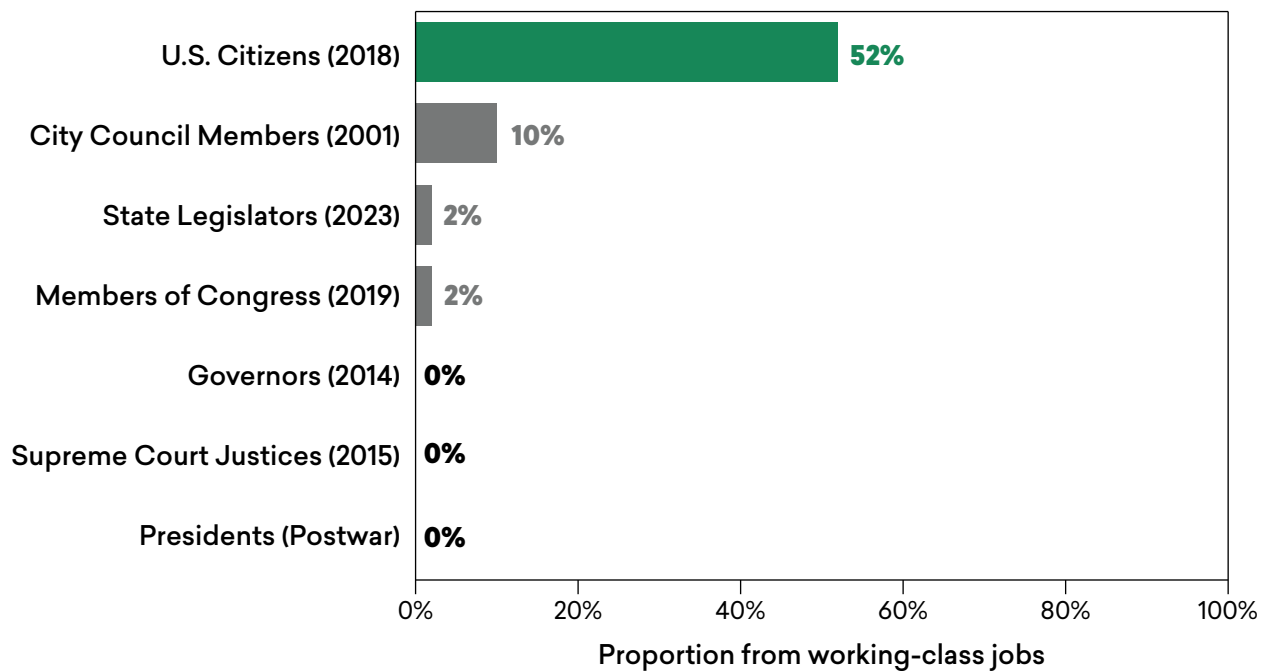
Working-class Americans make up more than half of the U.S. labor force. Yet people from manual labor, service, clerical, and informal sector jobs almost never go on to hold elected office at any level of government. Their absence from public service adversely impacts trust in government, runs contrary to our national ideals, and makes it difficult for our political institutions to understand and respond to the needs of working people in a fast-changing economy.

The problem is not that workers are unqualified or uninterested in public service: it's that running for office is personally burdensome in numerous

ways, and working-class people are less likely to be able to shoulder those burdens. The United States doesn't lack workers with the talent to lead. It lacks systems that identify, recruit, train, and support candidates from the working class. If we want a stronger democracy, we need to build real pathways for working-class Americans to serve in elected office.

How to Elect More Working-Class Americans and Why It Matters outlines reform blueprints for parties, unions, interest groups, funders, and policymakers to increase the number of working-class candidates and officeholders.

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 Jessica 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.

A Blueprint for Parties, Unions, and Interest Groups: Build the Pipeline through Institutional Partnerships

- **Create formal, institutionalized partnerships.** Establish partnerships between labor, interest groups, and political parties to recruit and support working-class candidates.
- **Recruit working-class candidates directly.** Develop structured programs to identify, recruit, and train workers who hope to run for office, especially at the state and local level.
- **Create seed money programs for workers.** Offer early funding to help workers build viable campaigns and attract future support.
- **Offer targeted political scholarships or fellowships.** Within existing campaign finance rules, provide income support so workers can run for office while still paying their bills.
- **Increase the visibility of working-class representation gaps.** Track and publicize candidates' occupational backgrounds. Create metrics and strive for growth in the number of working-class people who go on to hold office.
- **Reserve seats on organizational leadership committees for working-class people.** Ensure leadership roles within organizations include people with working-class jobs.

A Blueprint for Researchers: Support Evaluation Throughout the Reform Process

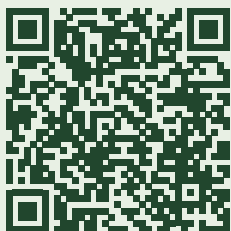
- **Build in an evaluation process.** Run pilot programs, measure outcomes, and scale what works.

A Blueprint for Legislators: Reduce Financial and Structural Barriers and Create Your Own Worker Pipeline

- **Pass laws that allow candidates to use campaign money to cover basic living expenses.** Permit reasonable spending on childcare, housing, food, and other necessities.
- **Offer a cost-of-living stipend for candidates.** Create cost-of-living stipends for candidates, using simple means tests and safeguards to prevent abuse.
- **Ensure a right to return to work.** Guarantee that people who run credible campaigns for public office can take leave and return to their jobs after serving their communities.

A Blueprint for Structural Reformers: Redesign Systems for Long-Term Inclusion

- **Create and empower citizen advisory committees.** Create representative citizen assemblies or advisory boards that work alongside elected institutions to give citizens a direct voice in the policymaking process.
- **Shorten campaign timelines.** Reduce the length of campaigns to lower burdens on candidates and barriers to entry.
- **Reserve seats for working-class people.** Create rules in parties or institutions that ensure that a minimum number of seats will be held by working-class Americans.



Scan the QR code to read the full report and learn more about working-class candidates.

For inquiries, please contact **Nicholas Carnes** (nicholas.carnes@duke.edu) and **Noam Lupu** (noam.lupu@vanderbilt.edu), authors of *How to Elect More Working-Class Americans and Why It Matters*.

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