

The Cash Ceiling
Why Only the Rich Run for Office – And What We Can Do About It

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Brief Description

Why are we governed by the privileged? If millionaires formed their own political party, that party would make up about 3% of the general public, but it would control all three branches of the federal government. The Millionaires Party would have a majority in the House of Representatives and a filibuster-proof super-majority in the Senate. It would have a majority on the Supreme Court and a Commander in Chief in the White House. If, on the other hand, *working-class Americans*—people employed in manual labor, service industry, and clerical jobs—formed their own party, that party would have made up more than half of the country since the start of the 20th century. But legislators from that party (those who worked in blue-collar jobs before getting involved in politics) would never have held more than 2% of the seats in Congress.

This economic gulf between citizens and politicians has serious consequences for public policy. Just as the shortage of women in public office biases policy on gender issues, the shortage of politicians from lower-income and working-class backgrounds ultimately tilts economic policy in favor of the interests of the wealthy and against the needs of middle- and working-class people. Government *by* the rich is often government *for* the rich. So why are we governed by the rich in the first place?

The Cash Ceiling is the first book to ask why so few working-class Americans go on to become politicians. In it, I debunk popular misconceptions (such as the ideas that workers are unelectable or unfit to govern), I identify the stages in the candidate entry process that screen out potential working-class candidates, I explore the factors keeping workers off of ballots, and I evaluate a variety of reform proposals. Drawing on a wide range of data, I show that our political process has a *cash ceiling*, a series of structural barriers and corresponding individual-level behaviors that make it almost impossible for working-class Americans to run for public office. However, these barriers aren't invincible. Programs to recruit and train workers have the potential to increase the economic diversity of our governing institutions and ultimately increase the political voice of ordinary citizens. *The Cash Ceiling* provides a comprehensive account of why so few working-class Americans hold office—and what reformers can do about it.

Overview

In every level and branch of government, politicians in the United States tend to be vastly better off than the people they represent: they are wealthier, more educated, and

more likely to come from white-collar jobs. Working-class Americans—people employed in manual labor, service industry, and clerical occupations—make up 52% of the labor force. But politicians from the working class currently make up less than 10% of the average city council, less than 3% of the average state legislature, and less than 2% of Congress.

In the last few years, scholars and activists have started paying closer attention to the economic and social class gaps between politicians and citizens in the United States. One emerging line of research has found that lawmakers from different classes tend to bring different perspectives to the political process. The shortage of politicians from the working class—who tend to be more progressive on economic issues—appears to bias policy on issues like the minimum wage, taxes, and welfare spending towards the more conservative positions typically favored by affluent Americans. Social safety net programs are stingier, business regulations are flimsier, and tax policies are more regressive than they would be if our lawmakers came from the same mix of social classes as the people they represent.

Why, then, do so few people from the working class majority go on to hold public office? Scholars currently have many hunches, but little hard evidence. To date, only a few studies have explored this important topic, and most have come up empty-handed. There are still many stones left unturned: many possible sources of data have never been analyzed, and many popular reform proposals—like raising legislative salaries, publicly financing elections, or training working-class citizens to run for office—have never been evaluated systematically. No prior study on the shortage of workers in office has fully taken stock of larger theories about the numerical representation of social groups or the findings in adjacent literatures on the shortage of women and minorities in public office. And no study has attempted to comprehensively examine both the individual-level differences that deter working-class people from holding office and the larger structural or macro-level forces that drive those individual behaviors.

My aim in this book is to begin changing all that. *The Cash Ceiling* will provide a comprehensive account of the factors that discourage working-class Americans from holding office and the reforms that could encourage more qualified workers to run and win.

The book's main argument is that workers are less likely to hold office not because they are unqualified or because voters prefer more affluent candidates, but because qualified workers are 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 have the time and resources to run for office. But another important piece of the puzzle is a feature of our political process that we almost never talk about, namely, that workers are less likely to be recruited and encouraged by important gatekeepers 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.

These individual-level differences are in turn the result of many larger institutional or structural features of our political process. Some are old, some are new, and most are getting worse. Economic inequality is growing, which is making the resource differences between working Americans and white-collar professionals even starker. Labor unions are declining and pro-business interests are becoming more numerous and more sophisticated, which is making the "encouragement gap" even wider. Campaigns are becoming more elaborate and more expensive, which is making running for office an even more time- and resource-intensive process (and giving gatekeepers more incentives to recruit only the wealthy). And the very fact that so few workers hold office today is discouraging future generations of working-class Americans from ever seeing politics as a realistic path for themselves.

In short, this book argues that our political process has a "cash ceiling" – a collection of structural barriers and corresponding individual-level attitudes and behaviors that make it almost impossible for working-class Americans to run for public office.

But there are ways to change this feature of our democratic process. Many familiar reform ideas would probably help: if we could reign in lobbying and campaign spending, promote broader political participation, and revitalize labor unions, workers might hold office in larger numbers. But understanding the cash ceiling also suggests several options that aren't on many reformers' radars right now, most notably *candidate recruitment and training*. Even the workers who have the time and resources to run for public office are seldom encouraged by political gatekeepers. That's easy to change, though: programs to identify, recruit, train, and support working-class candidates already exist, and scaling them up may be easier – and more appealing to party leaders and other gatekeepers – than many reformers realize.

My aim in this book is to break the scholarly silence about the causes of government by the privileged in the United States. My findings have serious implications for contemporary reform efforts and speak to enduring questions about representation and political inequality. With this book, I hope to shine a long-overdue light on America's cash ceiling.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 1: Government by the Privileged

The first chapter of the book lays out the most up-to-date evidence about the longstanding numerical underrepresentation of the working class. The chapter shows that workers are vastly underrepresented in every level and branch of government and

have been for essentially the entire history of our country. Chapter 1 also explains why our white-collar government matters: it reviews past research on the differences between politicians from different social classes and presents new analyses of confidential surveys of leaders' personal views. Like ordinary citizens, politicians from different social classes tend to have different perspectives on a wide range of economic issues: those who were workers tend to be more pro-worker, those who were business owners tend to be more pro-business, and so on. These patterns—coupled with the virtual absence of politicians from the working class—ultimately tilt economic policy in favor of the more conservative positions typically preferred by affluent Americans. To date, however, scholars of US politics have seldom asked why so few working-class Americans go into politics in the first place. The chapter concludes by outlining the book's organization and summarizing its main argument, namely, that the US has a tough (but not unbreakable) "cash ceiling."

* Previously published material: None.

* New analyses: This chapter includes new estimates of the social class makeup of politicians at all levels of government, the first side-by-side comparison of the numbers of women and working-class people in Congress and state legislatures throughout the 20th century, and a new analysis of the social classes and personal views of state legislators from an original national survey of state legislative candidates that I co-organized in 2012.

Chapter 2: The Conventional Wisdom (is Wrong)

In Chapter 2, I begin the book's empirical investigation by identifying the stage in the candidate entry process at which most working-class people are screened out. In the process of doing so, I also test two other widespread ideas about workers, namely, that they seldom hold office because they aren't fit to govern and because voters prefer affluent candidates. Drawing on original surveys of political party leaders and ordinary citizens, I first identify the characteristics that define a high-quality candidate in the minds of voters and key gatekeepers. I then use national surveys of ordinary citizens (the National Election Study, the General Social Survey, and an original survey) to illustrate that the social class gaps in these qualities in the general public are far too small by themselves to account for the shortage of workers in public office. Next, I take up the idea that voters prefer affluent or professional candidates over workers. Using data on federal and state elections, I show that candidates from the working class tend to perform about as well as white-collar professionals in actual races; using data from an original hypothetical candidate field experiment, I show that voters are just as likely to support a candidate who is randomly described as having a working-class job; and using an original survey, I show that voters self-report holding favorable views about working-class candidates. In the chapter's final analysis, I examine an original survey of state legislative candidates, which reveals that workers seldom hold state legislative seats because they seldom run (not because they run and lose). Together, the analyses in Chapter 2 suggest that workers aren't underrepresented in public office because they're

less qualified or because voters dislike them; they're underrepresented because they simply don't run.

* Previously published material: I re-analyze the data from this chapter's hypothetical candidate experiment in a co-authored comparative politics paper on voter attitudes about working-class candidates in the US, the UK, and Argentina that is currently forthcoming at *American Political Science Review*. The paper uses the data slightly differently, however, and the relevant figure in *The Cash Ceiling* is unique to the book manuscript (not a duplicate of a figure in the paper).

* New analyses: This chapter presents data on the characteristics that voters and party leaders want in an ideal candidate (from an original national survey of the leaders of the county-level branches of the Republican and Democratic parties that I co-organized in 2013 and a follow-up public opinion survey in 2014), data on the distribution of those characteristics among professionals and working-class people in the general public (from my 2014 public opinion survey and from the General Social Survey and the National Election Study), data on how cities governed by majority-worker city councils perform over time financially (from the Census and the International City/County Management Association), data on what voters say they think about working-class candidates (from my 2014 public opinion survey), and data on the social class makeup of candidates and winners at the state and local levels (from my national surveys of state legislators in 2012 and 2014 and from the Local Elections in America Project).

Chapter 3: Why Workers Don't Run

Chapter 3 then asks why workers so seldom run. In this chapter, I try to get inside the minds of working-class Americans to understand the individual-level differences in resources, ambition, and recruitment that keep workers from running for public office. Building on research on candidate entry decisions and political participation more broadly, I first use an original survey of ordinary citizens (corroborated by data from the 1990 Citizen Participation Study and aggregate-level data on the social class makeup of state legislatures in the 1990s and 2000s) to test the hypothesis that workers are less likely to run because they often lack the necessary resources (like time and money) and because they often don't want to be candidates (because they doubt they can win, make a difference in office, and so on). In contrast to the literature on gender gaps in political ambition, I find no evidence of social class gaps in who *wants* to run for office. However, I find clear evidence of important gaps in who *can afford* to run: in surveys, workers are more likely to report that they don't have the time or money to run for public office, and in states where economic inequality is more severe, fewer workers govern. Chapter 3 also tests the hypothesis that workers are less likely to be recruited. In surveys of ordinary citizens and political party leaders, I find that qualified working-class respondents are less likely to report being encouraged to run for office and that party officials are less likely to report encouraging them. Together, these factors—social class gaps in resources and recruitment—seem to explain why qualified working-class citizens rarely try to field campaigns. As scholars have long known about

other forms of political participation, working-class Americans often don't run for office because they can't, and no one asks them.

* Previously published material: The section of this chapter that analyzes differences in recruitment uses data from an unpublished working paper on gatekeeper biases against the working class.

* New analyses: The section of this chapter on differences in resources analyzes data from my 2014 national survey of the general public, comparable data from the 1990 Citizen Participation Study, and aggregate-level data on income inequality and working-class representation in the 50 states in 1979, 1993, 1995, and 2007. The section on ambition uses my 2014 public opinion survey to measure social class gaps in how qualified people feel to run, whether they think they would win, and how interested they are in running.

Chapter 4: What's Stopping Them

In Chapter 4, I explore the macro-level foundations of social class gaps in resources in recruitment, that is, I document the structural features of our economy and our political process that discourage individual workers from thinking like candidates. Using aggregate-level data on who runs and wins in the 50 states, I highlight how differences in social forces like economic inequality, union strength, and campaign costs can ultimately lead to differences in the social class backgrounds of our political decision makers. These patterns illustrate the serious hurdles that workers are up against in the 21st century: campaigns are becoming more expensive and more time consuming, legislatures are becoming more professionalized, unions are declining, and that's making it even harder for workers to run for office.

* Previously published material: None.

* New analyses: This chapter uses aggregate-level data on working-class representation in the 50 states in 1979, 1993, 1995, and 2007; time series data on working-class officeholding in a subset of 35 states over the last three decades; and my surveys of state legislative candidates in 2012 and 2014. With these data, I analyze the relationship between the number of workers who run/win and aggregate-level measures of economic inequality, political participation, union density, campaign costs, legislative professionalization, and working-class representation in higher offices.

Chapter 5: What We Can Do About It

The cash ceiling isn't invincible, however. In Chapter 5, I discuss the reform solutions that seem most promising. Some of the ideas reformers have floated—like raising salaries for legislators—don't really square with what we know about the factors keeping working-class Americans out of office. But some—like publicly financing elections, collecting early seed money to support new candidates from the working

class, and inviting workers to candidate training programs – seem to have tremendous potential.

* Previously published material: My analysis of one reform program, raising legislative salaries, has also appeared in a co-authored paper that is currently forthcoming at *American Political Science Review*.

* New analyses: Like Chapter 4, this chapter analyzes aggregate-level data on working-class representation in the 50 states in 1979, 1993, 1995, and 2007; time series data on working-class officeholding in a subset of 35 states over the last three decades; and my surveys of state legislative candidates in 2012 and 2014. In this chapter, I use these data to study whether more workers run or win in places with higher legislative salaries, publicly financed elections, and candidate recruitment and training programs that target workers. I also analyze data on US cities from the International City/County Management Association to determine whether workers are more likely to hold office in cities with different electoral rules, e.g., single-member vs. multi-member districts.

Chapter 6: Moving the Needle

In Chapter 6, I discuss why the shortage of politicians from the working class hasn't gotten much attention in the past, and I describe what reformers and concerned citizens can do to make progress on the political representation of the working class and the larger phenomenon of political inequality.

* Previously published material: None.

* New analyses: This chapter will include a rough comparison of the estimated costs and benefits of programs to increase working-class representation and the costs and benefits of other common reform proposals, including lobbying reform, campaign finance reform, and voter mobilization.

Appendix

The Appendix lists several methodological details that might interest specialists but that general interest readers might find distracting, including the details of my original surveys, the full wording of every survey item analyzed in the book, and the complete results of every regression model referenced in the book (which I summarize with easy-to-understand figures in the body of the manuscript).

* Previously published material: None.

Author Information

I am an Assistant Professor of Public Policy at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. I grew up in Kansas, and in high school and college I worked as a

cashier, bus boy, dish washer, receptionist, construction worker, and truck loader. In 2006, I earned a BA in political science at the University of Tulsa, in 2008 I earned an MA in Politics at Princeton University, and in 2011 I finished my PhD in Politics and Social Policy at Princeton. I have published extensively on the shortage of politicians from the working class. My first book (*White-Collar Government: The Hidden Role of Class in Economic Policy Making*) was published by University of Chicago Press in 2013 and won four APSA awards (the Harold D. Laswell Award, the Carl Albert Award, the Alan Rosenthal Prize, and the Gladys M. Kammerer Award). I have also published papers on this topic in *American Journal of Political Science*, *Journal of Politics*, *American Political Science Review*, *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, and *Politics, Groups, and Identities*. My work has been covered in a wide range of media outlets, including the *New York Times*, CNN, NPR, Vox, MSNBC, Huffington Post, the Monkey Cage, Talking Points Memo, and the *Washington Post*.

Market

The Cash Ceiling is written for any informed person who cares about political equality. However, it is first and foremost a book for scholars of US politics: it uses data and methods that political scientists will find persuasive, and it directly engages with research on US politics, specifically the literatures on candidate entry, political participation, voter biases, and descriptive representation. The book is intended to speak to major academic debates about representation and political inequality in the United States.

That said, *The Cash Ceiling* is written in a vivid style that attempts to aggressively engage as many students and general interest readers as possible. The book does not assume more than a passing familiarity with statistical analysis, and it does not require any prior contact with political science. When the book uses discipline-specific concepts, measures, and terms, it explains them clearly and succinctly. It presents straightforward figures and saves technical details like regression models and data collection procedures for appendixes. Most importantly, *The Cash Ceiling* is written in a conversational tone, uses carefully-chosen and memorable anecdotes at the start of each section, and includes a brief summary page at the end of each chapter. The book is designed to meet the intellectual standards of advanced scholarship on representation and candidate entry, but it is written in a style that I hope will maximize its appeal among scholars in adjacent fields, students, reformers, and general interest readers.

Among scholars, the book's primary audiences are:

- 1) scholars who study the numerical or descriptive representation of social groups such as women and people of color, a topic that has been gaining visibility recently thanks to renewed interest in the "personal roots" of legislative conduct;

- 2) scholars interested in who runs for office, a broad topic that has always been a central area of inquiry in political science;
- 3) scholars of social class stratification, one of the pillars of sociological inquiry;
- 4) scholars who study the labor movement and the political power of the working class; and
- 5) scholars who study the oversized political influence of affluent Americans, a topic that has emerged in the last decade as one of the most important areas of inquiry in political science and in the social sciences more generally.

Each chapter of *The Cash Ceiling* is written so that it can stand alone. Each chapter includes original data analyses, and each chapter could be assigned in graduate or advanced undergraduate courses on US politics, representation, inequality, or social class stratification.

Outside of academia, the book will be most appealing to practitioners, policy makers, journalists, and citizens who care about labor or working-class politics, political inequality, campaigns and elections, and political reform. The book frequently uses visually appealing tables and figures to communicate key points in a way that is both informative and memorable. The book's conclusion offers many points for discussion and practical consideration, especially for those interested in improving the representation of middle- and working-class Americans.

Competition

The Cash Ceiling is the first book to ask why so few working-class people hold office in the United States. There are no direct competitors, although several books deal with related aspects of the larger issue of political inequality.

There is a growing literature on the factors behind the over-sized influence of affluent Americans in our political process, exemplified by work like *Unequal Democracy* by Larry Bartels (Princeton University Press 2008), *Winner-Take-All Politics* by Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson (Simon & Schuster 2010), *The Unheavenly Chorus* by Kay Lehman Schlozman, Sidney Verba, and Henry E. Brady (Princeton University Press 2012), and *Affluence and Influence* by Martin Gilens (Princeton University Press 2012). Books like these are related—in that they deal with inequalities in political influence—but they focus on the inputs of the political process, inequalities in who pressures government, either through routine forms of political participation or through larger organizational efforts. *The Cash Ceiling* focuses on inequalities in who decides what to do with those inputs, inequalities in who *runs* government. Whether our political process heeds one voice or another depends not just on who's doing the talking or how loud they are—it also depends on who's doing the listening.

There is also a subfield of research—much of it published as books—on the numerical or descriptive representation of social groups like women (e.g., *The Difference Women Make* by Michele Swers [University of Chicago Press 2002]; *It Takes a Candidate* by Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox [Cambridge University Press 2005]) and racial minorities (e.g., *Race, Redistricting, and Representation* by David Canon [University of Chicago Press 1999]). *The Cash Ceiling* draws on insights from many of these books, but it focuses on a group that past work in this vein has not studied, the working class.

Finally, there is an older literature under the heading of *power elite theory* that is related, although most of the books on this topic that are still in print are updated classics, not recent works. Moreover, these books describe the social class makeup of government, but do not attempt to determine why it is the way it is. The most prominent examples include *The Power Elite* by C. Wright Mills (Oxford University Press 2000 [1956]) and *Who Rules America?* by G. William Domhoff (McGraw-Hill 2009 [1967]).

I hope that *The Cash Ceiling* will do for research on the social class makeup of our political institutions what books like *It Takes a Candidate* did for the study of women in office, namely, provide a comprehensive framework for understanding why the group in question is so badly underrepresented—and inspire a new wave of research on the factors keeping workers out of office.

Additional Information and Specs

I expect the manuscript to be approximately 100,000 words (including all front and back matter, tables and figures, footnotes, appendixes, and the bibliography). I plan to include approximately 40 figures in the text and approximately 15 tables in the appendix. The book has not been submitted to any other presses, although I have discussed the project with the editor at the University of Chicago Press who published my first book, *White-Collar Government*. I plan to complete the manuscript by this July and have it ready for submission by the start of the 2016-2017 academic year.

Other Materials

Please find attached my CV, working drafts of Chapters 1 and 2, and PDF copies of the three related article-length manuscripts referenced in the Chapter Outline above:

- Nicholas Carnes and Eric Hansen. Forthcoming. “Does Paying Politicians More Promote Economic Diversity in Legislatures?” *American Political Science Review*.
- Nicholas Carnes and Noam Lupu. Forthcoming. “Do Voters Dislike Working-class Candidates? Voter Biases and the Descriptive Underrepresentation of the Working Class.” *American Political Science Review*.
- Nicholas Carnes. Working Paper. “Keeping Workers Off the Ballot: Gatekeeper Biases and the Descriptive Representation of the Working Class.”