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1

Why Don't Workers Govern?

The professional politician must also be economically 'dispensable,' that is, his income must not depend upon the fact that he constantly and personally places his ability and thinking entirely, or at least by far predominantly, in the service of economic acquisition. . . . [I]t is easier for the lawyer to be dispensable; and therefore the lawyer has played an incomparably greater, and often even a dominant, role as a professional politician.

—MAX WEBER, "POLITICS AS A VOCATION"¹

BETWEEN 1889 AND 2003, Brazil had thirty-four presidents: mostly military officers and lawyers, one medical doctor, one economist, one civil engineer, and even a professor of political science. But on January 1, 2003, the country inaugurated its first and only working-class president.

Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva quit school after second grade and worked as a street vendor, shoe shiner, and dry cleaner before training to become a lathe operator. In that job, he joined the metalworkers' union, got elected to its governing board, and eventually became its president. In the late 1970s, he led strikes in defiance of the military dictatorship's prohibition on organized labor action, and in the 1980s he was one of several union leaders who cofounded the Workers' Party. He ran for the national legislature

and won (on his second try), and in the late 1980s and 1990s he ran for president and lost three times. In 2002, as the Workers' Party's popularity continued to grow, Lula ran for president once more on a platform that emphasized minimum wage protections, job growth, and economic equality—and won. And with that, Brazil had its first president from the working class.

Lula's journey to the presidential palace was by no means easy. And it was staggeringly unlikely. Although more than 70 percent of the Brazilian labor force is employed in working-class jobs, between 2004 and 2014, people from those same jobs made up just 17 percent of Brazilian mayors, 4 percent of state lawmakers, 3 percent of national lawmakers, and 0 percent of governors.² Lula made history when he became president, but he had been defying the odds long before that, simply by running for and holding any elected office.

The simple question at the heart of this book is *why*. Why are stories like Lula's so rare? Why is it that people in working-class jobs almost never go on to hold elected office in the world's democracies?

Working-class jobs are fundamental to every society on the planet. Even in the wake of the information revolution and deindustrialization in the twentieth century, in all but a handful of small, affluent countries,³ the labor force today is still mostly made up of what we refer to as working-class jobs: manual labor jobs like construction workers, service industry jobs like restaurant servers, clerical jobs like receptionists, and informal sector jobs like day laborers. Like Brazil, in the average democracy, working-class jobs make up about seven out of every ten occupations; countries like the Bahamas, Greece, and Nigeria all have close to 70 percent working-class labor forces. In poorer countries, the share of working-class jobs is often even higher; in Ghana, Guatemala, and Pakistan, working-class jobs make up close to 90 percent of the labor market. Even in rich democracies, working-class jobs almost always make up at least narrow majorities of the labor force: In France, Switzerland, the UK, and the US, working-class

occupations are 51 to 54 percent of all occupations.⁴ Modern life in every country would truly be unthinkable without the people who pave roads, repair electrical lines, move freight, style hair, work in factories, deliver packages, stock shelves, build houses, repair cars, clean hotel rooms, answer phones, dig trenches, wait tables, clean hospitals, ring up groceries, fill in potholes, and empty garbage.⁵

Although people in working-class jobs make up large majorities of most labor forces, they almost never go on to hold elected office in the political institutions that make the most consequential decisions about economic and social life. In the Bahamas, Greece, and Nigeria, the share of lawmakers in the lower or unitary chamber of the national legislature who had working-class jobs when they were first elected to a political office—the Lulas of these institutions—ranges from 0 to 1 percent. In Ghana, Guatemala, and Pakistan, former workers make up less than 3 percent of the national legislature. In France, Switzerland, the UK, and the US, they make up 1 to 3 percent.⁶ Even the national legislature in Brazil is no exception: When Lula was sworn in as president, almost every member of the Brazilian Congress from his own political party—the Workers' Party that he cofounded—was either a lawyer or an economist.⁷

These countries aren't alone. Every study that has ever analyzed the economic backgrounds of politicians has found that people from less privileged economic strata are sharply numerically underrepresented in elected office relative to their numbers in the population as a whole.⁸ The shortage of workers in office dates back as far in history as the data go; it is often present from the origins of electoral democracies through the present day.⁹

These kinds of inequalities have significant consequences; the near-absence of people from working-class jobs in elected office influences public policy, political representation, and even the legitimacy of democracy in the eyes of the public. When workers hold office in larger numbers, economic policies tend to be more pro-worker, and people—workers and professionals alike—tend to express more trust in their elected institutions. Government by

the privileged is often government *for* the privileged, and that can have serious drawbacks, especially for working people. As the old saying goes, if you're not at the table, you're on the menu.

Even so, scholars don't know what exactly keeps working-class people away from the table, that is, why people from the kinds of jobs that Lula came from so rarely go on to hold elected office in the world's democracies.

The question is simple, but the answer we put forward in this book has radical implications for our understanding of elections, representation, and democratic politics: Electoral democracy has built-in biases that uniquely disadvantage qualified people from the working class. Running for office is personally burdensome in every electoral system, working-class people the world over struggle to shoulder those burdens, and the elites who gatekeep the candidate entry process naturally have incentives to pass over workers. Why do so few working-class people go on to hold office in democracies? Because the very nature of elections keeps workers off the ballot.

Working-Class People Don't Govern

When scholars, journalists, and politicians talk about the "working class," they often mean vastly different things. In campaigns and elections, candidates and pundits often use the phrase casually;¹⁰ some use it to convey something about a person's place in the economy or in society, others use it to refer to someone's speech or dress or other mannerisms, and still others use it to assert that someone is authentic or down-to-earth.¹¹ Academic researchers who use the term typically define it more precisely, but those definitions can still vary widely from study to study. In our research, we define the working class as people who work in manual labor, service industry, clerical, and informal sector jobs. We prefer to call this group "the working class" or "workers" rather than "the lower class" or "the popular class" because we want to highlight how much this group depends on work for their

livelihoods (and because *lower* seems pejorative). For our purposes, what's important about this group is that their position in the economic system is precarious: Their jobs pay less, require less capital or formal education, and offer less security.¹² (For interested readers, the appendix to this chapter explains in more detail why we choose to focus on occupations rather than other indicators like education, income, or family background. Our online appendix also lists exactly how we identify working-class people, candidates, or politicians in every dataset that we analyze in this book.)

Thinkers from Aristotle to Adam Smith to Alexander Hamilton have written about the economic backgrounds of politicians, but what we might call the modern age of research on this topic began in the middle of the twentieth century. In the 1950s, the congressional scholar Donald Matthews began cataloging and analyzing the occupational backgrounds of politicians in the US.¹³ Cross-national research came soon after, and by the 1970s scholars were publishing retrospectives on the literature.¹⁴ From the 1980s through the early 2000s, research on this topic slowed to a trickle, but a second wave of research began in the early 2010s, inspired by the fast-growing scholarship on the numerical representation of social groups¹⁵—what Hanna Pitkin calls descriptive representation¹⁶—and the political implications of rising economic inequality across affluent democracies.¹⁷

To the best of our knowledge, every first- and second-wave study that has ever been conducted has found that working-class people and other economically disadvantaged groups are far less likely to hold office than we might expect based on their numbers in the population as a whole. Matthews found that low-salaried workers, wage earners, servants, and farm laborers made up 75 percent of the US labor force in 1940 but just 7 percent of state legislators from 1925 to 1935, 2 percent of governors from 1930 to 1940, 3 percent of US House members and 0 percent of senators from 1949 to 1951—and just 3 percent of presidents, vice presidents, and cabinet ministers from 1877 to 1934.¹⁸ Robert Putnam's

1967 study of Great Britain, Italy, West Germany, and the United States found that people in manual jobs made up 60 to 65 percent of the labor forces in these countries but less than 3 percent of each country's national legislature.¹⁹ Pippa Norris and Joni Lovenduski found that worker representation in the British Parliament fell from 4 percent of Conservative MPs and 72 percent of Labour MPs in the first decades of the twentieth century to 1 percent of Conservatives and 22 percent of Labour by 1992.²⁰ And in Heinrich Best and Maurizio Cotta's data on eleven European countries dating back to the nineteenth century, people from working-class jobs rarely made up more than 5 percent of lawmakers, never made up more than 35 percent, and either stagnated near 0 percent for most of the twentieth century or rose around midcentury but then declined toward 0 percent by the year 2000.²¹

The scope of research on this topic now extends to a wider range of countries (Argentina, India, Sierra Leone, and Sweden, to name only a few),²² time periods (scholars continue to find that the share of European politicians from less-privileged backgrounds is declining),²³ and institutions (research on national executives in democracies similarly finds that single-digit percentages are drawn from working-class occupations).²⁴ In every country, historical era, and institutional context scholars have studied, they have reached the same basic conclusion: Politicians in democracies are vastly better off than the people they represent.

Second-wave researchers now mostly take this point for granted. As we've noted elsewhere,²⁵ recent work on the economic backgrounds of politicians routinely opens with statements like "the affluent tend to be overrepresented in office,"²⁶ "around the world, legislatures are dominated by politicians who are wealthier and more educated than their constituents,"²⁷ "the underrepresentation of specific groups in political institutions is considered to be a democratic problem of justice, legitimacy, responsiveness and effectiveness,"²⁸ and "[the] political exclusion of the working class calls into question one of the fundamental principles of democracy."²⁹

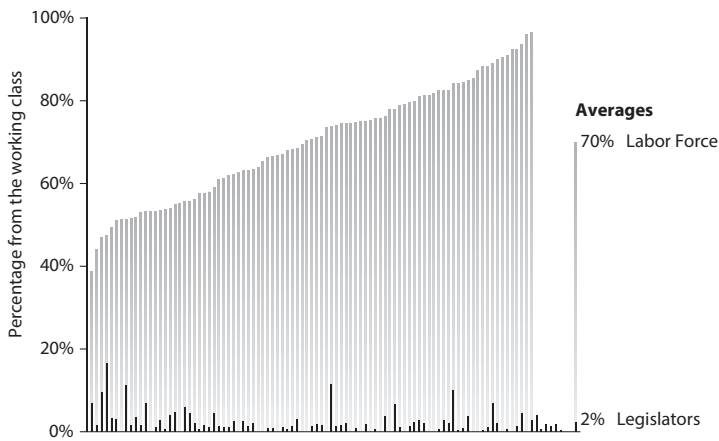


FIGURE 1.1 Working-Class Representation in 97 Democracies

Notes: Working-class representation in the labor force is indicated with lighter bars; black bars illustrate the share of lawmakers in the lower or unitary chamber of the country's national legislature who had working-class jobs when they were first elected to public office. Data come from the 97 democracies for which we could obtain data on legislators, of the 103 democracies with over 300,000 citizens as of 2016. The labeled bars on the far right represent the averages across the 97 countries included in the figure.

Sources: Global Legislators Database (Carnes et al. 2024; 2025), ILO (2020a).

Perhaps the most important caveat is that this research has collectively been a bit scattershot, studying just one country or region at a time, often with an emphasis on the US or Western Europe. Thanks to recent advances in data collection, however, we can now study the representation of working-class people in almost all of the world's democracies all at once. Figure 1.1 plots data from a novel global census of the occupational backgrounds of members of national legislatures in the world's democracies, which we collected over the course of several years in partnership with an international team of collaborators.³⁰ Each pair of bars in Figure 1.1 represents a single country: The black bar is our estimate of the

share of lawmakers in the national legislature who came from working-class jobs and the lighter-colored bar is an estimate of the share of working-class jobs in the country's labor force calculated using data from the International Labor Organization (ILO).

Viewed this way, we can see for the first time that the findings in previous studies truly reflect a global phenomenon: Working-class people are numerically underrepresented in every democracy in the world for which we have data. In the average country (represented with the rightmost pair of bars), working-class jobs make up 70 percent of the labor force, but people from working-class jobs who get into politics go on to hold just 2 percent of the seats in the country's legislature. There are, of course, substantial differences across countries. But as seventy years of research on the economic backgrounds of politicians has strongly hinted, in virtually every democracy in the world, working-class people are vastly underrepresented in elected political offices.³¹

Working-Class Representation Matters

When we talk about the kinds of inequalities in officeholding documented in Figure 1.1, one common rebuttal is that workers don't need to hold office because working-class people are adequately represented—or perhaps even better represented³²—by people who are not from the working class themselves (an occupational group we refer to alternately throughout this book with labels like “white-collar,” “professionals,” and “not working class”).

This elitist perspective has a long intellectual heritage. Aristotle maintained that “the best legislators” were not those from poor or working backgrounds but those “of a middle condition.”³³ Alexander Hamilton went further, arguing that government by the very well-off was desirable and, in fact, inevitable, because, “mechanics and manufacturers will always be inclined with few exceptions to give their votes to merchants in preference to persons of their own professions or trades. . . . They know that the merchant is their natural patron and friend; and they are aware that however great

the confidence they may justly feel in their own good sense, their interests can be more effectually promoted by the merchant than by themselves.”³⁴ Today, scholars often echo the reassuring idea that in competitive political systems, politicians—even if they are overwhelmingly drawn from the most economically well-off—can be counted on to promote the greater good and ensure the economic well-being of the majority of citizens.³⁵ After all, politicians want to get reelected.

This rosy view has not been universally embraced by political observers, of course. To the contrary, many thinkers have issued dire warnings about the undesirable consequences of government by the privileged. In *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith argued vigorously against letting the rich lead government institutions, characterizing the owners of a society’s productive technologies as “an order of men, whose interest is never exactly the same with that of the public, who have generally an interest to deceive and even to oppress the public, and who accordingly have, upon many occasions, both deceived and oppressed it.”³⁶ When Hamilton wrote about the virtues of government by the privileged a decade later, he seemed to be responding to excoriating criticisms from Anti-Federalists who charged that the proposed US Constitution would create institutions that “will consist of the lordly and high minded; of men who will have no congenial feelings with the people, but a perfect indifference for, and contempt of them; [it] will consist of those harpies of power that prey upon the very vitals, that riot on the miseries of the community.”³⁷ Early twentieth-century social theorists from Robert Michels to Vilfredo Pareto expressed similar concerns about the implications of political organizations ruled by an economically privileged elite.³⁸ A great deal of recent research has found that politicians (who tend to be overwhelmingly well-off) don’t seem to share—or even really know—the preferences of the people they represent,³⁹ and political thinkers have made renewed normative arguments for workers holding office.⁴⁰ In sharp contrast to cheerful portraits of benevolent aristocrats and professionals who care about the

working class, there may be good reasons to think that people from different economic positions naturally have different preferences and priorities about government policy and, once in office, behave accordingly and ultimately tilt policy in favor of the industries or social classes they come from.

Which perspective is right? Does it matter that working-class people are so sharply underrepresented in government institutions in the world's democracies? Or do the rich govern for the good of all? The first wave of scholarship on the economic backgrounds of politicians in the 1960s and 1970s offered little in the way of concrete answers.⁴¹ Some studies investigated topics like whether politicians from different occupational backgrounds had different attitudes about what representation should mean or whether they tended to vote differently on a wide range of issues. However, they mostly came up empty-handed, which contributed to the decline of first-wave research on the economic backgrounds of politicians.⁴²

In contrast, second-wave research argued that politicians from different economic backgrounds should tend to have different economic attitudes (as opposed to their attitudes about other issues or about representation generally), and that these differences should be most visible when politicians make choices about economic issues (as opposed to other topics) and when their choices are less closely monitored and constrained by external actors (e.g., when shepherding new legislation through the legislative process, rather than when casting highly scrutinized roll-call votes).

Guided by this improved theoretical framework, second-wave researchers have uncovered clear evidence that the economic backgrounds of politicians can significantly influence public policy, tilting vital economic policies against the preferences and interests of the less privileged social classes who are excluded from elected office. Some scholars have studied politicians' *personal preferences*: Across contexts as diverse as Ireland, Israel, the US, Europe, and Latin America, politicians from working-class jobs tend to be more leftist or progressive on economic issues⁴³ and

those from professional jobs or business backgrounds tend to be more rightist or conservative,⁴⁴ other things equal.⁴⁵ Others have studied how politicians *behave in office*: Leaders in Argentina, Denmark, Norway, the UK, and the US who come from working-class and less-privileged backgrounds tend to support more leftist and pro-worker economic legislation⁴⁶ (especially in activities that are less heavily scrutinized by voters and party leaders) and tend to talk more about redistributive issues and employment.⁴⁷ New research has even begun to consider whether the differences between politicians from different occupations is due to people with different viewpoints choosing different jobs or to jobs themselves influencing the viewpoints of the people who hold them; the latest studies suggest that the work itself—and not mere occupational sorting based on preexisting political views—shapes how future politicians will behave in office.⁴⁸

In our own first study on this topic, we asked whether politicians from the working class think and behave differently in Latin America.⁴⁹ Using surveys of legislators in eighteen Latin American democracies in the late 1990s and early 2000s, we compared how legislators from different occupations answered survey questions about economic policies and government spending. Compared to other legislators, those from the working class were 7 to 10 percentage points more likely to say that the government should be more involved in the economy and were 7 to 10 percentage points more likely to say that social programs should receive more government funding. In Argentina, we then compared these ideological gaps to differences in how legislators actually behave: We found that legislators from the working class were 13 percentage points less likely to sponsor or cosponsor right-leaning economic bills, relative to legislators from white-collar, for-profit jobs. In short, we found that legislators from the working class really do have different preferences and behave differently in office. As Colin Mellors noted in his study of British legislators, “There is a distinction between having sympathy with the working class and having actual working experience.”⁵⁰

Do these differences in how politicians from different classes think and behave affect policymaking? A third category of research has focused on the *policy consequences* associated with the presence or absence of lawmakers from different economic backgrounds. Consistent with research on individual politicians' preferences and choices, this work finds that politicians from less-advantaged economic backgrounds tend to enact more leftist economic policies when they hold office in larger numbers and politicians from more advantaged economic backgrounds tend to enact more rightist economic policies that ultimately result in higher economic inequality.⁵¹ Despina Alexiadou, for instance, recently analyzed the backgrounds of cabinet ministers in eighteen European democracies dating back to 1945; her findings suggest that "moving from a cabinet with no working-class ministers to one with 40 percent working-class ministers, we see an increase in welfare generosity by 20 percent."⁵² The social class backgrounds of politicians seem to tilt policy on social safety net spending, business regulations, tax policies, and other vitally important economic issues.

Some studies have even found that the social class makeup of elected institutions might influence the *legitimacy of government* itself. In Latin America, for instance, Tiffany Barnes and Gregory Saxton find that in countries with fewer working-class officeholders, citizens are less likely to think that the national legislature is doing a good job, that lawmakers can be trusted, or that the national legislature has accomplished what the citizens hoped.⁵³ Likewise, in the UK, Julia Cagé finds that voter turnout declined over time in places where the class backgrounds of political candidates most deviated from the social class makeup of the voters themselves.⁵⁴

As a simple illustration of the kinds of patterns scholars have documented, Figure 1.2 uses our new data on the occupational backgrounds of politicians to chart how countries with more working-class people in their national legislatures (horizontal axis) differ in terms of government redistribution (vertical axis). Our measure of redistribution shows how much government taxes

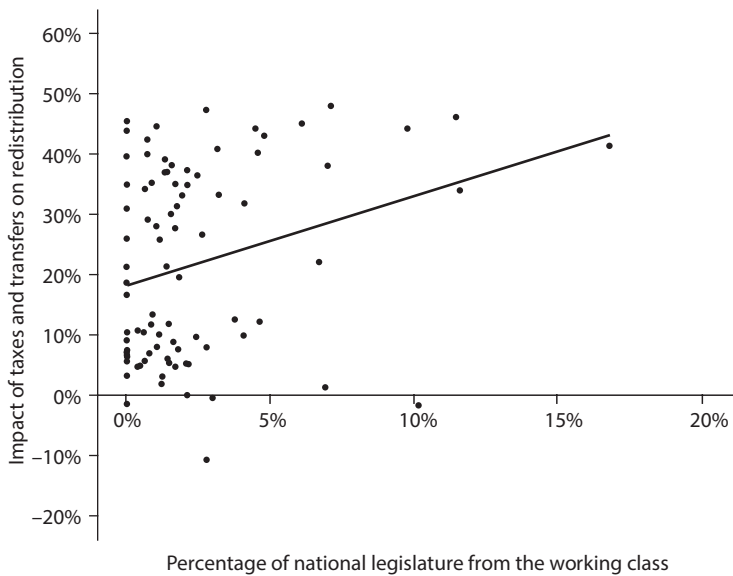


FIGURE 1.2 Working-Class Representation and Redistribution

Notes: The vertical axis measures the effect of government taxes and transfers on inequality as the percentage change in the Gini coefficient between market income and disposable income (higher values indicate more redistribution). The horizontal axis reports the share of lawmakers in the lower or unitary chamber of the national legislature who had working-class jobs when they were first elected to public office. The linear relationship is statistically significant at $p < 0.001$ ($N = 95$) and is substantively similar when we examine absolute rather than relative changes in the Gini coefficient.

Sources: Global Legislators Database (Carnes et al. 2024; 2025), Solt (2019).

and transfers reduce the market-based level of income inequality. So countries that redistribute more income (i.e., those that do more to fight economic inequality) will have higher values on the vertical axis in the figure.

The pattern in Figure 1.2 is only illustrative, of course,⁵⁵ but it is clear enough, and consistent with a growing number of studies: When working-class people hold office in larger numbers, public

policy tends to be more favorable to the least well-off.⁵⁶ And when workers don't hold office, economic policies and outcomes are better for the haves and worse for the have-nots.

Locating the Leaks in the Pipeline

Findings like these raise an obvious follow-up question: If it matters that workers so rarely go on to hold office in electoral democracies, what exactly keeps them out? Scholars still don't have a firm answer. Research has shed more light on what *doesn't* explain the near-absence of working-class people from public office than what does.⁵⁷

Empirical research in political science has mostly focused on the ideas that working-class people are less likely to hold office because they are less qualified, less likely to be preferred by voters, or less interested in holding office. According to these perspectives, workers don't hold office because they aren't good enough, popular enough, or ambitious enough. As we discuss in more detail in chapter 2, none of these hypotheses has found much support in empirical research. There are lots of qualified working-class citizens out there who are interested in running for elected office, and when they run, they tend to be about as popular with voters as other candidates.

A few single-country studies suggest more promising explanations. In the US, there are signs that working-class people are more likely to hold office in places where unions are stronger and the material burdens associated with campaigning are lower.⁵⁸ In the UK, scholars have documented the importance of political parties as recruiters (or gatekeepers) who shape who runs and goes on to hold elected office.⁵⁹

We think the most important clue, however, lies in simple descriptive analyses of the labor force, the candidates who run for office, and the winners of elections. The big leak in the pipeline, as it were, seems to happen at the candidate emergence stage. In the US, for instance, working-class people make up a little over half of

the labor force and at least 40 percent of the people who seem qualified to hold office, but they make up just 5 percent of the candidates for state, county, and local offices. In Brazil, workers make up more than 70 percent of the labor force but just 9 percent of the candidates for national legislature and 4 percent of the candidates for governor.⁶⁰ In both cases, the “screening out” seems to be happening not in elections themselves, but in who shows up on the ballot.

The same seems to be true in many other democracies. Figure 1.3 plots data from the ILO on worker representation in nine countries' labor forces (black bars) alongside data from the Comparative Candidate Surveys (CCS) on the shares of working-class people who ran for (dark grey bars) and won (light grey bars) seats in those countries' national legislatures. (For some countries, the CCS includes more than one election cycle.) The surveys that make up the CCS project are administered to all candidates for national legislature but, of course, candidates are free not to complete them, and there seem to be indications that working-class candidates are more likely to complete their surveys, thereby artificially inflating their numbers in the samples of candidates and winners.⁶¹ But even if we take the estimates in Figure 1.3 at face value—knowing that the shares of working-class people among candidates and winners are probably a bit inflated—it is clear that the most important leak in the pipeline is that working-class people are rarely on the ballot at all.

There may be other leaks, of course. In the data plotted in Figure 1.3, for instance, workers who run appear to lose at slightly higher rates. But the vast majority of the screening out seems to happen at the point when people get on the ballot. If we want to understand why the rich govern, the most promising way to begin our investigation is to ask why so few working-class people run for office in the first place.

The answer that this book puts forward is that working-class people so rarely become candidates because of what we might think of as side-effects of electoral democracy itself, specifically

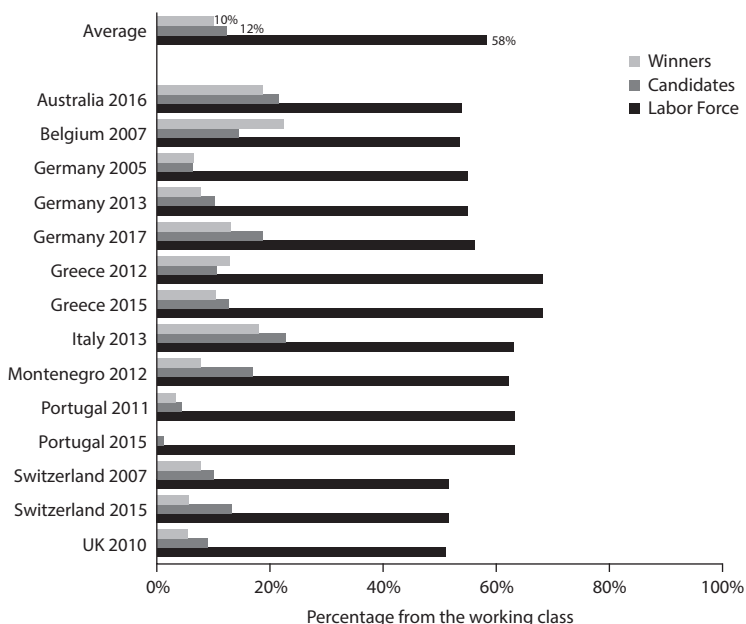


FIGURE 1.3 Worker Representation Among Elected Representatives, Candidates, and the Labor Force

Notes: Bars report the share of working-class people in each group.

Sources: CCS (2016; 2022), ILO (2020a).

two features of elections that we think are nearly universal across democracies.

The first is that running for elected office in any democracy requires a person to give up the most precious resources that exist: time, energy, and stability. No matter how a country structures its elections, standing for office takes people away from other productive or valued activities that they could engage in, and it introduces additional stress and significant uncertainty into a person's plans for the immediate future. As such, social groups that face greater precarity—who have fewer resources, less material security, and less tolerance for taking big risks (who are not economically “dispensable,” as Max Weber would say)—should be at a significant disadvantage in the candidate emergence process.

We believe that the working class is one such group. Running for office is a little like starting a nonprofit organization: In principle, anyone can do it, but it takes a huge amount of time and energy, and an ability to endure stress, uncertainty, and the risk of total failure. As a result, the vast majority of the people who do so are not manual laborers or service industry workers, but rather people who have a less precarious and more secure place in society.⁶² Scholars sometimes conceptualize the decision to run for office as a utility calculation: People run when the expected benefits of running are greater than the expected costs. Our argument is that for working-class people, the expected costs are so large that they dwarf any payoff. It's a bit like asking a person awaiting a heart transplant to compete in a marathon because there's a big cash prize for the winner. The costs are so high and the risks are so grave that the likelihood of winning and the payoff for doing so really don't matter.

These dynamics, in turn, powerfully discourage party officials, interest groups, and other institutional gatekeepers from supporting working-class candidates; this is the second feature of electoral democracies that keeps workers off the ballot. Party control over nominations and elections varies widely across countries, but parties are ubiquitous in democracies, and in every electoral system, key actors like party leaders and interest groups have significant power over identifying, recruiting, training, supporting, endorsing, and putting forward candidates for public office. These gatekeepers have finite resources, and they know that elections are often won and lost by small margins. When they consider candidates, they are well aware that running for office is more difficult for working-class people, and that makes workers unappealing to the gatekeepers who could, in principle, help working-class people get into office.

These two simple processes are nearly universal in electoral democracies; they reinforce one another⁶³ and they create a sort of gravitational pull that can only be overcome by extraordinary circumstances. Scholars are accustomed to thinking about the numerical representation of social groups as something that is fluid or that might even exhibit positive feedback. One school of

thought in the US, for instance, held that if we could just run women candidates in a given district that hadn't seen many before, they would win, and then party leaders and voters and donors would see that women are viable candidates and would support more women running—a self-reinforcing process would take hold.⁶⁴ When it comes to working-class representation, however, there is little hope for this kind of positive feedback. Even if workers run and win and hold office successfully, the basic operation of elections will always exert a gravitational pull that discourages future workers from running and discourages future gatekeepers from supporting them. To put it another way, the main obstacle facing workers isn't a prejudice that may be overcome with time and positive experiences, but a built-in feature of the electoral environment that will always be there to trip up the next generation of workers.

This explanation casts doubt on many of the hunches scholars have put forward over the years to explain why so few workers hold public office. It suggests, for instance, that things like differences in electoral institutions or variations in economic and social conditions won't matter more than marginally for working-class representation. Workers should hold office more often where running for office is less personally burdensome (like in local races) and less often where it is more burdensome (like in national races). Likewise, workers might hold office in slightly larger numbers in places where unions are stronger, where workers' parties hold more seats, where workers take home more income, or where public financing makes fundraising less burdensome. But if running for office is still a personally burdensome experience—and it always is—then differences in economic, social, and political conditions will only matter to a limited extent.

If workers are inherently disadvantaged by the burdensome and precarious nature of running for office, then electing large numbers of workers to the most powerful institutions (like national legislatures) will require extraordinary and unusual alignments of political forces. It will require intense, organized, and durable

relationships between key groups of elites, like when political parties create formal mechanisms for recruiting candidates directly from strong, centralized labor unions. When these kinds of arrangements occur, workers will sometimes hold office in larger numbers at higher levels of office, or within party coalitions in national institutions. But parties and interest groups evolve over time, and when these unusual alliances cease to exist—when they stop targeting and supporting working-class candidates—worker representation will fall back toward zero. The relevant model is not prejudice against a social group fading away after members of that group hold office, but something more like a hot air balloon that goes up when you turn on the flame, but that is always being pulled down by gravity at the same time. With working-class representation, we don't expect to find a tipping point, a critical mass, a positive feedback effect, or any other self-reinforcing process. The obstacles facing workers are built into elections themselves, and overcoming those obstacles requires sustained, organized effort. When that effort slows down or stops—when the flame is turned off—worker representation will drift back down to the ground.

We think this theory helps explain the boom-and-bust cycle of working-class representation in some European democracies: For strategic reasons, political parties formed close alliances with labor organizations that did the work of getting workers on the ballot by helping them overcome the personal burdens that come with running for office. When those alliances broke down, however, working-class representation declined to its natural level, which is close to zero. A hot air balloon can be heated and rise into the sky, but gravity is always there exerting downward force, and once the heat is turned off, the balloon comes to rest back on the ground. Workers face stable obstacles and fragile supports.

This theory also suggests that at least some of the barriers keeping working-class people out of office are fundamentally different from the barriers that give rise to other social inequalities in the makeup of government. This is a point that is often made but is

worth repeating: Marginalized groups and identities are not interchangeable. Although there are often important parallels between the obstacles that uniquely discourage women from holding office and the obstacles that discourage racial and ethnic minorities, for instance, it is never safe to assume that the barriers facing one group are the same as the barriers facing another.⁶⁵ We believe that the barriers facing working-class people are fundamentally different: They are not rooted in the desire of one group to subordinate another that drives misogyny and racial prejudice,⁶⁶ or the discouraging political socialization experiences that women and minorities often face. To the contrary, our explanation is not rooted in time-varying or place-based features of psychology, societies, history, or geography: It is simply a political inevitability that is common to all electoral democracies. Running for office is always a personally burdensome experience, and working-class people are, by definition, less able to take on additional burdens.

Of course, this theory says nothing about how electoral democracies compare to nondemocratic forms of government. We are not claiming that electoral democracy does *more* to exclude working-class people from public office than dictatorships. Quite the opposite: There are good reasons to expect nondemocratic countries to be even more economically exclusionary. Our aim is not to compare democracy to the alternatives, but to understand why even electoral democracies—with their noble aspirations of representative government—are nonetheless governed by the privileged.

Our findings, in turn, raise a significant complication for celebrationist narratives about electoral democracy. In the US, Hamilton anticipated government by the privileged, but described it as a feature, not a bug: Working-class people would not want to run and would not win votes if they did, because they were less qualified and perfectly well-represented by more privileged people. This kind of reasoning allowed supporters of electoral democracy to sidestep the decidedly undemocratic possibility that elections might be the exclusive domain of the well-to-do. If,

however, elections keep the working class out of office by simply excluding them from consideration against their will and the will of voters, it would represent a major defect that would join other recent blows to folk theories of electoral democracy.⁶⁷

If elections are inherently biased against working-class people, moreover, that would imply an ethical responsibility on the part of supporters of democracy to do something about it. We have suggestions.

The Plan for This Book

In chapter 2, we begin by discussing some of the simple theories scholars have put forward to explain worker underrepresentation. Most past research offers *deficit* explanations—arguments that foreground the alleged shortcomings of working-class people, but that so far haven't been corroborated by empirical research. We also discuss and test a variety of simple explanations that we term *country-centered explanations*. These arguments assert that worker underrepresentation is unique to countries with certain features or flaws perceived to drive down worker representation: countries with majoritarian electoral systems as opposed to proportional representation, countries where campaigns are expensive and privately financed, countries where leftist parties are weak, and so on. As the title of chapter 2 suggests, popular deficit arguments and country-centered explanations don't take us very far. When it comes to the question of why so few working-class people hold office, there are just no easy answers.

The real answer, we think, lies not in some problem with working-class people or with specific subsets of countries, but rather with elections themselves. Chapter 3 outlines our argument in more detail. Our explanation has the advantage that it helps us make sense of various trends in worker representation: why workers are underrepresented in every electoral democracy, why workers are better represented in some times and places than in others, and why even the historical success stories of worker representation eventually

fade away. Along the way, we also highlight the central role that elite gatekeeping plays in democratic representation. In chapter 3, we focus on what we know about worker representation, how it fits into our larger theory, and how we can test that theory empirically.

In chapter 4, we test the first piece of our argument, the idea that running for office and getting on a ballot is an especially burdensome experience for working-class people. Using original surveys, we can directly observe how the burdens associated with elections create obstacles that discourage potential candidates from the working class. Moreover, we can see these processes play out in real-world elections: We show that workers run and hold office less often in places where elections are more burdensome.

We then turn our attention to the second part of our argument, the idea that political gatekeepers rarely help working-class people overcome the obstacles they face. Chapter 5 shows how gatekeeper incentives magnify the individual-level obstacles that potential candidates from the working class face. Using surveys of ordinary citizens, we show that qualified workers are far less likely to report that they have been encouraged to run for elected political office by party and interest group leaders. We then draw on interviews with party leaders in Europe and Latin America, who report the same thing: They see workers as facing greater obstacles and they often report that their organizations do not regularly encourage working-class people to run. Objective data seem to confirm both accounts: Using our global data on national lawmakers, we show that political parties of all stripes—left and right, big and small, popular and stigmatized, new and old, well and poorly resourced—rarely send workers to elected office.

Why, then, do workers sometimes hold office in large numbers? In chapter 6, we use historical case studies from Europe and contemporary paired comparisons from Africa and Latin America to examine why some countries occasionally elect larger numbers of workers to office and others don't. These analyses highlight that it takes exceptional alignments of political forces to elect significant numbers of workers: strong labor movements and institutional

partnerships between peak union organizations and powerful political parties that bolster worker representation by helping workers overcome the personal burdens associated with running for office. However, these unusual political configurations never last. Building on historical case studies of two exceptional instances when worker representation spiked during the twentieth century (in the UK and Germany), we also document a strikingly consistent pattern: These exceptional circumstances aren't durable. When workers win office in significant numbers, professionals eventually replace them in subsequent elections, and even parties that start out pro-worker succumb to the basic logic of elections that dictates that parties should seek out professional candidates who will have an easier time running. When they do, worker representation drops back toward zero.

In chapter 7, we return to the important normative questions about representation and democracy raised by our argument, including the pressing question of how to address worker underrepresentation. Chapter 7 argues that there is an ethical imperative for democracies to implement remedies that make officeholding more attainable to working-class people and that there are real-world examples that can serve as a starting point for reform. Once we know that electoral democracy has an unwanted side effect, we have a responsibility to try to mitigate it. We conclude by discussing the most promising ways forward for reformers who hope to do something about the forces that are keeping workers off our ballots and out of office in the world's electoral democracies.

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