

Debate

Class and Representation in Latin America

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Mexico's 2012 presidential election was fought between two affluent career politicians and a millionaire businesswoman. The 2013 race in Chile pitted an economist against a physician. And the top candidates in last year's presidential election in Brazil were both millionaire economists.

The pattern is clear: Latin American democracies – like democracies all over the world – are disproportionately run by the rich. Although *working-class* jobs (informal workers, manual labor, and service industry jobs) make up the vast majority of the labor force in every Latin American country, only a tiny percentage of Latin American lawmakers come from those kinds of jobs. Like most places, Latin America is run by white-collar governments.

Many journalists, pundits, and political observers take this aspect of the governing environment for granted in Latin America and elsewhere. (In 2013, commentators in Chile buzzed about having two female frontrunners in the presidential race. But they failed to note that both came from affluent backgrounds.) Perhaps they are so accustomed to well-off politicians that they simply see them as a natural feature of the political landscape. Or perhaps they believe that it does not matter whether politicians are drawn from one class or another.

In the 1970s, scholars of comparative politics reached exactly that conclusion. After a handful of studies (which, in hindsight, probably had serious methodological problems) found that policymakers from different classes behave about the same in office, the eminent political scientist Robert Putnam concluded that “the assumption of a correlation between attitude and social origin lies behind most studies of the social backgrounds of elites, . . . most of the available evidence tends to disconfirm this assumption” (R. Putnam, unpublished manuscript: 93). A decade later, a sweeping review of the evidence available in the mid-1980s concluded that the existing data were “scattered and inconclusive” and “certainly [did] not add up to a finding that the social . . . [or] economic . . . biases of legislative recruitment result in a . . . policy bias of legislative institutions” (Matthews 1985: 25). In the mid-1990s, another review of the research reached the same conclusion: scholars had “not clearly established that the social background of politicians has a significant influence on their attitudes, values and behavior” (Norris and Lovenduski 1995: 12). Ever since, the idea that a legislator's class does not matter has been the *de facto* conventional wisdom in the scholarly community.

This conventional wisdom has helped fuel indifference about the overwhelmingly unequal social class makeup of the world's political institutions. But new evidence suggests that the scholarly consensus may be wrong (Carnes 2013, and his contribution to this

debate). A fresh look at data on Latin American democracies suggests that legislators from different classes bring very different economic perspectives to public office, and as a result, they often make different kinds of choices about economic policy (Carnes and Lupu 2015). Government by the rich is not an irrelevant quirk of the political landscape. Latin America's plutocracy has real consequences for who wins and who loses in the region's politics.

Government by the privileged in Latin America

Like most advanced and developing countries (including the U.S.), the majority of the labor force in Latin American countries is working class. The lighter bars in Figure 1 plot data from the International Labour Organization (ILO) on the percentage of citizens in 18 Latin American countries working in what we might think of as blue-collar jobs in the early 2000s. In less developed countries like Bolivia and Honduras, the working class makes up close to 90% of the economy. Even in the more developed countries in the region, like Argentina, more than two out of every three citizens have working-class jobs. On average, roughly 80% of Latin American citizens are workers.¹

In sharp contrast, people from the working class make up just 10% of the average Latin American legislature. As the darker bars of Figure 1 illustrate, in all of the 18 major democracies in the region, there is at least a 60-point gap between the percentage of citizens employed in working-class jobs and the percentage of legislators drawn from the working class. Workers are the backbone of Latin American economies, but in democratic politics throughout the region, they rarely have a seat at the table. Even if the descriptive underrepresentation of workers has no effects on policy outcomes, it may be normatively problematic.² Given how weak labor unions are across the region, Latin American democracies are precisely the kinds of contexts in which Mansbridge's (this debate) normative case for descriptive representation applies.

Does class matter?

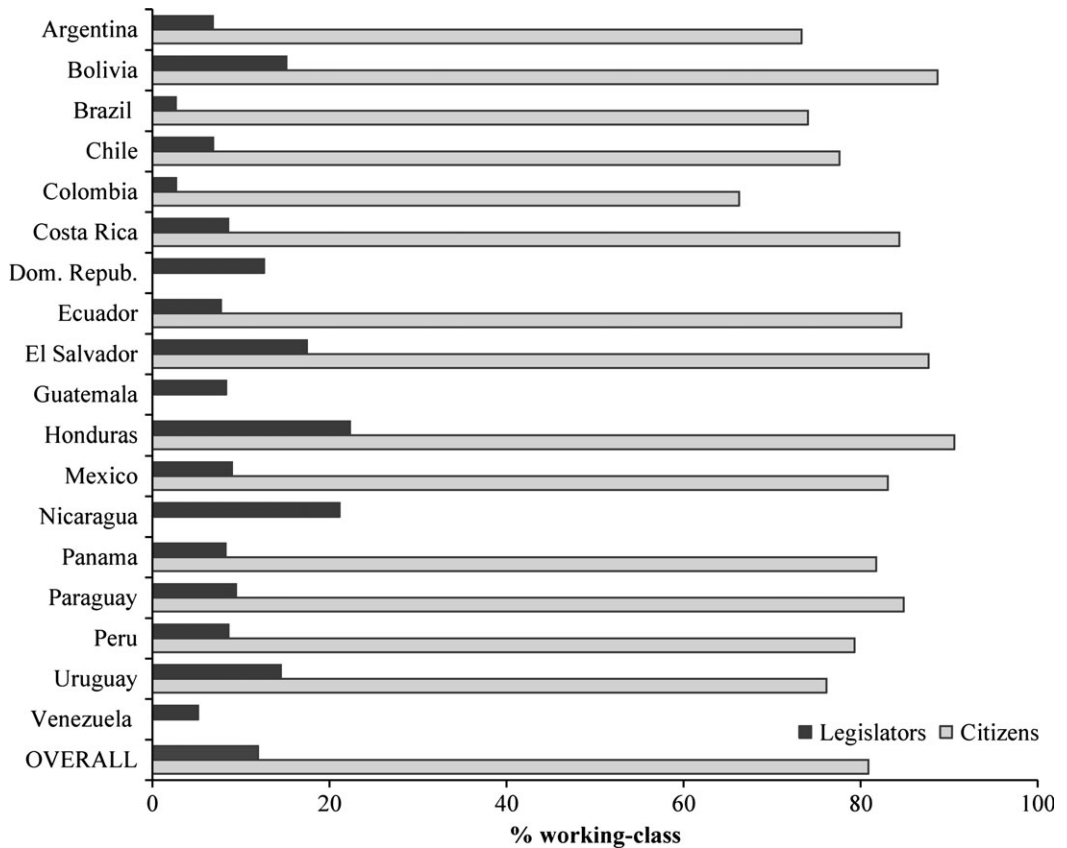
Of course, democratic governments are supposed to ensure that politicians serve their constituents, not themselves. And in many Latin American countries, political parties form tight coalitions and vote in lock step. In terms of policy outcomes, does it matter what class a popularly elected leader comes from? After all, elected officials presumably have incentives to do what is best for the public and toe the party line, regardless of their personal stakes in the issues of the day.

Although parties and constituents do a great deal to keep democratically elected politicians in line, politicians still have a lot of leeway. Most of the work in any legislature goes on before legislation is brought to a vote, in behind-the-scenes maneuvers that receive little attention from journalists and citizens. Parties police these less visible stages of the legislative process far less aggressively. Even parties that exercise strong control over how their members vote often give them the freedom to introduce bills that they care about and to set the legislative agenda to problems that concern them. In these instances,

¹ Carnes and Lupu (2015) discuss at length why occupation is a better measure of class than many alternatives.

² As one reviewer suggested, it may also weaken public confidence in representative institutions if they are seen as illegitimate or biased.

Figure 1: Class in Latin America



Source: Carnes and Lupu 2015.

legislators often have some discretion to base their choices on their own experiences, views, and personal preferences.

And those preferences often depend on where legislators come from. In recent years, scholars have begun to appreciate just how much discretion legislators have – and how much their personal backgrounds matter. In India, studies find that policy outcomes differ depending on the proportion of lawmakers who are women or who are from lower castes (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004; Pande 2003). In the U.S. and Western Europe, female legislators behave differently than male legislators (Bratton and Ray 2002; Mansbridge 1999). In Africa, lawmakers from certain ethnic backgrounds improve their ethnic group's wellbeing (Franck and Rainer 2012). And in Latin America, female legislators hold different political attitudes and initiate different legislation than their male counterparts. When scholars measure legislators' personal characteristics and choices carefully, they often find that political institutions with different social compositions produce different kinds of policies.

Unfortunately, early studies of class and legislative conduct – the research that led Putnam and others to write off gaping inequalities in the social class makeup of the world's governments – did not measure legislators' characteristics *or* choices carefully.

Although most social class analysts regard *occupation* as the ideal measure of a person's place in a society's economic and status structure (Hout et al. 1995; Manza and Brooks 2008; Weeden and Grusky 2005), research on legislators' class backgrounds has focused largely on educational attainment and childhood socialization. Although class divisions in public opinion tend to be most pronounced on *economic issues* – the issues that affect different classes differently – studies of legislators' class backgrounds have typically focused on other topics. And whereas legislative scholars recognize that lawmakers have little personal discretion when casting their votes and that most of the important decisions about which problems get on the agenda are made long before the final passage vote (Burden 2007; Hall 1996; Kingdon 2011), most research on class and legislative conduct has focused on roll-call voting. As a result, scholars did not really reject the idea that a legislator's class background might matter – they never really gave the idea a fair hearing.

And a fair hearing leads to a strikingly different verdict. In representative surveys of legislators all across Latin America, those from the working class consistently express more progressive views on economic issues. Likewise, legislators from white-collar jobs – especially those from more privileged positions in the private sector – tend to bring more conservative views to office.

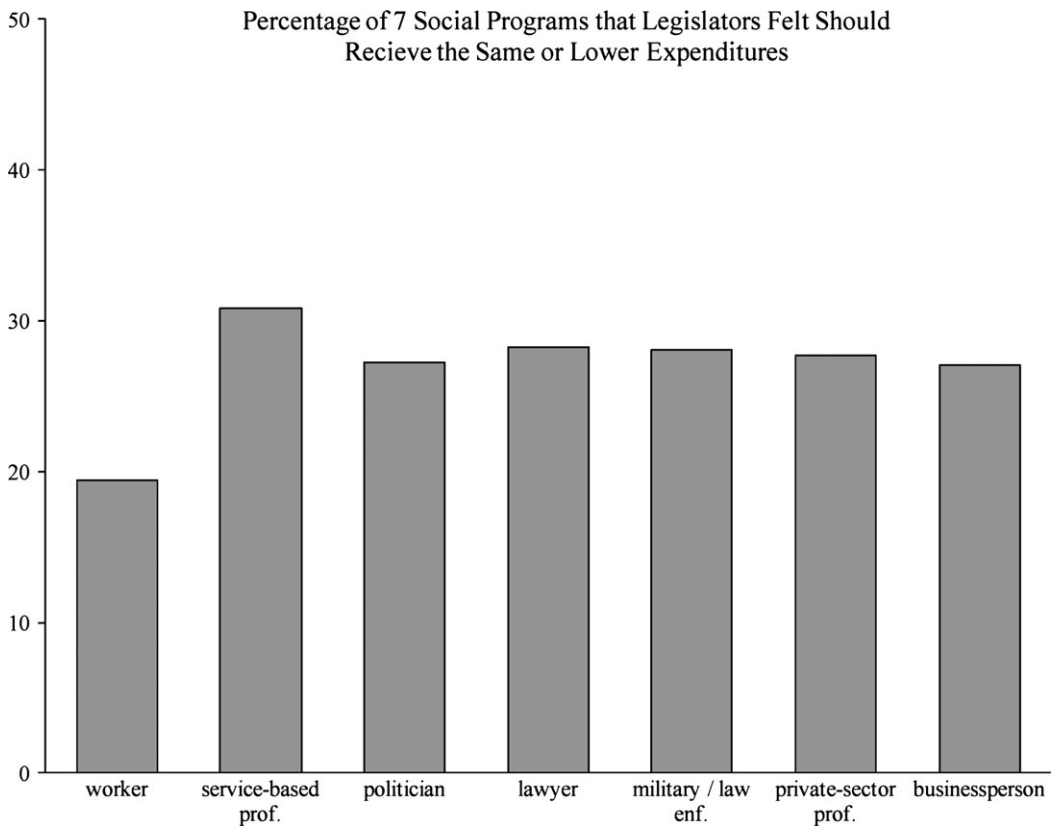
Figure 2 plots survey responses from over 1'500 legislators in the 18 major Latin American democracies. The survey – conducted by the University of Salamanca in the early 2000s – asked a series of simple but probing questions about lawmakers' personal views on ten economic programs: price controls, free primary education, free secondary education, free university education, public housing, guaranteed employment, social security, environmental regulations, unemployment insurance, and basic needs provisions.

The social class divisions in lawmakers' responses are crystal clear. Figure 2 plots the percentage of the seven social spending programs that legislators felt should receive the same or lower spending (dividing legislators by occupation, as in Figure 1). Legislators who scored higher on this measure personally favored lower government intervention in the economy (more rightist policies), and legislators who scored lower favored more economic intervention (more leftist). The basic social class divisions in Latin American legislators' attitudes are easy to see. Like ordinary citizens, lawmakers from various white-collar professions tend to have more rightist views. Lawmakers from the working class, on the other hand, tend to bring a more leftist perspective to the legislative process. With appropriate measures, “the assumption of a correlation between attitude and social origin” that Putnam dismissed actually appears quite sound.

Of course, legislators face a wide range of external pressures that mute the influence of their own views: parties, constituents, interest groups, social movements, and so on. In many countries, the differences of opinion documented in Figure 2 are dampened when legislators vote on bills (see Lloren et al., this debate), the stage of the legislative process where parties and other actors wield the most influence.

But behind the scenes, legislators from different classes exhibit distinctly different priorities. Figure 3 illustrates this point with data from Argentina in the early 2000s, when Argentine parties were among the most disciplined in Latin America. The first set of bars graphs the differences in the *attitudes* about government spending Argentine legislators reported on the survey in Figure 2. The second set of bars graphs the percentage of the economic *bills they actually sponsored* (a common measure of agenda-setting activity) that would increase or decrease spending on the same set of economic programs. And the third set of bars plots a standard composite measure of *how Argentine legislators voted* on economic issues. In all three sets of bars, we have divided legislators into profit-oriented

Figure 2: Class and Economic Attitudes in Latin American Legislatures



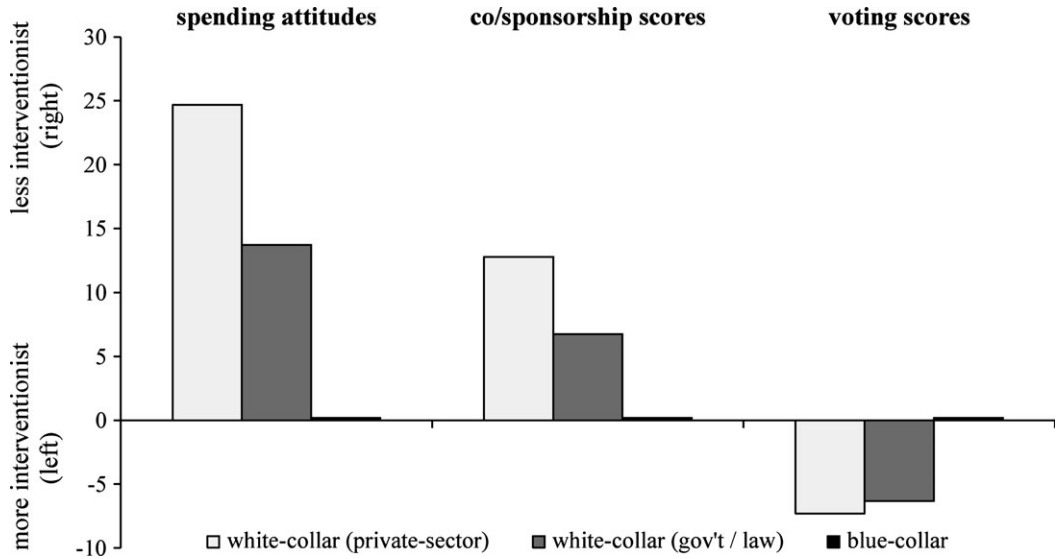
Source: Carnes and Lupu 2015.

white-collar jobs (business owners and technical professionals), other white-collar jobs (lawyers, career politicians, military/law enforcement, and service-based professionals), and blue-collar jobs (manual laborers and service industry workers). And in all three, we account for the legislator's party affiliation.

Like other Latin American lawmakers, Argentine legislators from different classes tend to see economic issues differently. When they cast their ballots they tend not to differ all that much, presumably because parties and other actors are keeping them on a short leash. Yet when fewer people are watching, the differences in their economic priorities are plainly apparent: legislators from the working class tend to introduce substantially more leftist economic bills.

In a typical legislative session, the shortage of Argentine legislators from the working class translates into roughly 50 fewer leftist bills being introduced. It is impossible to know exactly how these missing bills might have affected economic policies, but ideas usually have narrow windows of opportunity. Because there are so many white-collar lawmakers, there are more people ready to act when the time is right for the rightist policies that more affluent citizens tend to prefer and fewer to advocate leftist policy when conditions are right. The voices of workers are being silenced long before legislators cast their votes. Contrary to decades of scholarly thought, Latin America's white-collar government skews economic policy.

Figure 3: Estimated Class-based Differences in How Argentine Legislators Think, Advocate, and Vote on Economic Issues



Sources: Carnes and Lupu 2015.

Notes: Bars represent estimated differences from regressions relating the variable in question to occupational indicators (blue-collar was the omitted category) and party indicators. *Spending attitudes* are a measure of the percentage of seven government programs each legislator personally felt should receive the same or less funding. *Co/sponsorship scores* measure the percentage of economic bills each legislator sponsored or cosponsored that were centrist or rightist. *Voting scores* are ideal points based on each legislator’s roll-call votes (rescaled here to range between 0 and 100).

Variation across countries

In most countries, politicians are drawn disproportionately from the top strata of society. Citizens from the working class, on the other hand, are vastly underrepresented: people from the informal sector, manual labor, and service industry jobs almost never go on to hold office. These imbalances in the makeup of political institutions have sizable effects on economic policy. Legislators from different classes think, vote, and advocate differently. Social spending programs are stingier, business regulations are flimsier, tax policies are more regressive, and protections for workers are weaker than they would be if legislatures were not run by the affluent.

Still, those general trends mask substantial variation across countries. Figure 1 shows that whereas less than 3% of Brazilian and Colombian legislators come from working-class backgrounds, over a fifth of Honduran and Nicaraguan legislators do. Some of that variation no doubt stems from differences in levels of wealth across these countries. There are simply much larger segments of the electorates in the poorer Central American states who are workers. But wealth hardly explains all of the variation: workers are significantly more underrepresented in Chile than in Colombia even though Chile’s GDP per capita is double Colombia’s.

Workers may also be more underrepresented in countries with weaker links between unions or social movements and political parties. Indeed, the most representative

legislatures in the region in terms of class are in countries with historically stronger labor-based parties: Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay. Even so, Mexico's legislature is among the least representative despite a relatively strong labor movement with party ties, and Colombia's is among the most representative despite very weak unions and elitist parties.

What does seem to correlate strongly with worker underrepresentation is ethnic diversity. Latin American countries with large indigenous groups – Bolivia, Ecuador, and Mexico – are also among those whose legislatures most underrepresent the working class. Since indigenous populations in the region also tend to concentrate among lower-skilled occupations, it is perhaps unsurprising that political systems that largely exclude the former end up also underrepresenting the latter. One would expect, then, that recent efforts in these countries to bring indigenous groups and ethnic minorities into the national legislature through quotas may have also improved the representation of the working class.

The fact is, though, that we still know little about why some countries' elected leaders better reflect the distribution of social classes in the electorate than others. Scholars have simply not been asking these kinds of questions because, for decades, we mistakenly believed that the underrepresentation of the working class was unimportant.

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