

The Economic Backgrounds of Politicians

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Abstract: Research on the economic backgrounds of politicians is once again flourishing in political science. In this article, we describe the economic characteristics that scholars have recently studied and the common threads that have emerged in modern work on this topic. This growing literature is largely united by a shared concern about the unequal economic makeup of institutions: recent work generally agrees that politicians tend to be vastly better off than citizens on every economic measure, and that politicians from different economic backgrounds tend to think and behave differently in office. However, the literature is far from a consensus answer to the questions why politicians are so economically advantaged. Looking ahead, there are numerous opportunities for future work to address this gap; to extend the literature to new countries, institutions, and time periods; and to better understand how economic backgrounds intersect with race, gender, and other social characteristics.

Keywords: political elites, class, education, wealth, representation

Research on the economic backgrounds of politicians is once again flourishing in political science. Scholars and political observers have always been interested in the economic strata politicians come from, that is, the wealth, occupational history, education, family of origin, and so on of the world's political leaders. But modern social scientific research on this topic has tended to ebb and flow over the last few decades. A first wave of research began in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when scholars produced a burst of descriptive studies on the background characteristics of politicians (e.g., Domhoff 1967, Gruber 1971, Lipset & Solari 1967, Matthews 1954, Verner 1974, Von der Mehden 1969). By the 1980s, however, some of the same scholars were lamenting that the topic had fallen by the wayside in the study of political institutions (Matthews 1985). Research on the economic backgrounds of politicians still continued, albeit at a much slower pace, especially in places like the UK where seismic shifts in the economic makeup of national legislatures were occurring (e.g., Norris and Lovenduski 1995). In the early 2010s, a new wave of research began—inspired by the larger literatures on economic inequality and political representation—that focused on the causes and consequences of inequalities in the economic makeup of government (e.g., Carnes 2012), and by the mid-2010s, major political science conferences were regularly holding entire panels devoted to the topic. Today, scholarship on the economic backgrounds of politicians is once again an active area of inquiry in mainstream political science.

In this article, we describe the economic characteristics that political scientists have recently examined and the common threads that have emerged in this growing literature. Although many recent studies have focused on just one economic characteristic at a time, the literature has collectively analyzed a broad range of economic characteristics, and scholars examining different economic traits have often reached similar conclusions. Scholars seem to be

converging on a coherent *politics of economic origin*. In this paper, we outline the common findings and arguments in the literature on the consequences of politicians' economic backgrounds and the causes of the economic makeup of government, and the frontiers for new research on this topic.

We focus in particular on the thread that most tightly binds the modern literature, namely, concerns about inequalities in the economic makeup of political institutions. Research on the economic backgrounds of politicians is once again in the mainstream—and today's research is often driven by a goal of understanding why governments around the world are so often run by the privileged.

1. Measuring Economic Backgrounds

When researchers study the economic backgrounds of politicians, which economic characteristics do they focus on, and how do they measure them? Scholars' approaches vary widely, especially compared to research on mass political behavior, which often uses economic measures that are easy to ask on surveys or that are readily available in off-the-shelf datasets, like education or household income. In contrast, research on the economic backgrounds of politicians includes work on income and education, but also includes studies that compare more and less wealthy politicians, politicians who were school teachers and those who were attorneys, and many other economic traits.

The most common economic characteristics that scholars analyze are occupation, education, wealth, income, and family of origin (usually the occupation or wealth of a person's primary caregivers during childhood). Each of these traits can be measured many ways, of course. Education can be defined as years of schooling (Besley et al. 2011), attaining specific

credentials like a bachelor's degree (Carnes & Lupu 2016b), the type of school one attends (Norris & Lovenduski 1993), or even holding a specific type of degree like a law degree (Bonica 2020). Income can be counted at the individual or household level. Wealth can be measured as financial assets (Stacy 2020), net worth (Carnes 2013), ownership of material resources, or even land ownership (Rossi 2014). Occupation is perhaps the most complex; in the larger literatures on stratification and social class, there are scores of systems for classifying occupations (and centuries-long debates about which is preferable). In the literature on the economic backgrounds of politicians, scholars have often divided politicians into those from particular industries, like agriculture or financial services (Makse 2022), or those from distinct types of jobs, like business executives (Kirkland 2021) or workers (O'Grady 2019).

The variety of economic measures that scholars have studied in this literature partly reflects the simple fact that there is no one right way to measure the economic backgrounds of politicians. On the contrary, the right measure depends on the theory being tested. If scholars believe that schooling confers skills that politicians might use in their efforts to pass legislation or manage government bureaucracy, then it makes sense to compare politicians with different educational backgrounds (e.g., Besley et al. 2011; Carnes & Lupu 2016b; Erikson & Josefsson 2019; Volden et al. 2020). If researchers hypothesize that politicians with different levels of wealth might have different personal motivations when they vote on legislation or might differ in how well they attract campaign donations, then wealth is obviously the right measure (e.g., Eggers & Klačnjaja 2021, Stacy 2020). And if political scientists suspect that politicians from different social classes think and behave differently in office, then it makes sense to compare politicians from different prior occupations (e.g., Carnes 2013, 2018; Carnes & Lupu 2015, 2012; O'Grady 2019).

Regardless of which economic measure scholars are interested in, there are common topics that cut across research on the economic backgrounds of politicians. Scholarship under this umbrella tends to focus on (1) the numerical or *descriptive representation* of people from different economic backgrounds in elected office, whether in a snapshot of a particular moment in time, changes over time, or differences across places; (2) the *consequences* of politicians' economic backgrounds for the values, preferences, and behaviors of individual politicians or for policy outcomes at the level of political institutions; and/or (3) the *causes* of the economic makeup of government, that is, the factors that influence the likelihood that people from different economic backgrounds go on to hold office.

Much of the modern research on these topics, moreover, is united by a common interest in the politics of inequality.

2. Descriptive Inequality as Motivation

Most recent studies of the economic backgrounds of politicians have been motivated by a shared normative concern about the fact that politicians tend to be vastly better off than ordinary citizens. To be sure, the first wave of political science research on this topic often noticed and commented on these kinds of inequalities. But early research more often focused on simply establishing that such inequalities existed, or on painting a broader picture of the many factors that might influence politicians. Matthews (1954), for instance, framed his groundbreaking work on the economic backgrounds of politicians as a general analysis of elite decision-making. “The basic premise of this study,” he wrote, “is that the social and psychological characteristics of the individual officials acting within a political institutional framework must be considered before an

adequate understanding of politics and government is possible” (p. 2). In first-wave research, the goal was often simply to understand who politicians were.

Beginning in the 2000s, research on the economic backgrounds of politicians began to reflect a new motivation: understanding the inequalities that first-wave research revealed. This development was undoubtedly influenced by a larger resurgence of interest in economic inequality in political science (e.g., Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy 2004) and by the rich and growing literatures on the descriptive under-representation of social groups like women and people of color. Against this backdrop, research on the economic backgrounds of politicians began to foreground representational inequality as its point of departure. Today, studies in this literature regularly begin with motivations like, “the affluent tend to be overrepresented in office” (Hemingway 2022, p. 84); “around the world, legislatures are dominated by politicians who are wealthier and more educated than their constituents” (Warburton et al. 2021, p. 1253); “the underrepresentation of specific groups in political institutions is considered to be a democratic problem of justice, legitimacy, responsiveness and effectiveness” (Wauters 2012, p. 225); and “[the] political exclusion of the working class calls into question one of the fundamental principles of democracy” (Barnes & Saxton 2019, p. 910).

These kinds of descriptive inequalities are indeed striking, and remarkably consistent. Whether scholars focus on education (Osei 2021), wealth (Verniers & Jaffrelot 2020), occupation (Best & Cotta 2000, Carnes & Lupu 2015), income (Dal Bó et al. 2017), or family background (Thompson et al. 2019), across countries as diverse as Argentina, India, Sierra Leone, Sweden, and the US—to name just a few—the same pattern emerges: politicians come disproportionately from the most advantaged segments of society. In some countries, particularly in Western Europe, researchers also find that the number of politicians from less-privileged

economic backgrounds has declined over recent decades (Evans & Tilley 2017, Heath 2016, Lamprinakou et al. 2017, Pilotti 2015, Wauters 2012). To our knowledge, every study ever published in this literature—every country, every time period, every institutional context, every measure of economic status—has uncovered the same basic descriptive inequality: politicians everywhere are significantly better off than the people they govern.

As a simple illustration, Figure 1 analyzes new data on OECD countries (Carnes et al. 2021). In the figure, we plot the percentage of lawmakers in each country’s lower chamber or unicameral national legislature who were primarily employed in working-class occupations—the economic measure we have studied most extensively in our own research—when they were first elected to public office (black bars) and the percentage of the country’s labor force employed in working-class jobs (grey bars). We define working-class jobs as manual-labor, service industry, clerical, informal sector, or labor union jobs. (Carnes & Lupu 2022c describes our coding and analysis in more detail.) Viewed this way, it is easy to see that working-class citizens are consistently numerically underrepresented by vast margins. The typical labor force in the OECD is made up of between 56 and 58 percent working-class jobs, but the typical national legislature is made up of just 3 to 5 percent legislators who had working-class jobs when they got into politics.

[Figure 1 here]

Of course, the literature on the economic backgrounds of politicians is not unanimous in its motivations. As with first-wave research, some modern studies analyze the economic backgrounds of politicians in order to understand other political phenomena, like why public policy differs from place to place, without necessarily foregrounding concerns about representational inequality (e.g., Han & Han 2020). Some studies even conceptualize inequalities

in officeholding not as problems or puzzles, but as desirable outcomes; the most notable example is probably the research on politicians' educational backgrounds, which often starts from the assumption that formal education is a marker of a politician's competence or quality (an assumption that we think is flimsier than many realize; see Carnes & Lupu 2016b, Curto-Grau & Gallego 2021). On balance, however, the bulk of the contemporary research on politicians' economic backgrounds starts from a position of concern about the fact that politicians are so much better off than the people they represent.

From there, scholars typically go on to ask one of two questions: what do these inequalities mean for policymaking, and why do they exist in the first place?

3. The Consequences of Politicians' Economic Backgrounds

If concerns about representational inequality make up one common thread in the literature on politicians' economic origins, a second is the consistent finding that representational inequality matters. Politicians from different economic backgrounds tend to think differently in ways that mirror differences in the general public, and when they have some leeway in their choices in office, they seem to behave differently. This finding cuts across economic measures, countries, and institutional contexts. In recent years, it has become something of a conventional wisdom that politicians from different economic backgrounds tend to bring different perspectives to office and, at least some of the time, tend to act on them.

This conclusion is probably the sharpest point of disagreement between first-wave scholarship and modern research. The first wave of literature on this topic began in the 1950s, but it cooled off considerably in the decades that followed, in part because scholars were skeptical that the economic backgrounds of politicians really mattered (e.g., Edinger & Searing

1967, Searing 1969). In the 1970s, Putnam (1976) concluded that “most of the available evidence tends to disconfirm” the “assumption of a correlation between attitude and social origin [that] lies behind most studies of the social backgrounds of elites” (p. 93); in the 1980s, Matthews (1985) argued that the available evidence was “scattered and inconclusive” and “certainly [did] not add up to a finding that the . . . economic . . . biases of legislative recruitment result in a . . . policy bias of legislative institutions” (p. 25); and in the 1990s, Norris and Lovenduski (1995) noted that research still had “not clearly established that the social background of politicians has a significant influence on their attitudes, values, and behaviour” (p. 12).

Why did first-wave and modern scholars arrive at such different conclusions? Part of the answer is simply that the first wave of research on politicians’ economic backgrounds did not actually include much work on the consequences of those backgrounds (Carnes and Lupu 2015). The two waves of research also focused on different outcome variables. Whereas modern research often asks whether politicians from different economic backgrounds differ in how they think and behave on economic issues, first-wave research often focused on outcomes like feelings of efficacy and representational styles (Kim & Woo 1972, Prewitt et al. 1966). From a theoretical standpoint, the contemporary emphasis on economic policy probably makes more sense. People from different economic strata tend to have different views about the government’s role in economic affairs, because of differences in self-interest (e.g., Meltzer & Richard 1981), general ideology, (Piketty 1995), or social networks (Keely & Tan 2008; Manza & Brooks 2008). As a result, research from around the world has consistently found that people who are more economically advantaged in a society tend to be more supportive of rightist economic policies, and those who are less advantaged tend to be more supportive of leftist policies (e.g.,

Evans 2000, Hayes 1995, Hout et al. 1995, Korpi 1983). If the economic makeup of political institutions is lopsided, the most obvious place to begin looking for consequences would be in the economic attitudes of policymakers and the choices they make on economic issues.

The other important distinction between first-wave and modern research is that modern work has paid more attention to the role of personal discretion in linking a politician's background to their choices in office. Many of the choices a politician makes are constrained by other actors like constituents, party leaders, interest groups, and so on; we might only expect officeholders from different backgrounds to behave differently when they are making choices that are less heavily influenced by external pressures (Burden 2007). In highly-scrutinized activities, like roll-call voting in many national legislatures, we might not expect politicians to have as much discretion as when they are, for instance, making decisions about which issues get on the agenda (Kingdon 2011). However, roll-call voting in legislatures was another major focus of first-wave research on the consequences of politicians' economic backgrounds (e.g., Best 1985). Scholars were often studying the very outcomes that were least likely to reveal differences between politicians from different economic backgrounds.

Modern research on the consequences of politicians' economic backgrounds has tended to be mindful of both of these theoretical concerns and has, in turn, found clear evidence that politicians from different economic backgrounds think and behave differently on economic issues. One group of studies has focused on politicians' personal *policy preferences*, which are not themselves constrained by outside forces. Consistent with research on public opinion, these studies have found that the politicians who are more personally conservative on economic issues are those from professional or white-collar jobs in Ireland, Latin America, and the US (Carnes 2013, Carnes & Lupu 2015, Courtney 2015), those from business backgrounds in Europe and

Israel (Hemingway 2022), and those who earn higher incomes in Switzerland (Wüest & Rosset 2019). A related group of studies has found that politicians who are economically advantaged have policy preferences that are more *congruent* with the preferences of advantaged citizens (who tend to be less concerned about economic inequality and less supportive of government spending and redistribution) whether looking at more and less educated citizens in the Netherlands (Hakhverdian 2015), citizens from different occupational classes in Switzerland (Wüest et al. 2019), or citizens with different incomes, educations, and occupations in Indonesia (Warburton et al. 2021). Across different economic measures and different national contexts, politicians from different economic backgrounds consistently appear to think differently about economic issues, potentially contributing to unequal congruence (e.g., Giger et al. 2012; Lupu & Warner 2022a, 2022b; Persson 2021).

A second category of consequences research has focused on politicians' *behavior*, again with an emphasis on economic issues and the moderating role of discretion. Some have focused on the relatively less-constrained process of *policy entrepreneurship*, that is, on the actions legislators take as new proposals are created and shepherded through the policymaking process. Some research has focused on bill sponsorship; this work has typically found that politicians from less-advantaged economic backgrounds tend to propose and cosponsor bills that are more leftist on labor, economic, and redistributive issues, whether the focus is on legislators from working-class and white-collar occupational backgrounds in Argentina (Carnes & Lupu 2015) and the US (Carnes 2013), more and less wealthy legislators in the US (Griffin & Anewalt-Rensburg 2013, Kraus & Callaghan 2014), or legislators with and without labor union backgrounds in Argentina (Micozzi 2018). Other studies focus on what politicians say in floor speeches; in the UK, legislators from working-class occupations take more liberal positions on

redistributive issues in their parliamentary speeches (O’Grady 2018), and in Norway, legislators raised by white-collar fathers are more likely to discuss economic and business-related issues, while those raised by blue-collar fathers are more likely to talk about industry and employment (Fiva et al. 2022; but see Bailer et al. 2022).

When it comes to *roll-call voting in legislatures*, the evidence is slightly more mixed, consistent with the idea that politicians have less discretion when they cast these public votes. Some studies find relationships between the economic backgrounds of legislators and their voting behavior: in the US, members of Congress from working-class jobs tend to vote to the left of those from white-collar jobs on economic issues (Carnes 2012, 2013), and wealthier members are more likely to vote against the estate tax (Griffin & Anewalt-Remsburg 2013), but members educated at elite universities also cast more liberal votes (Volden et al. 2020). In US state legislatures, union-affiliated lawmakers are more likely to vote to support unions (Lamare 2015). In the UK, even though members of Parliament typically toe the party line, those from working-class jobs cast more progressive votes on key welfare bills (O’Grady 2018). Still, other studies find less clear-cut results. In the US Congress, Democratic legislators raised in working-class families cast more liberal votes, but the same is not true among Republican legislators (Grumbach 2015). And in Argentina, legislators from different class backgrounds express different preferences on surveys and sponsor different kinds of economic bills, but they do not vote differently, in keeping with the idea that roll-call voting in legislatures is often a low-discretion activity for politicians (Carnes & Lupu 2015).

A third category of research on consequences has focused on *policy outcomes* rather than individual politician behavior. Whereas the literature on preferences and individual behavior tends to focus on legislatures, research on policy outcomes largely focuses on executives (but see

Adolph 2013, Carnes 2013, Meriläinen 2022, Shorette et al. 2021). In Europe, governments with cabinet members from business and banking occupations are associated with lower taxes and higher economic inequality (Alexiadou 2022). In Canada, provincial executives from white-collar backgrounds are associated with lower social spending (Borwein 2021). Among NATO member states, heads of government from business occupations were more likely to freeride in their military expenditures than those with other economic backgrounds (Fuhrmann 2020). And in data on 74 democracies, executives who experienced material hardship in their youth increased social spending (Han & Han 2020). Mayors with business backgrounds also seem to shift municipal spending: in the US, they spend more on infrastructure and less on redistribution (Kirkland 2021; but see Beach & Jones 2016), in Russia they spend more on infrastructure (Szakoni 2021), and in Spain, mayors with more formal education implement more conservative fiscal policies (Curto-Grau & Gallego 2021). In short, there is something of a consensus in the literature that politicians from less advantaged economic backgrounds tend to be more leftist in how they think and behave—and in the kinds of policies that governments enact when they hold office in larger numbers (see also Krčmaric et al. 2020).

In addition to these outcomes, scholars have analyzed three other kinds of consequences that are worth noting as well. One group of studies has examined *legislative effectiveness*; work on the US has found that legislators from more-advantaged backgrounds seem to be more effective at advancing legislation through the policymaking process (Stacy 2020, Volden et al. 2020; but see Carnes 2013, Hansen and Clark 2020), but work in Sweden does not find analogous differences (Erikson & Josefsson 2019). Other studies have examined the *symbolic effects* of the economic makeup of government; Barnes & Saxton (2019), for instance, show that Latin Americans have more positive views of their national legislature in countries with more

legislators from working-class backgrounds (see also Arnesen & Peters 2018, Evans & Tilley 2017, Wauters 2012, Heath 2016). And a final group of studies has debated whether politicians from different economic backgrounds—in particular, those with more and less formal education—differ in *how well they perform in office*. One widely-cited study claims that executives with more formal education produce greater GDP growth (Besley et al. 2011), but our own analysis failed to replicate this finding clearly and found that on a wide range of measures—GDP, economic inequality, labor unrest, unemployment, inflation, and even military conflict—more and less educated leaders performed about the same (Carnes & Lupu 2016b; see also Curto-Grau & Gallego 2021). Topics like these represent prime opportunities to extend the literature on the economic backgrounds of politicians to outcomes that have received less attention.

4. The Causes of Representational Inequalities

Probably the most significant under-tilled field in this literature, however, is the research on the causes of politicians' economic backgrounds, that is, the factors that influence the economic makeup of political institutions.

Why study causes? This literature is often motivated in part by the research on consequences: if the economic backgrounds of politicians matter, it is natural to wonder why the economic backgrounds of politicians are the way they are. Like the consequences literature, the research on causes has also been motivated by the simple fact that the economic makeup of political institutions tends to be so lopsided, an outcome that is especially puzzling in democracies, where elected institutions are supposed to somehow represent the people who elect them. Inequalities like these often lead researchers to wonder why the economic makeup of

political institutions is so often skewed in favor of people with higher incomes, more wealth, white-collar occupations, more formal education, and so on.

Overall, there is less research on the causes of politicians' economic backgrounds than there is on the consequences. First-wave scholars often discussed hypotheses, but never arrived at anything approaching a consensus, and although modern scholarship has gone further, the research on causes is still thin and inconclusive. This might reflect a sort of scientific division of labor; in a sense, the more pressing question is whether the economic backgrounds of politicians matter, because if they do not, there may be less reason to study the factors that influence the economic makeup of government.

The relative shortage of work on causes—and the lack of a scholarly consensus—might also reflect the greater complexity of the phenomenon. Studying the consequences of a politician's economic background is conceptually straightforward (even if it is often challenging to carry out in practice): researchers simply need to measure the association between the economic traits of leaders and their attitudes or behaviors (and any theorized mediating and control variables). This can require a great deal of original data collection, but the underlying theoretical mechanisms are straightforward and rarely in doubt: politicians from different economic strata have different attitudes, and when conditions are right, they tend to behave differently.

In contrast, theorizing about why more politicians are drawn from certain economic backgrounds is a bit like solving a whodunit: there are many potential suspects and countless ways that one or more of them might be working together. That is, there are numerous potential mechanisms that might help or hinder candidates from different economic backgrounds—resources, gatekeeping, ambition, voter biases, and so on—and they are potentially connected in

complex ways—e.g., a potential candidate who is less economically advantaged may have fewer resources, which in turn may make gatekeepers overlook them, which in turn may leave them with under-resourced campaigns that fail to generate many votes on Election Day.

To organize the theoretical possibilities, we find it helpful to focus on two questions: *when* in the process of attaining political power do people from a given economic group become numerically over- or under-represented, and *why* does that inequality occur when it does?

Many scholars in the broader literature on the descriptive representation of social groups have asked *when* social groups are screened out, conceptualizing the process of becoming a politician as a series of discrete stages, a pipeline that can be inspected for leaks (e.g., Carnes 2018, Fox and Lawless 2005, Gulzar 2021, Lovenduski 2016, Norris and Lovenduski 1995). A person must be qualified and able to run (scholars sometimes refer to this group as potential candidates), they must want to hold office (what scholars call nascent political ambition), they must then formally enter the race (expressive ambition), in many countries they must be selected by their party to stand as a candidate, and then they must receive enough votes to win the seat they seek. (Of course, the process is different for appointed positions.) If people from a given social group are disproportionately screened out at any stage, they will be numerically underrepresented in office.

Once scholars have identified when an economic group is screened out, they can then ask *why* the group is screened out at that stage. Scholars sometimes divide these theories into the categories supply and demand (e.g., Lovenduski 2016, Norris and Lovenduski 1995): supply explanations emphasize differences in the numbers of qualified and able potential candidates from a given social group, and demand explanations emphasize how other actors—voters, party leaders, or even institutional design characteristics—might support or discourage that social

group. We find it helpful to divide explanations by the level of society that they focus on: individual- or *micro-level* explanations emphasize the characteristics and behaviors of individual citizens (like potential candidates or voters), *meso-level* explanations focus on large groups in society (like political parties and interest groups), and *macro-level* explanations emphasize forces that affect an entire society (like political institutions or economic and social conditions in a polity). These different kinds of explanations are not mutually exclusive, of course; they often simply differ in their focus (e.g., individual choices, or the groups and institutions that structure those choices).

In the literature on the economic backgrounds of politicians, the research on causes doesn't include many studies that ask *when* less-advantaged groups are screened out. To conduct such a study, scholars must measure the distribution of a given economic trait among ordinary citizens, qualified people, declared candidates, party candidates, and winners—a tall order in many contexts. The few published studies on this topic generally point to the decision to run for office as a significant obstacle for less-advantaged citizens; in England (Norris and Lovenduski 1995) and the US (Carnes 2018), people from non-professional and working-class occupations (respectively) were less likely to run for state and national offices but no less likely to be selected by their party in England or to win office in the US. However, there simply isn't much published research on this question. For the vast majority of the world's political institutions, it's still anyone's guess when less-advantaged economic groups might be screened out of the pipeline of new politicians.

There is more research testing hypotheses about *why* different economic groups might be disproportionately advantaged or disadvantaged, either at a given stage or in the broader political selection process as a whole. The most common explanation tested in the modern literature is the

micro-level hypothesis that voters might be biased against economically disadvantaged candidates. However, this idea has not found clear support in modern empirical research, including observational research in the US (Adams et al. 2020, Bonica 2020, Carnes 2018) and Canada (Albaugh 2020, Sevi et al. 2020) or in survey experiments comparing hypothetical candidates with different income levels in the UK (Campbell & Cowley 2013) and US (Griffin et al. 2019); different occupations in Japan (Horiuchi et al. 2018), the US (Hoyt & DeShields 2020), and Argentina, the UK, and the US (Carnes & Lupu 2016a); different education levels in the US (Gift & Lastra-Anadón 2018); or different parental social classes in Austria, Germany, and the UK (Vivyan et al. 2020), or Canada, the UK, and the US (Kevins 2021). On the contrary, researchers more often find that voters see less-advantaged candidates as warmer and more relatable. There are exceptions in some countries and parties, of course; in Denmark, leftist voters prefer a leftist attorney to a leftist factory assistant, and in Norway there are no occupational differences, but voters prefer a candidate with a doctorate to one without any higher education (Arnesen et al. 2019; Pedersen et al. 2019; see also Wüest & Pontusson 2022). On balance, however, research on individual-level voter biases has mostly suggested that this hypothesis may be a dead end.

Several other individual-level explanations have similarly stumbled in modern research, although they have been studied less extensively. Researchers have not found evidence that economic inequalities in who holds office are the result of economic inequalities in qualifications or interest in running (Carnes 2018, Carnes & Lupu 2022a, Dal Bó et al. 2017). The closest the literature has come to an individual-level explanation is a study that shows that citizens in Argentina, the UK, and the US do not seem to know or care how badly under-represented working-class people are (Carnes & Lupu 2022b).

Macro-level explanations have also fallen short of explaining why some economic groups are numerically underrepresented. Many scholars have speculated that the basic features of electoral systems (proportional vs. majoritarian, single-member vs. multimember) might influence the economic makeup of politicians, but few have tested this hunch (but see Joshi 2020), and the available evidence has not been promising; in the OECD countries, for instance, politicians from working-class jobs are equally rare in every category of electoral system (Carnes & Lupu 2022c). Likewise, scholars sometimes speculate that things like public campaign financing and politician salaries might influence the economic makeup of government, but research in the US has not supported either hypothesis (Carnes 2018, Carnes & Hansen 2016, Kilborn 2018), and public campaign financing seems not to account for much variation in working-class representation in the OECD (Carnes & Lupu 2022c; but see Motolina et al. 2022).

Meso-level explanations seem to have fared the best so far. Some scholars have focused on political parties, in particular the hypothesis that party leaders are often biased against less-advantaged candidates. Studies of parties in Belgium (Dodeigne & Teuber 2018), Germany (Rehmert 2020), the UK (Durose et al 2013), and the US (Carnes 2018) have all found that party leaders prefer candidates with more formal education and discourage candidates from working-class occupations. Another group of studies has focused on unions, meso-level organizations long thought to politically empower working-class people (e.g., Becher & Stegmueller 2020). In the US, unions seem to promote officeholding among unionized and working-class occupations (Feigenbaum et al. 2019, Sojourner 2013), and union density seems to account for some variation in working-class representation across the OECD (Carnes & Lupu 2022c). Finally, donors have emerged as another meso-level explanation. In the US, wealthier politicians and

candidates with law degrees tend to attract more funding from the donor class (Bonica 2020, Eggers & Klašnja 2021).

Of course, we might just as well think of donors (or any explanation in the preceding paragraph) not as a meso-level explanation, but as a byproduct of macro-level forces (like the high cost of campaigning in the US) or a driver of micro-level differences (perhaps donors cultivate confidence among potential candidates from some economic strata more than others). Research into why less-advantaged people are under-represented in politics is challenging in part because of the sheer complexity of the political and social forces at work.

As it stands, the literature on causes is still a long way from a complete assessment of that complexity. Rather, this literature can be thought of as a growing body of scholarship that has confronted a monumental question with a mix of more and less successful hypotheses, and that still has a long way to go. There is simply little work in this area—especially relative to the vast scope and complexity of the potential explanations that are available. In that sense, research on causes represents the most expansive frontier in our knowledge about the economic backgrounds of politicians.

5. What's Next?

There are, of course, many frontiers in this literature. On each of the major topics scholars have studied—descriptive inequalities, consequences, and causes—there is still ample room for new research and urgent questions that need answers.

The literature is unanimous in acknowledging descriptive inequalities in the economic makeup of the political institutions scholars have studied. But even on this point, most stones remain unturned. For the vast majority of economic measures, government institutions, and time

periods, there are no publicly available data on the economic makeup of officeholders. Without global data on a given measure, researchers cannot clearly see differences across place, and without historical data they cannot see changes over time. Of course, many key stakeholders in academic research (journals, funders, and hiring and promotion committees) under-value purely descriptive research, even when it can be foundational to a field of inquiry. But researchers who manage to overcome this unfortunate bias and collect and publish descriptive data will make important contributions to what we know about the economic backgrounds of politicians (see, for example, Hansen & Clark 2020, Makse 2019, Warburton et al. 2021).

Likewise, research on the consequences of politicians' economic backgrounds has reached something of a consensus that the economic backgrounds of politicians can matter for economic policy, but there is room for more work in more national contexts and more time periods. One unanswered question is how well these findings travel across institutional contexts; most of the research to date on individual politician attitudes and behaviors has focused on legislatures, and most of the work to date on policy outcomes has focused on executives. What would scholars find if these outcomes were studied in other kinds of institutions? Do the economic backgrounds of judges matter? Delegates to international institutions? Moreover, research on some outcomes is still relatively thin, or contested: there is a great deal of room for research on how the economic backgrounds of politicians matter symbolically and how they are associated with outcomes like legislative effectiveness and leader quality.

Another outcome that seems especially pressing is unequal responsiveness. In the last decade, numerous studies have shown that politicians' choices tend to be strongly associated with the preferences of more-advantaged citizens and weakly associated (if at all) with the views of less-advantaged citizens (e.g., Bartels 2016, Elsässer et al. 2021, Gilens 2012, Lupu & Tirado

Castro 2022, Schakel 2021). Scholars often raise the possibility that this unequal responsiveness may be driven by the fact that politicians themselves are so economically well-off, but to our knowledge, no published study has actually demonstrated a link between the descriptive representation of economic groups and the kind of unequal responsiveness that scholars have recently documented. This may partly reflect the fact that the descriptive representation of economic groups simply varies so little; for instance, in Bartels's (2016) Senate data, there are no Senators who worked primarily in working-class jobs, and Gilens's (2012) over-time data on public opinion and policy outcomes covers a period when the share of working-class people in Congress was never higher than two percent. With so little variation, it can sometimes be impossible to study how the economic makeup of government affects unequal responsiveness. However, given the importance of research on unequal responsiveness, finding a way around obstacles like these should be a high priority for the scholarship on the economic backgrounds of politicians.

Most pressingly, there are not many published studies that ask when less advantaged groups are screened out of the political pipeline and why the economic makeup of political institutions is as unequal as it is. Scholars need to study more cases and test more explanations.

Along the way, it may be beneficial to expand the range of hypotheses scholars consider when they ask why less advantaged groups are screened out. Most scholars study micro-, meso-, or macro-level explanations, but we would also suggest considering another level: *universal* explanations. In their work on British politicians, Bovens and Wille (2017) note that the shift away from government by aristocrats was accompanied by the emergence of a highly professionalized version of democracy—politicians came less from noble families and more from elite universities and pipeline professions. If a similar process plays out in every

democracy, it may be that some inequalities in who holds office essentially do not vary at the macro level, that they are essentially universal. Scholars should consider—and devise ways to study—the possibility that there are obstacles to political equality in every country and context. If aristocracy always give way to elitism, that may represent an essentially universal explanation: less-advantaged people may never hold office in large numbers anywhere.

Finally, as the literature on this topic moves forward, there is one overarching need that can be addressed regardless of the question researchers are asking, namely, a need for more work that acknowledges and studies the intersection of the economic backgrounds of politicians and other important social characteristics, most notably race and gender. Of course, we are by no means the first scholars to notice the need for greater attention to intersectionality in this literature, and many first-wave and modern studies have asked important questions about the intersections of economic characteristics, gender, race, and other traits (Barnes et al. 2020, Bernhard et al. 2021, Bueno & Dunning 2017, Carnes 2020, Murray 2021, Norris & Lovenduski 1995). Research on the economic backgrounds of politicians is large and cohesive, but it is somewhat siloed, and it will be significantly richer as more studies examine the intersection of economic and other social characteristics, both in statistical analyses and (even more pressingly) in qualitative and theory-building research.

A half-century after the start of the first wave of research on the economic backgrounds of politicians, the subject is experiencing a second boom period. It has reentered the mainstream in political science, and broad threads have emerged that cut across countries, time periods, and measures. But the first wave was something of a cautionary tale: the literature did not persuasively answer key questions about consequences, and work on this topic eventually slowed to crawl. Today, the topic has picked up speed once again, but that momentum will only last if

scholars continue to answer pressing questions about generalizability across time and place, the scope of the consequences of representational inequalities, the root causes of economic imbalances in the world's political institutions, and the many ways that economic characteristics intersect with race, gender, and other pillars of social organization.

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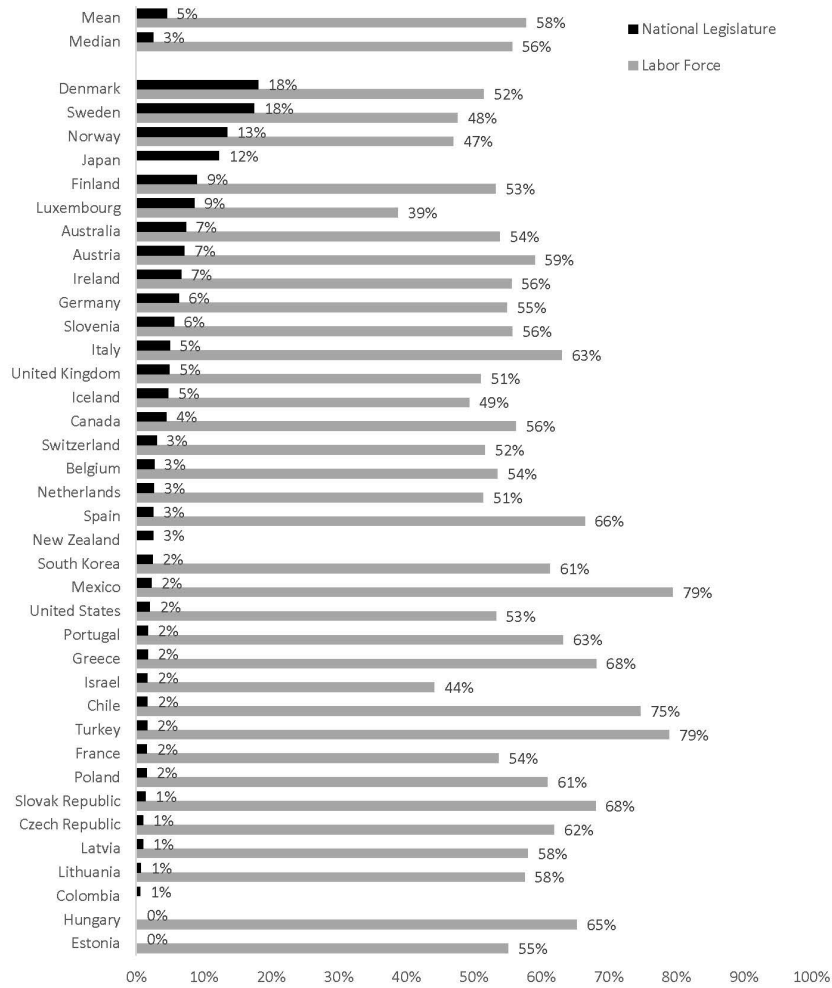
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Figure 1: Working-Class Representation in the OECD



Sources: Carnes et al. (2021), Carnes & Lupu (2022c), International Labor Organization (2020)