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The Economic Backgrounds of Politicians

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Keywords

political elites, class, education, wealth, representation

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 studies generally agree 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 regarding why politicians are so economically advantaged. Going forward, 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.

INTRODUCTION

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 other such attributes 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 been all but abandoned 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 United Kingdom, where seismic shifts in the economic makeup of national legislatures were occurring (e.g., Norris & Lovenduski 1995). In the early 2010s, a new wave of research began—inspired by renewed interest in 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 review, we outline the common findings and arguments in this literature on the consequences of politicians' economic backgrounds and the causes of the economic makeup of government, as well as the frontiers for new research on this topic. We focus in particular on the thread that most tightly binds the modern literature, namely, concern about inequalities in the economic makeup of political institutions. Research on the economic backgrounds of politicians is once again in the mainstream—and much of today's research is driven by a goal of understanding why governments around the world are so often run by the privileged.

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 measure with surveys or are readily available in off-the-shelf data sets, 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 schoolteachers 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 measured as the number of years of schooling (Besley et al. 2011), the type of school attended (Norris & Lovenduski 1993), attaining specific credentials like a bachelor's degree (Carnes & Lupu

2016b), or even attaining 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 (Grumbach 2015), 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 decades-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 2018).

The variety of economic measures 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. Rather, 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, Carreri & Payson 2021, 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 their success at attracting campaign donations, then wealth is obviously the right measure (e.g., Eggers & Klašnja 2018, Stacy 2020). 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, O'Grady 2018).

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 (a) the numerical or descriptive representation of people from different economic backgrounds in elected office, whether recording a snapshot of a particular moment in time, tracing changes over time, or reporting differences across places; (b) 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 (c) 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.

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, 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" (Matthews 1954, p. 2). In first-wave research, the goal was often simply to understand who politicians were.

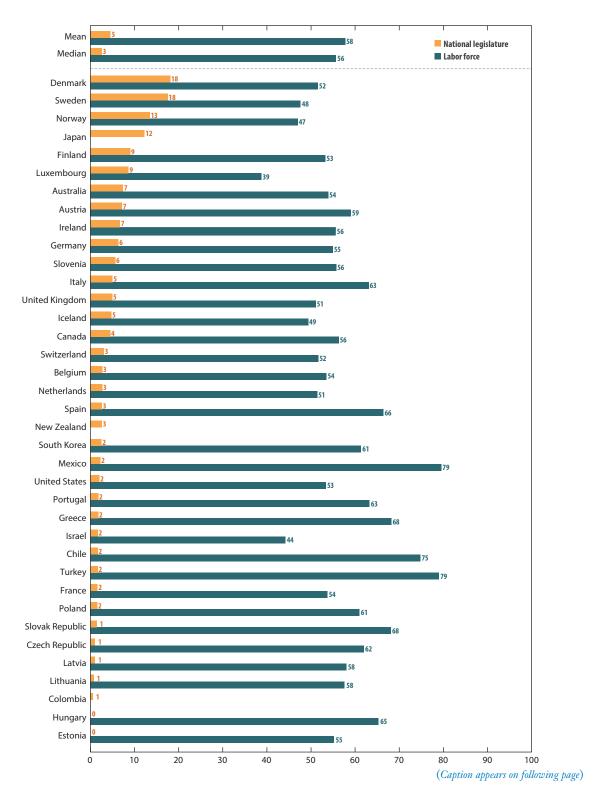
Beginning in the 2000s, research on the economic backgrounds of politicians began to reflect a new motivation: understanding the inequalities that first-wave research revealed. This

development was undoubtedly influenced by a larger resurgence of interest in economic inequality in political science—exemplified by the Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy formed by the American Political Science Association in 2004—and by the rich and growing literatures on the descriptive underrepresentation 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 statements of motivation such as, "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 United States—to name but a few—the same pattern emerges: Politicians come disproportionately from the most economically 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 (see Carnes & Lupu 2022c). 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, alongside the percentage of the country's labor force employed in working-class jobs. 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 includes 56–58% working-class jobs, but in the typical national legislature, only 3–5% of the legislators had working-class jobs when they first entered politics.

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 (e.g., Han & Han 2021) or why politicians and voters appear to respond differently to childhood experiences of economic shocks (Carreri & Teso 2021)—without necessarily foregrounding concerns about representational inequality. Other studies even conceptualize inequalities in officeholding not as problems or puzzles but as desirable outcomes. The most notable example is 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).



Working-class representation in OECD countries (Carnes & Lupu 2022c, Int. Labor Organ. 2020). The typical labor force in these countries includes 56–58% working-class jobs (*blue-green bars*), but in the typical national legislature, only 3–5% of the legislators had working-class jobs (i.e., manual labor, service industry, clerical, informal sector, or labor union jobs) when they first entered politics (*orange bars*). We do not have labor-force data for Colombia, Japan, and New Zealand.

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 policy making, and why do they exist in the first place?

THE CONSEQUENCES OF POLITICIANS' ECONOMIC BACKGROUNDS

If concerns about representational inequality form 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, institutional contexts, and countries (although the cases researchers study come disproportionately from Europe and North America). 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 cooled off considerably in the decades that followed, in part because scholars were skeptical that the economic backgrounds of politicians truly mattered (e.g., Edinger & Searing 1967, Searing 1969). In the 1970s, Putnam (1976, p. 93) 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"; in the 1980s, Matthews (1985, p. 25) 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"; and in the 1990s, Norris & Lovenduski (1995, p. 12) noted that research still had "not clearly established that the social background of politicians has a significant influence on their attitudes, values, and behavior."

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 & 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 about and act 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 policy makers and the choices they make on economic issues.

The other important distinction between first-wave and modern research is that recent 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, and interest groups; 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 these theoretical concerns and has, in turn, found compelling evidence that politicians from different economic backgrounds think and behave differently when it comes to economic issues. One group of studies has focused on politicians' personal policy preferences, which are not 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 United States (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,b; 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 scholars have focused on the relatively less constrained process of policy entrepreneurship, that is, on the actions lawmakers take as new proposals are created and shepherded through the policy-making process. Some research has focused on bill sponsorship; this work typically finds 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 United States (Carnes 2013), more and less wealthy legislators in the United States (Griffin & Anewalt-Remsburg 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 United Kingdom, 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). Across a variety of democracies and measures, politicians from less privileged economic backgrounds seem to behave differently than those from more privileged backgrounds when they have leeway to act on their preferences.

When it comes to behavior that is more constrained by parties and interest groups, such as rollcall voting in legislatures, the evidence is more mixed. Some studies do find relationships between the economic backgrounds of legislators and their voting behavior. In the United States, 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). Similarly, union-affiliated lawmakers are more likely to vote to support unions in US state legislatures (Lamare 2015), and British Members of Parliament from working-class jobs cast more progressive votes on key welfare bills (O'Grady 2018). At the same time, 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 (Carnes & Lupu 2015). Because roll-call voting in legislatures is often a low-discretion activity for politicians, studies find less consistent evidence that the economic backgrounds of politicians shape this kind of behavior.

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 study legislatures, research on policy outcomes largely concentrates on executives (but see Adolph 2013, Carnes 2013, Meriläinen 2022, Shorette et al. 2021). Although they study a wide variety of countries, levels of government, and policy domains, there is something of a consensus among these studies that politicians from less advantaged economic backgrounds tend to enact more leftist policies when they hold office in larger numbers (see also Krcmaric et al. 2020). In Europe, for instance, 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 free-ride 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 2021). Mayors with business backgrounds also seem to shift municipal spending. In the United States, they spend more on infrastructure and less on redistribution (Kirkland 2021; but see Beach & Jones 2016); in Russia, they spend more on infrastructure (Szakonyi 2021); and in Spain, mayors with more formal education implement more conservative fiscal policies (Curto-Grau & Gallego 2021). In short, research on policy outcomes seems to find fairly consistently that the economic backgrounds of executives also have important policy consequences.

In addition to these outcomes, scholars have analyzed three other kinds of consequences worth noting. One group of studies has examined legislative effectiveness. Research on the United States has found that legislators from more advantaged backgrounds seem to be more effective at advancing legislation through the policy-making process (Stacy 2020, Volden et al. 2020; but see Carnes 2013, Hansen & Clark 2020), but research in Sweden does not find analogous differences (Erikson & Josefsson 2019). Other studies have explored 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, Heath 2016, Wauters 2012). 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 years of 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 and to a broader range of country contexts.

THE CAUSES OF REPRESENTATIONAL INEQUALITIES

Perhaps the most significant undertilled field in this literature is the research on the causes of inequalities in politicians' economic backgrounds—that is, the factors that influence the economic makeup of political institutions.

Why study causes? This research 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 represent the people who elect them. These kinds of inequalities 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 inequalities in politicians' economic backgrounds than there is on the consequences. First-wave scholars often discussed hypotheses but never approached consensus, and although modern scholarship has gone further, the research on causes is still thin and inconclusive. This might reflect a sort of scientific triage: 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. Numerous potential mechanisms 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 underresourced campaigns that fail to attract many votes on election day.

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

Many scholars in the broader literature on the descriptive representation of social groups have conceptualized the process of becoming an elected politician as a series of discrete stages, a pipeline that can be inspected for leaks (e.g., Carnes 2018, Fox & Lawless 2005, Gulzar 2021, Lovenduski 2016, Norris & Lovenduski 1995). They must be qualified and able to run (scholars sometimes refer to this group as potential candidates), they must want to hold office (having what scholars call nascent political ambition) and then formally enter the race (expressive ambition), in many countries they must be selected by their party to stand as a candidate, and finally, 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 of these stages, 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 a given stage. Scholars sometimes categorize these theories as supply and demand (e.g., Lovenduski 2016, Norris & 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 or 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 versus the groups and institutions that structure those choices).

In the literature on the economic backgrounds of politicians, the research on causes does not 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 most 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. People from nonprofessional 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 (Norris & Lovenduski 1995) or to win office in the United States (Carnes 2018). However, there simply is not much published research on this question. For the vast majority of the world's political institutions, it is still anyone's guess when less advantaged economic groups are 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 political selection process as a whole. The most common explanation tested in the modern literature is the microlevel hypothesis that voters might be biased against economically disadvantaged candidates. From a normative perspective, this might be the most appealing explanation because it suggests that whatever inequalities exist in the economic makeup of government might simply be inequalities that voters want. However, the voter bias hypothesis has not found clear support in modern empirical research. Across countries as varied as Argentina, Austria, Canada, Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States, and across a range of measures of economic backgrounds, both observational and experimental studies fail to find evidence that voters prefer politicians from more privileged economic backgrounds (Adams et al. 2020, Albaugh 2020, Bonica 2020, Campbell

& Cowley 2014, Carnes 2018, Carnes & Lupu 2016a, Gift & Lastra-Anadón 2018, Griffin et al. 2019, Horiuchi et al. 2018, Hoyt & DeShields 2020, Kevins 2021, Sevi et al. 2020, Vivyan et al. 2020). On the contrary, researchers more often find that voters see less advantaged candidates as warmer and more relatable, and voters consistently report that they would prefer to see more working-class politicians in office (Carnes & Lupu 2022b). Of course, there are exceptions to these findings in some countries, at least in comparisons of politicians within a subset of parties or those from specific types of occupations (Arnesen et al. 2019, Matthews & Kerevel 2022, Pedersen et al. 2019; see also Wüest & Pontusson 2022). On balance, however, most research on individual-level voter biases suggests that this hypothesis is 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 United Kingdom, and the United States do not seem to know how badly underrepresented working-class people really 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 versus majoritarian, single-member versus multimember) might influence the economic makeup of political institutions, but few have tested this hunch (for an exception, 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 institutional features like public campaign financing or politician salaries might influence the economic makeup of government, but research in the United States 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). Still, only a few studies have asked these questions, and most of those have focused on the United States or other wealthy democracies.

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 2022), the United Kingdom (Durose et al. 2013), and the United States (Carnes 2018) have all found that party leaders prefer candidates with more formal education and discourage candidates from working-class occupations (but see Matthews & Kerevel 2022). Another group of studies has focused on unions, meso-level organizations long thought to politically empower workingclass people (e.g., Becher & Stegmueller 2020). In the United States, 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). Donors have emerged as another meso-level explanation. In the United States, wealthier politicians and candidates with law degrees tend to attract more funding from the donor class (Bonica 2020, Eggers & Klašnja 2018). Although these studies focus on a small number of countries, they suggest that meso-level explanations that focus on parties, unions, or donors may be the most fruitful avenue for explaining inequalities in politicians' economic backgrounds.

Of course, we could think of donors (or unions or parties) not as a meso-level explanation but as a byproduct of macro-level forces (like the high cost of campaigning in the United States) or as

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 underrepresented 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 not much work in this area—especially relative to the vast scope and complexity of the universe of potential explanations—and almost all of it focuses on the world's wealthier democracies. In that sense, research on causes represents the most expansive frontier in our knowledge about the economic backgrounds of politicians.

WHAT'S NEXT?

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

The literature is unanimous in acknowledging descriptive inequalities in the economic makeup of the political institutions that scholars have studied so far. But even on this point, most stones remain unturned. For the vast majority of economic measures, government institutions, countries (particularly in the Global South), and time periods, there are no publicly available data on the economic attributes 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) undervalue purely descriptive research, even when it can be foundational to a field of inquiry; they fail to recognize that, as Achen (2002, p. 441) notes, "[a] theory needs things to explain, and finding them is part of our job, too." 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, Carreri & Payson 2021, 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? What about the backgrounds of 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 empirically 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 before running for office, 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 2%. 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 that 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 & 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 often from noble families and more often 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 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: the need for more work that acknowledges and studies the intersection of the economic backgrounds of politicians and other important social characteristics, most notably race, ethnicity, and gender. Of course, we are by no means the first scholars to notice that this literature needs to grapple with the issue of intersectionality, and many first-wave and modern studies have asked important questions about the intersections of economic characteristics, gender, race, ethnicity, and other traits (Barnes et al. 2020, Bernhard et al. 2021, Bueno & Dunning 2017, Carnes 2020, Murray 2023, Norris & Lovenduski 1995). The body of research on the economic backgrounds of politicians is large and cohesive, but it is somewhat siloed, and it will be enriched significantly 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.

More than half a 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 offers a cautionary tale: The literature failed to persuasively answer key questions about consequences, and as a result, work on this topic eventually slowed to a crawl. Today, the topic has picked up speed once again, but its recent 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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