

Does the Numerical Underrepresentation of the Working Class in Congress Matter?  
Evidence from Roll Call Voting in the House of Representatives

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## **Abstract**

Working-class citizens have been numerically underrepresented in policymaking institutions throughout most of America's history. Little is known, however, about the political consequences of this enduring feature of our democratic system. This essay examines the relationship between legislators' class backgrounds and their votes on economic policy in the House of Representatives during the 20th century. Like ordinary Americans, representatives from working-class occupations exhibit more liberal economic preferences than other legislators, especially those from profit-oriented professions. These findings provide the first evidence of a link between the descriptive and substantive representation of social classes in the United States.

The interests of the dealers . . . in any particular branch of trade or manufacture, is always in some respects different from, and even opposite to, that of the public. . . . The proposal of any new law or regulation of commerce which comes from this order, ought always to be listened to with great precaution . . . . It comes from an order of men, whose interest is never exactly the same with that of the public, who have generally an interest to deceive and even to oppress the public, and who accordingly have, upon many occasions, both deceived and oppressed it.

—Adam Smith ([1776] 1953, 19)

Will not the land-holder know and feel whatever will promote or injure the interests of landed property? . . . Will not the merchant understand and be disposed to cultivate as far as may be proper the interests of the mechanic and manufacturing arts to which his commerce is so nearly allied? Will not the man of the learned profession, who will feel a neutrality to the rivalships between the different branches of industry, be likely to prove an impartial arbiter between them, ready to promote either, so far as it shall appear to him conducive to the general interests of the society?

—Alexander Hamilton ([1787] 1961, 215-216)

Concerns about the effects of numerical imbalances in the class composition of political officeholders have a long history in American political thought and in democratic theory more generally. Political scientists know very little, however, about the links between the social class composition of political institutions and policy outcomes in the United States. Do lawmakers from different class backgrounds behave differently in office? Do they promote the interests of their own social class at the expense of other groups? Or do policymakers work for the common good regardless of their own backgrounds?

The answers to these questions are crucial to our understanding of how America's political institutions operate. Officeholders in every level of government are, on average, better-off than the people they represent by virtually any measure of class or social attainment. The median individual net worth among members of Congress, for instance, is estimated at almost

\$800 thousand (Center for Responsive Politics 2009), or more than six times the median net worth among American families (Bucks et al 2009). The alumni of thirteen prestigious universities have constituted about 15% of the House of Representatives and 25% of the Senate in every Congress since the 1950s, whereas their living graduates make up less than 1% of all adults.<sup>1</sup> And lawyers and businesspeople, who comprised approximately 10% of the nation throughout most of the 20th century, made up more than 75% of every Congress that served during that time.<sup>2</sup> Similar patterns have been documented among presidents, Supreme Court justices, state and local lawmakers, and high-ranking bureaucrats. As Matthews (1985, 18) argued in his survey of the literature on the social class composition of political decisionmakers, “almost everywhere legislators are better educated, possess higher-status occupations, and have more privileged backgrounds than the people they ‘represent.’”

These numerical imbalances in the class composition of American officeholders have persisted even as other kinds of disparities—most notably racial and gender inequalities—have begun to subside. Figure 1 below plots the percentage of legislators who were female, non-white, or who came from working-class occupations (that is, who last worked as a manual laborer or union official before entering politics) in each Congress from 1901 to 1996. Although women and racial minorities were still underrepresented at the end of the 20th century, their gains during the postwar period sharply contrasted the stable underrepresentation of working-class people, who made up between 50% and 60% of the nation during the last hundred years but who constituted 2% or less of the legislators who served in each Congress during that time.<sup>3</sup>

[Figure 1]

Understanding the consequences of this enduring feature of America’s democratic system should be a high priority for scholars of legislative decisionmaking. However, research on the

descriptive and substantive representation of social groups—the literature that would seem to be a natural home for this kind of inquiry—has been mostly silent about class. This essay uses data on the social class backgrounds and roll call votes of legislators in the House of Representatives to study how the numerical representation of different classes in political institutions affects outcomes on the set of issues for which social class should matter most, domestic economic policies. The findings presented here shed new light on the political ramifications of longstanding imbalances in class composition of American government.

### **What are Social Classes and How Should We Measure Them?**

There are many ways to define and measure social class. Most social scientists use the term to refer to groups whose members occupy a common position in a society's economic or status structure.<sup>4</sup> Within this larger framework, however, scholars differ widely in how they conceptualize and measure classes. Some use income or wealth as a proxy for social class. Others use occupation, education, or family background. Still others rely on composite measures of “socioeconomic status” to approximate an individual's social class position.

When thinking about the links between policymakers' choices and their *social class backgrounds*—their past and present social class positions—there are a number of reasons to prefer measures of their occupational backgrounds. Historically, most class analysts have regarded occupations as the best approximations of individuals' position in a society's class structure. In his pioneering descriptive research on the class composition of political institutions, for instance, Donald Matthews (1954a, 23) argued that “[p]robably the most important single criterion for social ranking in the United States is occupation. Although it is by no means a certain index to an individual's social standing in the community, occupation is perhaps the

closest approach to an infallible guide.” Indeed, occupations are robust predictors of other common measures of class like income or social standing (Katz 1972, 63) as well as individuals’ own subjective assessments of their class positions (Hout 2008).

Occupations, moreover, are more plausible drivers of political attitude formation than many of the alternative class measures in use in the literature today. Manza and Brooks (2008, 204) summarize the case for this view as follows:

Income groups have no common organizational anchor, and . . . current income alone is a poor measure of long-term social standing and life chances . . . . Education level is sometimes substituted as a measure of class . . . , although individuals with the same level of educational attainment also do not necessarily have any organizational anchor connecting them outside of their occupational locations. . . . Occupation provides the most plausible basis for thinking about how specifically class-related political micro processes and influences occur . . . . Workplace settings provide the possibility of talking about politics and forging political identity, and work also provides a springboard for membership in organizations where class politics are engaged: unions, professionals associations, business associations, and so forth.

Indeed, in empirical analyses, occupations are stronger predictors of Americans’ political attitudes than many other social class measures such as education or family background—which predict weak or inconsistent differences in Americans preferences<sup>5</sup>—and composite prestige or socioeconomic status measures—which actually appear to obscure the relationship between political opinion and social class (Weeden and Grusky 2005; Lareau 2008, 12). And while financial class measures like income and wealth sometimes predict differences in political views (e.g. Gilens 2009), they can conflate individuals with very different life chances, socialization experiences, and group loyalties.<sup>6</sup> When thinking about how individuals’—or, for present purposes, politicians’—places in the social structure influence their political views, what they did for a living seems to be a better measure of their class backgrounds than how much money they

made, what their parents did or earned, how much education they received, or any composite measure.

### **Social Class and Legislative Decisionmaking**

There are good reasons to suspect that policymakers' occupational or social class backgrounds have important consequences for their choices in office—and, as a result, for policy outcomes and for the balance of power between various social classes in the United States. To date, however, scholars of American politics have almost entirely neglected this topic. Even as work on the numerical representation of women and racial minorities has flourished in the last few decades, the scholarship on elite decisionmaking and representation has been virtually silent about imbalances in the class composition of political officeholders. Descriptive research on U.S. lawmakers' class backgrounds enjoyed a brief renaissance in the 1950s and 1960s (e.g. Beckett and Sunderland 1957; Domhoff 1967; Matthews 1954b; 1954b; Mills 1956; Zeller 1954), but follow-up analyses “to determine the relationship between [legislators'] social backgrounds and the conduct of government” (Matthews 1954b, 2) never materialized. Donald Matthews's (1985, 17) complaint a quarter century ago about the state of the scholarship in this area is no less true today: despite “several decades of unprecedented achievement in legislative research,” the link between policymakers' social class backgrounds and their choices in office “is still mainly an assertion” (see also Mayhew 2008; Norris and Lovenduski 1995; Putnam 1976, ch. 4).<sup>7</sup>

There are several signs that this assertion deserves legislative scholars' attention. For one, class influences a host of politically relevant attitudes and behaviors among ordinary Americans. An individual's social class position engenders material interests that pit members of different classes against one another in a variety of settings (Wright 1997). It affects how individuals are

socialized (Keely and Tan 2008) and the kinds of groups with whom they associate and identify (Lott 2002). These factors in turn influence Americans' political preferences and choices: research dating back to the earliest election studies and opinion surveys (e.g. Centers 1953, 359) has found that measures of social class are powerful predictors of voting behaviors (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Evans 2000; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2006, 135; Weakliem and Heath 1999) and policy preferences (Campbell et al [1960] 1980, ch. 13), especially on issues with immediate economic implications (Hout 2008).

It is not difficult to imagine that the same might be true for politicians. Political observers of all stripes have argued for centuries that legislators from different social strata differ in their approaches to policymaking.<sup>8</sup> Politicians themselves often attribute paramount importance to their occupational and social class backgrounds (Pessen 1984).

It is well known, moreover, that other personal traits can influence policymakers' attitudes and choices. Relative to white politicians, members of racial minorities have been found to be more supportive of legislation that is important to racial minorities (Canon 1999; Dye and Renick 1981; Meier and England 1984; Welch and Karnig 1979; Whitby 1997). Relative to male politicians, female legislators are more likely to see themselves as representatives of women (Reingold 1992; Thomas and Welch 1991) and to support legislation on women's issues (Berkman and O'Connor 1993; Bratton and Haynie 1999; Frankovic 1977; Thomas 1991; Swers 2002). Scholars who have investigated the links between policymakers' decisions and other traits such as having daughters (Washington 2008), serving in the military (Gelpi and Feaver 2002), attending church, having children in school, and even smoking (Burden 2007) have also found evidence that these personal characteristics influence legislators' decisions in office.

The idea that policymakers from working-class backgrounds might see certain political issues through a different lens than other politicians is easy to square with the theoretical model of representation and elite decisionmaking underlying research on these other legislator characteristics. Although policymakers' choices are often constrained by external influences like constituent preferences (Arnold 1990; Mayhew 1974), interest groups (Hall and Wayman 1990), and party leaders (Cox and McCubbins 1993), it is generally believed that legislators base their decisions on their own judgments at least some of the time (Jewell 1982; Kingdon 1981; Reeher 1996). As a result, personal characteristics, experiences, or group identifications that systematically influence lawmakers' policy preferences can influence their decisions in office (Burden 2007, ch. 2). And when different groups have competing interests, the numerical or *descriptive representation* of those groups can have important consequences for their *substantive representation*, that is, the advancement of their interests in the political process (Pitkin 1967). Insofar as lawmakers from different class backgrounds differ in their values, knowledge, self-interest, or ideology (Burden 2007, ch. 2),<sup>9</sup> in situations in which they have discretion, their choices should differ by class, and the numerical representation of different classes should therefore affect the content of policy outcomes.

If policymakers' social class backgrounds influence their preferences and decisions in this fashion, those who have at least some discretion should differ by social class in ways that mirror class-based divisions in mass opinion. On economic questions, the set of issues for which social class seems to matter most in political opinion studies (e.g. Hout 2008), officeholders from *working-class occupations*—manual labor and service industry jobs—should tend to have the most liberal preferences, other things equal. Policymakers from *professional, profit-oriented occupations*—white collar jobs that entail a great deal of material security and in which profit is

generally the paramount objective for both employer and employee—should tend to be the most economically conservative. And politicians from *professional, not-for-profit occupations*—white-collar jobs in which profit is not necessarily paramount, such as public-sector work and service-based professions like teaching and social work—should tend to be more liberal than those from profit-oriented professions (since they have fewer incentives to promote the interests of businesses or the wealthy) but more conservative than policymakers from working-class backgrounds (since those from not-for-profit professions enjoy greater material security and are less invested in issues affecting the welfare of the working class than workers themselves).

### **An Empirical Test: Class and Economic Roll Call Voting in the House of Representatives**

The idea that policymakers' class backgrounds might influence their choices is potentially relevant to any institution in which decisionmakers have at least some discretion. In many respects, however, Congress is the ideal institutional setting in which to begin studying the relationship between class and legislative conduct. The class backgrounds and behaviors of members of Congress are far easier to measure than the backgrounds and choices of lawmakers in state and local government. Congress is also substantively ideal: its collective choices are consequential, and its members are closely monitored by a wide range of interested parties, which reduces their discretion and thereby reduces the influence that class might have on members' decisions.

To determine whether members of Congress from different class backgrounds differed in their choices in office, I examined data on several composite measures of roll call voting on economic policies—the set of issues for which class should matter most—in the U.S. House during the 20th century. I limited my attention to the House for practical reasons; during the last

century, there has not been enough variation in available measures of senators' class backgrounds to facilitate good inferences about class and legislative decisionmaking in the Senate.<sup>10</sup> I focus on roll call voting because it is a high-visibility activity in which members of Congress have limited discretion (Burden 2007; Hall 1996). This analysis provides a hard test of the theory that the class composition of government matters; if a relationship between social class and roll call voting exists in Congress, stronger relationships likely exist in lower-visibility institutions and for lower-visibility legislative activities.

### *Measuring Social Class*

Many class analysts recommend that scholars measure individuals' occupations by grouping them into several discrete categories. Simple dichotomous schemes such as owners vs. workers or manual vs. non-manual jobs—which were widely used in earlier waves of quantitative research on the American class structure—are too blunt for many empirical applications (Hamilton 1972; Hout, Manza, and Brooks 1995). Measurement approaches that use education and income data to place occupations on continuous socioeconomic status scales—which came into fashion in the 1960s and 1970s—are increasingly regarded as methodologically suspect (Grusky and Sørensen 1998; Weeden and Grusky 2005). Instead, many analysts recommend grouping occupations into a small number of discrete classes (e.g. professionals, business owners, unskilled workers, etc.) based on factors like the amount of skill they require or the amount of authority they entail (e.g. Wright 1997).<sup>11</sup>

To measure the social class backgrounds of members of the U.S. House, I rely on the *Roster of United States Congressional Officeholders and Biographical Characteristics of Members of the United States Congress* (ICPSR and McKibbin 1997), a dataset that includes

biographical information about every member of Congress who served before 1997 drawn from the official *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*. The *Roster* dataset is not without its drawbacks; it is limited to the information in legislators' official profiles, and some of its class variables are operationalized in less-than-ideal ways. However, its historical breadth and its inclusion of systematic data on several measures of legislators' social class backgrounds make it an ideal starting point for research on the links between class and elite decisionmaking.

The *Roster* file's occupation variable places each legislator in the dataset into one of 48 categories based on the last non-political job listed in his or her *Biographical Directory* profile. I collapsed this coding scheme into seven categories:<sup>12</sup> farm owners, businesspeople, other private-sector professionals (such as doctors and architects), lawyers (who could not be disaggregated into private- and public-sector attorneys due to the way the occupation data in the *Roster* file were coded), politicians,<sup>13</sup> service-based professionals (such as teachers and social workers), and workers (industrial, farm, and union).<sup>14</sup>

Figure 2 plots the percentages of representatives in the House who fell into each of these occupation categories during each Congress between 1901 and 1996 (the end of the *Roster* dataset). With the exception of a modest increase in the percentage of representatives classified as career politicians in the early 1980s and a corresponding drop in the proportion of lawyers,<sup>15</sup> the occupational makeup of the House changed surprisingly little during the 20th century (despite seismic changes in the composition of the American workforce). For most of the last hundred years, between one and two thirds of representatives were lawyers. Businesspeople consistently made up about 20% of the chamber, and farm owners and other private-sector professionals together made up about 10%. Service-based professionals held a smaller percentage of seats, and workers were even rarer.

[Figure 2]

If legislators from different occupational backgrounds differ in ways that mirror class divisions in mass opinion, other things equal I expect to find that legislators from profit-oriented professions—businesspeople, farm owners, and other private-sector professionals—tend to be the most conservative on economic questions; that legislators last employed in working-class jobs tend to be the most liberal; and that those last employed in not-for-profit professions—politicians and service-based professionals—or as lawyers (an occupation category that includes both corporate attorneys and public defenders) fall somewhere in between.<sup>16</sup>

### *Measuring Roll Call Voting on Economic Legislation*

To determine whether these patterns are in fact evident in representatives' roll call votes, I examined two composite vote measures: first-dimension DW-NOMINATE estimates and roll call scores computed by the AFL-CIO's Committee on Political Education. DW-NOMINATE scores are based on every roll call vote cast in each Congress and locate legislators on a left-right scale representing the issues that have traditionally divided the two parties (Poole and Rosenthal 1997), which tend to revolve around economic issues and questions about the government's size and role in the market. DW-NOMINATE scores are especially useful because they are comparable across terms, which allows researchers to examine changes over time and to pool observations over many decades. They are less than ideal, however, in that they are not strictly a measure of each member's economic issue positions.

For that reason, I complement analyses of DW-NOMINATE scores with analyses of AFL-CIO scores, which were available in an existing dataset (Lublin 1997) for the years 1973-1992. The AFL-CIO's Committee on Political Education assigns each member of Congress a

score each year based on his or her choices on a small number of votes that the organization deems most important to the interests of workers. These scores are less comparable over time than DW-NOMINATE scores and are only available for the last few decades, but they reflect members' choices on issues central to the balance of power between different social classes.<sup>17</sup>

To facilitate exposition, I rescaled both the DW-NOMINATE and AFL-CIO scores to range between 0 and 100, with higher values signifying more votes cast in favor of conservative policies.

### **Class and Economic Policy Voting in the House of Representatives**

Did legislators from different social class backgrounds vote differently on economic issues? Figure 3 begins to answer this question by plotting average rescaled DW-NOMINATE and AFL-CIO scores across the seven occupation categories I created using pooled data on every representative in every 20th-century Congress for whom both the class and voting measures were available (1901-1996 for DW-NOMINATE scores, 1973-1992 for AFL-CIO scores).<sup>18</sup>

Occupational differences in roll call voting were striking. Representatives who entered politics after careers in profit-oriented professions—farm owners, businesspeople, and other private-sector professionals—voted substantially more conservatively than other members.

Representatives from working-class jobs, on the other hand, voted more liberally. And representatives who last worked as politicians and service-based professionals (the not-for-profit professions) and lawyers (the professional, ambiguous category) fell in between. The gap between the average DW-NOMINATE scores of the most liberal and the most conservative occupational groups—workers and farm owners—was almost 10% of the possible scale. On AFL-CIO scores, the gap was even more pronounced; workers and farm owners differed by

more than 50 points. Contrary to Alexander Hamilton's expectations, in 20th-century Congresses, merchants and mechanics did not have harmonious views about the government's role in the economy.

[Figure 3]

Figure 4 plots class-based differences in roll call scores by decade. Although the voting behaviors of some groups varied relative to others over time, from the 1940s onward, businesspeople, farm owners, and other private-sector professionals consistently had more conservative DW-NOMINATE scores than workers. As before, class-based differences were comparable but considerably more pronounced with AFL-CIO scores; in the three decades for which they were available, these measures were consistently ordered across occupations in the same fashion as DW-NOMINATE scores but differed by wider margins. Some scholars have speculated that historical changes like the rise of the welfare state, the diversification of the occupational structure, and across-the-board increases in living standards have muted class antagonisms and are bringing about the demise of class politics in advanced democracies (Clark, Lipset, and Rempel 1993). In Congress, however, class divisions do not appear to have declined—and may even have increased—in the last half century.<sup>19</sup>

[Figure 4]

These occupation-based differences in roll call voting on economic policy do not seem to be the spurious by-products of differences in other legislator or district characteristics. Figure 5 plots average DW-NOMINATE scores for representatives from each occupational background, this time dividing the sample by several other variables that might influence a representative's choices, such as the legislator's party identification, gender, and race; the partisan composition of the legislator's district (measured as the Republican share of the two-party vote during the last

presidential election); the representative's own vote margin in the last election; and the racial composition, median family income, and median age of the representative's congressional district.<sup>20</sup> (I focus here on DW-NOMINATE scores, which go back farther in time, in order to increase the number of observations in each subgroup of the data.)

[Figure 5]

None of these variables “explain away” the association between occupations and roll call voting.<sup>21</sup> For each subgroup of cases, the basic pattern documented in Figure 3 (repeated in the upper left corner of Figure 5) appears to hold: farm owners, businesspeople, and other private-sector professionals tended to vote more conservatively than lawyers, service-based professionals, politicians, and especially workers. Of course, many of the control variables themselves also predicted striking differences in DW-NOMINATE scores, most notably the legislator's party and race and the district's presidential vote margin and racial makeup. These factors are undoubtedly important in shaping legislators' choices in office; even after taking them into account, however, legislators' class backgrounds appear to have an independent influence on their economic policy votes.

Regression analyses tell a similar story. Table 1 reports results from least squares models that regressed rescaled DW-NOMINATE estimates (models 1 and 2) and AFL-CIO scores (model 3 and 4) on indicators for members previously employed as farm owners, businesspeople, other private-sector professionals, lawyers, politicians, and service-based professionals (workers were the omitted category). Models 1 and 3 were estimated with only these variables; models 2 and 4 added controls (coefficients reported in Appendix B) for legislator characteristics (party, age, race, gender, and education) and district characteristics (presidential voting, legislator's margin of victory, racial composition, median family income, median age, and state). Models 1

and 2 pooled observations across every Congress from 1963-1996, the years when data existed for each control variable; models 3 and 4 pooled data from 1973-1992, the years when both controls and AFL-CIO scores were available.

Occupational differences were substantial (and statistically significant) in these analyses. Each coefficient in Table 1 can be interpreted as the expected difference—on a 0-100 scale—between representatives in the category in question (e.g. lawyers) and those in the omitted category (workers), with higher values signifying more conservative voting behavior on the part of the former. In model 1, which regressed DW-NOMINATE scores on occupation indicators without controls, the estimated gap between the most conservative occupational groups—businesspeople and farm owners—and the most liberal group—workers—was approximately 13 to 17% of the possible scale. Adding control variables in model 2 substantially reduced the occupation coefficients, but the results still suggested that legislators who previously ran businesses and farms or who worked in other private-sector professions had roll call scores three to four points more conservative than legislators who last held working-class jobs.<sup>22</sup>

[Table 1]

Occupational differences in the roll call scores computed by the AFL-CIO were even larger. In the model without controls, former workers and former farm owners differed by an estimated 52 points. Even after adding controls, the gap remained substantial—according to model 4, farm owners, businesspeople, and other private-sector professionals voted against labor an average of 6 to 14% more often than workers.

It is important to note, moreover, that the models in Table 1 ignore the possibility that social class may be driving some of the variables treated as controls. If legislators' occupational backgrounds have some causal effect on their partisan identifications, election returns, or initial

decisions about whether to run for office in certain types of districts, the models reported here will understate the total effect of class on roll call voting. Disentangling these processes empirically is highly problematic, however, and for present purposes not strictly necessary. Even if we assume that class has no effect on any of the controls, the findings in Table 1 suggest that class predicts substantial differences in legislators' roll call votes that mirror class-based divisions in public opinion.

### **Alternative Social Class Measures**

Analyses of the Roster dataset find that representatives' occupational backgrounds matter a great deal for their choices on economic policy. But what about the other social class measures that scholars sometimes use? To check that occupations were the most appropriate class indices for this analysis, I examined the relationship between economic roll call voting and two common alternatives, education and financial resources.

The *Roster* dataset records whether each member of Congress attended college and, if so, whether his or her last college was a public or private institution. Although somewhat crude, this measure allowed me to test whether members of Congress with less education—those who had not attended college—differed systematically from those from a higher educational “class.” Models 5 and 6 in Table 3 below report regressions that related legislators' rescaled DW-NOMINATE and AFL-CIO scores to indicator variables for members who last attended college at public and private institutions (those who did not attend college were the omitted category). Consistent with findings in the public opinion literature, the differences between legislators with different educational backgrounds were modest and statistically insignificant.<sup>23</sup>

[Table 2]

Measures of legislators' financial resources fared poorly as well. Models 7 and 8 in Table 2 list results from regressions relating DW-NOMINATE and AFL-CIO scores to estimates of members' outside incomes and net worths generated using their annual financial disclosure statements, which are only available electronically for the 108th-110th Congresses (Center for Responsive Politics 2009).<sup>24</sup> Neither measure predicted differences in roll call voting scores. Alternative specifications (available on request) that entered each measure separately and that took into account potential non-linearities in the relationship between financial resources and vote scores reached similar conclusions.<sup>25</sup> Representatives' general economic orientations appear to be tied to how they previously earned a living, not how much education they received or how much money they earned.

### **Does the Numerical Underrepresentation of the Working Class in Congress Matter?**

One of the defining features of America's political system is that men and women from the working class seldom occupy important political offices. If legislators' class backgrounds shape their political outlooks in some systematic way, the numerical underrepresentation of working-class Americans could have dramatic effects on who wins and who loses in the policymaking process.

The evidence presented in this paper suggests that this is the case. In the House of Representatives, legislators' class backgrounds appear to have an independent effect on how they vote on economic policies, especially on the issues seen as most important to the material welfare of working-class Americans. The underrepresentation of the working class in Congress skews roll call voting in favor of conservative economic policies that are often characterized as beneficial to the upper class and that are more in line with affluent Americans' subjective policy

preferences (Bartels 2008, ch. 3). Put differently, descriptive inequalities in the class composition of political officeholding appear to have important consequences for the substantive representation of different social classes' economic interests.

It is difficult to know how different policy outcomes would be if the class composition of government were equal to that of the nation as a whole (given that there are so few working-class members of Congress in my sample and that I have data on individual choices, not collective decisions). Taken at face value, however, the individual-level results above suggest that descriptive inequalities in policymakers' class backgrounds likely have significant effects on the final results of the economic policymaking process. For instance, while the average member of Congress in my sample voted with the AFL-CIO approximately 56% of the time, models 3 and 4 in Table 1 suggest that if the class composition of Congress were identical to that of the nation as a whole, the average member would have supported the AFL-CIO's position between 59% of the time (model 4, with controls) and 69% of the time (model 3, without controls), which translates into approximately one to three more major progressive economic policies in each Congress (assuming that the AFL-CIO supports approximately two dozen bills every two years). Compared to this 3- to 13-point difference in the average member's AFL-CIO score in a class-balanced Congress, members in a race-balanced Congress would have differed by only 2 to 6 points, and members in a gender-balanced Congress would have differed by only 1 to 6 points.<sup>26</sup> The class composition of Congress appears to matter enough to push policy in a conservative direction on at least a few major economic bills in each Congress, and it appears to matter more for legislators' general economic orientations than other attributes that have received considerably more attention in the scholarship on representation.

Of course, the preceding analyses represent a first cut at a complex problem and leave many questions unanswered. How well do these results generalize to other policymaking institutions in the United States? Are there ways to measure the attitudinal factors that mediate the relationship between class and roll call voting? Do the trends documented here extend to other legislative behaviors like committee work or bill proposals?

These caveats aside, this paper provides the first systematic evidence that the class backgrounds of political decisionmakers influence policy outcomes on economic questions. Its findings are also relevant to larger debates about the relationship between politics and economic inequality in the United States. Although the near absence of working-class people in American political institutions could not have been the origin of the rising inequalities in distributional outcomes that the United States has experienced since the 1970s (since workers were underrepresented long before then) it may have muted the government's response to these sweeping economic changes. This paper's empirical results suggest that America's class-imbalanced legislative branch tends to favor economic policies more in line with the interests of the haves than with the needs of the have-nots. Although this study does not directly link economic inequalities and the class composition of political institutions, its findings suggest that our government might have done more to slow the rapid growth of resource disparities—and might do more in response to future economic shocks—if more policymakers were drawn from the social strata that suffer when inequality rises and economic hard times hit.

This study's results also speak to scholarly discussions about asymmetries in political influence in the United States. Several recent studies have shown that policymakers (Bartels 2008, ch. 9; Jacobs and Page 2005) and policy outcomes (Gilens 2005) tend to be highly responsive to the preferences of wealthier citizens and mostly unaffected by the views of low-

income Americans. For the most part, scholars have attributed these representational inequalities to imbalances in routine forms of political participation like voting and donating money to campaigns (see, for instance, Jacobs and Skocpol 2005). The findings presented in this analysis suggest that the causes of unequal representation in the United States are more complex than scholars and political observers currently recognize; who participates and who donates may affect who wins and who loses in the policymaking process, but who governs matters, too.

Political observers interested in reducing imbalances in political power in the United States should not limit their attention to the familiar policy proposals of promoting broader participation among working-class people and reforming the campaign finance system. Even districts where working-class people make up disproportionate shares of voters seldom elect working-class politicians. Even before the advent of the kind of astronomical campaign spending that has become a staple of modern congressional elections, working-class people seldom held national office. As long as policymakers have some discretion and as long as the working class is numerically underrepresented in political institutions, class-based inequalities in political influence will likely remain an important feature of America's democratic system. Political observers interested in reducing these representational inequalities should think seriously about the forces that discourage working-class Americans from holding political offices.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> These figures were based on alumni estimates for the Ivy League, Stanford, Chicago, Northwestern, West Point, and Georgetown. This set of universities is illustrative and is not meant to represent a definitive list of “elite” colleges. The percentages reported here were computed using alumni estimates (many of which are usefully summarized in “Ranking Black Colleges According to Alumni Listings in *Who’s Who*” 1996) and data from the *Roster of U.S. Congressional Officeholders* dataset (ICPSR and McKibbin 1997).
- <sup>2</sup> These figures were computed using data from the Census Bureau (Ruggles et al 2009) and the *Roster of U.S. Congressional Officeholders* dataset (ICPSR and McKibbin 1997).
- <sup>3</sup> These estimates and the information in Figure 1 were computed using Census data (Ruggles et al 2009) and the *Roster of U.S. Congressional Officeholders* (ICPSR and McKibbin 1997).
- <sup>4</sup> For instance, Jon Elster (1985, 331)—who is often cited in the contemporary class analysis literature (e.g. Herring and Agarwala 2008, 2)—defines a class as “a group of people who by virtue of what they possess are compelled to engage in the same activities if they want to make the best use of their endowments (i.e., tangible property, intangible skills, and cultural traits).”
- <sup>5</sup> Education measures sometimes predict conservative views (Kaufmann 2002) and sometimes predict liberal views (Mariani and Hewitt 2008; Newcomb 1958). Family social class

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measures are mostly uncorrelated with policy preferences once individuals' adult class positions are taken into account (Barber 1970; Langton 1969, ch. 2).

- <sup>6</sup> Interns at investment banks, skilled machinists, and graduate students, for instance, earn similar incomes but differ dramatically in terms of their socialization experiences, group loyalties, and expected lifetime earnings.
- <sup>7</sup> A handful of studies have examined whether lawmakers from specific occupations such as business (Witko and Friedman 2008) or law (Eulau and Sprague 1964; Miller 1995) stand out from other politicians, but this work has been sporadic and inconclusive.
- <sup>8</sup> Some notable examples include Aristotle ([350 BC] 1953, 17), who asserted that “the best legislators have been of a middle condition”; Adam Smith ([1776] 1953, 19), who worried that the owners of a society's productive technologies would not govern with the interests of the public at heart; John Stuart Mill ([1861] 2001, 133), who advocated government that would “bring together the best members of both classes”; and anti-Federalists in the United States, who charged that the proposed Constitution would advantage the upper class in elections and, consequently, in the policymaking process (Manin 1997, 111).
- <sup>9</sup> In *The Personal Roots of Representation*, Burden (2007, ch.2) argues that the factors that link policymakers' personal characteristics and their preferences are knowledge, values, self-interest, and ideology. Lawmakers' social class backgrounds could influence each of these intermediate psychological mechanisms: individuals' social class positions affect what they know, what they value, what they perceive as their self-interest, and what political ideologies they embrace. As Burden notes, determining which of these mechanisms are driving lawmakers' policy preferences is difficult—and not strictly necessary for establishing that a relationship exists between a characteristic and members' choices. Whether working-class

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Americans know more about the conditions of workers, care more about advancing workers' interests, see their own self-interest as linked to the welfare of the working class, or simply adopt the more economically liberal ideological commitments characteristic of working-class Americans, the consequences for policy and representation will be roughly the same.

<sup>10</sup> According to the dataset used in this analysis, only four senators from working-class occupations held office after 1900, and none served after 1950.

<sup>11</sup> Some even recommend using completely disaggregated occupation coding schemes with dozens of categories (Weeden and Grusky 2005). This approach is not feasible for this analysis, however, given the number of legislators available for study.

<sup>12</sup> This coding scheme is similar to the six-category occupational coding system that Hout, Manza, and Brooks (1995) use to study voting in the United States, which consists of professionals; managers, administrators, and nonretail sales workers; owners and proprietors; nonmanagerial white-collar workers; skilled workers and foremen; and semi-skilled and unskilled blue-collar workers. There are essentially four differences between these occupation categories and those that I use. First, I split Hout, Manza, and Brooks's professionals category into four groups: private-sector professionals like doctors and architects (whom I expect to behave more like businesspeople), service-based professionals like teachers and social workers (whom I expect to have more liberal economic preferences), lawyers (since I cannot distinguish between private- and public-sector lawyers, I treat them as their own group), and politicians (whom I regard as not-for-profit professionals). Second, since the Roster data identify businesspeople but do not distinguish between owners, managers and other white-collar employees, my business category consists of all three of Hout, Manza, and Brooks's white-collar business categories (managers, administrators, and nonretail sales workers;

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owners and proprietors; and nonmanagerial white-collar workers). Third, I distinguish between farm owners and other businesspeople to allow for the possibility that they might differ, although my expectation is that farm owners occupy a place in the class structure similar to that of business owners (in that they own the means of the production, profit is a paramount motive in their work, and their interests are often at odds with the interests of lower-level employees). And, fourth, my coding scheme has one occupation category—workers—that subsumes the skilled and semi-skilled workers categories in Hout, Manza, and Brooks’s coding scheme. This is out of necessity; the Roster dataset’s occupation categories do not allow me to distinguish clearly between these two groups.

<sup>13</sup> The career politician category includes legislators whose last recorded occupations involved politics (e.g. party officers, policy analysts), those whose *Biographical Directory* entries did not record any previous non-political occupation, and 11 cases representing members listed as retirees (although excluding these did not change any of this study’s findings).

<sup>14</sup> Appendix A lists the occupations in the *Roster* dataset and the collapsed groups used here.

<sup>15</sup> The abruptness of this change may reflect a reclassification of government attorneys.

<sup>16</sup> These expectations are similar to what Hout, Manza, and Brooks (1995) find in their analysis of voting in national elections; managers, owners, and proprietors are consistently the most likely to vote Republican, while skilled and semi-skilled workers are the most Democratic.

<sup>17</sup> They are also highly correlated with other economic interest group scores like those assigned by the Chamber of Commerce of the United States. From 1999-2008, for instance, AFL-CIO and Chamber of Commerce scores had a correlation of 0.887.

<sup>18</sup> To account for the fact that most representatives were observed more than once, I use robust-cluster standard errors—which “are unaffected by the presence of unmeasured stable [unit]-

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specific factors causing correlation among errors of observations for the same [unit], or for that matter, any other form of within-unit error correlation” (Bradley et al 2003, 215)—clustered by individual members.

<sup>19</sup> Of course, in light of the correlation between class and party, it is possible that the apparent class polarization evident in the top panel of Figure 4 could simply reflect party polarization. In either case, it is clear that class-based differences in legislative behavior are neither a recent phenomenon nor a withering feature of congressional decisionmaking.

<sup>20</sup> Data on legislators’ vote margins are from Lublin (1997) and Swift et al (2009). Data on district characteristics are from Lublin (1997) and were only available starting in 1963. Data on presidential voting are from Brady and D’Onofrio (2009) and were only available starting in 1953. The averages reported in each panel in Figure 5 were based on data pooled across as many 20th-century Congresses as possible, subject to these availability restrictions

<sup>21</sup> In the panels divided by median family income and median age, I divided the districts in the pooled dataset into terciles based on the variable in question. In the presidential vote panel, districts were divided into election-specific terciles based on the Republican vote share, although results were similar when districts were divided into those where the Republican share of the two-party vote was less than 40%, 40-60%, and greater than 60%.

<sup>22</sup> To check that pooling observations across Congresses (and, therefore, measuring the behaviors of most representatives many times) did not affect my findings, I replicated model 2 using rescaled Common Space DW-NOMINATE scores, which are only computed once for each legislator based on his or her entire voting record in Congress. The results (available on request) were similar, both in size and statistical precision. I also estimated model 2 separately for each of the four decades for which control variables were available. Except in the 1960s,

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the associations reported in model 2 were essentially the same, although coefficients were less statistically precise given the smaller sample sizes in these analyses (results available on request). It is unclear whether the findings for the 1960s reflect a genuine difference in the importance of class to congressional behavior or are the result of interrogating the dataset too aggressively by both estimating a model with many controls and subsetting the data.

<sup>23</sup> With controls in place, modest differences are evident, as Appendix B illustrates. These differences, however, are substantively small, are not in the expected direction—legislators in a higher educational “class” tend to vote slightly more liberally—and are empirically suspect since they are not robust to the exclusion of control variables.

<sup>24</sup> At the time of this writing, these data were available from 2004 (the second year in the 108th Congress) to 2007 (the first year in the 110th Congress); I used the 2004 and 2007 data to estimate legislators’ financial resources during the 108th and 110th Congresses and averaged the 2005 and 2006 estimates to generate measures for the 109th.

<sup>25</sup> Models (available on request) that used indicators for income or net worth ranges or that used continuous measures with square terms reached substantively similar conclusions.

<sup>26</sup> I generated these estimates by holding all variables at their observed values and setting the personal characteristic variables—either those for occupations, races, or genders—at their averages across the 1970, 1980, and 1990 Censuses. For occupations, this meant setting the farm owners variable at 0.013 (1.3% of citizens were farm owners), businesspeople at 0.173, other private-sector professionals at 0.101, lawyers at 0.004, service-based professionals at 0.077, and politicians at 0.005. For race, I set the Black indicator at 0.117, the Asian indicator at 0.028, and the Hispanic indicator at 0.09. For gender, I set the female indicator at 0.50.

### Appendix A: Original and Collapsed Occupation Groups

Broad Category	Narrow Category	Broad Category	Narrow Category
Farm Owners	Business (Ag. /Farming)	Politicians	Political Consultant Political Party Officer Pub Policy Analyst Public Relations/Lobbyist Unknown / None Retired
Businesspeople	Associate Director / CEO Business (Banking) Business (Contractor) Business (Insurance) Business (Investments) Business (Manufacturer) Business (Mining/Petro.) Business (Real Estate) Business (Retailing) Business (Transportation) Business (Unspecified) Communication Executive	Service-based Professionals	Charity Organizer College Administrator College Professor Education Admin. Guidance Councilor High School Admin. Librarian Minister/Priest Sec. School Teacher Social Worker Teacher (Unspecified)
Other Private-Sector Professionals	Accountant / Economist Actor Advertising Architect/Urban Planner Author Doctor/Dentist/Vet Engineer Hospital Administrator Journalist/Publisher Medical Office Manager Mortician Pharmacist Professional Athlete Radio and Television	Workers	Laborer Soldier Union Officer
Lawyers	Lawyer		

## Appendix B: Regression Results with Controls for Models 2 and 4 in Table 2

	2	4
Farm Owners (indicator)	16.63** (3.95)	14.31** (3.57)
Businesspeople (indicator)	12.97** (3.83)	5.95* (2.90)
Other private-sector Professionals (indicator)	11.01** (3.92)	6.58* (2.98)
Lawyers (indicator)	8.02* (3.77)	4.49 (2.76)
Politicians (indicator)	6.23 (3.88)	3.27 (2.85)
Service-based Professionals (indicator)	6.46 (3.97)	3.92 (3.00)
Age	-0.03 <sup>+</sup> (0.01)	-0.03 (0.04)
Female (indicator)	-0.86 (0.53)	-1.44 (2.03)
Black (indicator)	-5.57** (0.95)	-6.41* (3.15)
Hispanic (indicator)	-4.968** (1.120)	-16.448** (3.505)
Asian (indicator)	-4.008** (1.451)	-13.535** (2.479)
Republican (indicator)	18.797** (0.337)	53.443** (1.171)
Attended Public College (indicator)	-1.976* (0.797)	-6.462* (2.667)
Attended Private College (indicator)	-2.129** (0.785)	-5.883* (2.678)
Republican Presidential Vote Proportion	9.62** (0.98)	34.81** (4.31)
Representative's Vote Proportion	3.02** (0.71)	15.02** (2.68)
District: Percent White	0.03* (0.02)	0.05 (0.05)
District: Median Age	-0.07 (0.05)	-0.48* (0.19)
District: Median Family Income (in \$10,000s)	0.51** (0.14)	-2.73** (0.71)
Intercept	27.718** (2.605)	17.499* (8.219)
Dependent Variable	DW-NOM	AFL-CIO
Timeframe	1963-1996	1973-1992
Controls	Yes	Yes
N	6,165	4,243
R <sup>2</sup>	0.835	0.796
SE	4.880	15.948

Notes: <sup>+</sup> p<0.10, \* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, two tailed. Dependent variables are re-scaled to range between 0 and 100, with higher values signifying more conservative roll call voting behavior. Coefficients for state indicators are omitted but available on request. Standard errors are clustered by legislator.

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Figure 1: Women, Racial Minorities, and Workers in Congress, 1901-1996

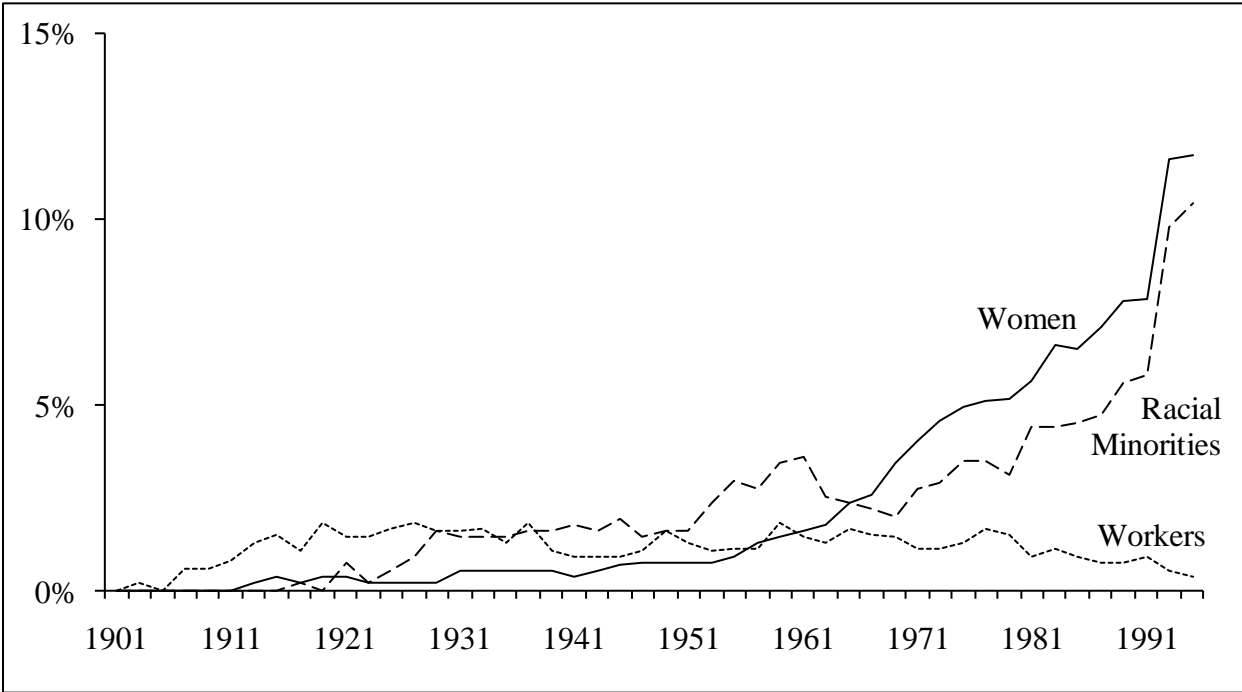


Figure 2: The Occupational Backgrounds of U.S. House Members, 1901-1996

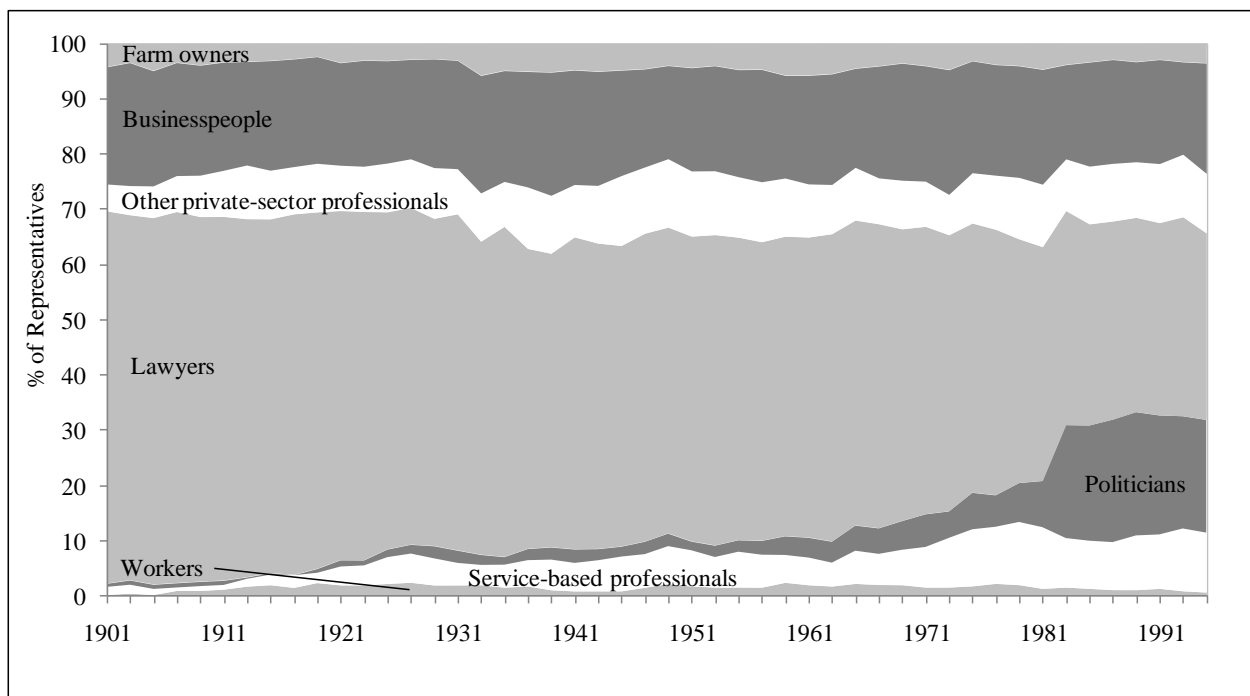
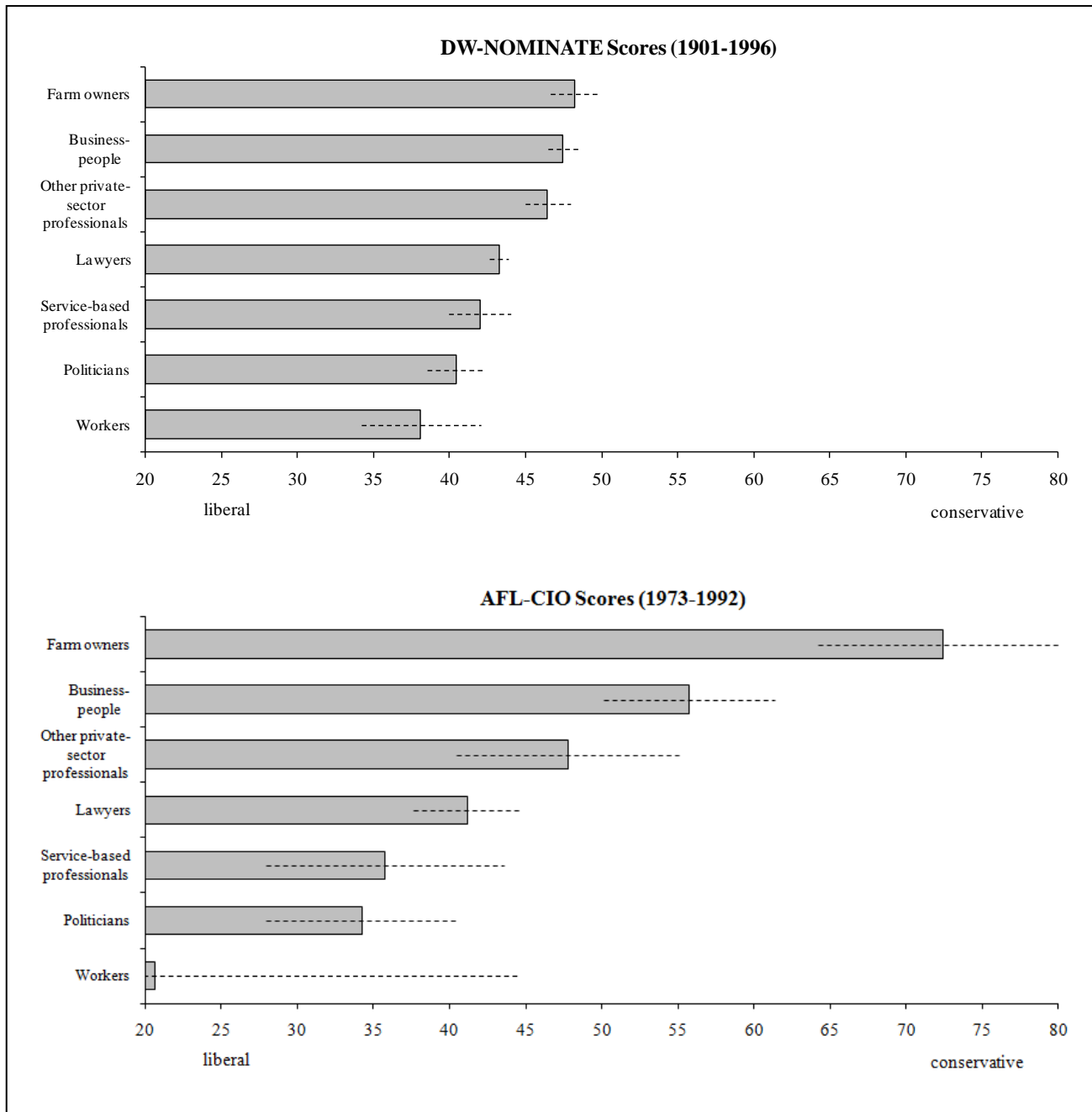
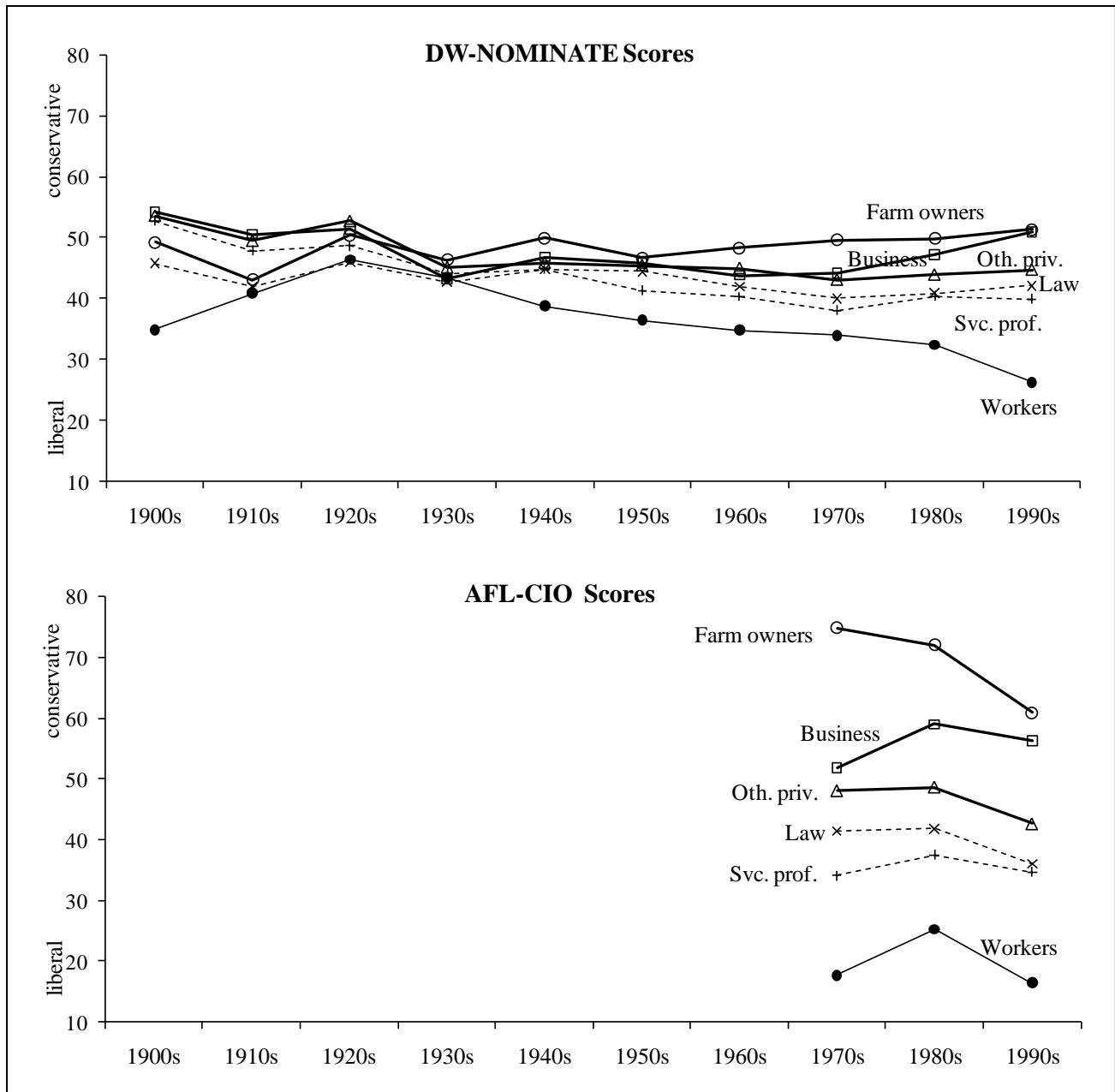


Figure 3: Average First-Dimension DW-NOMINATE Scores and AFL-CIO Scores, by Representatives' Social Class Backgrounds



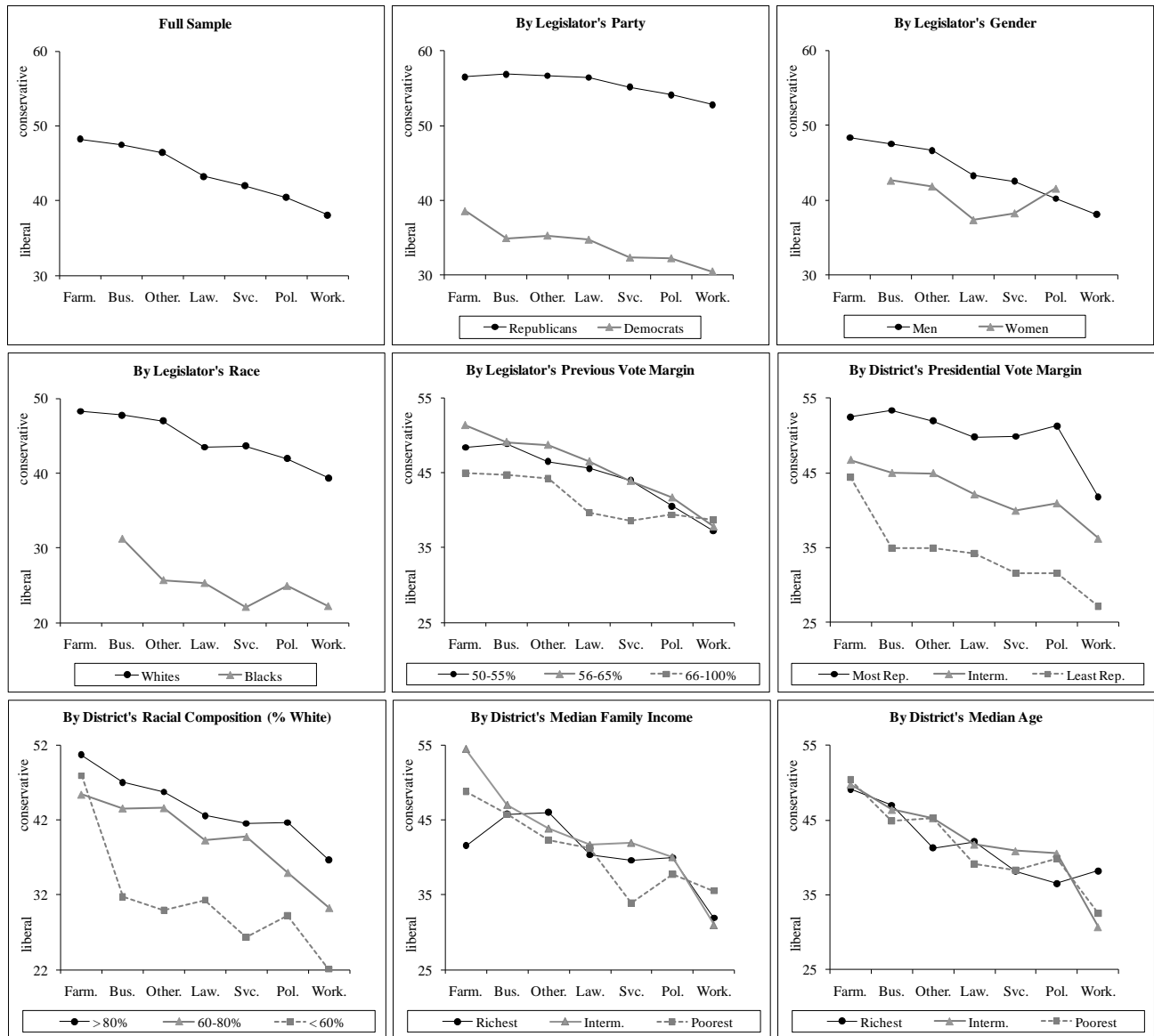
Notes: DW-NOMINATE and AFL-CIO scores are rescaled to range between 0 (most liberal) and 100 (most conservative). Dotted lines represent 95% confidence intervals estimated with clustered standard errors.

Figure 4: Class-based Differences in First-Dimension DW-NOMINATE Scores and AFL-CIO Scores, by Decade



Note: DW-NOMINATE and AFL-CIO scores are rescaled to range between 0 (most liberal) and 100 (most conservative). For aesthetic reasons, this figure omits representatives from the politician category, whose average roll call scores closely tracked those of lawyers.

Figure 5: Class-based Differences in DW-NOMINATE Scores, by Legislator and District Characteristics



Notes: Because of data limitations, the first five panels were based on data from 1901-1996, the panel labeled “By District’s Presidential Vote Margin” was based on data from 1953-1996, and the remaining panels were based on data from 1963-1996. Results were omitted if there were fewer than ten observations for a given group in the pooled dataset.

Table 1: Class and Roll Call Voting on Economic Policy in the House of Representatives

	1	2	3	4
Farm Owners	16.63** (3.95)	4.47** (1.41)	51.75** (12.90)	14.31** (3.57)
Businesspeople	12.97** (3.83)	2.52 <sup>+</sup> (1.32)	35.08** (12.54)	5.95* (2.90)
Other Private-sector Professionals	11.01** (3.92)	3.19* (1.38)	27.09* (12.76)	6.58* (2.98)
Lawyers	8.02* (3.77)	1.89 (1.31)	20.49 <sup>+</sup> (12.34)	4.49 (2.76)
Politicians	6.23 (3.88)	1.70 (1.33)	13.58 (12.62)	3.27 (2.85)
Service-based Professionals	6.46 (3.97)	1.53 (1.39)	15.09 (12.84)	3.92 (3.00)
Workers (omitted category)	--	--	--	--
Dependent Variable	DW-NOMINATE		AFL-CIO Scores	
Timeframe	1963-1996		1973-1992	
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes
<i>N</i>	7,414	6,165	4,307	4,243
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.062	0.835	0.073	0.796
SE	11.503	4.880	33.74	15.948

*Notes:* <sup>+</sup> p<0.10, \* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, two tailed. Cells report coefficients (with standard errors in parentheses) from models relating composite roll call scores (DW-NOMINATE estimates in models 1 and 2, AFL-CIO scores in models 3 and 4) to occupation indicators. Each dependent variable is re-scaled to range between 0 and 100, with higher values signifying more conservative roll call voting behavior. Standard errors are clustered by legislator. Control variables (which are included in models 2 and 4) and intercepts are omitted above; complete model results are listed in Appendix B.

Table 2: Alternative Social Class Measures and Economic Policy Voting in the House

	6	7	8	9
<i>Education</i>				
Attended public college (ind.)	-0.45 (1.58)	-3.66 (6.48)	--	--
Attended private college (ind.)	-2.41 (1.55)	-10.26 (6.41)	--	--
<i>Financial Resources</i>				
Net worth (in millions)	--	--	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.07)
Outside income (in millions)	--	--	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.09)
Intercept	43.76** (1.47)	51.39** (6.20)	45.66** (0.83)	44.50** (1.66)
Dependent Variable	DW-NOM	AFL-CIO	DW-NOM	AFL-CIO
Timeframe	1963-1996	1973-1992	1999-2008	1999-2008
<i>N</i>	7,441	4,316	1,624	1,624
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.007	0.010	0.001	0.000
SE	11.86	34.869	19.531	39.86

*Notes:* <sup>+</sup> p<0.10, \* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, two tailed. Cells report coefficients (with standard errors in parentheses) from models relating composite roll call scores (DW-NOMINATE estimates in models 6 and 8, AFL-CIO scores in models 7 and 9) and the explanatory variables. Each dependent variable is re-scaled to range between 0 and 100, with higher values signifying more conservative roll call voting behavior. Standard errors are clustered by legislator.