

Study suggests that in congress, working-class backgrounds matter

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New Berkeley research shows some members of Congress appear more influenced by working-class family backgrounds than others.

New UC Berkeley research shows that members of Congress with working-class childhoods—especially Democrats—are more likely to cast roll-call votes for policies expanding opportunities for low-income families in health care, food aid, the minimum wage and higher education.

Findings from the study, conducted by Jacob Grumbach, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Political Science and a graduate fellow at

Berkeley's Institute of Governmental Studies, are summarized in the June edition of Political Research Quarterly.

"Having a working-class background tends to make members of Congress (especially Democrats) more liberal," explained Grumbach. "There are other factors that make legislators more liberal, too, such as coming from a district with liberal voters, or being nonwhite or female—but coming from a working-class background is especially impactful."

Grumbach noted that almost all members of Congress are upper-class and held elite occupations before being elected to seats in Washington, D.C.

Grumbach noted that few Republicans with working-class experiences get elected to public office, and upper-class Republicans in Congress do not back government support programs for the working class as often as Democrats even if they did grow up in families of modest financial circumstances.

While recruiting political candidates from lower-paying jobs can be challenging because of the high costs of campaigning, he said it may be important for people who want more government support programs to work harder on behalf of political candidates who came from working-class families before rising to the elite.

"In an era of sharply rising economic inequality," Grumbach wrote in a summary of his research, "politicians hailing from working-class jobs can do a great deal to make American politics and policy more responsive to the needs of the average citizen ... because they will likely do more than other privileged officeholders to advocate policies that expand economic opportunities for all Americans."

"Legislators who were corporate lawyers with working-class parents approach policymaking differently (than) those who were corporate lawyers with corporate lawyer parents," Grumbach said in his paper.

He said memories of a working-class upbringing may help legislators hold more accurate views of the realities of American economic life. As an example of the opposite, he points to 2012 Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney's assertion that middle income is \$200,000 to \$250,000 a year, a range that actually represents the top 2 percent of earners. Romney came from an elite background; his father was one of the nation's most prominent businessmen and a governor of Michigan.

Grumbach concluded by suggesting that future research examine Congresses of the postwar period to determine any role of legislators' social mobility in the inequality-inducing American social and economic policy of recent decades.

More information: "Does the American Dream Matter for Members of Congress? Social-Class Backgrounds and Roll-Call Votes." *Political Research Quarterly*, first published on March 16, 2015. [DOI: 10.1177/1065912915572902](https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912915572902)

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