

Higher pay no enticement to blue-collar politicians, study finds

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Contrary to popular belief, increasing politicians' paychecks is not likely to encourage more working-class people to run for office, new research from Duke University finds.

Reformers often say that low legislative salaries are a big reason why wealthy or retired Americans are far more likely to hold office.

However, a study by Nicholas Carnes, assistant professor at Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy, and Eric Hansen, a Ph.D. candidate at UNC-Chapel Hill, found in [states](#) that offer more pay, legislatures remain dominated by white-collar professionals.

The study, "Does Paying Politicians More Promote Economic Diversity in Legislatures?" was published online in the *American Political Science Review* on Dec. 28.

"On a lot of measures, politicians who are paid more perform better," Carnes said. "Research shows they have greater expertise, show up for votes more often and are more productive. Reformers argue higher pay also would have the benefit of increasing economic diversity in our political institutions. Our research shows this isn't true."

What reformers overlook is the extraordinary cost of campaigning—in money, time and energy, Carnes said.

"Running for office takes months and months. Candidates have to attend dozens of public events, and get educated about different issues. They

have to make campaigning a full-time job, and that is the barrier that keeps out people who are not wealthy. If you would lose your home while campaigning, it doesn't matter whether the job—if you win—offers \$10,000 or \$80,000."

Previous research has shown white-collar professionals are over-represented in government office relative to the general population, and that the economic background of legislators affects their decision-making while in office.

More than half the country works in manual labor or service industry jobs, yet just 2 percent of congressional seats and 3 percent of state legislative seats are held by people who had blue-collar jobs before getting into politics. The shortage of blue-collar representatives leads to economic policies that favor affluent Americans, research has found.

The new study examined data on the salaries and employment backgrounds of state legislators in all 50 states. The data included Carnes' 2012 National Candidate Study, which surveyed 10,000 candidates who ran for state legislative offices that year, whether successful or not, as well as data compiled by the National Conference of State Legislatures in 1993, 1995 and 2007. Those data mirrored a 1979 survey by the Insurance Information Institute on the occupations previously held by state legislators nationwide.

Results were consistent across all the years studied, Carnes said.

Legislative salaries vary widely from state to state. New Hampshire and New Mexico are on the low end, paying, respectively, \$200 per two-year term and nothing but a \$150 per diem while in session. On the other end of the spectrum, California, New York and Michigan pay more than \$75,000 a year.

The number of former blue-collar workers holding elected state offices was lowest—about 2 percent on average—in states paying the highest salaries, and highest—about 7 percent—in states that pay the least.

"Rather than making political jobs more appealing to lower-paid people, it appears higher salaries make them even more attractive to higher-paid professionals and make it even more difficult for working-class people to break into politics," Carnes said.

More information: NICHOLAS CARNES et al, Does Paying Politicians More Promote Economic Diversity in Legislatures?, *American Political Science Review* (2016). [DOI: 10.1017/S000305541600054X](https://doi.org/10.1017/S000305541600054X)

Provided by Duke University

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