



# **White-Collar Government: The Hidden Role of Class in Economic Policy Making**

*Nicholas Carnes*

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Eight of the last twelve presidents were millionaires when they took office. Millionaires have a majority on the Supreme Court, and they also make up majorities in Congress, where a background in business or law is the norm and the average member has spent less than two percent of his or her adult life in a working-class job. Why is it that most politicians in America are so much better off than the people who elect them—and does the social class divide between citizens and their representatives matter?

With *White-Collar Government*, Nicholas Carnes answers this question with a resounding—and disturbing—yes. Legislators' socioeconomic backgrounds, he shows, have a profound impact on both how they view the issues and the choices they make in office. Scant representation from among the working class almost guarantees that the policymaking process will be skewed toward outcomes that favor the upper class. It matters that the wealthiest Americans set the tax rates for the wealthy, that white-collar professionals choose the minimum wage for blue-collar workers, and that people who have always had health insurance decide whether or not to help those without. And while there is no one cause for this crisis of representation, Carnes shows that the problem does not stem from a lack of qualified candidates from among the working class. The solution, he argues, must involve a variety of changes, from the equalization of campaign funding to a shift in the types of candidates the parties support.

If we want a government *for* the people, we have to start working toward a government that is truly *by* the people. *White-Collar Government* challenges long-held notions about the causes of political inequality in the United States and speaks to enduring questions about representation and political accountability.

## White-Collar Government: The Hidden Role of Class in Economic Policy Making Details

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## **From Reader Review White-Collar Government: The Hidden Role of Class in Economic Policy Making for online ebook**

### **Justin Powell says**

I should note that this is not a publication for the normal lay-audience, or at least doesn't intend to have been. It's written in scholarly style, with heavy citations, footnotes, tables, etc.

The simple conclusion that Carnes set out to first establish is that ones economic class or background heavily dictates how one votes when in office. White-collar votes in favor of white-collar interests, etc. The evidence is given in an overwhelming presentation and I think is thoroughly convincing. The downfall to such conclusions is that a majority of Americans have not benefited, or are represented in the government. Or at least haven't been represented in the time frame Carnes explores.

Highly recommended for the lay political junkie, or for those who actively explore scholarly discussions in political science.

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### **Jason Burkhardt says**

More statistics than anything else, but interesting to see there is actual data that correlates with what seems obvious - that those from wealthy/white collar backgrounds have more influence in government for their blue collar counterparts, and not due to any magical ability to govern better.

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### **Phil says**

Scholars of Congress usually focus on factors external to individual legislators--parties, constituents, lobbyists, etc.--to explain their behavior. Carnes turns the focus on to the members themselves showing that their class backgrounds has a significant influence on their behavior as legislators. He finds that members of Congress who have working class backgrounds are substantially more liberal, especially on economic issues, than members without such backgrounds. Carnes's research is a must for understanding both legislative behavior and the impact of inequality in American politics.

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### **Cameron DeHart says**

Can't believe I didn't read this earlier. A great little book packed with data and figures. I love that Carnes doesn't shy away from making normative statements.

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### **John says**

This short work of political science provides an interesting and informative take on an aspect of US

government that is rarely discussed; namely, the role of class in economic policy making.

Written by Nicholas Carnes, a professor at Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy, "White-Collar Government" relies on a substantive analysis with three main parts. The book begins by looking at the class structure of American political institutions, most notably the US Congress, and documents the extent to which those institutions are (and have been historically) dominated by the most privileged segments of society. Second, Carnes compares the attitudes of working-class and white-collar political leaders on assorted economic issues and finds stark differences between the two groups--differences that are reflected clearly in voting patterns. Lastly, Carnes explores the extent to which class differences influence which economic issues even advance to the voting stage and finds that legislators from working-class backgrounds generally must work harder to advance economic policies that benefit the working class than do white-collar legislators who attempt to advance economic policies favored by that constituency. Yet despite working harder, legislators from working-class backgrounds are less likely to see their policies enacted.

Based on his analysis, Carnes concludes that the elected members of political institutions like the US Congress are not so much "out of touch" with the working-class voters that dominate most constituencies as they are "out of step." Put differently, these representatives are more in tune with the interests of their own class and the dearth of representatives from working-class backgrounds ensures that white-collar interests dominate economic policy since almost all representatives effectively share the same worldview and general interests.

Overall, "White-Collar Government" is a very informative and engaging book that communicates its points clearly and with the support of much evidence yet seldom overwhelms the reader with the quantitative analyses that underpin many of the arguments. And the book combines that empirical evidence with some persuasive moral and ethical arguments about the deleterious effects that white-collar government has on the value of political equality and the very legitimacy of representative democracy.

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