Michael Michaud, a member of the United States House of Representatives, grew up in Medway, Maine, graduated from high school in East Millinocket, and worked at a mill and as a supervisor at the Great Northern Paper Company until his election to Congress in 2002. His website describes him as a "working class Mainer," without a college degree, who is in a "unique position among members of Congress to understand the problems that face real Americans here and around the country."

Indeed, he is. According to Nicholas Carnes, a professor of public policy at Duke University, blue collar workers make up about 9 percent of America's city councils and 3 percent of state legislatures. Legislators with substantial working-class experience constitute less than two percent of Congress, whose members have a median net worth of $1.5 million, almost twenty times the amount held by the median family in the United States.

In *White-Collar Government*, Carnes carefully documents this reality, which has been hidden in plain sight. And he demonstrates that it matters: politicians from the working classes, it turns out, think and vote differently from those with white collars on economic issues, including taxation, social spending and corporate regulations. With its compelling case that "who wins and who loses depends in large part on who governs," his rigorous book should command the attention of everyone who is concerned about the state of our democracy.

Using his own data for the first decades of the twenty-first century and somewhat less reliable information for the second half of the twentieth century, Carnes shows that on votes on economic issues the gap between working class members of Congress and farm owners, lawyers and businessmen exceeds the gender gap and the gap between legislators who represent districts with the highest and lowest median incomes. Surprisingly, perhaps, time spent in office does not result in the co-optation of legislators on these issues.

In essence, Carnes writes, the shortage of people from the working class, which accounts for more than half of the labor market, and the over-representation of white collar Americans in the House of Representatives and U.S. Senate, "means that tax policies are more regressive, business regulations are more pro-business, and social safety net programs are thinner."

Carnes' simulations suggest that, for example, had blue collar workers held seats in Congress in proportion to their numbers in the population as a whole, bills limiting business liability for Y2K computer malfunctions, reducing federal taxes for wealthy Americans in 2001, providing a $700 billion bailout for the financial services sector during the Great Recession would not have passed.

At the state level and in cities the results were similar, even when Carnes took into account fiscal resources, poverty levels, racial and ethnic demography, and the political party composition of the legislature. States and municipalities with more working class legislators tended to favor progressive economic policies and spend more on social welfare. By contrast, "across the board," white collar government has been "good for white collar Americans and bad for the less fortunate."

Having mobilized substantial evidence that the nation's current political system is broken because it violates the democratic principle that the needs and interests of every citizen should have equal weight, Carnes insists that the under-representation of blue collar workers is neither a necessary evil, the result of the invincible ignorance of blue collar workers, or the expression of the popular will. The system, he adds, "can be fixed."

As a model, Carnes points to the AFL-CIO of New Jersey, which applied the apprenticeship model from the building trades to recruit and train candidates to run for political office. In the 1990s, he points out, their New Jersey Labor Candidates School produced a large number of working class candidates. Aided by a vigorous get out the vote effort, about seven hundred of

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*Class Rules*  
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them won local and state elections, a 76 percent success rate.

The model, which rests on the proposition that many politically capable blue collar citizens are out there, is replicable, he suggests, even in states with weak unions. After all, Carnes points out, many grassroots organizations can do this work (they did it in recent decades to recruit women candidates).

The prospects for a successful outcome may not be as bright as Carnes thinks they are, but it’s refreshing isn’t it, to have a persuasive analysis of a pressing problem that concludes by proposing a practical solution and a claim that “changes like these aren’t rocket science. They just take a little hard work.”

*Skepticat*

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If a congressman owns 300 franchised restaurants (and one of them reportedly does) are they likely to be sympathetic for a higher minimum wage. If a senator owned a mega million health care empire (and one of them did) would saving patients health care costs be a high priority. Just who’s interests are being represented in a congress of mega millionaires anyway? SF writer Robert Heinlein in "Double Star" had a parliament where occupations rather than geographic areas were represented and by practicing members of real trades, professions, retirees etc. - and not rich guys bought by billionaires and global corporations. Think better representation of a much more diverse group of interests than the plutocracy might help. Methinks probably yes!

9 MINUTES AGO

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