

## Intersectional Approaches to Understanding Working-Class Candidates and Politicians

**Abstract**

The working-class population in the United States makes up roughly 60%<sup>1</sup> of the labor force today. According to a 2021 report<sup>2</sup> by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, women, especially women of color, and workers in the service occupation face higher rates of poverty compared to their white and more educated counterparts. Yet, when we look at descriptive representation, working-class politicians are vastly underrepresented (Carnes, 2013).

Class is defined in this dissertation as those individuals who have similar occupational positions in society and could potentially connect and understand each other because of those social interests and commonalities (Carnes, 2013; Olin, 1997). I build on previous work on class (Barnes, et al., 2021; Carnes, 2013) and candidacy (Lawless and Fox, 2010; Pitkin, 1967), and argue the literature on political elites and candidates should incorporate more intersectional ways to examine such underrepresentation. In this dissertation, I put forth a plan to answer the following three questions: Does working-class candidate identity—as it intersects with race, ethnicity, and gender—increase the likelihood of winning primary and general elections? Moreover, what barriers do working-class candidates encounter while running for office and can any of those barriers be alleviated by labor candidate training? Lastly, what attitudes do American respondents have about working-class candidates, and would they vote for them if given the opportunity? First, I hypothesize that while white men and women may use a working-class identity, women, particularly women of color, are also likely to leverage this identity due to their life experiences (Anzaldúa and Moraga, 1981; Crenshaw, 1990) and because of its effectiveness with voters during elections. Second, I hypothesize that undergoing a candidate labor training program will help alleviate some barriers and demystify the process of running for office. Lastly, I hypothesize that voters will have positive attitudes about working-class candidates and would vote for them if given the opportunity; previous work suggest voters do not hold negative biases towards working-class candidates and would support and vote for them (Carnes and Lupu, 2016a,b; Robison et al., 2020).

For this dissertation, I will implement a mixed-methods approach to answer these questions by leveraging observational candidate data, interviews with working-class candidates and politicians, survey experiments, and additional survey data. To answer these questions, I develop a theory, which I call intersectional class identity, that draws from multiple disciplines with a particular focus on class and intersectionality. In sum, I explore the ways class intersects with race/ethnicity and gender to further our understanding of political candidates and politicians and the way they present themselves, with a particular emphasis on the working-class and occupational backgrounds they present online and as they relate to political campaigns.

\*Please, email me at [vallejoe@msu.edu](mailto:vallejoe@msu.edu) for a copy of my dissertation chapter.

---

<sup>1</sup> Read more about the working-class in the U.S. [here](#).

<sup>2</sup> Read the BLS report [here](#) for more details.

## Dissertation Outline and Chapter Summaries

This dissertation will follow a traditional format within political science, which includes a total of six chapters. Listed below are my dissertation outline and chapter summaries.

### Dissertation Outline<sup>3</sup>:

- **Chapter One:** Introduction (Purpose of the dissertation, research questions, establishes the context of the underrepresentation of working-class candidates and politicians, and what it means to be working-class candidates and/or politicians).
- **Chapter Two:** Literature Review and Theory (Defining class and working-class identity, descriptive representation: race/ethnicity and gender, intersectional descriptive representation. Lastly, building on these theories, I develop a theory, which I call *intersectional class identity*).
- **Chapter Three:** “Who are Working-Class Candidates?” (Title of chapter).
- **Chapter Four:** “Labor Candidates and Training Programs” (Title of chapter).
- **Chapter Five:** “Do Americans Support Working-Class Candidates?” (Title of chapter).
- **Chapter Six:** Discussion and Conclusion (Summary of the dissertation, contributions to the literature and field, policy recommendations, and future work).

### Dissertation Chapter Summaries

- **Chapter One: Introduction**  
Chapter One introduces the historical definition of class and as it relates to the working-class. I describe why I choose to use occupations as the primary marker for class identification. It also describes and provides context for the underrepresentation of the working-class in political office and its importance. In a span of roughly 46 years, our ideas of what the working-class look like and the jobs they hold are no longer the same. For example, according to the report by Draut (2018), while in 1970s the working-class was defined primarily as white (nearly 88%) men in manufacturing jobs (Evans and Langsæther, 2021), in present-day the demographic trends of the working-class population are a lot more diverse racially and occupationally. For example, Latinx and Black people comprise around 35% of the working-class today while whites comprise roughly 51% Draut (2018). Thus, both women and racial minorities hold most working-class occupations today. In sum, scholars tend to overlook multiple, overlapping identities, such as race/ethnicity, gender, and class, and the role they serve when political candidates both decide to run for and serve in elected office.
- **Chapter Two: Literature Review and Theory**  
Chapter Two discusses why political science scholars should examine class in combination with other descriptive identities, such as race/ethnicity and gender. The underlying assumption is that people who hold similar jobs in society will be more likely to have similar experiences and potentially shared economic and political interests. Working-class politicians also support more liberal economic policies in comparison to

---

<sup>3</sup> Note that chapters three, four, and five will include their respective methodology, methods, analysis, and findings per study. I implement a mixed-methods approach by leveraging observational candidate- and election-level data, interviews with working-class candidates and politicians, survey experiments, and additional survey data.

legislators of different economic backgrounds (Carnes, 2013). Building off the work by Brown et al., (2021, 2022), Phillips (2021), and Reingold et al., (2020), this dissertation will also incorporate intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1990) and theory of the flesh (Anzaldúa and Moraga, 1981) as the primary theoretical frameworks for helping scholars better understand marginalized, underrepresented candidates and politicians. Taken together, I leverage both theories to build *intersectional class identity theory*. *Intersectional class identity theory* posits that candidates and politician with multiple intersecting, marginalized identities will face unique challenges both when running for office and once elected.

- **Chapter Three: “Who are Working-Class Candidates?”**

Chapter Three explores the interconnection between race/ethnicity, gender, and class primarily by analyzing observational data. I build on data I helped collect and code from the Candidate Characteristics Cooperative (C3) Database<sup>4</sup> for the 2018<sup>5</sup> and 2020<sup>6</sup> election cycles. The C3 Database is a collaborative research project funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF) and contains hand-coded race/ethnicity and gender of all primary and general election U.S. state legislative candidates (both upper- and lower-chambers) that ran for elected office in 2018 and 2020, in all 50 states, regardless of whether they advanced from the primary and general election. Moreover, I will be using data provided by Eric Hansen, which was built on top of Shor and McCarty’s 2011 data<sup>7</sup>, and contains state legislative incumbent candidates from 1993 to 2014 elections. Lastly, I collected additional occupational data by working on a collaborative, outside project<sup>8</sup> funded by the NSF for the 2022 state legislative elections. Overall, these data contain state legislative elections and occupational data from a large number of states and about thirty years’ worth (1993 to 2022) of elections to further both the internal and external validity of my research.

- **Chapter Four: “Labor Candidates and Training Programs”**

Chapter Four focuses on an examination of working-class candidates, with a specific focus on women of color. The primary goal of this chapter is to examine how women of color candidates’ socioeconomic background or labor union experience shapes their path to running for office. I work with candidates running and/or elected for various levels of government, specifically local- and state-level. I am working with the alumni of several candidate training programs across the country. I seek to discern whether taking part in a labor candidate training program helps those with a union background and/or working-class background demystify the campaign process and potentially limit any perceived

---

<sup>4</sup> Read some of my co-authored public-facing work [here](#) to learn more about some of the research produced as a result of the C3 Database.

<sup>5</sup> Fraga, Bernard L.; Juenke, Eric Gonzalez; Shah, Paru, 2021, “Candidate Characteristics Cooperative (C3) 2018 Data”, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/VHAPHV>, Harvard Dataverse, V2, UNF:6:xIhBPOhz4IjhD/x3KsR4rw== [fileUNF]

<sup>6</sup> Fraga, Bernard L., Eric Gonzalez Juenke, Paru Shah. “Candidate Characteristics Cooperative Database, 2020 State Legislative Elections.” Working Project. Unpublished.

<sup>7</sup> Shor, Boris; McCarty, Nolan, 2014, “Individual State Legislator Shor-McCarty Ideology Data, July 2014 update”, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/26805>, Harvard Dataverse, V1, UNF:5:B/ieM8k2T3p72LQHHCJp/Wg== [fileUNF].

<sup>8</sup> Carnes, Nicholas and Eric R. Hansen. 2022. The State Legislators Dataset, Version 1.4 [computer file]. Durham, NC: Duke University. Available online from [www.duke.edu/nwc8/stateleg.html](http://www.duke.edu/nwc8/stateleg.html).

barriers. I have collected a total of 20 interviews and my goal is to collect approximately 25-30. In sum, learning more about the campaign process and potential barriers working-class candidates face has the potential to change who runs for political office, especially women and racial/ethnic minorities who are vastly underrepresented at all levels of government.

- **Chapter Five: “Do Americans Support Working-Class Candidates?”**

Chapter Five examines U.S. voter attitudes towards working-class candidates. The primary goal of this chapter is to examine what attitudes and thoughts voters have about such candidates, specifically those with intersectional racial/ethnic and gender identities. I leverage both quantitative and qualitative survey data. I pull from various sources of data, such as the following: an original 2020 pre-election Lucid survey, the 2020 Collaborative Multiracial Post-Election Survey (CMPS), both the 2022 and 2023 Cooperative Election Study (CES) surveys, an original 2023 Lucid survey, and the 1984-2020 American National Election Studies (ANES) surveys. The surveys contain a combination of demographic, political, and experimental data. In sum, these data will help us gain a greater understanding of whether voters would potentially like to see, support, and vote for working-class candidates.

- **Chapter Six: Discussion and Conclusion**

Lastly, Chapter Six explores the implications of the dissertation and findings for political elites, political ambition, and institutions. I revisit current gaps in the literature and discuss how the dissertation contributes to addressing such gaps. I include policy implications and recommendations for scholars, policy makers, political parties/leaders, unions, labor advocates, and interest groups alike with a specific focus on local- and state-level candidates and political. In conclusion, this chapter ends with a brief discussion of my future research agenda.