



How Everyday Americans Are Running for Office ...and What Happens When a Waitress Gets Elected

New Research From American Rights at Work

In an election year, it's important to ask whether the people in elected office really understand what life is like for average Americans. Trends indicate that being wealthy is increasingly a requirement to run for office. According to a recent analysis by *The Washington Post*, "Between 1984 and 2009, the median net worth of a member of the House has risen 250 percent...rising from \$280,000 to \$725,000 in inflation-adjusted dollars. Over the same period, the wealth of an American family has declined slightly, with the median sliding from \$20,600 to \$20,500, according to the Panel Study of Income Dynamics from the University of Michigan."ⁱ

In the era of Citizens United, with extremely costly campaigns, it's no surprise that members of Congress are wealthier and far removed from the day-to-day experiences of Americans who struggle to stay afloat, or just barely live within their means. Aside from campaign finance reform, how can we address this disconnect between elected officials and the people they represent? We found one encouraging effort: unions across the country are encouraging their members – everyday Americans like waitresses, nurses, and police officers – to run for elected office at the local, state and even federal level. And as our research demonstrates, when members of Congress held jobs like nurse, teacher, and police officer before entering office, they were more likely to take pro-worker positions such as protecting Social Security, enacting stronger workplace safety and discrimination protections, and reforming the financial industry.

Case Study: How Does a Waitress Get Into Office?

Michael Wasser, Senior Policy Analyst, American Rights at Work

The Culinary Workers Union Local 226 is an example of one union helping to develop its members as leaders, and eventually, elected officials. Based in Las Vegas, the Culinary Workers – a part of Unite Here – represents 60,000 members, including bellhops, laundry room attendants, housekeepers, and cocktail waitresses.ⁱⁱ Michael Wasser, senior policy analyst at American Rights at Work, traveled to Las Vegas to learn the story of one member candidate, Maggie Carlton.

Carlton is a 14-year Culinary Workers member who worked as a waitress at the Treasure Island casino while successfully running for and then serving in public office.ⁱⁱⁱ Her shop floor experiences as a union member influenced her path to political candidacy. While waitressing in the casino's coffee shop, Carlton served as a bargaining team member, shop steward, and volunteer on the union's organizing and political campaigns. She participated in negotiations for three collective bargaining agreements, sitting across the table from the country's top gaming executives.

Through these leadership roles within the union, Carlton gained experience directly crafting workplace policy and advocating for workers' interests. Reflecting on the experience, Carlton notes she learned about "...working with people, the drive for consensus, learning to put groups of folks together..." Her path to political office began when Culinary Workers staff told a group of stewards, including Carlton, that they thought it would be valuable to have a worker candidate run for office in a Las Vegas-area state senate district. Carlton decided to run, and throughout both the primary and general campaigns, she walked the streets of her district after work each night, introducing herself to voters and sharing how she would represent the interests of ordinary workers in the state senate. The Culinary Workers supported her by mobilizing voters in door-to-door communications and phone banking. Carlton won the election, unseating an establishment-backed incumbent in the Democratic primary before emerging victorious in the general election.

Undeterred by the pomp and circumstance of the statehouse, Carlton started work on a variety of pro-worker policy initiatives, providing the perspective of a working mother in committee hearings and caucus conferences. When the legislature wasn't in session, Carlton kept working as a waitress at Treasure Island. She did this throughout her 12 years in the state senate before term limits forced her to move to the state assembly, where she continues to serve working families of Las Vegas.

Involvement in union-related work also served as a conduit for Steven Horsford's political career in Nevada, according to an interview with Michael Wasser. Before successfully running to serve in the state senate, he led the Culinary Academy of Las Vegas, a training program jointly operated by the Culinary Workers and the Las Vegas casinos where members work, a job he still holds outside of his political work.^{iv} Horsford, a member of Culinary Workers Union Local 226, works with both the union and casinos to develop programs benefiting employees and employers. Through the Culinary Academy, workers gain training opportunities that are critical to career development in Las Vegas' hospitality industry. In turn, the casinos and resorts benefit from high-performance, high-skilled employees.

Having held an interest in politics and public policy from a young age, Horsford decided to run for state senate in 2004. Like Carlton, he looked to the Culinary Workers for strategic advice, speaking with the union's seasoned staff about the details of running for public office. Horsford won a crowded Democratic primary and, later, the general election with assistance from the union. Like in Carlton's campaign, Culinary Workers' members helped register voters, knocked on doors, and participated in phone banking operations to garner support for Horsford in his district.

Horsford notes that his Culinary Academy work provides valuable experience for serving in elected office, particularly in his role as Nevada Senate majority leader. Just as legislators in the political arena face varied factions and interests

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— D. Taylor, Secretary-Treasurer, Culinary Workers Union Local 226

members, but for all people that are trying to get access to employment or trying to move their career or advance their career.”

The Culinary Workers Union leadership understands the problem of this chasm between elected representatives and the people they represent. As Secretary-Treasurer D. Taylor told Wasser, “Everyday people who wait on tables, clean rooms, and make food should have a voice as compared to lawyer-dominated legislatures, business-dominated legislatures. That the common sense of the average person was just getting drowned out, that's why [the union] wanted to elect some of [its] own to be in the state legislature.”



Maggie Carlton is a 14-year Culinary Workers member who worked as a waitress at the Treasure Island casino while successfully running for and then serving in public office.

clamoring for attention, Horsford must work to find ways to satisfy multiple interests in the labor-management partnership. He notes, “[The Culinary Academy leadership] have a very delicate balance to make sure that we’re achieving the objectives [of all stakeholders]...and forging consensus sometimes when it does not look like it is there initially.” Like Carlton brings the life experiences of a working mom to her political role, Horsford connects his Culinary Academy work to his legislative service. “What I have tried to do in my experience at the [Culinary Academy] has been to try to inform [the legislative work], not just for union

New Data: What Happens When a Nurse or Teacher Is Elected?

J. Ryan Lamare, Former Research Analyst, American Rights at Work,
Assistant Professor of Labor Studies and Employment Relations, Penn State University

Once an everyday worker like a teacher or police officer is elected into office, what is the tangible impact of their background on their voting record? To understand this question, Penn State University Assistant Professor Ryan Lamare examined the voting records from 1994–2011 of the members of Congress from California who either had a working class or middle class occupation (like teacher, police officer, nurse) or who noted their membership in a union from 1994–2011.^v Lamare found that a politician’s union background significantly and positively influences his or her likelihood of taking a pro-worker policy position. Members with a union background had more “worker-friendly” voting records (on issues ranging from Social Security, unemployment, discrimination, and financial industry reform), even when controlling for factors like party affiliation, political changes in the district, union financial support, demographic characteristics, and a number of other factors that could influence someone’s voting pattern.^{vi}

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While Lamare’s findings are still preliminary in nature and have not yet been submitted for peer review, his results that a member’s background is a highly meaningful determinant of voting are in line with similar research by Duke University professor Nick Carnes. Carnes found that a U.S. House member’s occupation before being elected influences how liberal or conservative he or she votes.^{vii}

Conclusion

Clearly, an individual’s life experiences and background shape how they vote, which is why it’s a serious concern that more and more members of Congress are from elite backgrounds, with little understanding or empathy for the experiences of average Americans. Yet if you waited tables to support your family, you bring the real perspective and values of everyday working Americans to the policy decisions you make in office – simply because you are affected by them too.

With immense financial barriers to elected office, unions are a critical source of support for everyday workers who decide they want to represent their communities. Union members build demonstrable leadership skills through their roles as stewards or in bargaining, and some are ready to take the plunge from there into elected office. Union members are also out there knocking on doors and calling voters on behalf of candidates – in Carlton’s case, their co-worker – who have similar life experiences.

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- i. Whoriskey, Peter. “In Focus: Lawmakers’ wealth leaves voters behind,” *The Washington Post*, 27 Dec. 2011.
 - ii. About Culinary Workers Local 226. (2012). Retrieved from: <http://www.culinaryunion226.org/about.asp>.
 - iii. Having developed an interest in healthcare from her time as shop steward and a member of the legislature, Maggie left Treasure Island to work for a healthcare-focused nonprofit in 2000.
 - iv. --. (2012). 2012 Media Kit. Las Vegas, NV: Culinary Academy of Las Vegas, p. 3.
 - v. The California Congressional delegation was chosen for review since there were enough members with union backgrounds to make any determinations from the data.
 - vi. Members’ “pro-worker” voting records are based on the AFL-CIO Congressional scorecard. Each year, the AFL-CIO tracks the votes of all Members of Congress on legislation the institution took a position for or against. The legislation includes financial industry reforms/ consumer protections, environmental issues, protections for Social Security & Medicare, and employment-related bills covering discrimination, unemployment extensions, and workplace safety. <http://www.aflcio.org/Legislation-and-Politics/Legislative-Voting-Records?termyear=2009&act=3&location=House&memberid=>
 - vii. Carnes, Nicholas (2012). Does the Numerical Underrepresentation in Congress Matter? *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 37(1), 5–34.