

CAMPAIGNING WITH CLASS: THE EFFECT OF CANDIDATE WEALTH ON  
VOTERS' EVALUATIONS

Meredith L. Sadin  
University of California, Berkeley  
[msadin@berkeley.edu](mailto:msadin@berkeley.edu)  
Tel: (401) 742-2249

**ABSTRACT** Most candidates are much wealthier than the people they aim to represent. Do Americans care? Or are voters content to elect people who are much better off than they are? I present evidence from four survey experiments that manipulate the social class of hypothetical political candidates. I show that people are less likely to vote for a wealthy candidate when his wealth is tied to big business or explicitly compared to that of average Americans'. This finding holds true regardless of the respondent's partisan identification and regardless of the candidate's party. I also find that a candidate's *current* class is only part of the story as voters are also less likely to vote for a candidate with privileged upbringings. This study provides the first investigation that illustrates that a candidate's social class resonates with voters.

During his 1992 bid for re-election, President George H. W. Bush confronted a checkout scanner at the National Grocers Association convention and commented that he was “amazed by some of the technology.” While Bush later insisted that his comment was taken out of context, the media pegged him as an elitist whose, “view of the outside world remains essentially that of a rich man who has spent virtually all of the past twenty years in a world of boardrooms and limousines” (Schultz, 1E). The media’s reaction to this gaffe was not an aberration. Historically, when candidates’ words or actions are emblematic of their upper class status, the fourth estate reacts with disdain. There was a similar outcry when John McCain could not remember how many homes he owned, when John Edwards spent \$400 on his haircut, and when Mitt Romney wagered \$10,000 during the 2011 Iowa Republican debate.

However, while the media and electoral opponents punish candidates when their wealth becomes salient, the fact remains that most lawmakers *are* incredibly wealthy. National elected officials are better off than a majority of Americans in educational attainment, occupational status, and financial resources (Carnes 2012). The average wealth of members of congress between 2004 and 2011 ranged between 12 and 17.5 million dollars for the Senate, 4 and 6 million for the House, and 160 and 230 thousand dollars for the average American (Center for Responsive Politics 2014). Additionally, between 40-50% of members of Congress are millionaires, while only 1% of American citizens can say the same (Center for Responsive Politics 2014).

How do we reconcile the evidence that indicates candidates get punished for their wealth by the media and their opponents with the fact that most elected officials are, in actuality much wealthier than the people they represent? In truth, political science

research has paid very little attention to whether a candidate's social class matters to voters. Despite the prevalence of information and discourse about candidates' social class backgrounds in the modern campaign, political scientists have yet to systematically examine whether voters take aspects of a candidate's class profile into account and how this information matters. Do Americans punish candidates when their wealth or social advantages become particularly salient? Or are voters content to elect an entirely "white collar government?"<sup>1</sup>

My findings suggest that voters do indeed penalize wealthy candidates, but only under certain conditions: when their wealth is tied to big business and when it is compared to average Americans'. Moreover, a candidate's current class is not all that matters – voters are less likely to vote for candidates that grew up in wealthy homes as well. These findings illuminate the understudied issue of how class operates in the context of American campaigns and highlight the class-based shortcuts that citizens use to evaluate their representatives.

## SOCIAL CLASS AS A SHORTCUT FOR CANDIDATE EVALUATION

Research on social class—particularly attitudes towards the rich—is timely. Over the past few decades, economic inequality has risen at an alarming rate, while class mobility has stagnated (Bartels 2008). During this time the average real income of the top 5% of American households increased by 90% between 1975 and 2003, while the average real income of the poorest quintile increased by only 10% (Bartels 2008).

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<sup>1</sup> "White-collar government" is a phrase coined by Nicholas Carnes in his similarly-titled book (2013).

Membership in class groups also serves as a basis for interpersonal evaluation and discrimination. Fiske et al. (2002; 2007) found that individuals perceive the rich to be less warm but more competent than other class groups. Conversely, wealthier Americans have been shown to hold negative stereotypes about the poor (Darley and Gross 1983; Fiske et al. 1999) and to express unease in relating to those less well-off than themselves (Bullock 1995; Lott 2002).

Voters frequently use candidates' personal characteristics in order to make inferences about them. A candidate's party is a defining heuristic in American political decision-making, providing a cue to voters about their personality, behavior in office, and policy positions (Rahn 1993). People also draw a variety of conclusions about candidates on the basis of race (Citrin et al. 1990; McDermott 1998; Weaver 2012), gender (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; McDermott 1998), religion (Calfano and Djupe 2009; Campbell, Green, and Layman 2010; McDermott 2007; 2009), and even whether they think a candidate is attractive or not (Banducci et al. 2008; Sigelman et al. 1986). Informational shortcuts like these are a ubiquitous facet of political reasoning. Citizens often use them in an unconscious and automatic way to make sense of a complex political world. As Popkin (1991) noted, "Demographic facts provide a low-information shortcut to estimating a candidate's policy preferences . . . Where these characteristics are closely aligned with the interests of the voter, they provide a basis for reasonable, accessible and economical estimates of candidate behavior" (62).

However, to date, no research has examined whether voters take a candidate's social class into account – or in particular, what they infer about wealthy candidates. This lacuna in the literature is surprising considering the prevalence of information about a

candidate's social class in the modern campaign. If social class operates as a heuristic, it is most likely that it does so when it is accessible. As such, this question is ripe for research using candidate evaluation—a context in which class cues abound. Candidates' social class is fodder for political pundits (Parker 2007); included on candidates' web sites,<sup>2</sup> referenced in stump speeches (Huckabee 2008), featured in political advertising (Obama 2008) and utilized as campaign strategy (Nagourney 2003).

When voters evaluate candidates, they often use a *goodness-of-fit* or *representativeness heuristic*. In other words, they might draw conclusions about a rich candidate by asking themselves how similar he or she is to their own stereotype of rich people in general (Kahneman and Tversky 1972; Popkin 1991, 74). A majority of people think that the rich are less warm than others (Cuddy et al. 2008; Fiske et al. 2002; Fiske et al. 2007). If voters think of rich people as having these characteristics, when they learn that a candidate is also rich, they may think that the candidate is also cold.

Class—unlike race or gender—is not an immutable characteristic. As such, this project does not only examine perceptions of current candidate wealth, but motivates these perceptions from an understanding of “attributions for wealth” as well as one’s “origins” which hinges on a more nuanced understanding that class-based stereotypes are inextricably intertwined with assumptions about mobility.

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<sup>2</sup> See for example the web sites of Rep. Xavier Becerra (D-CA) available at <http://becerra.house.gov/about-xavier/>, Rep. Andre Carson (D-IN) available at <http://carson.house.gov/about/biography>, Rep. Mike Coffman (R-CO) available at <http://coffman.house.gov/about/full-biography>

## **A Candidate's Current Social Class**

The little we do know about citizens' attitudes towards upper class candidates, we must extrapolate from work on group stereotypes in social psychology, which does not explicitly manipulate a candidate's social class profile within a campaign environment (e.g., Cuddy et al. 2008; Fiske et al. 2002; Fiske et al. 2007). According to this research, the rich are perceived as highly competent but very cold. In this way, stereotypes about the rich are "ambivalent"—meaning the group is perceived as high on one dimension (competence) but low on another (warmth). Public opinion research confirms this. A Pew Report confirms these findings: 43% of Americans thought the rich were more intelligent than the average person and 55% of Americans reported that they thought the rich were more greedy than the average person (Pew Research Center 2012). I hypothesize that voters apply the same attitudes to rich candidates as they do to rich people in general.

*H1. Voters will perceive upper class candidates as more competent but less warm or understanding of their concerns than their working class or control counterparts.*

How might these attitudes translate into vote preferences or penalties? After all, thinking a politician is cold does not necessarily mean that one will not vote for them (one only need look at the dreadfully low feeling thermometer ratings for "politicians" as a group on the American National Election Study to confirm this). As such, I propose that voters will only penalize rich candidates when they perceive them as an explicit threat to their interests.

According to social identity theory, when a person confronts a new group he or she immediately evaluates relative closeness to that group to determine whether the members are part of the evaluator's in-group (a close association) or out-group (a distant

association) (Tajfel 1970). People form these associations quickly and may do so on the basis of very minimal distinctions (Tajfel et al. 1971). For example, people may ask, “Is this group one I belong to? Are they like me?” Once they determine the answer to this question they determine how to respond. If the evaluator feels close to a target group, there is a high degree of preference for this group over other out-groups. This “in-group favoritism” can be expressed in a variety of different ways—e.g., through high favorability, increased liking, or an allocation of resources (see Tajfel 1982 for a review). Conversely, if the evaluator feels distant and dissimilar from the group, it is labeled an “out-group” and people exhibit the opposite reaction, often derogating out-group members. This derogation is especially pronounced under conditions in which the out-group is perceived as blocking the goals or interests of one’s in-group (Turner and Tajfel 1979; see Hewstone et al. 2002 for a review). I present two cases of a perceived threat to voters interests and test them both – a wealthy candidate that is tied to big business and a wealthy candidate whose wealth and advantage is compared to the average American’s.

Voters may see wealthy candidates as a threat when they are explicitly tied to big business. Americans hold particular dislike for the rich when they are associated with big business as they are perceived as competing with average Americans’ interests in a zero-sum game (McCloskey and Zaller 1984). According to a 2002 Gallup poll, 38% of Americans saw big business as the biggest threat to the country and these sentiments only increased with the coverage of Occupy Wall Street and the recession. Mainstream network coverage mentioned the phrase “corporate greed” five times from June through September of 2011, and 62 times in the month following the protests. A recent analysis completed using LexisNexis found that MSNBC used the word five times more in 2011

than it did in 2010, the year before Occupy Wall Street. And usage only continued to grow. In May of 2014 alone, “corporate greed” was uttered 647 times on MSNBC (Knefel 2012, Silver 2014). The association of big business and greed is not simply a case of disliking the rich because they are cold and uncaring. The perception of corporate greed presents a direct threat to many Americans and highlights the presence of structural inequalities, limited resources, and threatened group position. Americans are more likely to see big business – and those associated with it – as a threat to their interests instead of an asset. A 2012 Pew Research poll indicated that 72% of Americans believe that Wall Street only cares about making money for itself, while a 2014 Gallup poll revealed that 54% of people think big business does a terrible job at creating good jobs for Americans and balancing the issues of the country with the best interests of the company. As such, I hypothesize that citizens will penalize candidates for their wealth, but only when their wealth is *explicitly* tied to big business.

*H2. Voters will be less likely to vote for upper class candidates when their wealth is explicitly tied to big business.*

Theories of collective action rest on the notion of “relative disadvantage” – or the feeling that one’s group is deprived relative to another group (Smith and Pettigrew 2012, Runciman 1966). Intergroup animosity has been shown to increase when distinctions between groups are made salient and when one group is perceived as having a particular advantage, as in the case of the rich (Brewer 1979). Therefore, I hypothesize that highlighting the relative advantages the rich have over the average American will result in voters being less likely to vote for wealthy candidates.

*H3. Voters will be less likely to vote for upper class candidates when their wealth is explicitly compared with that of the average American.*

### **A Candidate's Class Origins**

What voters know about the current or adult social class of a candidate is not all that matters. Usually, the life stories and rhetoric about candidates' *social class origins* or childhood social class is common in the context of a national campaign. Often, candidates couch their campaign in very personal anecdotes about their roots.

The “Log Cabin” or “Horatio Alger” myth of American politics claims that any man, regardless of his *class origins*, can represent the people in political office (Pessen 1984). As Formisano (2008) commented, “Since at least the early nineteenth century . . . even candidates for office born on plantations have preferred to present themselves to the electorate as born in rude log cabins and have played upon their ties and sympathies to the common man” (3). Despite the fact that almost all presidents have professed at one point that they were born with humble roots, the Log Cabin myth appears to be just that—a myth—as all but a few candidates have hailed from upper- or upper-middle class backgrounds (Pessen 1984). Indeed, research on the distribution of lawmakers' *social class origins* supports the perspective that self-made men “have always been more conspicuous in American history books than in American history” (Miller 1952, 328).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> That candidates emphasize their humble roots—even when such roots are not so humble—is such conventional wisdom in campaigns that it has been the subject of humor:

Absent real hardships, modern politicians have simply gotten creative . . . They especially love tales of dishwashing. Senator Ted Cruz could finance his own presidential campaign if he had a penny for every time he mentioned his penniless father who “washed dishes for 50 cents an hour”

According to data from the Congressional Leadership and Social Status (CLASS) dataset (Carnes 2011), only 24% of the 783 legislators who served in the 106th through 110th Congresses (1999 to 2008) had a parent with a working class occupation at any point in the legislator's life. This proportion shrinks to 19% for legislators that had parents that spent their entire careers in poor or working class professions.

But why do candidates do it? One reason candidates choose to emphasize their modest upbringings may be to relate to the average voter. Due to their current lofty resources, many Americans may feel that few national political candidates cannot truly understand their daily concerns. In stressing one's humble beginnings, candidates can show voters that they are able to empathize with the average voter's economic circumstances because they "have been there." A candidate may use a narrative about his working class *origins* to build trust and credibility to the notion that, regardless of his *current* social class, he can draw on his past to understand the concerns of the less wealthy. In fact, candidates that focus on their humble origins have been found to be perceived as much more liberal than their counterparts who grew up with money (Carnes and Sadin, 2015).

Conversely, I hypothesize that voters will be less likely to vote for candidates with wealthy origins. A candidate that was born with privilege will be perceived as

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after fleeing Cuba for Texas. Hillary Clinton checked the dishwashing box during a summer stint, in 1969, working in an Alaskan lodge. Leon Panetta washed dishes in his father's restaurant, John Boehner (the second youngest of 12 kids!) in his father's bar, and Ronald Reagan in the girls' dormitory at Eureka College in Illinois. Rod Blagojevich, the incarcerated former governor of Illinois, reportedly worked six days a week washing dishes in the kitchen of a federal prison in Colorado . . . [and] Paul Ryan touted his dishwashing background at the Republican convention in 2012 and then reinforced it a few weeks later by washing dishes with his family at an Ohio soup kitchen. (Leibovich 2014)

unable to understand the concerns of the average voter due to his lack of personal experience with economic adversity.

*H4. Voters will perceive candidates with upper class origins less understanding of their concerns than candidates that have working class origins.*

I also hypothesize that voters are less likely to vote for candidates that grew up wealthy. After all, a candidate’s trajectory serves as a symbol of the American ethos to voters. When candidates stump to voters, they do not necessarily only profess to represent *Americans* but in some sense to represent *America*. Voters infer signals about the promise of mobility and opportunity from a candidate’s own trajectory. As such, trajectories that violate the deeply held values about equal opportunity may be considered a violation of the values that voters hold dear.

*H5. Voters will be less likely to vote for candidates with upper class origins.*

A summary of the *H1-H5* can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1. Predictions for Evaluations of Wealthy Candidates Relative to Working-Class or Control Candidates**

	Competence	Understands concerns of voters like you / Warmth	Vote intention
No big business ties or comparison to average American	+	No difference	No difference
Big business ties or comparison to average American	+	-	-
Wealthy origins	N/A	-	-

## EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

In order to account for the different types of class-based information provided to voters during a campaign, this study outlines two dimensions of a social class heuristic—

a candidate's *current social class status* (his or her adult class) and his *social class origins* (his or her childhood class)—and three types of class information in various permutations—occupation, education, and income. I use four experiments to examine how voters feel about a candidate's social class. The first experiment was conducted online in October of 2010 by Knowledge Networks using a nationally representative probability-based sample ( $N = 1,721$ ).<sup>4</sup> The second experiment ( $N = 2,193$ ) was administered in the same way as the first in November of 2011, but using Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk.<sup>5</sup> The third and fourth experiments ( $N = 2,159$ ) were conducted together in sequence also using Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk in October of 2013 and then

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<sup>4</sup> Data were gathered in October 2010 through a nationally representative online panel maintained by Knowledge Networks as part of the Time-sharing Experiments for the Social Sciences (TESS). Respondents resemble the U.S. population on most standard observables and had a response rate of 66.3%.

<sup>5</sup> Previous work has found that MTurk samples mirror nationally representative samples in many ways, especially in their responses to experimental treatments and political questions (see Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2010). In fact, these samples have been shown to be more representative than standard internet samples (Buhrmester et al., 2011), non-random in-person convenience samples, and typical college samples (see Berinsky, Huber and Lenz 2010; Paolacci, Chandler and Ipeirotis 2010). However, they are slightly less representative of the national population than respondents in internet-based probability panels like the one used in Experiment 1. Respondents in Experiment 2 were younger, more likely to be female, had higher education levels and were more likely to be Democrats than a random draw from the national population.

replicated using a nationally representative sample in April of 2014. Respondents were presented with the biography of a man named Ron Campbell who they were told was “thinking of running for Congress next year.” The style and content of the four-paragraph biography was based on official campaign literature from actual congressional candidates. In Experiment 1, respondents were randomly assigned to a biography with two manipulations, each with three levels—Campbell’s *social class origins* (which either contained no information, working class information, or upper class information) and his *current social class status* (which either contained no information, working class information, or upper class information). These levels were indicated by both an occupational cue and an educational cue.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Recent sociological models of class stratification in the U.S. use measures of occupation and education in each class category (Gilbert 2002; Thompson and Hickey 2005).

Scholars believe occupation is a stronger indicator of class membership than income (Manza and Brooks 2008, 204). Next to occupation, education is the next most influential dimension of class membership, as it not only aids individuals in their attainment of human capital, which inevitably affects one’s occupational attainment, but also provides individuals with a range of cultural behavior, such as dress and accent, which may be viewed as social class markers (Bourdieu 2003). These markers were chosen for the first experiment due to the realistic nature of including this type of information in a candidate’s biography. Income and wealth are also valid indicators of social class and are used in later iterations of the experiments. the process of defining social class is a sticky one. Indeed, scholars disagree about the dimensions that precisely predict social class membership and have theorized a host of possibilities: education, income, wealth,

In Experiment 2, subjects were given the biography embedded with one of the randomly-assigned social class profiles from Experiment 1 *and* a randomly-assigned cue about the candidate's party membership in both the initial instructions and the first line of the biography. The full text of the biography and the experimental treatments can be found in Box 1.

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property, family group structures or membership, political power, occupation, legal status, and patterns of ownership and consumption. Two class theorists have heavily influenced the body of scholarship on social class and economic stratification: Karl Marx and Max Weber. Karl Marx defined socioeconomic class as one's relationship to the means of production and viewed pure economic interest (more specifically, one's income, property, or wealth) as defining one's social class. Max Weber, on the other hand, theorized that economic interests were only one determinant of socioeconomic class in a set of broad 'values,' "which included many other things that were not necessarily economic nor interests" (Clark and Lipset 1991). In other words, in a Weberian conception of class, relevant class distinctions may be made on the basis of education, occupation, social standing, and family background as opposed to purely distributional economic outcomes (Lareau 2000; Lareau and Weininger 2003). This study adheres to a Weberian concept of class, not only for its relevance to the American sociopolitical context, but because candidate information such as education, family background, and current occupation is much more likely to be salient information to voters (for example, it is more likely to be found in a candidate's biography) compared to information about the candidate's property ownership, wealth or income.

## Box 1. Survey Instrument, Experiment 1 and 2

Below is the biography of a man who is thinking of running (Experiment 2 only: as the Democratic / Republican candidate) for Congress next year. Please read it carefully and answer the questions that follow.

Ron Campbell is running (Experiment 2 only: as the Democratic / Republican candidate) for Congress to bring accountability back to the political system. He knows that with integrity and commitment, we can put our country back on track.

Ron has served two terms in the state legislature from 2002-2010. During his time in the state legislature, he served as Vice Chairman of the powerful Appropriations Committee, which shapes the state's budget.

Ron's parents were his greatest teachers. His father was a *factory worker / surgeon* and taught Ron the value of public service. Ron is a proud graduate of *the public school system / Philips Academy Andover, a selective private boarding school* and believes that every child deserves a high-quality education. After graduating from high school, he **attended Yale University and Harvard Medical School before becoming a cardiologist / put himself through college before becoming an ambulance driver** and then entering politics. Ron has a steadfast commitment to the citizens of his state and has worked to bring jobs to the area and to promote economic growth.

He is married to, Susan, his wife of 24 years, and enjoys camping with his two sons, Jake and Scott, and his daughter, Erica.

Note: Experiment 1 randomized *the social class origins of the hypothetical candidate* and the **current social class of the hypothetical candidate** but did not mention the candidate's party. Experiment 2 randomized *the candidate's social class origins*, **his current social class** and the candidate's party.

Experiment 3 was conducted in an identical manner to Experiments 1 and 2, but it varied the occupation of the candidate so that it was not solely associated with the medical profession and also included his net worth. The full text of the experimental treatment paragraph can be found in Box 2.

## Box 2. Experimental Treatment, Experiment 3

Ron's parents were his greatest teachers. His father was a *factory worker / successful investment banker* and taught Ron the value of public service. Ron is a proud graduate of *the public school system / Philips Academy Andover, a selective private boarding school* and believes that every child deserves a high-quality education. **After graduating from high school, he joined a highly profitable private equity investment firm on Wall Street where he amassed a considerable net worth as CEO, estimated in 2012 at \$19-25 million.**<sup>7</sup> Ron has a steadfast commitment to the citizens of his state and has worked to bring jobs to the area and to promote economic growth.

The professions in the biographies were chosen based on research that showed that the public perceives the pay of CEOs and doctors as too high and the pay of factory workers as too little (Kelley and Evans 1992; Kluegal and Smith 1986, 120). The profession of “cardiologist” was chosen as the example of a upper class signifier that was not tied to big business as 27.2% of physicians are in the top 1% of wealthy households (White et al. 2012).

The nature of the design ensures that respondents are not knowingly comparing candidates with different social class characteristics to one another, which may alert them to the purpose of the study. All biographies also include a short paragraph about the candidate’s political experience, which is identical across treatments. This parity provides a baseline for candidate quality and ensures that all evaluations made about the candidate are a result of inferences made on the basis of social class cues and are not due to

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<sup>7</sup> Revealing the candidate’s net worth means that this treatment condition is not precisely parallel to the one without ties to big business, which only mentions his elite education and high status occupation. However, this paragraph is buried within a four-paragraph biography and serves as a subtle cue amidst other information about the candidate.

inferences made about the candidates hypothetical political experience as a result of his or her social class.

After reading the biography, respondents evaluated the candidate along a number of dimensions. They were asked to rate Campbell's competence and intelligence, the ability to understand their concerns (which is used as a measure of perceived "warmth"), and the likelihood of voting for him, which is a combined measure of vote intention and a traditional feeling thermometer.<sup>8</sup> I check covariate balance across conditions using multinomial logistic regression and a series of non-parametric tests and find no significant difference across conditions for all experiments. Furthermore, more than 80% of respondents in both experiments correctly identified the candidate's class origins, current class, and party in the manipulation checks administered at the end of the survey.

The survey experiments outlined above serve as a particularly strict test of the effect of a candidate's class on voter evaluations. First, the biographies made no overt commentary about what the class cues meant with respect to the candidate's ability to represent voters' interests. As a result, voters were left to make their own inferences. Second, there were no explicit comparisons provided for how the wealthy candidate was different than the average American. Finally, class information was hidden in the four-paragraph summary buried in a biography that focused on the candidate's policy platform and political experience—all of which was identical across conditions. While all these choices help ensure internal validity, it is extremely rare that a candidate would actually

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<sup>8</sup> The multi-item measures were compiled into two indices – a competence index and a vote likelihood index. Both indices have high internal consistency with a Cronbach's  $\alpha > 0.7$ .

tout his staggering net worth in his biography. This choice is unsurprising given the negative repercussions of doing so in Figure 2.

Experiment 4 serves to test the effect of highlighting the relative advantage that a wealthy candidate has over the average American. As there is no realistic way to do this in a candidate biography, the format of the experiment was changed to another context in which explicit wealth-related information about candidates actually shows up political life – news articles about candidates that release their tax returns to the public.

Experiment 4 was conducted twice—once in the in April of 2014 using a nationally representative sample from Survey Sampling International and again in same survey as Experiment 3 on Amazon Turk in October of 2013.<sup>9</sup> We repeated these questions in the second survey, in order to ensure that our experimental main effects could be replicated in a distinct sample. The results were the same across both surveys, so I have combined the two samples in the results.

In Experiment 4, respondents are randomly assigned to read one version of a short news article on another fictional candidate, John Gibbs, who has just released his 2012 tax returns. The design varies the party of the candidate as well as his annual income and its proportionality to the US median household income. In one case, the annual income is

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<sup>9</sup> Respondents were presented with treatment from Experiment 4 after answering a series of demographic questions that were used to serve as a distraction from the previous treatment in Experiment 3 and separate the stimuli. Analyses that regress evaluations in Experiment 4 on random assignment to condition in Experiment 3 assuages concerns of contagion across the experiments.

52 times as large—just about 2.7 million dollars—and in another it is twice as large—or just over \$100,000. The rest of the treatment is identical.

This test is different from the previous tests since the vignette puts candidate wealth in a context that voters are very familiar with and are likely to encounter in the political environment. Second, the issue of candidate wealth is front and center as opposed to being buried in a four-paragraph biography. Third, the test does the math for voters and creates a relative measure of how income difference between the candidate and the median household. The full text of the news article can be found in Box 3.

**Box 3. Experimental Treatment, Experiment 4**

**2012 Tax Returns**

**WASHINGTON – Democratic / Republican** candidate for Congress, John Gibbs released his most recent tax filing Friday afternoon showing that he made an annual income of **\$2,696,951 / \$104,951** in 2011 – about **52 / 2** times larger than the U.S. median household income of \$51,914.

Gibbs served two terms in the state legislature from 2008-2012. As Vice Chair of the Rules Committee, he considered for confirmation those individuals appointed to state agencies, departments, boards, and commissions.

**RESULTS – A CANDIDATE’S CURRENT CLASS**

I first examine the independent effect of a candidate’s current class when his wealth is not tied to big business. Figure 1 shows estimates and 95 percent confidence intervals from difference-in-means tests comparing the effects of being assigned to the condition with a currently upper class candidate relative to the control candidate

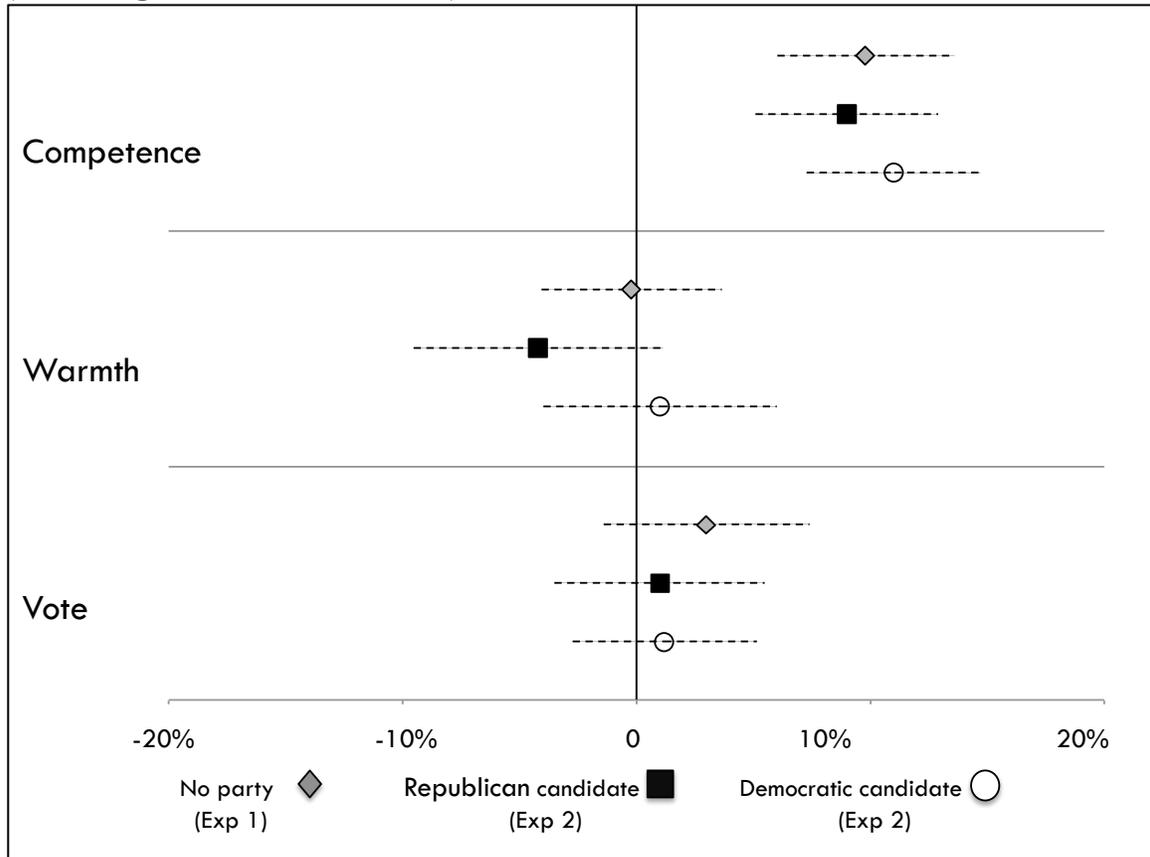
condition, which contained no class information.<sup>10</sup> As expected, voters perceive the currently upper class version of Campbell as being more competent than the control version of Campbell regardless of the nature of his partisan membership. This difference was sizable (as large as 11 percentage points in the case of the Democratic candidate). The currently upper class candidate is also seen as being more hard working than the control candidate (as much as 9 percentage points more in the case of the Democratic candidate). Both in the presence and absence of a party cue, voters appear to make inferences about a candidate's competence and work ethic on the basis of his current social class. However, no other consistent pattern emerges across the data with respect to the perceived warmth or respondents' propensity to vote for the candidate. Voters see no difference between the doctor version of the candidate and the control candidate on measures of understanding and were no more or less likely to vote for him.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> I chose the control candidate as the baseline comparison condition as opposed to the currently working class candidate because it has more external validity than a comparison with the condition in which Campbell is currently working class. Only 2% of members of Congress from 2000-2008 had a working class occupation right before entering office, making it a rare event (Carnes 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Models that control for respondent party, gender, income, age, education, and ideology do not vary in their substantive interpretation.

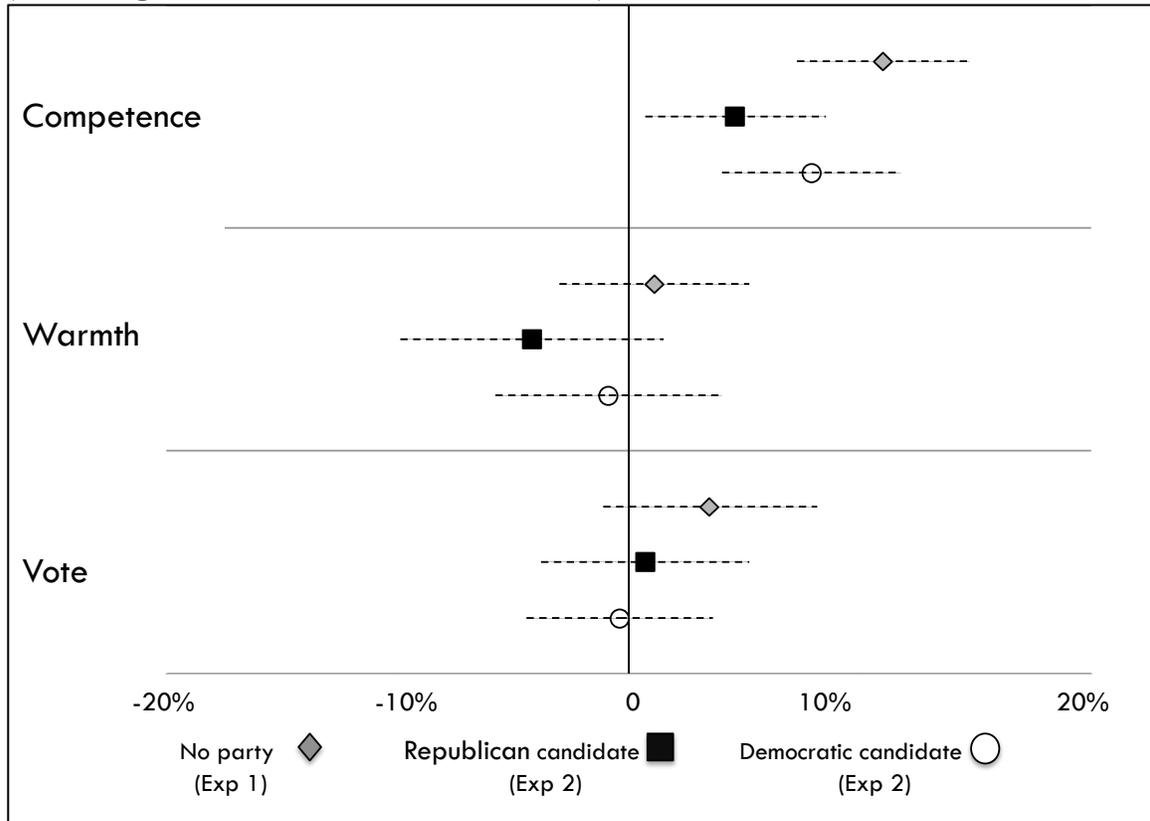
**Figure 1. The Effect of a Candidate's Current Class – No Ties to Business (Cardiologist Relative to Control)**



Note: Dots report the differences in mean evaluations of those assigned to a candidate with current upper class status (cardiologist) relative to those assigned to a control candidate on the dimensions listed above. More positive evaluations are coded as higher values and all variables are coded between 0 and 1. Dashed lines represent 95% confidence intervals from two-tailed t-tests.

The analyses in Figure 1 compare evaluations of the upper class version of biography relative to the control. It turns out there is not much difference, however, when the upper class version of the biography is compared to the working class version (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2. The Effect of a Candidate’s Current Class – No Ties to Business (Cardiologist Relative to Ambulance Driver)**



Note: Dots report the differences in mean evaluations of those assigned to a candidate with current upper class status (cardiologist) relative to those assigned to current working class status (ambulance driver) on the dimensions listed above. More positive evaluations are coded as higher values and all variables are coded between 0 and 1. Dashed lines represent 95% confidence intervals from two-tailed t-tests.

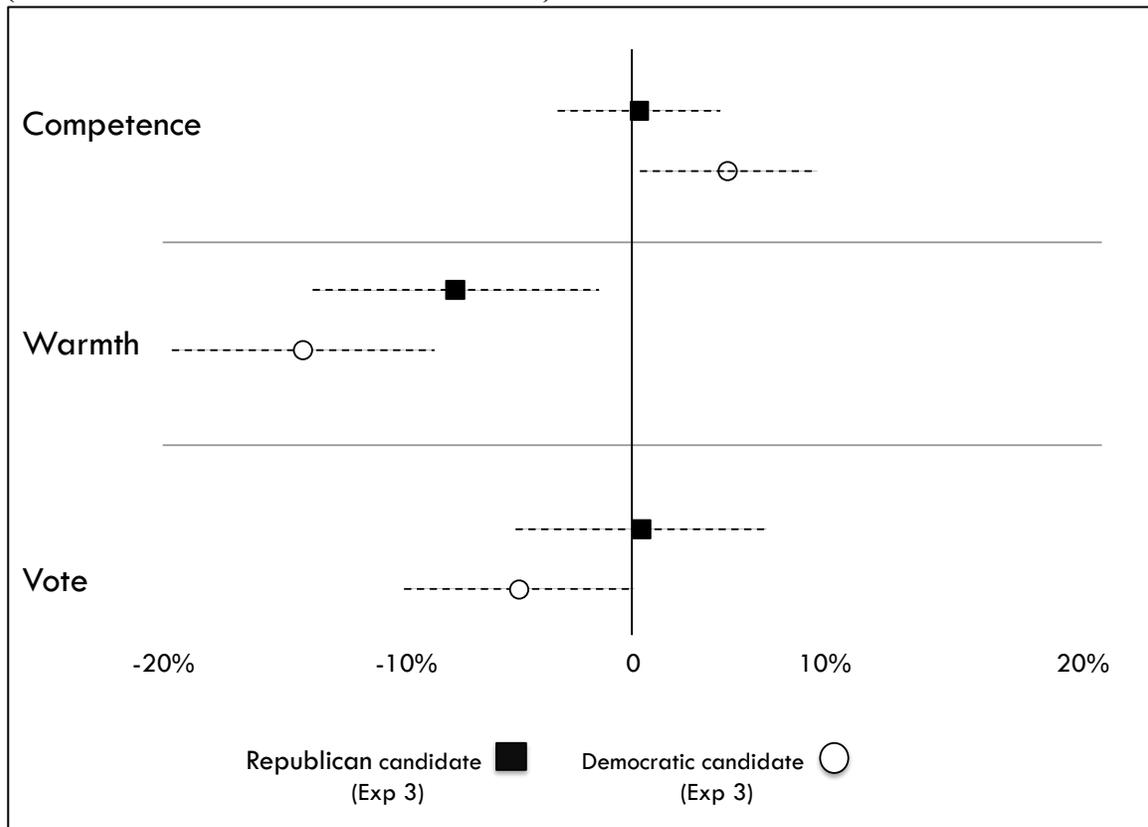
In fact, the comparisons look extremely similar between Figures 1 and 2. In other words, the working class candidate is indistinguishable from the control to respondents on all three evaluative dimensions. It appears that high status information comes with a competence boost, but current working class information comes with neither a penalty nor a boon.

However, in Experiments 1 and 2, Campbell’s occupation did not have explicit corporate ties. The medical occupation was chosen as a “neutral” class signifier in order

to avoid conjuring up images of big business, which can prompt feelings of dislike and suspicion, according to work on the American ethos.

Do evaluations change when candidate's wealth is explicitly tied to corporate ties? Next, I examine a condition in which Campbell not only has an occupation associated with big business (CEO of a profitable private equity company), but his large net worth is revealed to subjects. Figure 3 shows estimates and 95 percent confidence intervals from difference-in-means tests comparing the effects of being assigned to the condition where Campbell is a CEO candidate relative to the control condition, which contained no class information. Relative to the control candidate, the CEO version of Campbell gets a slight competence boost—after all the treatment sentence does tout his accomplishments as CEO—but he receives a considerable penalty in perceptions of his warmth. Respondents perceive the wealthy Republican candidate to be almost 8 percentage points less able to understand their concerns relative to the control and penalize the Democratic version by 14 percentage points. It appears that a helping profession goes a long way in influencing voters' perceptions of a candidate's warmth; or, conversely, a corporate job and a large net worth works in the opposite way. Moreover, voters are 4 percentage points less likely to say they would vote for the CEO version of Campbell when he is a Democrat, though his wealth does not seem to make a difference when he is a Republican.

**Figure 3. The Effect of a Candidate’s Current Wealth – Ties to Business (Investment Banker Relative to Control)**

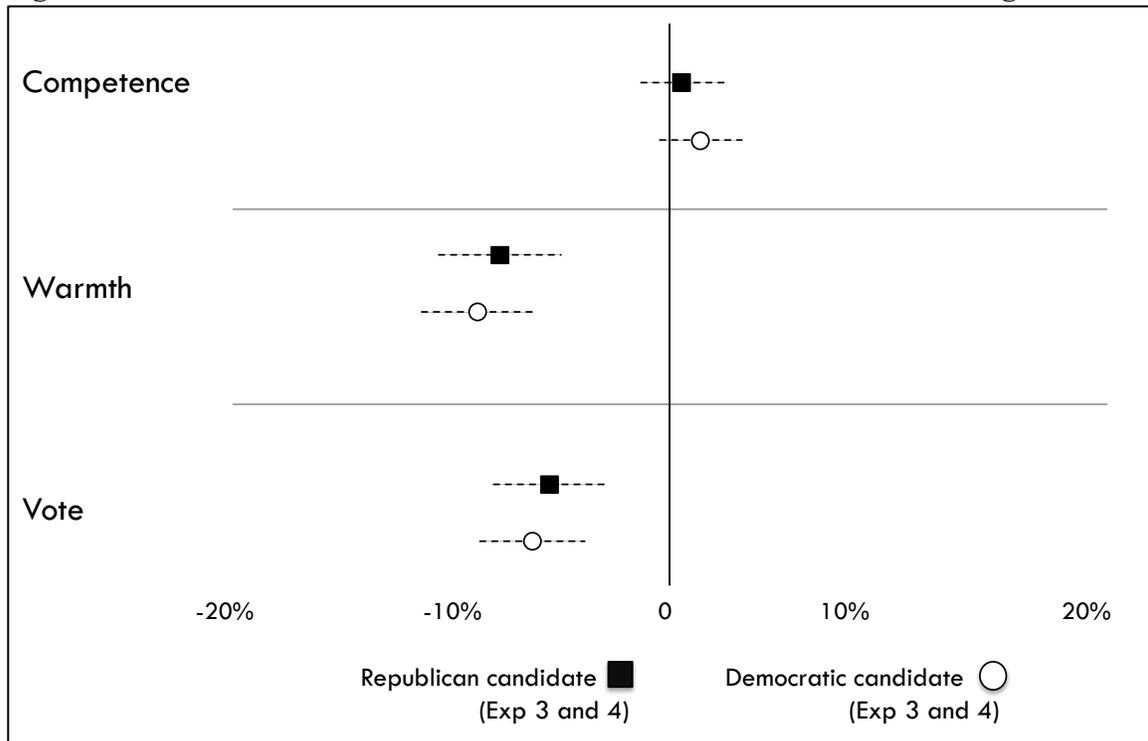


Note: Dots report the differences in mean evaluations of those assigned to a candidate with current upper class status (investment banker) relative to those assigned to the control condition on the dimensions listed above. More positive evaluations are coded as higher values and all variables are coded between 0 and 1. Dashed lines represent 95% confidence intervals from two-tailed t-tests.

Next, I examine the results of Experiment 4 (N=2,880), which presents voters with a news article about a fictional candidate, John Gibbs, who has just released his tax returns. Relative to the previous tests, I find a small and statistically insignificant competence boost for the wealthy candidate – only half a percentage point for Gibbs when his party is given as Republican candidate and 1.4 percentage points when he is depicted as a Democratic version (see Figure 4). However, I find a much larger negative effect on perceived warmth and vote intention than in Experiments 1-3. Voters report that they perceive the Republican version of John Gibbs to be 7.8 percentage points less warm

and able to understand their concerns when he earn 52 times the median relative to twice the median and perceives the Democratic version of Gibbs to be 8.8 percentage points less warm. Moreover, respondents are 5.5 points less likely to vote for the wealthy version of Gibbs when he is a Republican and 6.3 points less likely to vote for him when he is a Democrat.

**Figure 4. The Effect of a Candidate’s Current Wealth – Relative Advantage**



Note: Dots report the differences in mean evaluations of those assigned to a candidate with earning 52 times the median income relative to that candidate with 2 times the median income on the dimensions listed above. More positive evaluations are coded as higher values and all variables are coded between 0 and 1. Dashed lines represent 95% confidence intervals from two-tailed t-tests.

In order to take into account the partisan identity of the respondents, I separate these analyses for Democratic and Republican respondents (N=844 Republican respondents; 1,245 Democratic respondents). In Figure 5, I present the means for respondents’ vote intention separated by self-reported partisan identification and find

notable parity across both respondents' and candidates' party. Close to forty-seven percent of Democrats say they will vote for the Democratic version of Gibbs when he earns only twice the median household; 39.5% of Democrats say the same when they are assigned to the biography in which he earns 52 times the median (diff= 7.0 percentage points,  $|t|=3.91$ ). When Republican respondents are assigned to the Democratic version of Gibbs, they are on the whole less likely to vote for him than Democratic respondents, but they do differentiate by class. Thirty percent of Republicans say they are likely to vote for a Democratic Gibbs when he is of average wealth; 23.6% say the same about the wealthy version of Gibbs (diff = 6.5 points,  $|t|=3.16$ ).

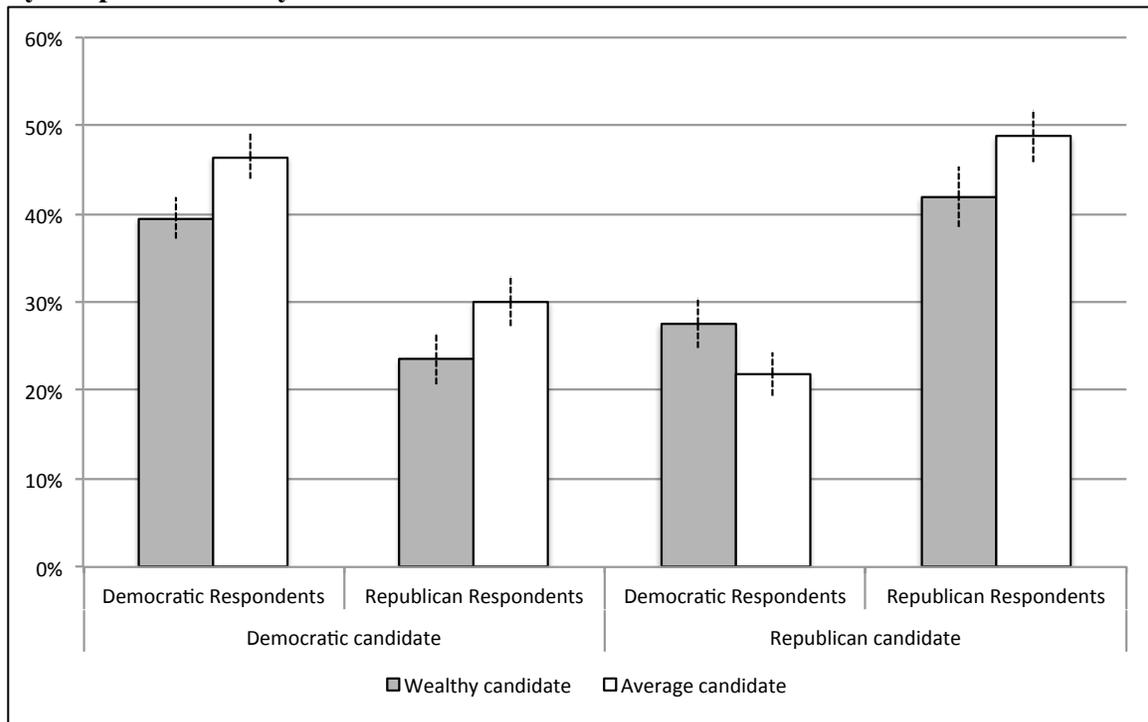
This effect is mirrored when respondents are assigned to the Republican candidate. While 27.6% of Democrats say they will vote for the average Republican version of Gibbs, 21.9% of Democrats intend to vote for the rich Republican version (diff= 5.7 points,  $|t|=2.96$ ). Conversely, when Republican respondents are assigned to the Republican version of Gibbs, they are on the whole much more likely to vote for him than Democratic respondents, but they do still differentiate by class. Close to fifty percent of Republicans say they are likely to vote for a Republican Gibbs when he is of average wealth; 42% say the same about the wealthy version of Gibbs (diff = 6.8 points,  $|t|=2.95$ ).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> All Democratic and Republican “leaners” were included in this analysis. The identical analysis was performed for people who identified as Independents (N=320).

Independents were 5.6 points more likely to vote for the less wealthy Democratic version of Gibbs relative to his wealthy counterpart and 6.0 points more likely to vote for the less

**Figure 5. The Effect of a Candidate’s Current Wealth (Taxed Income),  
By Respondent Party**



Note: Bars report the mean evaluations (with 95% confidence intervals) of those assigned to a candidate with earning 52 times the median income relative to that candidate with 2 times the median income on the dimensions listed above for both Democratic (N=1,245) and Republican (N=844) respondents. More positive evaluations are coded as higher values and all variables are coded between 0 and 1.

How much more do voters care about a candidate’s party compared to his class?

In order to compare the marginal effects of class and party, I present a series of estimates from models that interact the candidate’s party and the candidate’s class in Figure 6. Both white bars illustrate the effect of class for an in-party candidate on vote likelihood—in other words, the effect of moving from a candidate that earns 52 times the median to one that earns only twice the median within the respondents’ party. As shown in Figure 6, the effect is roughly equivalent across respondents regardless of their party: 7.0 percentage

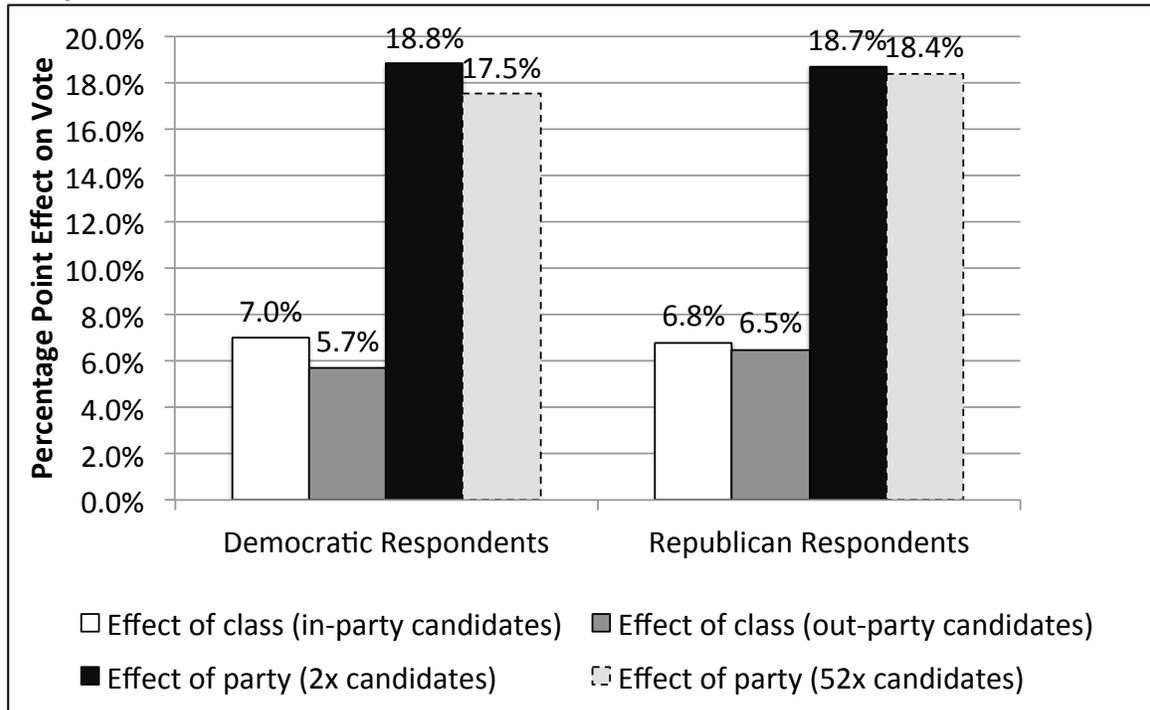
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wealthy Republican version. However, both of these differences were significant only at the  $p < .10$  level.

points for Democrats and 6.8 percentage points for Republicans. The dark grey bars illustrate the class effect for an out-party candidate. In other words, moving from a candidate that earns 52 times the median to one that earns 2 times the median for a candidate from the opposite party. This out-party class effect is 5.7 percentage points for Democrats and 6.5 percentage points for Republicans

The black bars, in contrast, show marginal effect of party for the average candidate—or the effect of moving from an out-party candidate to an in-party candidate for the candidate that earns twice the median. The effect is 18.8 percentage points for Democrats and 18.7 percentage points for Republicans respondents. This analysis helps to put the marginal effect of class into perspective relative to the marginal effect of party: Lastly, the light gray bars with the dashed outline illustrate the effect of party for the candidate that earns 52 times the median, which does not vary much across Democratic or Republican respondents. The effect of moving from an out-party candidate that earns 52 times the median to a comparable in-party candidate is 17.5 percentage points for Democrats and 18.4 percentage points for Republicans respondents. The take-away? On average, regardless whether a respondent is evaluating in-party candidates or an out-party candidates, his class matters about one third as much as his party does.

**Figure 6. Marginal Effects of Party and Wealth on Vote Intention, by Respondent Party**



Note: Bars report the percentage point marginal effect from models regressing vote intention on an 1) indicator variable for assignment to the candidate with 52 times the median income or to the candidate with twice the median income 2) respondent party and 3) the interaction between the two in a sample with 844 Republicans and 1,245 Democrats. More positive evaluations are coded as higher values and all variables are coded between 0 and 1.

## RESULTS – A CANDIDATE’S CLASS ORIGINS

As mentioned, what voters know about the *current* social class of a candidate is not all that matters. Usually, the life stories and rhetoric about candidates’ *social class origins* are common in the context of a national campaign. Are these biographies dressed up for good reason?

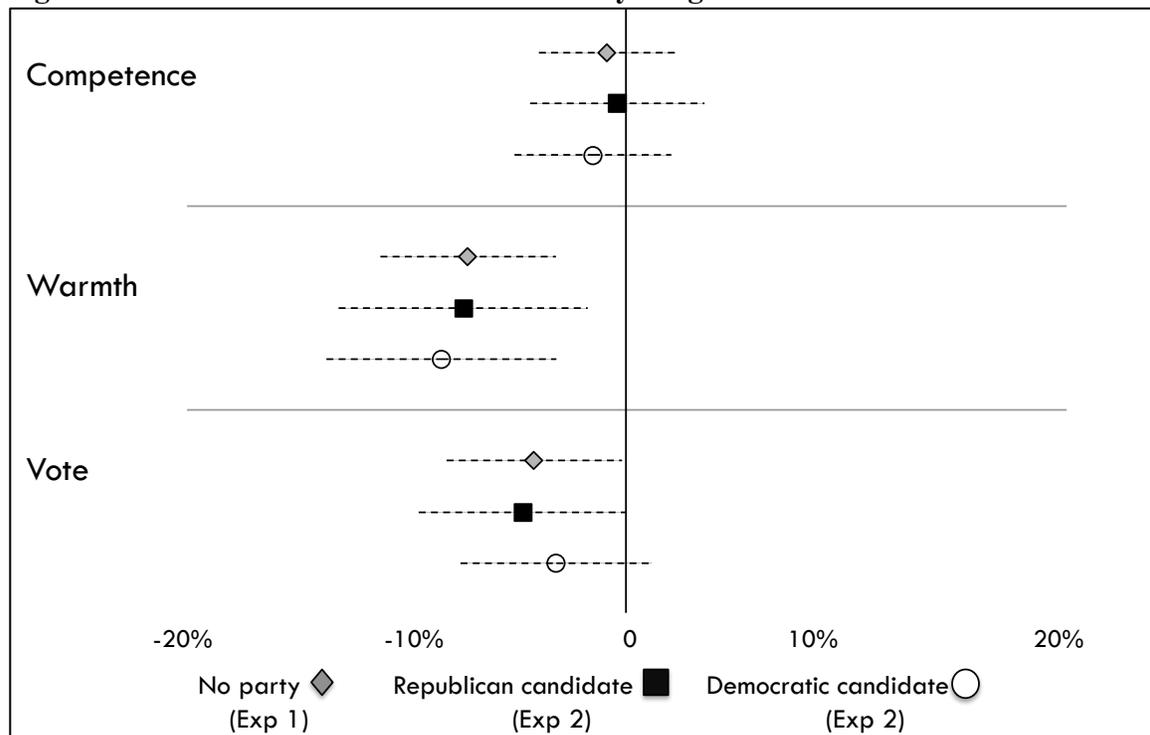
In the same experiments, I manipulate the candidate’s class origins while holding the candidate’s current class constant at the control version (with no class information). I do this by changing information about the candidate’s father’s occupation (which is either

a surgeon or a factory worker) and his secondary school (which is either an elite private boarding school or a public school). The results with respect to social class origins are depicted in Figure 7, which plots the difference in mean evaluations of being assigned to a candidate with upper class origins relative to being assigned to a candidate with working class origins. Unlike a candidate's current class status, there is no indication that individuals perceive candidates with wealthy origins to be any more competent than their less pedigreed counterparts. However, for all three party conditions, the version of Campbell with privileged origins is perceived as being at least 7 percentage points less warm than the version with working class origins. More importantly, people are significantly less likely to vote for the candidate that was raised in a wealthy – they are 4.2 points less likely when the candidate has no party, 4.7 points when he is a Democrat, and 3.2 points less likely when he is a Republican.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Results for the Democratic candidate do not reach statistical significance.

**Figure 7. The Effect of a Candidate's Wealthy Origins**



Note: Dots report the differences in mean evaluations of assigned to a candidate with upper class origins relative to a candidate with working class origins on the dimensions listed above. More positive evaluations are coded as higher values and all variables are coded between 0 and 1. Dashed lines represent 95% confidence intervals from two-tailed t-tests.

## Discussion

This study provides the first scholarly investigation into how a candidate's social class resonates with voters. The findings provide evidence that, in a pared down electoral setting, individuals do indeed use a candidate social class heuristic to make a variety of inferences about a candidate. Voters perceive candidates as being less warm and are less likely to vote for them when their resources are tied to big business or when their means are explicitly compared with the average American's. Moreover, voters appear to use a candidate's wealth as a heuristic even when they know the candidate's party and regardless of whether he is an in-party or out-party candidate. Finally, voters don't only

think about where a candidate is, but how far he has come, perceiving candidates that grew up with money as much less warm than candidates from working class homes. They are also less likely to vote for them.

This study also draws attention to a number of questions and highlights the need for further research. First, social class is a notoriously difficult concept to measure (see Hout et al. 1995). While I have opted for an occupational-educational cue combination in some cases, due to its prevalence in political campaign literature and its basis for recent sociological models of social class (Gilbert 2002; Thompson and Hickey 2005), a different conception of class will likely yield different evaluations from citizens. Because stereotypes about the rich are ambivalent, the ways in which wealth is depicted, displayed, and discussed in the context of a campaign matter immensely for voters' evaluations.

Second, despite the fact that a large majority of U.S. congressional lawmakers are wealthier, more educated, and have attained higher occupational status than the average American voter (Carnes 2012; 2013), this study does not present compelling evidence that voters have an across-the-board preference for upper class congressional candidates. To the contrary, while citizens appear to prefer *currently* upper class candidates in helping professions (perceiving them as more competent), they are averse to candidates whose wealth is made salient along with their connections to big business or when they are reminded of just how wealthy a candidate is in comparison to themselves. These data cannot fully explain the prevalence of economic inequality seen among our nation's lawmakers and thus other hypotheses must be pursued.

In exploring the reasons for the pervasive class-based inequality among elected officials, a number of explanations must be considered. First, working class candidates may not have the resources to run for office and, therefore, may face material barriers to entry. Second, working class candidates may not be recruited at the same rates—either due to “gate-keeping” by party elites or due to the lack of high-powered social networks that would otherwise encourage their prospective candidacy. Third, working class candidates may perceive themselves as being less qualified than candidates that are better educated, have attained higher occupational status, or are wealthier.<sup>14</sup> Finally, working class candidates may just be less qualified on average.

These findings highlight the way in which candidates signal their ability to empathize with the average voter through cueing their working class roots. However, candidates have myriad ways of sending working class cues besides their biography. Candidates may claim “friends in low places” such as how John McCain did with Joe the Plumber in his 2008 campaign and how Mitt Romney did by emphasizing that, while he did not grow up poor, his father did. Candidates may also publicly partake in traditions and cultural practices associated with the working class, such as Michelle Obama reminding *Late Show with David Letterman* viewers that she shops at Target, her husband discussing his NCAA bracket picks, or the Vice President highlighting the fact that he takes the train home almost every night, just like other commuters. Many perceptions are in the control of candidates themselves and can use this control to make certain dimensions more or less salient. For instance, female candidates may emphasize their

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<sup>14</sup> The phenomenon of perceiving oneself as unqualified has helped to explain the low number of women seeking political office (Fox and Lawless 2004).

more masculine qualities, such as competence, in order to compensate for gender stereotypes (Kahn 1996).

As with any study on heuristic judgment, we are left to wonder whether the inferences voters make about candidates on the basis of their social class are *correct*. Recent research suggests upper-class individuals are indeed less likely than those in working class positions to empathize with the suffering of others (Piff et al. 2012; Piff 2014; Stellar et al. 2012). No direct test has been conducted with respect to the actual warmth or competence of upper class political candidates specifically, but one study suggests that legislators from white collar jobs are less likely to empathize with the struggles of the working class and are more likely to support more conservative policies. One paper relates a candidate's ideology to his social class origins, which is where the action appears to be when it comes to the social class heuristic in candidate evaluation (Carnes and Sadin, 2015). It finds that, although voters consistently infer that politicians from less privileged families are more economically progressive, those politicians do not behave any differently than one another when voting on the same economic policies in the legislature.

This study also extends notions of the ways in which social class is consequential for political behavior. While previous research has limited its approach to exploring the effect of *voters'* social class on their own political behavior, the findings highlighted here reinforce the notion that voters do not operate in a vacuum. This study suggests that a *candidate's* social class serves as a signal to voters and draws attention to the fact that a social class heuristic operates in different ways depending on three factors: (1) whether the information concerns a candidate's *origins* or *current class*; (2) whether or not the

candidate's current wealth is tied to big business; and (3) whether a candidate's wealth is explicitly compared to that of the average American. In other words, class matters in a way we did not previously acknowledge. The findings, when taken in conjunction with what we know about voters' own social class (see Bartels 2008; Clark and Lipset 1991; Hout 2008; Hout et al. 1995), suggest that individuals do not only incorporate their own social class into their voting behavior, but are highly susceptible to receiving cues and making inferences about the social class of others as well. Class—it seems—is alive and well in American politics.

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