

REVIEW

**Tiffany D. Barnes, Yann P. Kerevel and Gregory W. Saxton, *Working Class Inclusion: Evaluations of Democratic Institutions in Latin America*
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In *Working Class Inclusion*, Tiffany Barnes, Yann Kerevel and Gregory Sexton provide a fresh perspective on the regional trend towards declining trust in elected officials, political institutions and democracy writ large: the dearth of working-class representatives. The idea is that out-of-touch ruling elites are doing a bad job of representing the interests of most voters. The question of political inclusion, and class-based inclusion specifically, is a worthy and urgent one to explore, especially considering the myriad threats to democratic governance in contemporary Latin America.

While much of the work on labour politics, to date, has been more historical and focused on a few cases to analyse labour mobilisation, corporatist legacies and the formation of political parties of the working class – for instance the tome *Shaping the Political Arena* by Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier (2002) – *Working Class Inclusion* adds a different perspective, focusing on the attitudes and preferences of voters. In relying on a wealth of survey data from LAPOP (specifically its AmericasBarometro project) and PELA (on attitudes towards parliamentary elites), this book marks a new frontier in this research tradition. It opens a dialogue between scholars of political representation in Latin America, those focusing on the United States, and those who study voting behaviour. It also links labour scholars and scholars of gender, race and ethnicity, who are interested in the political representation of other historically excluded groups.

The extent of data is impressive in terms of its regional scope and its reliance on open-ended questions that paint a rich portrait of voter attitudes, perceptions and preferences. The book is replete with rich quotes like this one from a respondent in Argentina: ‘people who are in government should have as their main objective to improve working conditions for the people. Although many lose the goal blinded by money and power, others really focus on helping people who are struggling ...’ (p. 92). The authors convey the ambivalence of many who view working class representatives as having the potential to understand them, but also the potential to disappoint them, given the ways these leaders are beholden to political parties and labour unions and prone to corruption.

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Chapter 3 establishes regional patterns using cross-national survey data. There are many striking findings. One that stood out was how respondents were asked to estimate the proportion of working-class representatives in the legislature and to identify their preferred proportion. Respondents vastly over-estimated the number of working-class representatives (they usually thought it was 25–30 per cent, when the true number is less than 10 per cent), and their preferred number was 64–70 per cent. The simple, descriptive plot in Figure 3.1 tells a damning story of why voters have such negative evaluations of national legislatures.

Chapters 4–7 drill down into the mechanisms by which voters evaluate legislators and how they get information about their class background. The authors deserve credit for their careful and nuanced analysis. Working-class individuals overall seem better equipped to represent the electorate, but some are regarded sceptically. There are more positive evaluations in Argentina than in Mexico. Moreover, evaluations are tepid, unless descriptive representation (e.g. the presence of working-class representatives) is paired with policy responsiveness (e.g. information about legislators introducing a bill for a job-training centre). The authors are thoughtful in testing different mechanisms, using vignette experiments to show causal effects. They also explore how respondents find out and evaluate the class background of legislators, especially through the media, using facial cues to identify people who have endured the toil of hard work.

Overall, I was persuaded that the elitist character of political representation has weakened trust in democracy. However, questions linger. Latin America is notorious for its hyper-presidentialism. Presidents typically set the policy agenda and the legislature either operates as a rubber stamp for the president's agenda or it serves as a veto player that is completely obstructionist. Given the weaknesses and poorly defined policy priorities of most legislatures in the region, would changing their composition really bolster their legitimacy? Moreover, the implication is that if all political parties recruited working-class representatives, regardless of ideology, trust in democracy would rise. However, imagine a case where a conservative party committed to austerity policies included more working-class representatives. Would that really improve perceptions of legitimacy, or would this simply be an instance of cooptation? When considering an 'ideal' legislature, it is interesting to imagine the kinds of policies that voters would want to see enacted but are kept off the agenda due to the absence of working-class legislators. Future research might explore how the policy agenda might shift with a more inclusive legislature, and whether such a shift would necessarily tilt power towards the political Left.

The conclusion examines the policy implications of the argument. The authors propose institutional reforms such as adding quotas for working-class representatives, an institutional reform which has effectively increased the representation of women and ethnic minorities. The proposed institutional reforms logically fit with the findings of the book, but this proposal will certainly spark some debate. Few labour organisations and other associations that represent non-elite groups are pushing for these types of reforms. Why? Perhaps this is because class-based identities differ from racial and gender-based ones in important ways. Working-class identities are more of degrees of distance from the elite, rather than categorical differences between well-defined groups. The working class is made up of workers in many different professions, the formal and informal sectors,

the private and public sectors, and the very poor as well as parts of the middle class. The lack of a coherent class-based identity makes representing this large group of voters difficult, and it might vex would-be institutional reformers.

Overall, this book marks a major landmark for the study of labour politics. It examines working-class representation from a valuable, new perspective, broadens the community of scholars who might be interested in labour representation, and raises fascinating questions for future research.