

# Occupational Representation on City Council\*

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## Abstract

Preliminary for WPSA, please do not circulate.

This investigation of occupational representation in American city councils shows descriptive results suggesting that the distribution of careers in city councils is different from the distribution of careers in Congress and other high offices. More liberal cities tend to elect city council members whose previous job was in the non-profit sector or in a different elected office whereas more conservative cities elect former business owners and law enforcement officers. Municipal policy outcomes reflect the occupational composition of city councils. Places with more business owners on the city council see lower taxes, for instance.

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# 1 Introduction

Who is elected to city council and why are they elected? How does their election impact the output of government? This paper addresses representation in municipal government by focusing on the careers that lead up to city council service. Many studies cover gender, racial, and religious representation. These studies have documented where and when certain people are elected to office and the policy consequences of descriptive representation (Holman 2014; Hajnal and Trounstein 2005; Kirkland 2021). However, occupational representation is relatively understudied given its importance. Every elected official enters office from some other job. Those previous jobs can be different political posts or nominally apolitical ones like engineer, carpenter, or school teacher.

Two challenges inherent to empirical studies of occupation have stunted its development in the literature; data collection and categorization.

Data collection is challenging because publicly available biographies can be inaccurate. Politicians write their own biographies for electability, not so that they can convey maximally accurate information on themselves. The same issue comes up with web sources like LinkedIn and self-composed ballot designations.

Categorization is unclear because one elected official can have dozens of past jobs. Using only the most recent job misses the bulk of the occupational identity but using every item on an officeholder's resume makes categorization impossible if they have worked in diverse sectors. While gender, race, and religion labels are debatable, the right way to label "career" or "occupation" is even less well established. For example the census has over 30,000 discrete job and industry labels (CDC 2023), and past political scientists have constructed their own bespoke job labeling schemas for their specific questions of interest (Carnes 2013; Kirkland 2021).

The United States has nearly 90,000 local governments. Most elected officials are serving at the local level (Warshaw 2019). Local governments focus on economic development, land use, and the provision of city services. Some of the most common city services are street

repair, parks, water, sewage, police protection, and fire protection (Anzia 2021). These services are distinct from federal government provisions.

Studies have established that, like national politics, local politics can be partisan and ideological (Warshaw 2019). Local politics now gets less coverage on TV and more closely resembles national politics (Hopkins 2018). Yet, it would be premature to do away with an older literature that views local politics as highly distinct. Progressive Era reforms, constraints from state governments, the overrepresentation of homeowners in voting and meetings, the strength of local unions and industry, and the 75% of municipal elections that are nonpartisan all set city politics apart from national politics. City government's distinctiveness, size, and duties suit it to a study of occupational representation.

Existing work with career data shows class disparities in American politics. The working class is dramatically underrepresented in Congress (Carnes 2013) and, at over 30%, business owner was the most common career prior to running for mayor. Elected mayors with business owning backgrounds opt for less redistribution and more infrastructure spending compared to mayors with different occupational backgrounds (Kirkland 2021). This paper asks more generally, which careers show up where, and why? And if municipal governments are responsive to their constituents (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014), then could occupational representation on city council be a part of the reason why?

## 2 Data

To answer my question I assemble two samples of cities. The first is the 97 most populous cities, with original career data extracted from web biographies for officeholders.<sup>1</sup> The second is all California cities, with occupation data extracted from candidate ballot designations for candidates and officeholders (CEDA 2023).

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<sup>1</sup>I started with 100 largest American cities but because of data availability - certain council members have no online presence - ended up with 97.

For both city samples I categorize the careers of city council members and candidates using the coding system devised by Nicholas Carnes in his study of the working class in Congress (Carnes 2013). I make one minor tweak, which is to include a distinct category for non-profit workers since so many city council members publicize this aspect of their past, and I omit his category of “Worker” due to its scarcity. The broad headings I apply to specific careers are:

- Business Owner/Executive (ceo, cfo, finance executive)
- Business Employee (cpa, realtor, project manager, non-executive business person)
- Non-profit Worker (community advocate, volunteer, non-profit founder)
- Politician or Staff Member (commissioner, town council, incumbent, assemblymember)
- Technical Professional (doctor, engineer, athlete)
- Service-Based Professional (nurse, teacher)
- Military or Law Enforcement (police, retired army, probation officer)
- Lawyer

This coding scheme is concise, yet captures important variation. There are edge cases which are hard to classify. An accountant can be an employee of or an owner of a business. Certain service professionals could be considered technical. For instance, a pastor is considered a service-based profession but requires technical training in many cases. I use this coding scheme because it is precedented and scalable.

## **2.1 Large American Cities**

For the first cut at looking at the relationship between occupation and representation in city councils I look to a sample of the 97 largest cities in the United States and the city

council members currently serving there. For these cities I collected web biographies from city websites, and read through them to pick out the most prominent career. If someone mentioend they worked as a restaurant waitress for 10 years then became a lawyer and started their own practice 20 years later, I record them as a lawyer. These 97 cities had 1,011 city council members whose occupation I attempted to classify. 134 of them were unclassifiable.<sup>2</sup>

## 2.2 California Cities

Using the Sacramento State California Elections Data Archive (CEDA) I was able to get the ballot designation for candidates going back to 1995. From a sample of about 35,000 city council candidates I classify the career into one of the eight categories listed above. 23,128 are clasifiable - many do not include a ballot designation or include a ballot designation that does not contain career information, like “retired,” or “community member.” For many ballot designations I am able to classify them using word searches in the ballot designation - like “attorney” flags lawyer or “ceo” flags business owner/executive. For less clear ballot designation text I use OpenAI’s chat GPT language model<sup>3</sup> to classify the career into one of the eight categories above.

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<sup>2</sup>The reasons for no available occupation included having no web biography and listing no careers in their biography or simply saying “retired.”

<sup>3</sup>chat GPT 3.5

### 3 Descriptive Results

In Table 1 I present the distributions of the eight career categories in 4 samples - large cities, California overall, California winners (officeholders) and California losers. Naturally many people coming to city council have a previous job that is also political in nature - ranging from big, high power previous elected offices like CA state assemblymembers to more run of the mill local elected positions (commissioners) or governmental staff jobs (congressional aide). In the California elected sample the rate of political jobs is quite high. Many folks simply put “incumbent” on their ballot designation, tapping into the well documented incumbency advantage (Fowler 2014). City councils, because of their nonpartisan elections and low information environment, are primed for the personal incumbency advantage to benefit longstanding officials.

The rate of lawyers on city council is far lower than in Congress, for instance (Carnes 2013). It could be the case that many of the individuals categorized as politician or staff member have a J.D. and a law background, but what is significant for this project is their most prominent career in the eyes of voters which I assume to be what is most prominent in their biography or listed in their succinct ballot designation.

The rate of business owners and executives is about 10% lower than the rate for mayors (Kirkland 2021). Patricia Kirkland used a sample of mayors going back to the 1950’s and this study uses only current city council member data for large cities and a sample for California going back to 1995. Future work ought to tease out over time changes in the composition of city councils.

Table 1: Occupational category frequency

Category	Large Cities (elected)		CA Cities (full)		CA Cities (elected)		CA Cities (unelected)	
	n	% of Sample	n	% of Sample	n	% of Sample	n	% of Sample
Politician or Staff Member	172	20.09%	7648	34.677%	5443	53.58%	2205	18.53%
Business Owner/Executive	141	16.47%	3768	17.085%	1346	13.25%	2422	20.36%
Service Based Professional	134	15.65%	2518	11.417%	852	8.39%	1666	14.00%
Business Employee	87	10.16%	4102	18.599%	1143	11.25%	2959	24.87%
Military or Law Enforcement	83	9.70%	890	4.035%	394	3.88%	496	4.17%
Non-profit worker	83	9.70%	881	3.995%	242	2.38%	639	5.37%
Technical Professional	80	9.35%	1437	6.516%	459	4.52%	978	8.22%
Lawyer	76	8.88%	811	3.677%	279	2.75%	532	4.47%

Both samples: national large cities, and in California cities separated into the full California sample, winners, and losers.

## 4 Ideological Results

Next I look into how the ideology of these cities relates to the composition of the city council. In this paper I present a simple regression of the share of the city council belonging to that occupational category on the ideology score for the city. To use a scaled ideology score for each city in my sample I use those developed by Chris Tausanovitch and Chris Warshaw in their 2014 piece. The score is a combination of survey responses from seven CCES surveys scaled to one dimension for close to 300,000 respondents and made representative of all cities through a multilevel regression and poststratification model (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014). I scale this measure so it has mean 0 and standard deviation 1 for ease of interpreting the coefficients I display in results tables. Higher ideology score means more conservative.

The regressions displayed below are:

$$\text{Occupational Category Share} \sim \text{Scaled MRP Ideology Score}$$

The intercept is estimated precisely in all regressions and the coefficient on the ideology variable is displayed in column three of the tables with statistical summaries included as well. I order the rows negative to positive on the coefficient on ideology so that the early rows with negative coefficients are careers associating with more liberal cities and the late rows with positive coefficients are careers associating with more conservative cities.

In the sample of large cities across the country (Table 2) there five stastically significant category coefficients: politician, non-profit, and lawyer for liberal cities and military and law enforcement and business owners for conservative cities. The coefficients here are also substantively interesting in that they range from 1/2 to 1/3 the size of the intercept. In other words a one standard deviation change in the ideology score has a different conditional average share of occupational categories. For reference in the large city sample a one standard deviation change in ideology is like going from San Jose, CA to Orlando, FL.

Table 2: Large city sample regression ideology correlations

Category	intercept	ideology coefficient	std.error	statistic	p.value
Politician or Staff Member	0.189	-0.054	0.017	-3.182	0.002
Non-profit worker	0.082	-0.038	0.012	-3.141	0.002
Lawyer	0.087	-0.024	0.012	-2.053	0.043
Technical Professional	0.095	0.007	0.013	0.544	0.587
Business Employee	0.098	0.010	0.011	0.906	0.367
Service Based Professional	0.162	0.013	0.018	0.751	0.454
Military or Law Enforcement	0.102	0.029	0.014	2.177	0.032
Business Owner/Executive	0.183	0.057	0.018	3.137	0.002

n: 97 cities

In the sample of California cities, which is larger but more ideologically homogenous, there are similar ideological associations in council career category shares, but notably the only non-significant coefficient is on the largest category, politician or staff member. This is



likely because the rate is very high in this category across the board in California, a liberal state. Many California city councils serve large jurisdictions and are coveted positions, even for people holding other previously elected offices. For instance, many city council members in Los Angeles come to the city council from the state assembly. A one standard deviation change in ideology score has a smaller coefficient relative to the intercept in the California sample than in the national sample because due to scaling the variable a one standard deviation change in ideology score in the California sample is a smaller raw score change than in the national sample.

Table 3: California city sample ideology correlations

Category	intercept	ideology coefficient	std.error	statistic	p.value
Non-profit worker	0.043	-0.012	0.002	-5.668	0.000
Service Based Professional	0.119	-0.009	0.004	-2.453	0.015
Technical Professional	0.067	-0.009	0.003	-2.959	0.003
Lawyer	0.040	-0.007	0.003	-2.561	0.011
Politician or Staff Member	0.342	-0.002	0.007	-0.266	0.791
Military or Law Enforcement	0.041	0.011	0.002	4.503	0.000
Business Employee	0.184	0.014	0.005	2.874	0.004
Business Owner/Executive	0.164	0.014	0.005	3.000	0.003

n: 269 cities

For the current conference I unfortunately did not have time to write up further results, but I am currently collecting spending data for these cities and looking to use a compositional model (like is used in geology) to study how the overall share of *each* job category affects spending outcomes. One first thought is: these relationships could be spurious and just represent the share of the city itself doing that job. In other words are city councils just representative of their publics and liberal cities have a different job distribution than conservative cities? To probe this I gather ACS data on the share of each city doing each job

and when I include this variable in a regression set up it does not change the coefficient on ideology and in some cases bolsters it. I'd like to show with this paper that one way we get responsive municipal government is through occupational representation at the city council level and I look forward to discussing with you all soon.

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