The Political Disconnect: Working-Class and Low-Income People on What Politics Means to Them and How They Might Be Mobilized

Healthy Equitable and Responsive Democracy (HEARD) Initiative
Swarthmore College

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Executive Summary

Democracy directly translates to “rule by the people.” A functioning democratic society must involve all kinds of people in deciding who will hold the power to enact laws and allocate tax dollars. However, working-class and low-income people vote at significantly lower rates than the more privileged in the US, and their participation has been declining in recent elections.

In order to understand why those with fewer resources are less likely to vote and how this might change, a diverse group of researchers interviewed 232 low-income and working-class people (in every major racial group) from across Pennsylvania – 144 of whom either did not vote, or voted only occasionally. Our researchers spoke with each interviewee about their lives and communities, the issues they cared about, and their views on politics and voting.

Key findings

Why many low-income and working-class people do not vote: disconnection.

Almost every one of the people we spoke with who rarely or never voted – across ages, racial groups, and regions of the state – told us that politics seems disconnected from their lives in one or more ways:

- They feel like politics is by, for, and about people unlike themselves – people who are wealthier or more educated, born with a "silver spoon." Many Black and Latino respondents talked about this disconnect in both racial and social class terms.
- They see politics as a game – corrupt and unable to create meaningful change. They believe that politicians are not interested in helping them or their communities.

What can help: people need connections to politics.

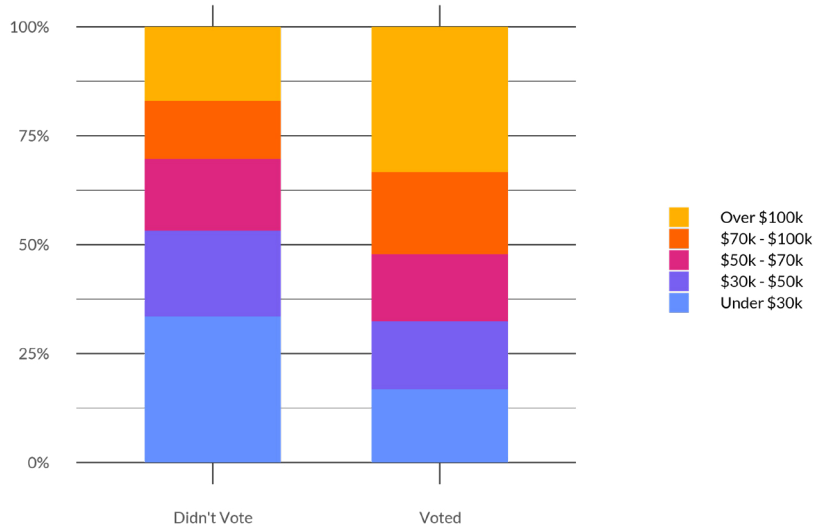
Our recommendations are based both on our interviews and on a broader body of research. Fundamentally, bringing low-income and working-class people into US politics will require campaigns, advocacy groups, and civic organizations to prioritize their concerns and take the time to build meaningful, ongoing relationships with low-income people and communities.

1. People want to believe that politics can meaningfully improve their lives – so they need to see **clear connections between the real problems people face and potential and actual solutions in politics and policy.**
2. People want to see themselves reflected in politics, campaigns, candidates, and government – so they need **more people from low-income and working-class backgrounds working in every aspect of politics and government, at every level.**
3. People want to feel genuinely listened to and cared about by those who have, or seek, political power – so they need politicians and other political groups to **spend more time in low-income and working-class communities, having two-way conversations.**

Introduction

In a time when wealthy authoritarians are dismantling US democratic institutions, the survival of our democracy depends on political participation from the rest of us. Yet, low-income and working-class perspectives are too often missing from democratic processes in the US. Lower-income people and those without college degrees vote at significantly lower rates than Americans with higher incomes and more education; people of color are also less likely to vote than White people. These problems have worsened over the last few election cycles.

Lower-Income People Are Over-Represented Among Non-Voters

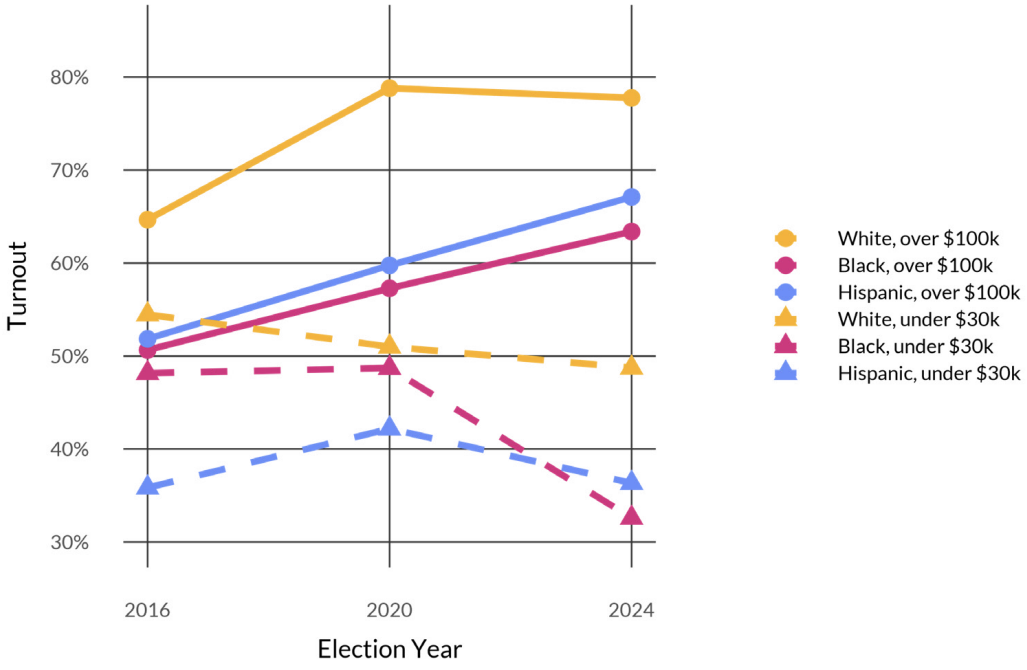


Note: Authors' analysis, Cooperative Election Study data for the 2024 Presidential election. Voters are validated by matching to election records.[1]

When substantial sections of potential voters are disconnected from politics, both the legitimacy and the representativeness of political decisions – and democracy itself – are threatened. If we want to (re)build a healthier and more meaningful democracy, we will need buy-in and participation from people across the social spectrum, in all racial groups and social classes.

Increasing voting among working-class and low-income people requires understanding what politics looks like from their perspectives, and listening to their views about the politicians and policies that affect their lives. Thus, our team of racially- and class-diverse researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 232 Pennsylvanians – in all major racial groups – who earn less than $45,000/year and/or do not have a college degree. In this report, we focus on those who are not regular voters – 144 of our respondents. Drawing from those interviews, this report explains why many low-income and working-class people choose not to vote.

We also provide recommendations for civic organizations, advocacy groups, party organizations, campaigns, and candidates who want our democracy to truly represent all its citizens, or who care about the concerns of low-income and working-class people. These recommendations for increasing electoral political participation among the working class are based on listening to what our interviewees told us, as well as previously published research.



Note: Authors' analysis, Cooperative Election Study data for the 2024 Presidential election. Voters are validated by matching to election records.[2]

People we talked with want to feel represented by their elected officials. Interviewees are concerned about being good citizens and good members of their communities, but feel those in politics ignore their experiences and background. Many pointed to the persistence of poverty, violence, or unemployment in their communities as evidence that electoral politics cannot make meaningful improvements in their lives. Fundamentally, our respondents described a deep sense of disconnection from politics.

When we asked participants what they thought might help themselves or others like them to become more politically engaged, the suggestions we heard were rarely about making voting access easier. Instead, people want to feel listened to and valued by political leaders. They want to see tangible changes in the quality of their lives and the issues affecting their communities. Getting these disengaged low-income and working-class people to the voting booth will require real, sustained connections with their communities.

Methodology & Interview Pool

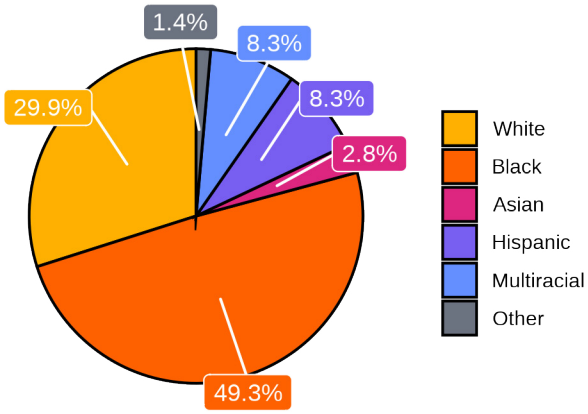
This report is based on 232 in-depth interviews conducted between 2018 and 2024 with low-income and working-class Pennsylvanians. In these interviews, we asked every participant about what politics means to them, what keeps them away from politics, and what might make voting more appealing. We focus on the 144 interviewees who voted irregularly or not at all, in order to understand why many low-income and working-class people don't participate in politics.

We recruited on social media, with flyers at transit stops and community gathering places, and through the networks of our undergraduate, graduate, and community-based researchers. Those who participated were compensated $20 for their time. All names used in this report are pseudonyms.

The research group is led by Dr. Daniel Laurison and has included a diverse team of 43 other primary interviewers and researchers: 20 undergraduate students, 14 community-based researchers, and 9 postgraduate researchers. Fourteen researchers are Black, 11 are White, 10 are Latino, 8 are Asian, and one is Indigenous. Thirty come from low-income or working-class backgrounds.

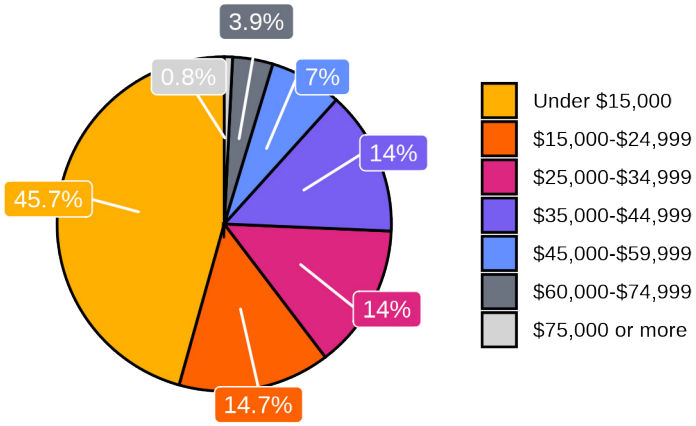
Our research group interviewed low-income and working-class people from both Western and

RACE

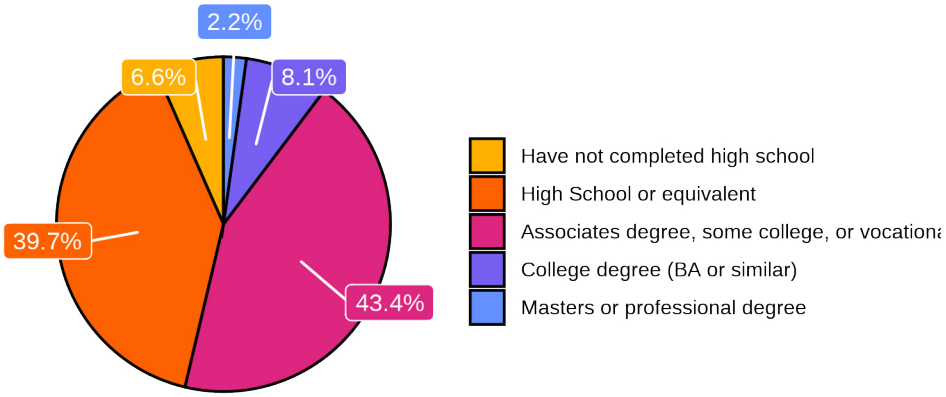


Charts reflect demographics of less politically engaged interviewees (n = 144). Ages range from 18 to 77; 47.9% men, 47.9% women, 4.2% nonbinary.

INCOME



EDUCATION



Southeastern Pennsylvania, in small towns, rural areas, suburbs, and major cities.

People were eligible to participate if they met one or more of the following criteria:

1. They earned less than $45,000/year.
2. They did not have a college degree.
3. They worked in a job that did not require a college degree.

Our goal in these interviews was to hear how people understand politics and what it means (or doesn't mean) to them. We did not try to influence their views, and we listened without judgment. Participants generally enjoyed the interviews, and often thanked us for listening to them.

A Note About Political Non-Participation

There are many reasons someone may not vote or engage in electoral politics; in this section, we discuss how current explanations fail to fully address why many low-income and working-class people do not vote.

Logistical and Administrative Barriers

One common explanation for lower voter turnout among low-income and working-class people (and Black and other people of color across class positions) is logistical and administrative barriers. Among our 144 less politically-engaged interviewees, only 12 – less than 10% – told us that they have been kept from voting by the time it would take, inconvenient polling locations or hours, or problems with the registration process. This is still far too many, but 83 people – 58% of the people we spoke with who do not vote regularly – reported that it would be easy to vote if they wanted to, or explained that they had had no trouble voting in the past.

There is no question that voting should be as accessible as possible; no one should be kept from voting by early registration deadlines, long lines, or onerous ID requirements. But reducing barriers – such as shifting to all-mail voting or same-day registration – is not all that is needed; substantial income and racial inequalities in participation persist (and sometimes even increase) when registering and voting are most accessible.[3]

Ignorance and Apathy

A frequent misconception about voter disengagement is that nonvoters do not know or do not care enough about politics. Yet our interviews found that most people do care deeply about their communities and are knowledgeable about many political issues. If they said they do not care about politics, it was usually because they feel politicians do not care about them. If they believed they do not know enough to vote, it was usually because they feel politicians are not speaking to them, or believe they cannot rely on media, campaign messaging, or political party membership to know whether a candidate is worth their vote.

Every single one of our less-engaged interviewees expressed care about the people around them, and all but two identified concerns about their communities and personal lives that are affected by electoral politics. Most make efforts outside electoral politics to improve the quality of life in their communities, whether through helping friends and neighbors, volunteering, or attending protests. They talked about how

their communities are neglected by people in power, and shared their views and beliefs on abortion rights, the social safety net, and more.

Views of Politics Part 1:

Politics Isn't for or About Us

People we spoke with feel that politics is something done by and for people who are wealthy and elite (and often also White). At some point in their interviews, 85% of the politically-disengaged low-income and working-class people we spoke with told us they feel politics is for those unlike themselves.

Our respondents expressed this in two overlapping ways:

1. People see politics as **not for people with their issues, identity, values, and concerns**; they see politicians as **uninterested** in their communities.
2. People see politics as serving **rich, privileged, and/or White people** – those who are raised to be knowledgeable and are encouraged to engage in politics.

Essentially, they feel politics is not meant for them.

Almost half of our respondents have an explicitly class-based picture of who politics is for. They imagine politics as people in suits: professionals and managers. They believe wealthier people not only have the time to follow politics but also have more at stake and more to gain, so they naturally have more influence and engagement. Our participants often argued that those with more privilege are more engaged with politics because politics affects them more.

It's Not for Me

Almost 70% of our politically disengaged interviewees described politics as something not meant for them. The disconnect between working-class and low-income people and those they picture as more involved in politics comes from a sense that they will not be listened to by those in power.

Ryan, a White, 32-year-old groundskeeper who had attended a few years of college but not graduated, told us how he feels when politics comes up: "It feels like something completely out of my control. You know? I feel like… And this is me I guess just feeling sorry for myself, but I have like, a checkered past, so I don't feel like I'm the type of person that people really listen to. I don't think I have much of a say in – I don't think there's anything I could do to change what's going on."

Miriam, an unemployed 46-year-old Latina woman who we interviewed on her porch in North Philadelphia, explained that she feels awkward talking about politics because it is clearly not aimed at her. She explained,

"when I'm watching this they are not talking to lay people. The jargon that they're speaking with is not for lay people at all."

When we asked Lamar, a 28-year-old Black man who worked as a phone banker, if he feels like his opinions matter to politicians, he told us: "I might as well be talking to a wall, trying to get them to do that. It'd be much easier to get a cat to take a bath than to get them to listen to me."

We heard these sentiments over and over: the way the political system works makes many low-income and working-class people feel as though politics is out of their control.

> *"Just in general politics [...] I feel like it's not for me. They're [politicians] not for me."*
> - Jaden, Black man, 20, retail manager

> *"No. I don't think there's interest in [...] the conditions we live in, in how we receive medical care. And I'm not saying this because I'm an immigrant; I'm saying it in general..."*
> - Adriana, Latina woman, 33, factory worker

Politics Is for Other People

When we asked Ryan who he thinks pays more attention to politics. He first told us "people on campuses" and then expanded: "I think it's people [who are] more well off in that, like, safety isn't the first thing that they think of when they leave their house in the morning. You know [...] when you're not looking over your shoulders constantly, you have, like, time to think." We asked all of our participants to describe how they pictured someone more politically involved than themselves. The single most common response was "people in suits."

Almost half of the people we interviewed explicitly told us they think of politics as something by and for

> *"Mostly suit and tie folks [...] going to different political functions, mostly to get donations for whoever their candidate is [...] like, Black tie affairs. Things like that."*
> - Mark, White man, 43, EMT

> *"I will say, a majority of them are from backgrounds that, you know, like they had a silver spoon in their mouth. [...] their parents already had plans for them. Like already had accounts for them, money for them."*
> - Luna, Black woman, 37, pharmaceutical operator

> *"Honestly, like people who are totally into politics, I always picture it – when you asked me that question, the first thing pops up is a* ***snobby person in a fancy suit or dress*** *or whatever. [...] You know, people who are not there to hear your opinions. They're not gonna sit and give you the time of day. They're just gonna keep pushing their ideas on. That's what I picture."*
>
> - Khoa, Asian man, 24, foreman

better-off, higher-income, White, or otherwise more privileged people. They explained that well-off people already have the resources and knowledge needed to participate in politics, as well as the power to exclude others from participating.

Jordan, a 26-year-old Black man who survived on gig work and food stamps, told us why he thinks richer people are more likely to participate: "I think because their voice matters because they're better off. [...] If you're better off that means some type of power or some type of money is being contributed to something. And that's really what all politics is, is who has the bigger stick and somebody who's struggling, or not where they need to be, or just living paycheck to paycheck, your voice don't matter cause they see you as a number, but if you're better off, they know your name." He concluded his interview by telling us he doesn't vote, because he knows that, at "the end of the day, it's not up to me and it's not up to the people that's in my neighborhood."

Case Study: Lala

We interviewed Lala, a Black single mother in West Philadelphia, both in 2018 when she was 26, and again in 2024 at 32. Lala had a high school degree and had attended trade school. She worked at a donut shop in 2018 and by 2024 had left the workforce due to a disability. She described her political participation as below average, and finds the whole process stressful and discouraging. She often hesitated sharing her thoughts, frequently saying she didn't know or lacked confidence in her views, but she was one of our most insightful respondents. The last time she voted was for Obama, driven by the hope that the first Black president would change her life. But after seeing little progress, she lost faith in the power of politics to create the change she envisioned. She thought

she would get involved again if she believed real change was possible. When asked what "politics" meant to her, Lala answered:

> ***"People in power that have money and that are above us and that don't really fully understand struggles like being in debt, having a child, being on welfare. I think that's what it's like, a disconnection, that's probably what I associate it with."***

When we asked what kinds of people she thought would be more politically involved than her, she replied:

> ***"They probably know more about what's going on, maybe they [...] talk to people who are running and they might be around those people so they might see what's going on. But when you don't see it and you're just like working, you probably don't know unless you're really involved. [. . .] They probably know who's corrupt, they probably know who's for people, but I really don't know who to trust so I'm just like... I don't know."***

Lala is worried, like many of our respondents, that she does not have the connections or inside knowledge to discern which candidates are "corrupt" and which are "for people." Lala often framed her political views through her experiences as a Black woman; she told us: "I think as Black people we feel like our vote doesn't matter." Lala's disillusionment runs deep. Politics feels overwhelming, depressing, and hopeless, especially when there do not seem to be any avenues for improvement. She told us:

> ***"People tell you that your vote matters and I feel like it doesn't and every time it's a person who doesn't really get us or isn't there for us."***

In both her interviews, Lala expressed what we heard from so many others: that politics does not include her. Her disengagement is rooted in personal and community experience, alongside an acute awareness of her position. Though she doesn't always understand political jargon, she is highly aware of her place as a working-class Black woman navigating obstacles like limited access to jobs, education, and upward mobility for her daughter. She often spoke in terms of "we," grounding her views in collective experience. That same group identity shapes both her withdrawal ("I don't vote") and her cautious openness to re-engage ("I wouldn't say I would never do it again").

Lala illustrates both our key findings in this section: she sees politics as "not for me" as well as specifically for other, more privileged people. She sees politics as out of reach, but she also simply doesn't see herself as the kind of person who votes. Her disinterest is reinforced by those in her network (no one she knows votes regularly) and a deep cynicism: she believes that nothing changes, voting doesn't matter, and all politicians are the same and don't care about people and communities like hers. That view isn't abstract; it comes from real experience. She voted for Obama and was excited when he won, and then didn't bother again because, she said, **"I don't know... what he actually did, 'cause I'm still doing the same things."**

Views of Politics Part 2:

Political Participation Is Not Changing Anything

Close to 94% of our less politically engaged low-income and working-class respondents see politics as ineffective at solving their everyday struggles. Repeated experiences of being overlooked, unheard, or materially unaffected by political outcomes lead them to feel a deep sense of disillusionment.

We heard three related themes across these interviews:

1. People see **politics as a corrupt game** or a contest, often referring to politicians as contestants wishing to grab money, attention, and votes, rather than having a commitment to a set of values or beliefs.
2. People feel like **both political parties are the same**. They often describe how each party seeks to hold and wield power, rather than attempting to make meaningful change.
3. People describe not **seeing their economic situation changing**, and their issues remaining unaddressed, whether or not they themselves voted.

For these people, the past hasn't brought change, and the present doesn't promise any either. Regardless of which party is in power, they feel like politics has consistently failed to improve their lives. Because of this, politics is often seen as distant, ineffective, and serving people with more privilege and power.

Politics Is a Game

Throughout our interviews, 74% of our less-engaged respondents described politics as a joke or told us they see politicians as corrupt. They often expressed frustration with politics, describing how political campaigns look like a game or drama where people are fighting for power. Many of our respondents also view politics as something only about winning and losing, and not actually about choosing representatives who could make their lives better.

Sylvia, an unemployed 33-year-old White woman from West Philadelphia, explained that she tries to pay attention to politics, but it's always "political drivel that I have heard before. The same false promises, the same [expletive] used car salesman jargon. I've heard it all before. Politicians have a very predictable script at this point, and I'm kind of done hearing it."

"I think people were just more so focused on either they really want Trump or the people really didn't want Trump. It was kind of like watching the playoffs. […] Not just my family, like families all over. They just kind of tuned in because it was entertaining. […] You know, like, even if they didn't care, it was entertaining."

- Aiyana, Black woman, 19, day care worker

"See, for me, politics is just a big scam. It is toxic. I find like every time a politician talks, I just think this person is just bringing out his own interest to gain for his or her own benefits. And that is selfish people who just want to be in a position where they power over the others…just because they're most influential in the society."

-Tabatha, Black woman, 26, waitress

Many of our respondents saw avoiding politics as avoiding being taken in by a scam or a hoax. By not voting for anyone, they could stay above the fray.

Both Parties Are the Same, Neither Cares About Us

Many less-engaged respondents also expressed distrust of both major parties. 55 people (38%) told us they don't feel like there is a meaningful difference between the two parties. They feel like neither party addresses their issues; that each is only concerned with gaining and maintaining political power, rather than executing tangible changes to people's lives.

Sylvia, quoted above, told us "the government values people who have money. Let's just be honest here. Unless you have money in this country, you don't [expletive] matter."

Kimber, a 36-year-old Black woman with an Associate's degree, spoke with us about the levels of racial and economic inequality in the US. We asked if she thought anyone was trying to address those issues, and she told us "Politically, I feel like… no one, right? Yeah. It's the same system. […] In our current political playing field, that's not there."

This sentiment leads to broader disengagement from politics.

"Regardless of Democrat or Republican, it's all the same group of people who are making the decision."

-Sergio, Latino man, 32, transporter

My Situation Hasn't Changed

Most of our non- or seldom-voting respondents – 76% – told us they feel like there is no way voting can make a change, or that nothing that happens in politics affects their lives, or that their situations will stay the same no matter who wins or loses elections. They've watched politicians make promises, win elections, and then vanish, leaving behind the same struggling neighborhoods and towns, the same crises of addiction and violence, and the same financial strain. Over time, that disappointment has hardened into a belief that no one in power really cares, and nothing is going to change.

> *"I'm done with the Democrats. I'm done with the Republicans. The political party is all the same, no matter what. And the government is going to elect who they want. The president is only a puppet for the people behind the scenes."*
> - Thomas, Black man, 56, unemployed

John, a 27-year-old Black UPS worker, explained why he sees a lot of people not voting:

> *They don't think it'll make a difference. […] a lot of people who grew up poor are always going to be poor, so it's like regardless of if I vote or not, my kids might still be poor, my grandkids might still be poor, and there aren't these resources necessarily out there for me to succeed and like who I vote for might not necessarily have my interests at heart. I feel like a lot of times like people from working class and like lower end and homeless and what not, are just like it's not gonna do anything for me like.... [laughs] it's not. It doesn't make sense for me to do this. Voting in a sense feels like a privilege. And that's pretty weird because people are like, it's your duty to vote. But it's like, a lot of times things don't change even if you do vote […] It's like when is it going to ensure that like, this guarantees my safety, or this guarantees that I'll be able to make payments on my mortgage or whatever.*

> *"Part of the reason I'm like one vote don't make a difference now is because even though I can [vote…] nobody is going to restructure us enough that's going to affect me personally."*
> - Ken, Asian man, 45, unemployed

"Because no matter what, you're going to have rich people, middle class people, low income people, the rich people are always going to be rich. Poor people are always going to be poor. They're always going to have money, we're not. Therefore they're going to buy whatever they want and we can't, and there's nothing we can do about it."

– Sonia, Multiracial, 46, Uber/Lyft driver

Case Study: Alex

We interviewed Alex, a 50-year-old gay Black man from Pittsburgh, in 2022. Never married and without children, Alex had worked in healthcare and security before becoming a restaurant server. While he graduated from high school, he did not attend college. Alex has never voted and doesn't follow politics. He is deeply disillusioned with the government and the two-party system. The only president he ever somewhat supported was Obama, mainly for expanding access to affordable healthcare. Yet, this wasn't enough to convince him to vote. For Alex, politics is just a power game, and the government doesn't care about people like him. He states:

> ***"It's all games, everything out here is a game. It's games, games, games, games [...] I don't really see nothing working for me as a Black man [...] To me, I'm like, it's all bull S-H-I-T. They say what they would do. I sit there and listen. [... Candidates] tell you what you want to hear. Once they get in there, they do whatever they want"***

Alex described both parties as one and the same, parties by and for rich people, creating division to obtain political power.

> ***"Republicans and Democrats, they really shake hands behind the scenes like this stuff is games. Democrats really don't care about the poor either. They don't really care."***

Alex has long been frustrated by low wages, lack of support, and the government's repeated failure to deliver real economic or healthcare reform for low-income people. While Alex does not vote, he has attended protests and rallies; however, he sees these methods as also ultimately ineffective. Even when policies change, he feels they only serve to keep the working class down.

> ***"I just marched with the SEIU and we were always fighting for $15 and I said to myself, [...] don't you understand. [The government will] say, you know what they've been wanting, $15. Give 'em $15. Once they give you $15, then they raise everything up. So you're back at zero. They don't wanna see you get ahead."***

Alex embodies all three findings in this section: he sees politics as a corrupt game, believes both parties are the same, and feels no real change ever comes. His own stagnant economic situation reinforces that view. Our conversation with him demonstrates how the lack of change in many people's personal lives not only makes them feel like voting and politics are not worth their time or effort, but also builds frustration, indifference, and doubt in the entire democratic system. When participating in politics leads nowhere, politics starts to look like a joke, not a serious avenue for progress.

Increasing Political Engagement Among Low-Income and Working-Class People

Plenty of working-class and low-income people do vote regularly: 88 of our 232 respondents voted in both midterms and Presidential elections (and often in state and local contests as well). The regular voters in our sample are, on average, slightly better off financially and slightly older than the 144 people discussed above. They are also somewhat more likely to believe some kind of change is possible through politics, to say they feel a duty to vote, and to feel they had a personal stake in politics.

However, many of the regular voters we spoke with share the frustrations and concerns about politics described above; 82% agree that politics is mostly by and for other (generally richer) people. Almost all of these regular voters are also deeply skeptical about whether political involvement is worthwhile. At the time of their interviews, they were continuing to turn out because they felt a duty to vote, or because the small effort it took seemed worth the small chance of making a difference. But **there is no guarantee that these regular voters will continue to vote**.

The working-class and low-income people we spoke with – both voters and nonvoters – told us over and over again that politics seems disconnected from their lives and experiences. They feel unheard, unrepresented, and uninspired by politics and politicians. They want solutions to problems affecting their lives and their communities – but many do not see how voting could make a difference.

If the pervasive sense among low-income and working-class people that politics is by, for, and about the well-off is not addressed, we are likely to continue to see substantial portions of the multi-racial working class staying home on election days, and further increases in racial and class turnout gaps.

Those who want our democracy to truly represent all its citizens, who care about the concerns of low-income and working-class people, or who want to earn their votes, need to create and sustain real connections with people and communities who do not currently feel represented.

We asked all our interviewees what would help them feel more engaged with politics. Based on their answers, along with the rest of what we learned from our interviews, we outline three key ways to increase political participation among working-class and low-income people in the United States. Our recommendations are for any campaign, advocacy group, party, or civic organization interested in increasing political participation among working-class and low-income people. We lay out the broad recommendations below, detail the evidence behind them, and suggest ideas for implementing them in the next three sections.

Our recommendations

1

Connect Politics to Problems and Solutions

Make it clear that there are (and can be) political and policy solutions to many of the real problems people face.

2

Recruit Political Practitioners from Low-Income and Working-Class Backgrounds

Risk of social disconnection compounds across marginalized identities. Addressing these disparities fully requires prioritizing intersecting aspects of identity including age, race, disability, sexuality, and gender identity.

3

Increase the Frequency, Quality, and Duration of Contact with Low-Income and Working-Class Communities

Meaningful progress requires moving away from individualizing approaches and instead prioritizing social solutions aimed at creating relational change.

1 Connect Politics to Problems and Solutions

Working-class and low-income people told us they want to see real changes, but they do not believe politics could bring those changes. Many pointed to specific, concrete problems in their lives and communities that they feel no one in politics is addressing; they told us that if they see evidence of real efforts at change, they will be more interested in voting.

For example, we talked with Aria, a 21-year-old Black woman from Coatesville who was working as a summer camp counselor. We asked her what it would take for her to get more interested in participating in politics, and she replied: "I feel like if I knew, like directly how it would impact and affect my life and what the benefits would be or things that wouldn't benefit me were. I feel like that would make it – if those things were more obvious right in front of me, I would probably be more engaged."

> ***If I knew [...] how it would impact and affect my life [...] I would probably be more engaged.***

Often, political communications do try to show people both the risks of electing one party and the benefits of electing another, but many people we spoke with do not trust these messages. They believed politicians are just "telling you what you want to hear," as Alex said above.

The people we spoke with are not unreachable, and they are not unreasonable. Ahmir, an unemployed 52-year-old Black man, explained that he just wants to see some evidence that politicians are actually working to meet his needs:

> *If the people that you go vote for...go and do what they're elected to do. And I see some changes in unemployment, homelessness, see some,* ***not drastic changes...but at least [a] start*** *[...] maybe I'll reconsider [voting]. There's a term, they say 'practice what you preach.' That's what I want to see.*

What research shows:

On average, politicians and policy are more responsive to the interests and demands of wealthy people and corporations than those of working-class and low-income people.[4] When laws and policies do direct resources towards low-income and working-class people and communities, the effects can be hard to see. Outside Medicare and Social Security, most redistribution in the US is done through either:

- means-tested programs, which reduce political engagement among recipients because they are so

often subject to punitive and demeaning interactions in order to receive benefits; [5]

- changes to the tax code, which not everyone knows about – and only those who file appropriately can benefit from – such as the Earned Income Tax Credit;
- grants which pass through many levels of bureaucracy before funds reach their recipients, often entirely stripped of any clear link to the bill which funded them.

All this makes it very difficult for everyday people to trace the relationship between much of what politicians do and how they actually experience their towns and neighborhoods, the economy, or social services.

What we recommend: Make it clear that there are political and policy solutions to many of the real problems people face.

People who want working-class and low-income people to turn out to vote need to make real connections with the daily issues regular people face. Part of the solution will be **proposals that aim to directly benefit those who are struggling** with low wages, unemployment, an insufficient social safety net, and the effects of poverty and job loss in their neighborhoods and towns. Another part will be clear, concrete communication about both the content and impact of proposed policies and past political achievements. Policies and communication are only the start, however; for many of our respondents, it will take more to build trust and to convince them that voting is worth their time.

2 Recruit Political Practitioners from Low-Income and Working-Class Backgrounds

Our interviewees believe that most politicians do not understand their lives or their struggles. They see an enormous distance between their own experiences and those of politicians, as well as the people they think of as being involved in or caring about politics.

This class (and often race) divide is a big part of our respondents' distrust of voting and politics.

But candidates, nonprofit staff, organizers, volunteers, and others who have personal experience with economic precarity could do a lot to help connect working-class and low-income people to politics. Max, a 51-year-old Black security guard, told us:

> ***If I was to vote**, it would have to be for a candidate that felt like I did and I'd seen through their actions that they're making change…I would have to personally feel—feel them. […] **You've got to have somebody that's really been through something to tell some people about something…** That's what's wrong with politics…You have all these rich people running for office…if you had a person that come in here that's broke, ain't got nothing, you know what I mean? And they just come in there and they just want to make a change. They're not caring about the money, they want to buck the lobbyists and… **yeah, I would be for that person.***

What research shows:

Our respondents' perception that political work is mostly done by people unlike themselves is accurate:

- very few US politicians are from low-income or working-class backgrounds[6]
- campaign staff and other political professionals are disproportionately White and elite-educated[7]
- people who volunteer for campaigns are Whiter, older, more educated, and higher-income than their party as a whole.[8]

What we recommend: Increase the number and visibility of people among your candidates, staff, and volunteers who come from working-class and low-income backgrounds.

Both social-class and racial representation help build trust and confidence. To help more people see themselves in politics and trust what they hear from people asking them to vote, organizations should seek to recruit and train volunteers, staff, and candidates from the same communities they are trying to mobilize, in terms of both race and social class.

3 Increase the Frequency, Quality, and Duration of Contact with Low-Income and Working-Class Communities

Our respondents want to feel heard by people with power. Many of them have never been asked to vote or seen a politician or canvasser visit their neighborhoods; others see efforts to mobilize them as instrumental and one-sided.

> *What would it take for me to get more involved? **If I thought I was going to get heard, I might get involved.***
>
> *- Marisol, Latina and White, 50, customer service*

Jaylen, a 19-year-old Black package handler, thought he would be more interested in politics if there were "ways for people to not just listen to what you hear on the news, but also like try to have conversation, a chance to get to know who you're voting for." He wants politicians to "have a little bit **more community outreach** [...]. So that we can know, ok, do we want to actually vote for this person or vote for somebody else."

> *I don't think they care about our votes or our opinions until they need to try to get the last couple of votes in. Like **I don't hear from politicians all year**. Until, you know, it's voting time and then they're all like, 'Hey, I need more African American 21- to 25-year-olds to vote for me and this is why you should vote for me.' And it's like, 'dude, **you're offering nothing that I like, but you're coming for me because you need more people in my demographic to vote for you. That's trash**.' [...] Before the votes had to happen, **I would appreciate it more if politicians actually put in a little bit more effort to hear what we wanted.*** – Essence, Black woman, 21, nanny

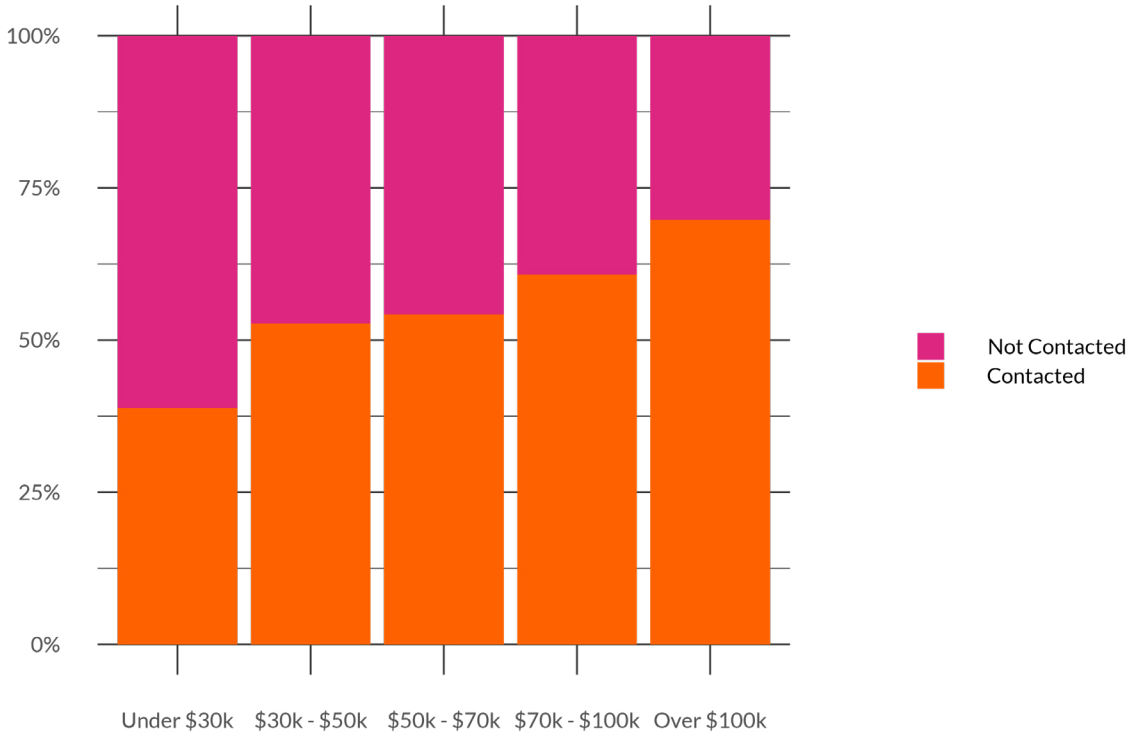
Deborah, a 62-year-old Black woman who was unemployed when we spoke with her, said she would like to see a politician: "**come to my house and talk to me**. He might not be able to get to everybody, but maybe in the community center, come within the neighborhood or something. **A lot of politicians don't come to the neighborhood**. Tell us your views and let us speak to your views."

What research shows:

We know a lot about how to increase political participation, and the key is contact and connection.

- People who belong to groups that mobilize them – like churches or unions – are much more likely to vote.[9]
- Absent that kind of organic organization, the most effective way to increase the likelihood that someone will vote is to ask them to do so, ideally in person.[10]
- When low-income people and people of color are asked to vote by an organization they know[11] or a neighbor they connect with, they are much more likely to vote.[12]
- However, lower-income people are less likely to be contacted by campaigns[13] and less responsive to standard canvassing efforts when they are contacted.[14]

Lower-Income People Are Less Likely to Have Heard From a Candidate or Campaign



Note: Authors' analysis, Cooperative Election Study data for the 2024 Presidential election.[15]

What we recommend: Invest in long-term efforts to make contact with, listen to, and be present in low-income and working-class communities.

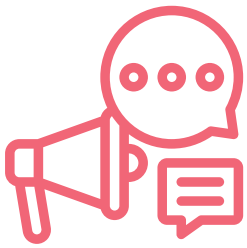
For some of our respondents, simply having someone take the time to ask them to vote would probably bring them to the polls – especially if that ask comes from someone from their neighborhood or community. But many people we spoke with also see one-off efforts to mobilize them as instrumental and insincere. For these people, longer-term investments in building trust will be necessary.

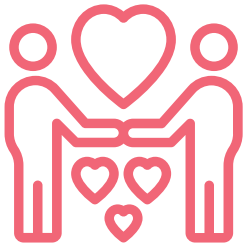
More consistent outreach efforts and events – including real listening and engagement – in lower-income communities would show that people in politics are interested in their concerns. These might include year-round, long-term organizing efforts, small-scale town halls, community service efforts, and other initiatives for building connections beyond one-off visits from volunteers or paid canvassers in the weeks before each election.

Summary: Recommendations for Engaging Working-Class and Low-Income People in Electoral Politics

The decline in voting among low-income and working-class people across the last decade, and the urgent need to build a healthier and more responsive democracy in the United States, necessitate large-scale efforts to include low-income and working-class people in electoral politics. There are already some great organizations and initiatives working on some of these recommendations, but not yet at the scale or depth needed.

The exact strategies different organizations should take depend on their particular mission, tax status, and capacity; here, we give just a few examples of what implementing these recommendations might look like.





What We Heard	What Should Happen	Possible Examples
People want to believe that politics can meaningfully improve their lives.	Make clear connections between the real problems people face and potential and actual solutions in politics and policy.	• A campaign highlighting the programs funded in a particular community by recent state or national legislation. • A proposal to raise wages for low-paid workers.
People want to see themselves reflected in politics, campaigns, candidates, and government.	Increase the number of people from low-income and working-class backgrounds working in every aspect of politics and government, at every level.	• Recruit, train, and pay people from low-income communities to staff campaign offices in their own neighborhoods. • Rethink the requirements and expectations – such as elite educational credentials or extensive political experience – for some jobs in civic, advocacy, and political organizations.
People want to feel genuinely listened to and cared about by those who have, or seek, political power.	More contact with, listening to, and ongoing presence in low-income and working-class communities.	• Have permanent political party offices in more low-income communities. • Invest in sustained, year-round organizing.

Conclusions

The message from working-class and low-income people is clear: politics feels like it's built for someone else. Many working-class and low-income people see politics as a corrupt game played by wealthy people, a game they are neither invited to nor equipped to play, and one which they will inevitably lose. People who don't see their identities, values, or lived experience in the political arena feel culturally and emotionally alienated – and sometimes actively excluded – from political participation.

Nonvoting among our respondents is not primarily about barriers, ignorance, or apathy. What may look like indifference is instead a sense that things don't change or that their voices don't matter. Most think voting would be easy and accessible, but make active decisions to abstain because of their dissatisfaction with and disconnection from politics, candidates, and government.

When lower-income people interact with the government, those interactions are often negative, whether in crumbling school buildings, via means-tested and insufficient social programs, or in encounters with the police. Positive, meaningful contact with government and political practitioners is much less common.

To revive and sustain a healthy democracy, working-class and low-income people will need to believe that politics is worth it. Ultimately, political participation is largely a matter of trust – having faith that the system can work, and that people in government have one's best interests at heart. Social science and common sense tell us that trust comes from relationships, from connections. Trust can be built through meaningful, two-way relationships developed and sustained over time.

People will vote if they believe that politics can meaningfully improve their lives, if they see themselves reflected in politics, campaigns, candidates, and government, and if they feel genuinely listened to and cared about by those who have, or seek, political power.

Lower rates of voting among working-class and low-income people are neither natural nor immutable. It is possible to have a democracy that includes everyone.

We hope this report will inspire everyone who cares about democracy to work to repair the political disconnect, to bridge the gap between the world of electoral politics and the lives of low-income and working-class people.

Endnotes

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