

Wealth gap widens between Congress and constituents

By Peter Whoriskey, Washington Post

BUTLER, Pa. – One day after his shift at the steel mill, Gary Myers drove home in his 10-year-old Pontiac and told his wife he was going to run for Congress.

The odds were long. At 34, Myers was the shift foreman at the “hot mill” of the Armco plant here. He had no political experience and little or no money, and he was a Republican in a district that tilted Democratic.

But standing in the dining room, still in his work clothes, he said he felt voters deserved a better choice.

Three years later, he won.

When Myers entered Congress, in 1975, it wasn't nearly so unusual for a person with few assets besides a home to win and serve in Congress. Though lawmakers on Capitol Hill have long been more prosperous than other Americans, others of that time included a barber, a pipe fitter and a house painter. A handful had even organized into what was called the “Blue Collar Caucus.”

But the financial gap between Americans and their representatives in Congress has widened considerably since then, according to an analysis of financial disclosures by The Washington Post.

Between 1984 and 2009, the median net worth of a member of the House more than doubled, according to the analysis of financial disclosures, from \$280,000 to \$725,000 in inflation-adjusted 2009 dollars, excluding home equity.

Over the same period, the wealth of an American family has

declined slightly, with the comparable median figure sliding from \$20,600 to \$20,500, according to the Panel Study of Income Dynamics from the University of Michigan.

The comparisons exclude home equity because it is not included in congressional reporting, and 1984 was chosen because it is the earliest year for which consistent wealth statistics are available.

The growing disparity between the representatives and the represented means that there is a greater distance between the economic experience of Americans and those of lawmakers.

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