

Can't find candidate's 'ordinary people'

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Feel ordinary? According to Democratic presidential candidate Sen. Barack Obama, he's interested in the welfare of "ordinary people." Taking a page from the class-warfare book of former Sen. John Edwards – you know, the "two Americas" pap – Obama's oratory is peppered with references to ordinary people. Edwards dropped out of the presidential sweepstakes when his one-note campaign collapsed. He has yet to endorse Obama or Sen. Hillary Clinton.

Obama has taken up a version of Edwards' theme with his frequent references to Americans he apparently believes are ordinary. He means, I suspect, Americans who are not wealthy or professional or educated. "Ordinary" in his parlance seems to denote a classification that is both stereotypical and insulting.

By Obama's lights, I come from ordinary people but no longer qualify because I have a good education and a professional job. Fair enough. But, I never felt ordinary, even growing up in a blue-collar tradesman's family in a Northeast industrial city. I never saw my dad as ordinary, simply because he worked at a trade. Our neighbors were much the same: factory workers, office clerks and secretaries, mechanics, electricians, carpenters, plumbers, truck drivers, construction laborers. And all of them far more complex than what Obama might define as the ordinariness of their jobs.

Ordinary? Never saw it. Never believed it, even years later after I'd done the college thing and moved on from my roots.

If anything, the working people of my parents' generation – and the people I know today who come home with dirt under their fingernails and aches in their muscles – don't qualify as ordinary the way politicians use the term. In my experience they work hard, cherish family, educate their children, go to church and take time for civic involvement. None of them, not one, is ordinary. If anything, they are to a person, extraordinary in that they are individuals with aspirations, deeply held beliefs and the joys and pains that come with the vagaries of living.

Of course, Obama attempts to categorize people by economic class. He folds low- and moderate-wage people into his version of ordinariness. People with bigger incomes must, by his assessment, be something other than ordinary because (why?) they make more money than their neighbors or they have advanced college degrees or they inherited a bundle from Granddad.

Obama says he wants to be the president who listens to ordinary people. Good luck with that. None of us in this great nation is ordinary. None of us is less or more of an American because of economic circumstances or social position. None of us should settle for being stereotyped and pigeonholed by politicians as ordinary. To accept such a classification is a guarantee of victim status.

Ordinary? Not me. Not you. Not any of us.

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