

Before coming to Washington, members of Congress typically build their reputations - and often their fortunes - on respected professional work in the private sector. Many, like Rep. Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.), are lawyers. Others, such as Sen. Tom Coburn (R-Okla.), are doctors. A lucky few come from more exclusive, exciting fields: Major League Baseball, in the case of Sen. Jim Bunning (R-Ky.).

But there's a small contingent hailing from a vocation that might be just the right prelude to politics: Reps. Bill Shuster (R-Pa.) and John Campbell (R-Calif.) represent the tiny-but-proud car salesman caucus.

"Being a car dealer or used-car salesman will get you a bad rap, but it's not as bad as being in politics," says Campbell. "My position in the public esteem went down from a car salesman to being a politician."

Shuster says he's proud of his former profession and notes he was a pretty darn good salesman. "I'd like to consider myself a closer," he says. "That's the business term for it."

Both representatives became owners of car dealerships for the same reason: They wanted to own their own business. For 13 years, Shuster, 48, owned a profitable mid-size Chrysler dealership in East Freedom, Pa.; in 2003, he sold the business. Campbell, 53, owned 13 franchises in Southern California. Most of them were Saturn franchises, plus a large Ford dealership. In his 25 years of selling, he moved Nissans, Mazdas, Porsches, Audis and Lincolns; he estimates he sold 5,000 to 6,000 cars a year, adding up to 150,000 cars throughout his career.

In many ways, selling cars off the lot provided the ideal preparation for the Hill, where salesmanship matters. "That's what this business is all about," says Shuster, "from selling yourself to voters to ... trying to work out legislation or amendments. ... You're selling it to leadership or a committee chair."

Making deals, be it on a sticker price or legislation, uses many of the same skills. "Being able to compromise and come to a conclusion, that's what you're doing when you're making a car deal."

You don't always get what you want, but you figure out how to make the sale and still make money."

Campbell also credits the car business with good training for politics. "It's all very diverse when you run a car dealership. There's the service, body shop, new cars, used cars [and] customers to take care of," he says, comparing the experience to his current job. "You're in Congress. You're on three committees. You have your party to deal with, and you have your constituents at home - lots of similarities that way."

For both members, arriving in Washington meant overcoming the stigma associated with their profession. "It's a derogatory thing to say 'a used-car salesman.' My opponents used to call me a used-car salesman," Shuster notes.

GOP media consultant Todd Harris understands this challenge. "As a media consultant, 'car salesman' would probably not be my first choice for a candidate's background," Harris says. "Obviously, 'independently wealthy Iraq war hero who married his high school sweetheart and reads to the blind on weekends' would be better."

But car salesmen looking to enter politics do have an advantage during elections, Harris says. Car dealerships are often closely woven into a local community's fabric. "They are often pillars of the community in terms of support for local projects, Little League teams and other civic activities," Harris says. "In many ways, it gives you an ideal platform from which to run for office, because you are already organized and known in the community."

And since arriving on Capitol Hill, the former car salesmen have climbed the ranks. Shuster is a deputy minority whip. Campbell serves on the prestigious Financial Services and Budget committees.

Shuster and Campbell aren't the only members of Congress with a background in automotive sales. Although he never sold a car himself, Rep. Vern Buchanan (R-Fla.) has been "a passive investor" in as many as 23 automotive dealerships, though currently that number is down to five. Buchanan's office passed on participating in this story, but Buchanan and Shuster talk regularly. "Just last night, Vern and I sat around for 45 minutes talking about the car business," Shuster says.

Now that the American car industry is taking its cues from Uncle Sam, auto trade groups are especially glad to have Shuster and Campbell around. "It's always beneficial to have individuals in Congress who have worked in the industry and understand the challenges manufacturers face in bringing vehicles to market that not only meet fuel economy, safety and emissions standards but also that consumers want to buy," says Charles Territo, the spokesman for the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers. Bailey Wood, spokesman for the National Automobile Dealers Association, echoes that sentiment. "There's a lot going on in the industry. Having those perspectives in Congress is extremely helpful."

It only makes sense that all three members of Congress with car-sales backgrounds are Republicans, says Campbell. "The vast majority of [people running] dealerships I know are fiercely independent people. Most of them are Republicans and have the 'Leave me alone. Let me sink or swim. It'll be on me'" mantra, says Campbell. "That's just the kind of way car dealers are. That fits largely with the Republican ethos more than the Democratic ethos."

Democratic pundit Karen Finney agrees. "It's not surprising that they are Republicans. It's probably surprising that there are only two," she says.

So why are there so few former car salesmen in Congress? "If you run a good, profitable auto dealership, it's a better living," Shuster says. "And you get to choose when you go on vacation."