

From Union Identity to Union Voting: An Assessment of the 1996 Election

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Abstract

An important but remarkably under analyzed labor studies subject is the relationship between union identity and union member voting behavior. The dominant political theory in America holds that pluralism generates overlapping and crosscutting interests that militate against the formation of a dominant political orientation. However, it is the thesis of this work that once subjected to intense union political education and lobbying, workers would strongly identify with their dues paying status and were more likely subsequently, to cast a union/class-based vote. Based on post-1996 presidential election surveys of union members in Illinois the following study addresses the subject of union members' political attitudes and voting behavior and serves to extend a underdeveloped field of scholarship by presenting empirical research on the relationship between union political education, political orientation and union member voting behavior.

During the 1996 presidential and congressional elections organized labor dramatically asserted itself as a major political influence. After years of political quietude characterized by falling unionization rates and stagnant wages, the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), implemented *Labor '96*. Motivated by the anti-union House Republican leadership and freshmen class of 1994, and the ascension of the Democratic Party centrist forces, organized labor undertook a political education program unprecedented in its history.

Dedicating \$36 million to grassroots lobbying and issues advertising, labor's assertiveness was an event that Mark Isakowitz, chief House lobbyist for the National Federation of Independent Business admitted "wakes me up in the middle of night" (Weisman 1996). In addition to the Federation's centralized campaign, the Center for Responsive Politics reported that organized labor spent \$119 million on federal political activity during the 1996 election cycle. Individual unions collectively spent \$66 million directly on candidates, while the AFL-CIO contributed a combined \$37.2 million on issue advocacy and campaign donations (*Labor Relations Week* 1997a, 970). While practically designed to re-elect President Clinton and to elect pro-labor candidates to congress, *Labor '96* involved a mass education and mobilization drive of rank-and-file members.

By most objective analysis it appears that Stewart Acuff, President of the Atlanta AFL-CIO Labor Council was right when he stated that organized labor had a significant impact and that "Labor '96 was a success" (Glenn, 55). In 1992, 19 percent of voters were union members, but in '96 approximately one out of four voters held a union card. In a year when a growing economy produced a 95 percent reelection rate for incumbent representatives, labor played a major role in defeating 18 sitting GOP office holders. In Illinois union support helped the Democratic Party to regain control of the state assembly and come within a whisker of grabbing the senate.

While *Labor '96* explicitly avoided partisan endorsements, the benefactors and the effects were anything but nonpartisan (Burkins 1996). Polling done by Peter Hart (1996) for the AFL-CIO shortly after the 1996 election revealed that an overwhelming number (64 percent) of union workers voted Democratic for president and for congress

(68 percent). In fact, Bill Clinton's union support was just short of the post W.W.II high (69 percent) garnered by Lyndon Johnson in 1964 (Form 1995). In addition, political commentators (Greenberg, Starr and Skocpol 1997) have recently noted a blue print for a renewed labor-populist political majority within the Democratic Party.

The purpose of this article, however, is not to recapitulate or to promote labor's success at helping Democratic candidates win office. Nor is it to offer a national assessment of the effectiveness of *Labor '96*. My objective instead is to examine how successful a small sample of local unions in one state were in achieving a principle political objective - - strengthening the relationship between union identity and union member voting behavior.

While a single localized critique cannot be broadly generalized, it is important to understanding union electoral behavior that independent analysis of organized labor's political efforts be conducted. In the context of *Labor 96'* and the AFL-CIO's preparations for election 2000, a decentralized analysis of union voting is likely to produce a good indication of how a rejuvenated education approach to politics has fared. However, except for the present study, according to a review of the Public Affairs Information Service database for political science and industrial relations literature, no non-AFL-CIO empirical reports of any size on union voting and the 1996 election have been published.

This project was predicated on the belief that once subjected to intense union political education and lobbying, workers would strongly identify with their dues paying status and were more likely subsequently, to cast a union/class-based vote. The political power of unions to advance their political interests has been a subject of study ever since

J. David Greenstone's classic, *Labor in American Politics* (1969). Following Greenstone's study additional works from Hamilton (1972), Verba et al (1979), Wilson (1979), and Form (1995) have addressed the ability of unions to function as an agent of political influence for their rank-and-file members. Now while this genre of work has co-existed with mainstream theories of political identification, it has also clashed in a fundamental way.

The dominant political theory in America holds that pluralism generates overlapping and crosscutting interests (e.g., gender, race, nationality, religious affiliation, place of residence, social membership) that militate against the formation of a dominant political orientation (Truman 1951). Applying this model to organized labor means in essence, that union workers do not typically vote as working-class members and are not singularly influenced by their union association. A rather thin body of empirical literature lends some endorsement for this thesis. As revealed in roughly two-dozen empirical studies from 1948 to 1999 on union member political attitudes and voting behavior (Juravich 1986; Masters and Delaney 1987, and LeRoy 1990), the efficacy of union education to influence member-voting preferences has been modest at best.

The present work continues the efforts of others to address the subject of union members' political attitudes and voting behavior. It also serves to extend the scholarship by presenting empirical research on the relationship between union political education, political orientation and union member voting behavior. The work that follows is divided into five sections. The first briefly presents four propositions tested in this work. Section two describes the data set chosen for the survey. Section three explains the methodology

utilized to assess the raw data. Section four discusses the survey's major findings and is followed by concluding remarks about future union member political behavior.

I. Propositions

To frame the analysis, the four following propositions about organized labor's activist approach to the 1996 national election were constructed: (1) *union members relied principally on union sources for their political information* (2), *the union message was to vote according to issues that effected their members as workers and consequently, the unions successfully constructed a set of issues to guide their members' voting* (3), *union identity and class status significantly shaped political preference* and (4), *union workers hold a latent support for an independent labor party*. In discussing the survey results below, I subjected each of these propositions to separate empirical analysis.

II. Data Set

Study findings are based on a mail survey of 2,000 retail trade, service, public sector, construction, and transportation and manufacturing labor union members in Illinois. Illinois has the country's third largest number of unionized workers (1,004,400) trailing only California and New York. With approximately one-fifth of the state's labor force unionized it also ranks ninth among the states in the percentage of employed workers who belonged to unions in 1998 (*Union Membership and Earnings Data Book* 1999). Over 80 percent of the state's labor force was employed in the sectors surveyed for this study.

The survey was designed by the University of Illinois Research Laboratory and distributed by the university's Institute for Labor and Industrial Relations. Respondents received the questionnaire within ten days of the 1996 election and all accepted returns

were post-marked no later than one month after the election. Completed surveys were mailed directly to the university and at no time did the unions involved have access to the data. The university independently proposed the survey project and unions representing a diverse section of workers were contacted about participating.

The academic institute randomly selected the respondents from five participating union locals in the Chicago metropolitan area (see Table 1). Unfortunately, while an

Table 1. Participating Unions

Unions	Percent of Survey	Industry
International Brotherhood Electrical Workers (IBEW)	37.1	Construction
International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT)	32.6	Transportation
United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW)	16.1	Retail Food
Service Employees International Union (SEIU)	10.8	Government/Health Care
United Steel Workers of America (USWA)	3.4	Manufacturing

equal number of surveys were mailed to each local, the manufacturing union experienced a long, punishing strike, which considerably reduced their representation. The absence of a manufacturing component had at least two other important effects. First, with 21.8 percent of the state’s roughly one million manufacturing workers unionized the lack of survey representation seriously hampers any conclusive claims about how the state’s unionized workforce voted. At 83 jobs per 1000 residents, manufacturing is not only the leading employment engine in the state but Illinois ranks above the national average for this sector (*United States Census Bureau, Economic Census Profile 1992*).

In addition, industrial unions have traditionally lobbied around broad national political issues that are determined at the federal governmental level. As such, the political objectives of the USWA are typically less narrow than those of a craft union like the IBEW, which must be more sensitive to localized conditions. In this sense,

cumulative survey responses may have been biased towards a more particularistic set of economic conditions and hence, less comparable across state boundaries.

Nonetheless, the valid over all survey response rate was 19 percent (n = 380). It should be noted that while the number of responses is low, unlike many past empirical union voting studies, this survey was not developed or distributed by any interested union. This does not insure survey design validity or eliminate all response biases but the independent origin of the work does provide some important mitigation against such problems.

Survey responses were collected from full-time (65.5 percent), part-time (16.8 percent), and retired (14 percent) workers. Part-time workers were drawn primarily from two unions and were employed for at least twenty hours a week. These workers did not differ significantly from their full-time cohorts in terms of median age or years of union experience, but did as expected earn on average less income and possess fewer years of formal education. While part-time responses did diverge in important ways from full-time answers, there was no significant observable difference in responses between retired and full-time workers. Nonetheless, retired worker responses are not included in the total number of reported cases because the surveyed unions did not uniformly include retirees in their educational efforts.

The median age and term of union experience was 46 and 18 years respectively. Male union members represented 78.4 percent of the sample and roughly 18 percent of the cases were minority workers. Given that female union members represented less than a quarter of the respondents, while making up 35 percent of the state's unionized workers, there are obvious questions about the degree of gender consensus on issue

rankings. Also, because women respondents were drawn mainly from two unions the findings are legitimately subject to representational challenges on the basis of occupational sectors.

A small number of cases reported approximate incomes below \$10,000 (3.4 percent) and above \$70,000 (8.6 percent). The majority of workers (52.2 percent) indicated incomes between \$30,000 and \$59,999.¹ Rank-and-file members accounted for 86 percent of all responses, with less than 1 percent of valid cases submitted by union executive board members and slightly more than 8 percent coming from union stewards and business agents. In addition, 54.1 percent of all workers had either a college degree or some college experience. Only 3.1 percent reported earning less than a high school diploma or general equivalency degree.

Finally, 96 percent of respondents voted in both the presidential and congressional elections. While this statewide turnout is very high it is on the order of recent national post-election studies, which demonstrated organized labor's increased political impact (Hart). In addition, after the struggles of the Reagan/Bush/Gingrich era it is reasonable to expect that even non-activist rank-and-file members would be better attuned to the importance of electoral action.

III. Methodology

Seven control variables, including age, income, gender, union tenure, union role, occupational classification, and party affiliation were measured. Age, union tenure, occupational classification and party affiliation were non-closed choice items, while

¹ . Income was based on the period starting January 1, 1997 and ending December 31, 1997.

union role, income, and gender were measured based on selecting one item from a Likert type scale. With the exception of occupational classification (full or part time) and gender none of the control variables significantly influenced or altered the direction of responses.

The independent variables in the survey, included sources of political information, intensity of union educational effort, nature of union political message, a self-identity description and strength of political partisanship. Sources of political information and intensity of union educational effort were assessed by asking workers to indicate the source(s) and importance (1=no importance to 4=very important) of the political information they received during the 1996 political campaign. Respondents were asked to select from a menu of union and nonunion sources. Analysis was then done to show the relationship between sources of political information and voting decisions.

Respondents also revealed the extent to which they agree or disagree (1=Strongly Agree to 5=Strongly Disagree) with statements identifying the union's political message. Workers were then asked to indicate from a lengthy list of issues (ex. the "economy," "abortion," "union security," "worker issues" [workman's' compensation, health and safety, minimum wage, overtime-pay...etc]) the importance of each issue to their voting decisions. Issue selection was then correlated with responses dealing with support for the "union message."

In addition, workers were asked to describe themselves and rank these identities in order of importance (1=most important to 7=least important) from a list of seven personal descriptions including for example, "Parent," "Union Member," and

“Taxpayer.” Respondents then indicated how important each description was to their voting decisions. Self-identification was subsequently correlated with issue importance and political partisanship.

Finally, respondents were asked to indicate their agreement (1=strongly agree to 5=strongly disagree) with a series of statements addressing political support for either of the two majority parties. Responses were then measured against union identity and issue importance to determine a worker’s interest in voting for a third/labor-oriented party.

In addition, three dependent variables were studied: (1) the importance of union political education efforts to influence voter behavior, (2) the creation of a union derived ranking of important issues, and (3) union member support for a class-based, labor political option. Multivariate analysis of covariance was run to indicate whether observed relationships in the data were statistically significant. All the dependent variables were dichotomously coded and logistic regressions coefficients for each dependent variable were reported.

IV. Results

P1: Union members relied principally on union sources for their political information.

Despite organized labor’s extensive educational effort, workers surprisingly relied more heavily on nonunion media sources for political direction than on those provided by their own union (see Table 2). While a significant 55.8 percent of members indicated that

Table 2. No.1 Source of Information

Source	Percent No. 1
Television News	25.9
Newspapers	18.8
Talk Radio	10.2
Union Literature	9.6

Union Endorsement	8.6
Union Meetings	6.2
Party Affiliation	5.2
Religious Institutions	2.8
Friends	1.9
Family Members	1.2
Party Literature	1.2
Magazines	0.9

“TV, newspaper, radio and magazines” were the most important sources in influencing their voting only 24.4 percent cited “union literature, meetings and endorsements” as most important. When responses are expanded to incorporate choices from the top three sources of influence, union voices still trailed popular media. A higher percentage of workers viewed popular media as the second and third (52.8-33.3; 42.2-33.6) most influential source of political information than union material.²

From an aggregate level of analysis then, labor’s educational outreach seems only modestly successful. However, when union sources are compared directly with television programming a different picture emerges. Notice that 24.4 percent of union respondents indicated that the union was their number one source of political information. This compares favorably to the 25.9 of workers who said that television was their best source of political data. To be sure, the effectiveness of the electronic media in conveying political information is open to debate, but its access capacity cannot be overstated. For example, National Election Studies (NES) findings indicated that 86

² . While not influencing the overall rate, union officers - not surprisingly - reported a higher dependence on union material than nonofficers. While suggestive of a divergence between rank-and-filers and union leaders, it is important to note that the ranking of information sources did not change.

percent of union households watched one or more television program(s) about the 1992 political campaign (1997a). Considering then the encompassing power of the electronic media to persuade and inform it is not an insignificant event that roughly the same percentage of respondents identified the union and television as being equally important as an educational tool.

It is important to note that extent of union informational efforts. While only 5 percent of respondents claimed that they did not receive any written political literature from their union, 7.7 percent received 11 or more items. In addition, 82.4 percent were sent between one and six separate pieces of literature. Workers were also politically informed at union meetings. Nearly a third (32.7 percent) of the respondents attended a union meeting where political issues were discussed. Attendance at union meetings for the specific purpose of participating in political debate is particularly remarkable when compared to what is known about union member involvement in all political meetings. Data from the NES Guide, for example, reveals that in 1994 only 6 percent of union households attended a political meeting and that since 1952 attendance at such affairs has never exceeded 9 percent (1997b).

In addition, the survey probably understated the extent of union contact on political matters. Respondents were asked to report on specifically labeled, union provided political sources of information. However, a review of the participating union's regular international and local publications (i.e., magazine, newsletter) for the six-month period prior to the election indicated that political issues were routinely addressed. Thus, survey results on the unions' educational efforts suggest two powerful occurrences: (1) union members got more politically involved than in previous election seasons and (2) it

was not candidate inspired campaigns or party machines that generated the elevated interest, but the union itself.

Despite all types of printed materials and formal meetings, only a marginal number of workers appeared to rely on their union's recommended candidate to determine their personal choice. While 65.6 percent of respondents agreed that the union's political education message included encouraging members to "vote the union endorsement," only 8.6 percent of them considered it the number one source in influencing how they voted. To be sure, almost two-thirds of respondents considered the union's endorsement "very important" or "important," but nearly three-quarters (74 percent) of them felt that way about television news programming.

While the union's informational outreach was extensive it apparently also inspired an increased level of membership nonvoting political activity. To be sure, nominally only few union members reported participating in any political activities beyond attending meetings. For instance, only 7.7 percent of respondents completed a union political survey. But when compared to 1994 NES findings the political activities of Illinois union households was above the national sample. Survey respondents indicated that 8.6 percent made a financial contribution into the union political action committee. This is better than twice the 4 percent of union households that according to NES, reported in 1994 giving money to political campaigns (1997c). While 4 percent of NES union households worked in some way for a party or candidate in '94 (1997d), more than double that number (9.9 percent) of survey respondents did volunteer work for a candidate. Finally, 25 percent of NES union respondents admitted - in an unspecified and inclusive manner - that in 1994 they tried to influence how others voted (1997e).

Yet, choosing from a closed list of political activities, 31.6 percent of surveyed workers reported that they handed out union literature (10.8 percent), made phone calls (9.9 percent), called radio talk shows (4 percent), wrote letters to the editor (4 percent), or worked on election day for the union (2.6 percent).³

It is interesting, however, to point out that despite the participating unions' sizable education efforts, very few workers had their political minds changed by their union's efforts. Only 10 percent of respondents agreed that union literature, meetings or endorsements changed their original voting plans. While the survey did not assess in which direction votes were changed, an explanation for what appears to be a minimum profit from a maximum investment may reside in what happened in 1994. When mid-term elections saw 77 right-wing conservative congressional freshmen usher in the "Contract With America" and the "Gingrich Revolution" union workers were given a nasty wake up call. For the two years leading up to the 1996 elections, union members were made painfully aware by congress, the business press and the commercial media that the political landscape had grown considerably less friendly. By the end of the 104th Congress, union members may have been sufficiently sensitized to the pressing political opportunities before them. Contrary to conventional wisdom, a union member's exposure to popular media sources for political information may not have disadvantaged a union-based vote.

Finally, it is interesting to note that union material was far more influential in determining political choice than "party affiliation," "literature from political parties," or

³ . Many of the workers who were personally involved were union leaders and most of them participated in every activity.

“family and friends.” The relative insignificance of party sources is better appreciated by noting that NES results from 1994 revealed that 29 percent of union households received direct appeals from one or more of the two major parties (1997f). To be sure, workers were not indifferent to partisan history and party appeals, but nor were they lead by simple party labels. A growing independent affiliation may be a typical transformation of the voting public, but for union members to claim an independence from party (i.e., Democratic) messages suggests that union workers acted more as workers and less as a Democratic party constituent. In addition, it suggests that workers trusted their union’s message more than they did the parties’.

While the findings do not reflect a dominant union position in politically educating their members, their level of importance does have at least two significant implications. First, the labor movement can better control its own message and is less dependent on a corporate controlled, largely hostile media agent to provide unbiased political coverage for its members (Tasini 1990; Puette 1992). Secondly, workers’ reliance on their own unions for political guidance dramatically improves the union’s ability to identify and frame the political debate. Instead of the scandal “frenzy” (Sabato 1991) individual “horse race,” candidate-centered approach to mass media political coverage (Lee and Solomon 1990; Jackson 1992), unions can provide an issue and policy-oriented analysis for their members. Union education efforts did not supplant the popular media as their affiliated members’ most influential source of election information, but they did effectively compete for influence and perhaps more importantly, presented an alternative medium.

P2: The union message was to vote according to issues that affected their members as workers and consequently, the unions successfully constructed a set of issues to guide their members' voting.

Before assessing what workers understood to be their unions' political message and its relationship to specific issues, it is first necessary to determine if workers heard any message at all. When asked to agree or disagree with the statement that there was "no union message," 90 percent of the respondents answered in the negative. The importance of recognizing a union message is bolstered by the overwhelming number of workers who believed that the union political message included encouragement to "vote according to the issues, which affect them as workers." While 82 percent defined the union's message as worker-issue oriented, only 39 percent believed that it included a vote based on "party label."

What then were the most important issues upon which workers grounded their political choice? Whether for president or congress respondents identified "union security," "worker issues," and the "economy" as the top three issues in deciding how they would vote (see Table 3). What is even more revealing of the relationship between

Table 3. Voting for President	Ranking		
	No.1	No. 2	No. 3
Union Security	19.0%	12.0%	6.6%
The Economy	17.2%	13.7%	13.9%
Worker Issues	15.4%	12.8%	9.5%
Education Funding	13.3%	9.2%	7.1%
Budget Deficit	6.8%	4.4%	8.2%
Crime	5.9%	10.0%	7.6%
Abortion	4.9%	1.8%	2.4%
Gun Control	3.1%	5.5%	4.7%
The Environment	2.8%	4.2%	3.9%

Capital Gains Tax	2.5%	4.7%	6.3%
Welfare	1.2%	5.5%	5.8%
Religious Issues	1.2%	2.6%	0.3%
Affirmative Action	0.9%	1.1%	2.9%
Immigration Policy	0.9%	0.8%	3.7%
Trade Policy	0.6%	3.4%	4.7%

union identity and a union established issue agenda, is the finding that more respondents held “union security” (19 percent) as their number one voting issue than the “economy” (17.2 percent). When “union security” respondents are combined with the 15.4 percent who identified “workers issues” as most important, they eclipsed the “economy” issue by a ratio of 2:1. Over all, 70 and 63 percent respectively of respondents said that “worker issues” and “union security” were “very important” issues. By contrast, less than 45 percent identified a “balanced budget,” “gun control,” “welfare reform,” “immigration policy,” “abortion,” “affirmative action,” and “defense spending” as very important issues.

Age, income, race, sex or union tenure factors did not disturb respondents’ agreement on issue ranking. There was, however, a serious variance between full-time and part-time respondents. While 71.1 percent of part-time workers stated that “worker issues” were very important, only 8.5 percent ranked union security among the top three issues. Perhaps reflecting their tenuous hold on the labor market, 23.7 of part-timers identified “education funding” as the most important political issue. Despite the absence of any statistical difference between part-time and full-time workers’ access to the union’s political message, part-timers held to an issue ranking in part markedly different

than their full-time union brothers and sisters. What issues part-timers’ prioritize has critical implications for organize labor’s political influence considering that 30 percent of the U. S. workforce is employed in “nonstandard” job assignments (*UNION Labor Report 1997a, 298*).

Worker adoption of a union orientation to the issues also had significant implications for candidate selection. Workers, who strongly agreed that the union message was to vote according to worker issues, were much more likely to vote Democratic than Republican. On the other hand, where workers identified a noneconomic issue or believed there was no union message, they were much less likely to vote Democratic. It appears then that unions succeeded in communicating a political message about worker issues and furthermore, that members voted on those issues.

P: 3 Union identity and class status shaped political preference.

When it came to self-identification, no descriptor was as significant as being a “parent.” Compared to just 10 percent who considered “union member’ to be the most important identifier, a plurality of the respondents considered “parent” to be the most important way to describe themselves (see Table 4). The pre-eminence of “parent” as

Table 4. Self-description of Respondents

Identifier	Percent
Parent	45.0%
Male or Female	11.0%
Taxpayer	11.0%
Working Class	11.0%
Union Member	10.0%
Religious Person	8.0%
Ethnic, Racial or Cultural Group	4.0%

a self-identifier is consistent with the classical sociological literature addressing the importance of home and community life on workers’ political consciousness. For example, David Halle (1984) identified an ideological split within the working class based on spatial dimensions. Halle pointed out that workers have an identity “at work” that is often counter-posed to their identity “outside work” (203). As a result, union political consciousness evolves within separate and at times divergent frameworks.

Despite the multiple sources of political orientation, when respondents were asked to assess the importance of each self-identifier in guiding their voting choices, union membership and class identity become much more significant self-identifiers. A remarkable 92 percent of workers indicated that “working class” was an important (or most important) way to describe them-selves when they *act politically*. This response was greater than the 87.6 percent of workers who identified “taxpayer” or the 85 percent who ranked “parent” as important election barometers (see Table 5).

Table 5. Identity Important to Voting

Identifier	Percent
Working Class	92.1%
Taxpayer	87.6%
Parent	85.0%
Union Member	82.3%
Religious Person	49.1%
Male	39.2%
Female	35.3%
Ethnic, Racial or Cultural Group	22.0%

In addition, pre-election fears that when voting workers would put gender, ethnicity, race or religious signifiers before their class or union identity were unfounded. Class and

union membership easily eclipsed “religious person,” “male,” “female,” or “member of an ethnic, racial or cultural group” as important identifiers in influencing worker political choices.

Now an important question about the above is the relationship between self-description and acting politically. In other words, is there a correlation between how one self-identifies and what identity is most relevant to voting? Specifically, the relationship between identity as a parent and identifying with the union label to voting is critical to this work.

In computing correlations for the variables in tables 4 and 5, I found that there is a negative relationship between identifying as a parent and all identities relevant to voting, except for union membership. To be sure the correlation is not statistically significant (.03), but it is positive. Taken along with the above importance of union membership to voting the direction of the relationship suggests a provocative political influence. According to conventional voting behavior research, the most important determinant of political orientation is parental (Hamilton). In accounting for how people vote, the key point is that a kind of "social inheritance" informs a person's preference. But if union member and parent are not perceived as dichotomous roles by *union members*, than work and family issues may be more readily merged in educational drives.

It is also interesting to note that worker self-identify has a strong positive relationship to establishing a ranking of important issues. Where workers said that union membership was "important" (25.8 percent) or "very important" (55.1 percent) to their voting decisions, 95 percent of them also agreed that “union security” was an important political issue. On the other hand, wherever a respondent stated that union membership

was of "little" (6.8 percent) or "no importance" (12.3 percent) to how they voted, there were zero cases of workers identifying union security as an important election issue.

A robust positive relationship also existed between union membership and “worker issues” and the "economy." Where dues paying status was very important or important to voting orientation, 93 percent and 83 percent respectively of respondents indicated that workers issues and the economy were important issues. There was, however, no significant relationship between any other issues. Consequently, it would seem that there was a convergence of issues and union identity. Now while the connection is relevant, perhaps the critical finding is of the “chicken or the egg” variety. In other words, what came first; issue orientation or union loyalty? While the methodology does not directly address the question it would appear that union attachment precedes an issue orientation. Workers who come to view their class status or union membership with the same level of intensity as they do their identity as parents or taxpayers, are probably more likely to base their political choices on specifically defined union/worker issues. Thus the AFL-CIO’s decision at the close of their fall 1997 convention to “build a new understanding of what it means to be in a union” would seem to be a prescient choice (*Daily Labor Record*, C-1).

While it appears that class and/or union membership significantly influenced the voting of respondents, there were two significant caveats. First, when they cast a vote female workers (35 percent) were not as inclined as males (55 percent) to consider their union membership as “very important.” Also, once again there was a dichotomous response based on status and hours of work. While 54.8 percent of full-time workers

revealed that being a union member was “very important” in making their voting decisions, a less impressive 34.4 percent of part-timers felt that way.

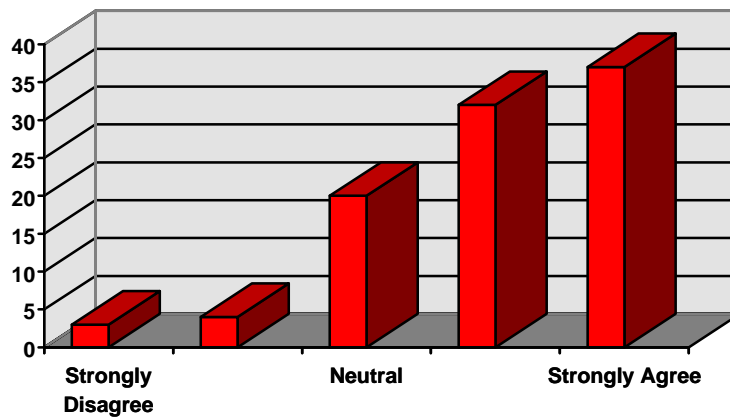
The discrepancy in the significance of union membership to voting between male-female and full-part time workers has obvious implications for macro-union political action. Job growth since 1980 has been principally in part-time work and union membership growth over the past two decades has relied disproportionately on signing up female workers. Women now account for 40 percent of all union members and the AFL-CIO had recently strategically acknowledged their importance to the organized labor movement by establishing the Working Women’s Department (*UNION Labor Report* 1997b, 297). It would appear then that a critical mass of union oriented voters is less likely in a part-time labor market. Thus, the benefits of full-time job creation may not only be increased union bargaining power, but greater union influence in state level policy-making.

P4: Union workers hold a latent but support for an independent labor party.

Does a union driven issue agenda and a strong union attachment amount to formidable rank-and-file support for the national Democratic party and/or the two party system? The answer is paradoxically a strong yes and a resounding no. Respondents did prefer Democratic candidates by a 3 to 1 margin (65.4 percent for president and 69 percent for congress). Support for the Democratic flag bearer even slightly exceeded the percent of workers (58.6 percent) that claimed to be registered partisans of the junior party. Significantly, respondents who thought “workers’ issues” and “union security” were important to their political choice were also more likely to have voted for Democratic candidates.

Worker affiliation with the Democratic party can be further assessed by determining whether respondents believed their voting options offered them a choice reflective of their own issue position. In other words, did voters have to hold their nose and settle for the best alternative or did they have a chance to vote their preferred position? Nearly half of the Democratic respondents “strongly agree” that they voted consistent with their beliefs. Even a majority (52.9 percent) of Republican voters expressed a convergence of issue ideas with their practical political choices. In an era of alleged growing political alienation and cynicism for partisan politics, it is surprising that only 7 percent of all union voters (including “independent” and “others”) registered the belief that their vote was detached from how they felt about the issues (see Chart 1).

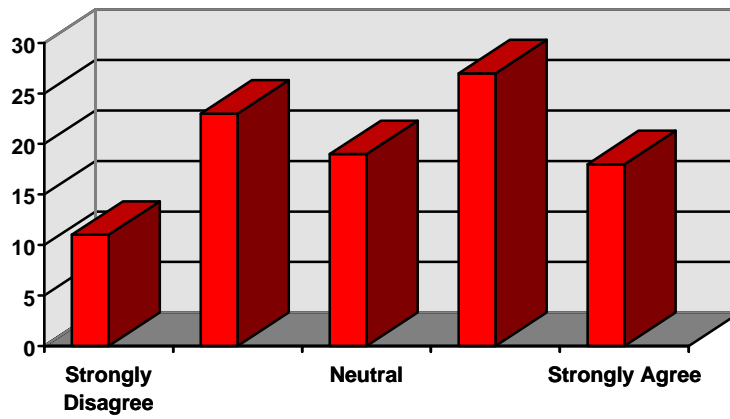
Chart 1. Percent of Vote Represented My Position on Issues



The above data appears to suggest that in 1996 the two party system was responsive to voter interests. But a closer look reveals that serious cleavages have opened up in the two-party hegemony reigning over union voters. Consider that while respondents did not appear to experience a dissonance between their own issue positions and their voting options, approximately 48 percent of all respondents agreed that “no

party represents the working class” and only 34 percent disagreed with this statement (see Chart 2). Despite the conservative anti-statist and anti-union elements of the 104th Republican controlled Congress, respondents remained deeply uncertain of any major differences between the two major parties.

Chart 2. Percent that Believes No Party Represents Working Class

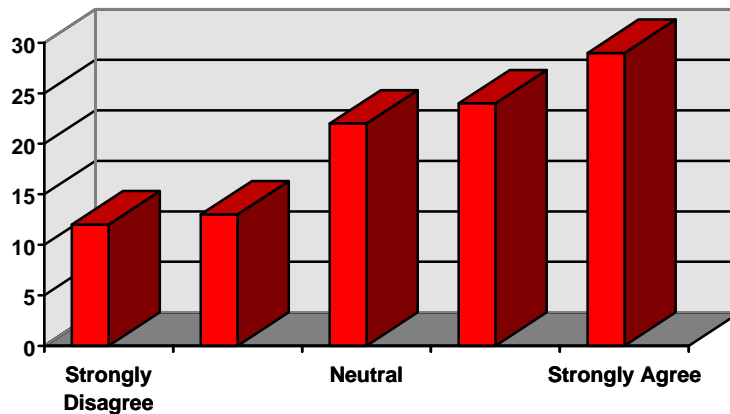


It is note worthy to point out, that 39.2 percent of Democratic identifiers did not feel that *even* their affiliated party represented their interests. Republicans, by an even larger margin (48.5 percent), were unpersuaded by the working-class orientation of the two-party system. Not surprisingly, the most critical stance towards both major parties came from those workers who labeled themselves as “independent.” An overwhelming 70 percent of independents (18 percent of total/n= 58) agreed that there were no political parties representing the interests of the working class.

Despite voting practices in 1996, if neither major party stands as a political defender of the working class, is there support for a future labor party alternative? Maybe. When asked if they would have voted in the past election for a third/labor-oriented party candidate for president, instead of the choices presented, 53 percent of

union workers answered affirmatively and approximately 29 percent did so strongly (see Chart 3).⁴ This compares favorably to the small number (13 percent) of respondents who “strongly disagree” that they would have abandoned one of the two major parties. The ratio then of union workers who would have voted for a labor party to those who would not have is 2:1.

Chart 3. Percent Would Vote for a Labor Party



A willingness to endorse a different partisan choice was spread across party affiliations. Democratic (52.1 percent) as well as Republican (41.4 percent) identifiers expressed a strong interest in voting for labor party candidates. Again, independents lead the way in bolting from the two-party system with over two-thirds embracing a labor party. Bolstering the plausibility that workers may be expressing a genuine interest in a labor party option is the fact that less than 10 percent of respondents voted for Ross

⁴ . Responses were nearly statistically identical for all electoral races. Thus, for clarity wherever I report the relationship of worker identity and issue importance to support for a third/labor party I am using percentages from the presidential contest.

Perot. But even independent voters nearly unanimously expressed a willingness to vote for a labor-oriented party. Another interesting finding was that of the 68 cases of declared Democratic or Republican voters who were “neutral” on whether the major parties represented the working class, approximately 40 percent would have voted for a labor party candidate.

Now worker support for a third choice had a definite ideological and issue orientation. Where respondents thought that being a “union member” was important in how they voted, the possibility of their voting for a labor party candidate dramatically increased. For example, the percentage of respondents who said they would vote for a labor party rose from a little less than a third for those who claimed that being a union member was of “little importance,” to 75 percent for those who indicated that such an identity was “very important” (see Table 6). The positive correlation (.54) among those workers stating a directional opinion was very significant.⁵

Table 6. As a Union Member/Vote for a Labor Party

	Disagree (N)	Agree (N)	Total (N)
No Importance	47.1% (8)	52.9% (9)	100% (17)
Little Importance	70.4% (19)	29.6% (8)	100% (27)
Important	30.5% (25)	69.5% (57)	100% (82)
Very Important	24.8% (37)	75.2% (112)	100% (149)

⁵ . I excluded the neutral cases (roughly 14 percent for each item) in order to reflect sentiment among those with a committed response. Obviously a neutral position indicates neither support nor lack thereof.

Labor party support was also positively correlated (.71) with the issues respondents considered important in influencing their voting decisions. Where, for example, workers thought that “worker issues” were of “little importance” to their political choice, only a third agreed that they would support a labor party. But of those workers who considered issues like the minimum wage, 40-hour week, and health and safety to be “very important” electoral guideposts, 74 percent would cast their vote for a third-labor choice (see Table 7).

Table 7. Would vote for a Labor Party by Importance of Worker Issues

	No Importance (N)	Little Importance (N)	Important (N)	Very Important (N)
Disagree	50.0% (2)	66.7% (10)	54.2% (19)	26.1% (54)
Agree	50.0% (2)	33.3% (5)	54.8% (23)	73.9% (153)

The likelihood of voting outside of the major parties also increased as workers cited the importance of “union security” as an issue. For respondents who said that union security was very important in their voting decision, a robust 76 percent agreed to vote for a labor party candidate (see Table 8). Again the correlation (.87) is very strong.

Table 8. Would vote for a Labor Party by Importance of Union Security

	No Importance (N)	Little Importance (N)	Important (N)	Very Important (N)
Disagree	71.4% (5)	69.2% (9)	44.6% (29)	23.6% (45)
Agree	28.6% (2)	30.8% (4)	55.4% (36)	76.4% (146)

There was a corresponding, meaningful decrease in support for a labor candidate as respondents stressed nonworker issues as being important to their vote. In other words, as workers came to vote less as class and union members, they showed a greater

comfort with the two-party system. What appears to be a curious contradiction to the above, however, is the statistical insignificance in the relationship between the importance of the “economy” issue and support for a labor-oriented party. Contrary to expectations, movement in either direction on the economy variable does not increase or decrease the likelihood in voting for a labor candidate. A possible provocative explanation for this is that while workers understood the importance of the economy as an issue, they constructed a political litmus test that was unequivocally in defense of unionization. In other words, a candidate who took favorable positions on interest rates and job growth, but did not endorse union organizing or labor law reform would not be sufficiently “labor oriented.”

In addition, it is possible that the surveyed unions not only profiled the importance of “being a union member,” but also may have fused it into other identities. Consider that a robust 73.8 percent of workers who said that their identity as a “taxpayer” was very important to their vote would support a labor-oriented party (see Table 9). In this case it appears that being a taxpayer did not conflict with being a union member.

Table 9. As a Taxpayer Would Vote for a Labor Party

	Disagree (N)	Agree (N)	Total (N)
No Importance	33.3% (5)	66.7% (10)	100% (15)
Little Importance	35.3% (6)	64.7% (11)	100% (27)
Important	46.1% (35)	53.9% (41)	100% (76)
Very Important	26.2% (44)	73.8% (124)	100% (168)

What is perhaps even more remarkable is that voting as a “parent” did not deter a majority of union workers from showing extensive interest in voting for a labor party.

While a cross tabulation of the importance of voting as a parent with labor party support did reveal a negative correlation, the range of support never fell below 64 percent (see Table 10).

Table 10. As a Parent Would Vote for a Labor Party

	Disagree (N)	Agree (N)	Total (N)
No Importance	26.1% (6)	73.9% (17)	100% (23)
Little Importance	20.0% (3)	80.0% (12)	100% (15)
Important	35.5% (22)	64.5% (40)	100% (62)
Very Important	35.4% (52)	64.6% (95)	100% (147)

At first glance the above may not seem very insightful, but then recall how effective Ronald Reagan was in the ‘80s in persuading working-class voters to vote as outraged taxpayers and beleaguered parents against liberal “tax and spend” politics. Now it seems extraordinary that despite a 1990’s bipartisan fealty to a “taxpayers’ tyranny,” the level of identity dissonance between taxpayer/parent and union member has apparently subsided.

Worker endorsement of a labor party choice is not however, positively influenced by direct union political appeals to the membership. Correlating respondents’ feelings about a third/labor-oriented party with sources of political information reveals that rank-and-file commitments to the major parties are not upset by union messages. For example, among workers who cited union material (ex. literature, meetings, and endorsements) as their number one source of information, only 35 percent agreed that neither party represents the working class while 48.3 percent disagreed with this position. Recalling that a small minority of respondents indicated that the union message was to

vote the “union endorsement,” it appears that issue orientation operated to a degree as a proxy for Democratic Party voting.

Conversely, the apparent union blessing of the two party system was positively correlated with workers preferring a better choice. While a majority (53.3 percent) of respondents who principally relied on public media sources would vote a third-labor party and only 26 percent of those who cited “party affiliation” as most influential would do so, a hefty 60 percent of workers who considered the union as their most important information source was prepared to vote the labor banner. I suspect the inconsistency is best explained by simple electoral politics. The pressing need to choose the most pro-labor candidate available shaped how workers viewed the messages from their unions about the two-party system.

There were also some significant differences among the control variables on the question of third party support. As was found in other relationships, part-time workers and female union members viewed things differently. While approximately 60 percent of full-time workers agreed that neither major party represented the working class, almost a third less (44.5 percent) as many part-timers felt this way. Similar ratios occurred when support for a third/labor-oriented party was analyzed. In addition, men (32 percent) were almost twice as likely as women (17.7 percent) to “strongly agree” that a third political choice is needed. As mentioned earlier, the growth in nonpermanent work and the disproportionate number of women holding part-time union jobs suggests that the form and substance of working-class politics is at least moderately dependent on occupational status.

It would appear then, that the key predictor of worker support for a third/labor-oriented party is the importance of *union identity* derived variables. Workers are more inclined to jettison past party affiliations for a third labor choice when they are ideologically and materially oriented to the union. One plausible, important implication of this relationship is that the union - as an institution - has the potential to generate an independent political constituency. Contrary to over 60 years of nearly consensual loyalty to national Democratic Party office seekers, educational endeavors like the ones exhibited in this survey may be capable of accelerating a political conversion of rank-and-file members. Along with at least 20 dry years of shrinking union membership and politically protected corporate assaults on organized labor, the political education efforts of the AFL-CIO and its affiliates may have exposed a potential for building an independent political structure.

To be sure, what union workers say they are prepared to do and what they would actually do are two different things. Protestations about third party voting have proven notoriously unreliable. A full discussion of third-party history, opportunities and possibilities is beyond the scope of this work, but perhaps the Henry and George Wallace presidential campaigns in 1944 and 1968 respectively, will provide just two guideposts in projecting union support for national independent politics. In both insurgent campaigns it took a substantial “re-education” effort by CIO and industrial union leaders to deter rank-and-file members from bolting the Democratic party. In 1944, CIO head Phillip Murray imposed a virtual ban on political debate inside the industrial union movement to short-circuit a sizeable pro-Wallace movement (Zieger 1995). Less than twenty-five years later, it took significant pressure from union leadership to prevent perhaps a third of

union members from voting for George Wallace (Boyle 1995). One lesson then to be drawn from these two examples is that without union leadership support, a candidate competing for political power under a labor or labor-lead party confronts a tremendous hurdle. But historically a modicum of rank-and-file interest has been there and this survey appears to belie notions that they are not prepared seriously consider a third-labor political way.

Conclusion

Labor '96 was designed to increase the collective voting power of 14.5 million union workers. If electing friendly Democratic candidates, turning out the union vote, and creating a class issue agenda were the particular goals of the campaign then according to this sample organized labor has rediscovered its political agency. What this survey revealed is that labor's direct educative function contributed to its success at the ballot box. In Illinois, union workers rallied to the polls, voted their issues and made their presence felt as union members.

While the role of the as union as *political educator* was formative, it does not appear that it was dominant. However, the results presented here strongly suggest that the union role as *political identity* was substantial. Workers voted an issue agenda that was positively correlated to their union membership. Candidates were elected and issues prioritized based on how it would advance and protect a voter's union status. To be sure, workers voted their union cards, but not primarily because meetings were held, literature mailed and endorsements made. It appears instead, that they connected their lived experiences with union security and material gain, and voted as union members. To a significant degree then, class eclipsed race, gender, nationality and cultural views as

voting determinants. The implications of this revisit what early 20th Century labor organizers understood; strategic planning must always build on ideological commitment.

Finally, as this survey reveals, in 1996 there was a strong positive relationship between union identity and political preferences. A significant majority of workers expressed their dissatisfaction with the major parties indifference to working-class interests. Consequently, Democratic and Republican partisan loyalties may be giving way to a third, more consciously labor party.

While the survey appearance of a worker willingness to support a labor-oriented party is not unprecedented, it is important to note that the vehicle for this new partisanship is the union itself. Survey results indicated that workers who strongly identified with the union voted as union members, and therefore, were very likely to embrace a labor party. It would appear that as rank-and-file ideological attachments increase, the labor movement's potential for creating an independent political structure and voting option grows more realistic. This survey seems to confirm the recent decision announced by SEIU President, Andy Stern to support Labor Party candidates as well as major party office contenders (*Labor Relations Week* 1997b, 965). Perhaps, Jeff Faux is correct when he encouraged progressive political forces to use terms like "working class" when they are debating ideas about how the world works (1997, 33).

Now to institutionally build a third political path and to win votes requires, among other things, that labor not only aggressively organizes new members, but also specifically slows down the rapid growth in contingent work. As this survey revealed, part-timers, even unionized ones, are less likely than full-time, permanent union workers to discard past partisan commitments. Efforts like the Teamster's 1997 campaign to

bargain and strike for more full-time employees at United Parcel Service or the multi-union endorsed “Job With Justice” coalition to support low end occupational workers represent two creative approaches to the problem. In addition, the disproportional percentage of women who are hired in nonstandard jobs and their increased representation in the labor movement requires a serious effort to more securely link gender issues with union identity.

At the heart of organized labor's political campaign in 1996 was a muscular historical remembering. In the 1930's and 40's the labor movement generally and CIO particularly, created a grassroots workers' movement that mobilized and aggregated union workers into the political process. In these earlier turbulent days of social change, political education was routine in the labor movement. Now whether labor's strategic planning was in fact the efficient cause for worker voting preferences or just one more reason for a renewed rank-and-file political astuteness, the survey finding suggest that organized labor remains a viable political agent for the organized working class.

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