

Voting the ‘New Union’ Label: Illinois Labor and The Return to Class Politics

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Introduction

Electoral behavior studies on post-WWII union voters have most often been framed within two contrasting theories. On one hand, many of the empirical works on employee attitudes and voting behavior give support to an *organizational segmentation* theory. The theory postulates that because union members’ political attitudes are influenced by divergent variables, organized labor’s social heterogeneity has created internal divisions that weakened its ability to forge a distinct union political consensus. In contrast, *class-politics* theory has contended that unions have strategically mobilized working-class political activity by representing their members’ interests as either consumers or workers (Wolfe 1969, Greenstone 1977; Masters and Delaney 1987; Form 1995).

According to a class-politics’ perspective a “distinctive union vote” explained much of organized labor’s national political acumen through the first two post-war decades. However, with some exception (Juravich 1986; Juravich and Shergold 1988; LeRoy 1990; Delaney, Masters and Schwochau 1990), the few empirical electoral studies conducted since the late-1960s have demonstrated that various, conservative social issues and organized interest groups have been effective in drawing rank-and-file union voters away from the labor-backed candidate.

At the height of the Civil Rights Movement commentators first identified the startling lack of labor and working class support for pro-union liberal candidates (Draper 1966; Rieder 1985) over the emerging issue of racial integration. Others have noted that public opinion poll data and union member attitude studies indicate a growing issue

schism between more liberal union leaders and more conservative members (Heldman and Knight 1980; Harwood 1981; Patton and Marrone 1983; Rapoport, Stone and Abramowitz 1991).

Over the past twenty years political observers have contended that groups like the National Rifle Association, Right-to-Life Committee and the Christian Coalition have exploited differences in union members' economic condition, occupational status, religious and political party affiliation, residential location, race and gender to prioritize a non-economic issue agenda. A number of commentators have gone as far as to credit the success of the Republican party in 1994 to the considerable deference shown by union members to issues like abortion, gun control, welfare spending and "family values" (O'Leary 1995; Clark and Masters 1996).

Union member electoral responsiveness to non-economic or workplace issues appeared to reflect an issue salience that often contradicted their economic or class interests. For instance, research done (Clark 1998) on voting records for 1993-1994 found a significant positive relationship between union member support for members of Congress who receive high scores from both conservative social (e.g., National Rifle Association) and anti-union conservative economic groups (e.g., National Association of Manufacturers). The compatibility of these groups serves to underscore the early-1970s popular upsurge in anti-union "front" organizations financed by business interests (Mechling 1978). By most accounts then segmentation theory seemed to explain organized labor's contemporary political record.

Organized labor's futility throughout the 1970s and 1980s in marshalling support for its favored social programs has suggested that unionized political action has not

successfully mobilized a strong class vote (Donnelly 1978; Rehmus 1984; Clark 1998). Inspired in part by the political failures of the past twenty years in 1995 an insurgency slate lead by John Sweeney, was elevated to the AFL-CIO leadership. The new leadership committed the national federation's political strategy to a singular focus on encouraging membership voting on the bases of workplace issues.

Reacting therefore to nearly three decades of academic scholarship and union reports, this study is designed to test for the presence of a weak rank-and-file political identity in the 1998 electoral cycle. Using the Federation's strategy as a model, the thesis of this work is that labor's emphasis on workplace issue education reduces the issue dissonance among different groups of union members thus overcoming the allure of noneconomic interests and consequently, increases the likelihood that rank-and-filers will cast their votes foremost as *union members*. In addition, the importance of union workers politically identifying with their employment relationship - beyond the electoral outcomes of any immediate elections – is that it would evidence cautionary signs of the emergence of a new era of class-politics.

Analysis of the 1996 (Hart 1996; Glenn 1997) and 1998 (Hart 1998) electoral contests did indicate that organized labor had played an enlarged national political role in picking winners and losers. During the 1996 election cycle, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, organized labor spent \$119 million on federal political activity. 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* 1997). In 1998 the Federation mailed 9.5 million pieces of literature to union households, made 5.5 million personal telephone calls and put 392

coordinators into the field to work on elections. Finally, according to national exit polling by Voter News Service, 23 percent of 1998 voters were members of union households up 4 percent from two year ago (“Working Families Vote,” *AFL-CIO, Labor* ‘98 1998).

But as promising as these findings are to labor leaders, they are too effusive to genuinely assess the budding emergence of something approaching a rank-and-file class political consensus. Macro evaluations of national elections are too insensitive to spatial variables. Labor markets, regulatory regimes, working-class attitudes, union political behavior and history are all a product of different state and even local conditions. Therefore, it is at the statewide level that organized labor’s renewed commitment to political mobilization should be measured.

Campaigns for statewide office, like governor and senator challenge the education capacity of unions to aggregate rank-and-file voters around a common set of issues. It is also the case that because voter turnout is typically lower in nonpresidential years statewide elections place a premium on organizational behavior (Patterson and Caldeira 1983). The result is that a heightened importance is placed in off-year elections on any groups’ efforts to get their membership to the polls. At the state and municipal level labor’s organizational strength is most concentrated and consequently, it is the optimal environment to assess the meaning of a union vote.

A decentralized analysis of voting attitudes is preferred to a national study for an additional reason. In attempting to assess the union’s influence over the political preferences of its members, it is important to minimize as much as possible the level of partisanship that customarily infuses national elections. Thus, to advance the exploration

of the class-oriented political attitudes of union members this work is based on a post-election survey of the 1998 Illinois gubernatorial and senate campaigns.

Now it is understood that without access to comparable studies and data sets from previous elections the findings of one post-election survey cannot definitively conclude that change has occurred. Ideally a more rigorous experimental design would need to be constructed. But if the cumulative weight of past scholarship and union analysis is accurate, evidence of strong union-identity voting in 1998 should lend validity to the AFL-CIO's political approach to educating their members and importantly, expand our current understanding of unions and politics.

The presentation of the survey findings is divided into seven sections. Following the introduction, section two introduces the four propositions that are tested in the study. Section three then describes the data set chosen for the survey. Section four explains the methodology utilized to assess the raw data and is followed by a brief description of the Illinois election. Section six discusses the survey's major findings and the work concludes with some remarks about labor's political reawakening.

Propositions

To frame the analysis, the four following propositions about organized labor's political approach to the 1998 Illinois gubernatorial and senate 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 was positively correlated with a vote for union endorsed candidates* and (4), *union political education transcended racial factionalism*

and subsequently crafted a worker's vote. In discussing the survey results below, each of these propositions were subjected to separate empirical analysis.

Data Set

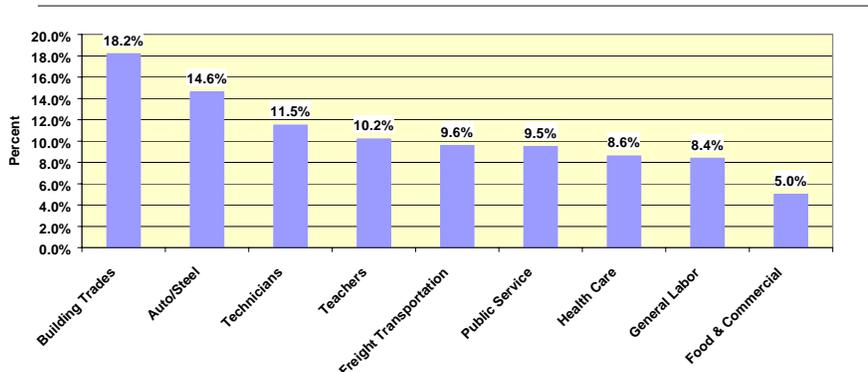
Survey findings are based on a questionnaire mailed to 4,500 randomly selected labor union members in Illinois. Illinois has the country's third largest number of unionized workers (1,004,400) trailing only California and New York. With approximately one-fifth of the state's labor force unionized it also ranks ninth among the states in the percentage of employed workers who belonged to unions in 1998 (*Additional Earnings and Union Membership Data 1999*).

The survey was designed by a state university research laboratory and distributed by an academic institute. Respondents received the questionnaire within ten days of the 1998 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.

Random mailings of this nature create obvious dangers of reporting bias. Because the respondents are self-selected conclusions will inevitably be burdened with a degree of imprecision. To reduce the potential for measurement error respondents were randomly selected from nine participating union locals in the Chicago metropolitan and central Illinois area employed in retail trade, service, public sector, building and road construction, transportation and manufacturing industries (see Chart 1). While not perfectly corresponding, the final percentage of respondents within occupational

categories was similar to the unionization rates reported by the Illinois State AFL-CIO for its affiliates.

Chart1.
Union/Industry Classification of Respondents



After excluding incorrectly or partially filled-out returns the valid survey response rate was 15 percent ($N = 681$). 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 (86.6 percent), and part-time workers (13.2 percent). The median age and term of union experience was 46 and 18 years respectively. Male union members represented 71.1 percent of the sample and roughly 22.9 percent of the cases were minority workers. While female respondents were a decided minority of the sample, according to the Illinois State AFL-CIO, women represent about 35 percent of the state's unionized workers.

A small number of cases reported approximate incomes below \$10,000 (1.4 percent) and above \$80,000 (8.8 percent). The majority of workers (55 percent) indicated incomes between \$30,000 and \$59,999.¹ Rank-and-file members accounted for 83 percent of all responses, with 5.5 percent of valid cases submitted by union executive board members and slightly more than 7 percent coming from union stewards and business agents.

Methodology

Ten control variables, including age; income, race, gender, union tenure, union role, occupational classification, political ideology and party affiliation were measured. Age, union tenure and occupational classification were open-ended items, while income, race, gender, party affiliation, political ideology and union role were measured based on the selection of one item from a Likert type scale. The independent variables in the survey, included sources of political information, nature of union political message, support for the union's political position, a ranking of issue importance and a self-identity description.

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 1998 political campaign. Respondents were asked to select from a menu of union and nonunion sources. Regression 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 (e.g., the “workplace” [health and safety, wages, unemployment and workmen’s’ compensation...etc], “abortion,” “union security”) the importance of each issue to their voting decisions. Issue selection was then correlated with support for the “union message,” and reliance on educational sources, as well as support for the labor-backed candidate.

In addition, workers were asked to rank in order of importance (1=most important to 7=least important) to their voting decisions a list of seven personal descriptions including for example, “Parent,” “Union Member,” and “Taxpayer.” Self-identification was subsequently correlated with issue importance and voting choices. The respondents also indicated their political ideology by selecting items from a continuum (1 = Very Liberal to 7 = Very Conservative). These responses were then correlated with issue importance and support for the labor candidate.

Finally, respondents were asked to indicate their agreement (1=strongly agree to 5=strongly disagree) with a number of statements addressing political support for affirmative action and welfare programs. The responses of a special cohort were then measured against their votes for the senatorial candidates in order to assess how important social issues were to electoral behavior.

In addition, four dependent variables reflecting voting preferences were studied and framed as propositions. First, union members relied principally on union sources for their political information. Second, the union message was to vote according to issues that affected their members as workers and consequently, the unions successfully created an issue agenda to guide their members’ voting. Third, union identity was positively correlated with a vote for union endorsed candidates. Finally, union political education

transcended racial factionalism and subsequently crafted a worker's vote. 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 regression coefficients for each dependent variable were reported.

The 1998 Illinois Election

In the 1998 election cycle organized labor's political action committees spent approximately \$31 million nationally on federal races including \$1.3 million on congressional candidates in Illinois (Center for Responsive Politics, October 1998). In addition to the financial investment in congressional contests, candidates for state assembly seats also attracted significant labor funding (*Money and Elections*, Illinois State Board of Elections, 1999, p. 24.)

Along with many contested congressional and state legislative contests, Illinois voters were treated to two high-powered competitive statewide races. Republican career politician and two-term Secretary of State, George Ryan pursued the open seat in the governor's mansion along with five-term, downstate Democratic Congressman Glenn Poshard. Ryan was considered a "pragmatic conservative" who understood the art of constructing a deal and the advantages of holding statewide office (Jonata and Doubek 1998). His record on social issues was in the party's mainstream, but to most of the state's labor movement Ryan's performance on workplace issues was decidedly poor. For example, in 1981 as Illinois Speaker-of-the House, Ryan allowed a "right-to-work" bill to come up for a vote and "voted against increasing the minimum wage five out of six times" (*Illinois AFL-CIO*, 1998).

In contrast, Poshard was considered by the Illinois State Federation of Labor the most pro-labor candidate for governor since Peter Altgeld in 1893 and managed his campaign with sizeable labor support.² The congressman achieved an 89 percent lifetime pro-labor voting record. His labor credentials were boosted by among other things, a vote against the “permanent replacement of striking workers,” the North of American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and support for the Family and Medical Leave Act (*Illinois AFL-CIO*, 1998). In January, Poshard was awarded the state AFL-CIO’s endorsement and the candidate proudly pointed out that the early show of support “proves that for those who stand with labor, labor stands with them” (Fornek 1998, 1).

In the Senate contest, ultra-conservative state senate Republican, Peter Fitzgerald challenged the incumbent, liberal Democrat Carol Moseley-Braun. Fitzgerald surprised the Republican Party establishment by tapping into his personal fortune (e.g., Bank of Montreal stock valued at \$50 million) to finance a upset win over the favored moderate candidate in the party’s primary (Doubek 1998). The central Illinois State senator was also the second highest spender among national senate candidates (Keller 1998). According to the state AFL-CIO, Fitzgerald’s two-term labor record was “abysmal.” For instance, he “voted to limit the abilities of employees to seek legal action for workplace grievances” and proposed “legislative interference in the state employee collective bargaining process” (*Illinois AFL-CIO*, 1998). In addition, Fitzgerald earned the full support of the National Right to Work Committee for his willingness, “if elected to cosponsor and seek roll-call votes on legislation” to repeal the union shop provisions of the National Labor Relations Act.³ For his stance on workplace and union issues,

Fitzgerald earned a 10 percent lifetime pro-labor voting record (*Illinois AFL-CIO COPE*, 1998).

Braun was a national story in 1992 when she rode the wave of the Anita Hill gender backlash vote to become the nation's first African-American woman elected to the United States Senate. During her reelection campaign Braun attracted support from high profile fund-raisers like Coretta Scott King, Maya Angelou, Vice President Al Gore and John Sweeney (Eckert 1998). She was also backed by the Illinois State AFL-CIO and was the recipient of considerable national Democratic Party financial support. The Senator was also among the top twenty congressional beneficiaries of labor PAC money (*Labor Relations Week* 1998). Braun's support came despite a litany of corruption charges, personal misdeeds and in 1993 a pro-NAFTA vote that according to the senator was "a good deal for Illinois" (Sawyer 1993, 1A). Despite her NAFTA position, Braun gained a 75 percent lifetime pro-labor voting record in Congress (*Illinois AFL-CIO COPE*, 1998). Illinois union voters apparently understood the importance of the 1998 election because exit polls revealed that they accounted for nearly 30 percent of all voters (*Labor Letter, Illinois State AFL-CIO*, November 1998).

Results

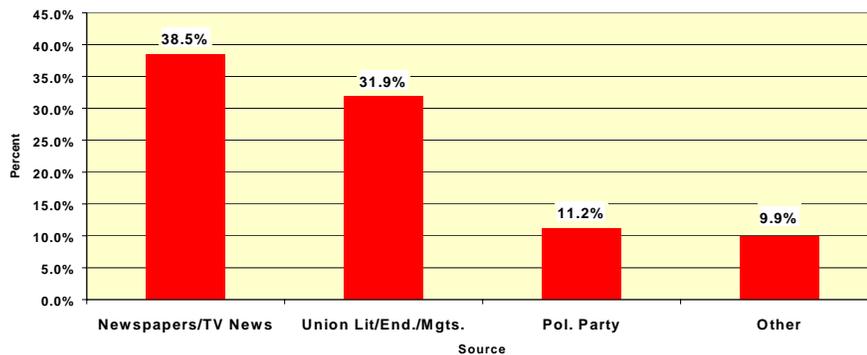
P1: Union members relied principally on union sources for their political information.

Illinois unions poured significant and diverse resources into the election campaign. For instance the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), an affiliate of the Illinois Federation of Teachers, not only contributed a sizeable sum of money to statewide elections but also put their hefty membership numbers to work. First a CTU letter was mailed reminding each member of the "disastrous legislation" that was passed in the state

during the 1995 legislative season removing key union rights for Chicago teachers. The union then arranged for about 300 members to work directly on campaign matters. The North Central District Council of the Laborers International Union (LIUNA) also mailed out over 7,000 letters to members identifying key issues to address. In addition, every business agent in 17 district locals wrote a personal letter to their respective members encouraging them to vote on workplace items.

Despite organized labor’s extensive educational effort, more workers identified nonunion media sources as the most important in influencing their electoral choice as those provided by their own union (see Chart 2). But not by much. While a significant 38.5 percent of members indicated that “TV, newspapers, radio and magazines” were the most important sources in influencing their voting 31.9 percent cited “union literature, meetings and endorsements” as most important.

Chart 2.
Most Important Information Sources



From an aggregate analysis then, labor's educational outreach would appear to have fallen short of an optimal level. However, when union sources are compared directly with television programming and newspaper stories a different picture emerges. Note that 31.9 percent of union respondents indicated that the union was their number one source of political information. This figure also reflects the absence of any relevant statistical correlation between information source and party affiliation. But when itemized, only 19.2 percent of workers said that television was their best source of political data and roughly the same number (19.3 percent) of respondents favored news print journalism. To be sure, the effectiveness of the mass commercial media in conveying political information is open to debate (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet 1948; Patterson and McClure 1976; Entman 1989; Bartels 1993; West 1995; Ramsden 1996), but its pervasiveness cannot be overstated. For example, NES findings indicated that since 1974, an average of 68 percent of union households has watched television coverage of congressional campaigns during a non-presidential year (1999b). NES findings also revealed that in the same time period a similar proportion (70 percent) of union households had read about congressional campaigns (1999c).

Thus the ability of unions in Illinois to militate against television coverage is impressive considering the enormous electronic time dedicated to the governor's and senate race. Republican candidate George Ryan took advantage of a record campaign war-chest exceeding \$11 million to consistently run television ads over the four months prior to the election and his Democratic opponent Glenn Poshard used more than \$475,000 of in-kind contributions on campaign appeals during the same time period. The state AFL-CIO also paid for at least \$350,000 in radio ads for the congressman (Franklin

1998). Ryan spent nearly \$10 million during the campaign and expense reports indicated that he allocated more than a third of it to television advertisements.

Spending figures in the Senate race were proportionally similar. Republican Peter Fitzgerald spent approximately 40 percent of the roughly \$13 million raised on television appeals to successfully on-seat the incumbent Braun. Like her opponent Braun funneled a hefty chunk of her \$6 million in campaign contributions into television ads. Based on figures provided by her ad consultant Adelstein and Associates, \$2.4 million was spent on television media buys to reelect Carol Moseley-Braun. Campaign spots were first aired in early September and continued until the November vote. While weekly spending never dropped below a quarter of a million, the heaviest expenditures occurred in the first (\$530, 242) and the last week (\$576, 868) of the campaign. Television ads ran on 28 stations in seven selected markets representing every section of the state.

In the two months prior to the election, Illinois voters were subjected to a barrage of ads from all four statewide candidates. For instance, in September and October no less than seven television spots ran in both the early morning and prime time viewing period throughout the state (*Adwatch*, Illinois Campaign for Political Reform, October 13, 1998). Along with individual campaign pitches, all four candidates appeared on numerous television and radio election broadcasts. Appearances included participation in both television and radio broadcast debates. A television joust between the gubernatorial candidates shortly before the election was viewed by nearly 60 percent of union respondents. Additionally, in the Chicago market all major television networks featured the candidates in one-on-one interview programs. The bottom line was that the local attention given to Illinois' statewide races kept the election at the top of the daily

morning and nightly broadcasts from the middle of the summer until the first votes were cast.

As expected, print coverage of the election was equally intense and apparently noticed by union members. Over 70 percent of survey respondents said they had read newspaper articles on the candidates. Beginning as early as January and continuing through the primary season campaign stories appeared regularly across the state. A check of the Newsbank/Newsfile Information WEB newspaper database revealed that between January 1 and the November vote, 68 election articles involving the candidates for governor and senate were printed in contributing Illinois papers.⁴ In addition, papers from a round the state editorialized on the election and along with the *Chicago Tribune* and *Sun-Times*, at least 13 endorsed candidates, including *Crain's Chicago Business*.

Considering the encompassing power of the commercial media to persuade and inform it is not an insignificant event that nearly as many respondents identified the union as being the most important educational source as they did the fourth estate. Regression coefficients measuring the relationship between a voter's reliance on information sources and his or her vote for Poshard and Moseley-Braun reflects the effectiveness of labor's educational outreach (see Table 1).

Table 1.
Respondents Relationship Between Reliance on Information Sources and Votes for Poshard/Braun

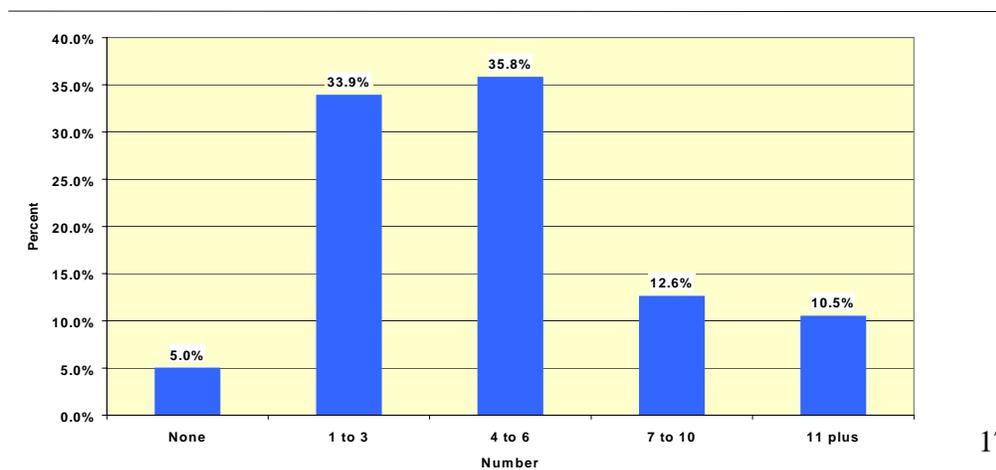
Information Source	Poshard	Braun
Television	-.2643	-.2218
Radio	-.0790	-.2769
Newspapers	-.3392	-.2231
Union Literature	.8563 **	.4535 **
Union Endorsement	.7809 **	.7352 **
Party Affiliation	.3174	.8529 **
Religious Group	-.1561	-.7326 **

Note: ** All correlations are statistically significant at the .01 level. (2 –tailed)

It is also important to recognize the extent of union informational efforts. While only 5 percent of respondents claimed that they did not receive any written political literature from their union, 10.5 percent received 11 or more items. In addition, 69.7 percent were sent between one and six separate pieces of literature (see Chart 3).

Workers were also politically informed at union meetings. Nearly a third (30 percent) of the respondents attended a union meeting where political issues were discussed. Respondents also relied more heavily on union reading material than political party mailings. A significant 87 percent of workers admitted to reading local union

Chart 3.
Number of Times Received Union Election Material



newsletters and flyers on the election, while slightly more than half (52.9) bothered to read party mailings.

The close attention paid to electoral issues may suggest to readers that the sample is not really representative. Perhaps our respondents, while not serving in any official union capacity, are in fact “activists.” But responses to survey questions about participation in specific electoral activity would seem to reaffirm the nonactivist nature of the sample. For instance, 71 percent of the respondents failed to make any financial contribution to the union political action committee and only one-tenth worked on election day for the union. In addition, less than one-fifth (19.7 percent) did any volunteer work for a candidate. Approximately the same modest proportion of workers reported that they handed out union literature (19.4 percent) and made phone calls (16.2 percent) to get out the vote. Even fewer called radio talk shows (3.1 percent), or wrote letters to the editor (3.8 percent).

Finally, perhaps there is no better measure of activist’s credentials than how ambitious they are in trying to recruit supporters to their cause. Despite the high profile nature of the governor’s and senate races, nearly two-thirds (61.8 percent) of respondents avoided any effort to “persuade someone else to vote for the union candidate.” For comparison purposes, since 1952 the National Election Opinion Studies (NES) has annually asked a nearly identically worded question. In 1996, 33 percent of union household respondents said “yes” in trying to influence “how others voted” (1999a). Thus, while not a comparable data set, the similarity of the NES findings with the present study (38.2 percent) does hint at a likely average rank-and-file member response. In summary, survey respondents were attentive to political signals, very interested in the

election, well informed about the candidates and issues, and except for a significant minority did little more than vote.

Finally, union material was far more influential in determining political choice than “party affiliation,” “literature from political parties,” or “family and friends.” Eclipsing party propaganda was no small feat. In the general election there were 1,786 registered state political committees endorsing candidates and furthering political causes (*Money and Election in Illinois* 1998). Additionally, worker reliance on union sources of information was positively correlated with their agreeing that their union’s educational goal was to “vote as a worker.” Coefficients comparing all sources of information to voting a union-derived worker agenda illustrate significantly positive scores for all union sources (see Table 2).

Table 2.
Relationship Between Sources of Information and Voting for Union Agenda

<i>Source of Information</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>
Television	-.0373
Radio	-.1788 **
Magazines	-.0429
Newspapers	.0349
Union Literature	.4656 **
Union Meeting	.3723 **
Union Endorsement	.4892 **
Party Literature	.1861 **
Party Identification	.1351 **
Family	-.0034
Religious Group	-.2016 **
Friends	-.0947

Note: ** All correlations are statistically significant at the .01 level. (2 –tailed)

Thus, for union members to claim a degree of independence from party and non-union messages suggests that union workers acted more *as workers* and less as a constituent of

other groups. It further suggests that workers trusted their union's message more than they did the entreaties of other groups.

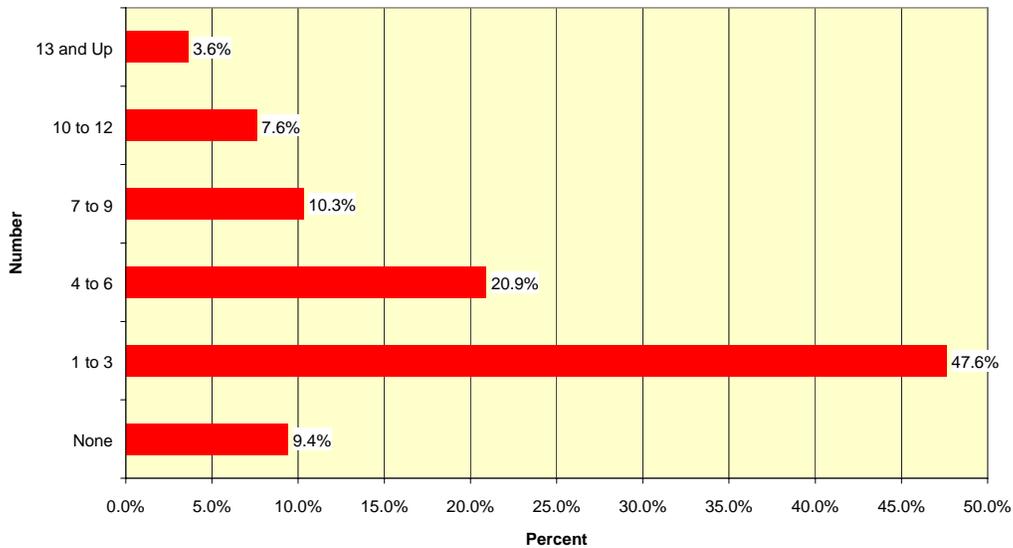
P2: The union message was to vote according to issues that affected their members as workers and consequently, the unions successfully created an issue orientation to guide their members' voting.

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," only 13.2 percent of the respondents answered in the positive. 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." The strong emphasis on issue voting and not party identity was a significant divergence from past union electioneering and consistent with national AFL-CIO program goals (Weisman 1996).

What then were the most important issues upon which workers grounded their political choice? Whether for governor or the senate more respondents (20.7 percent) identified "union security" as their number one voting issue than any other issue (see Chart 4). In addition, when "union security" respondents are combined with the 13.1 percent who identified "workplace issues" as most important, they represent a third of the workers. Over all, 70 and 63 percent respectively of respondents said that "workplace issues" and "union security" were "very important" issues. By contrast, "education" and

“taxes” were the only other issues that at least half of the respondents rated as very important to their electoral choice.

Chart 4.
Number of Times Respondents Participated in Political Activities



While age, income, or union tenure factors did not disturb respondents’ agreement on issue ranking there was some variance on gender, race, party affiliation and job status variables. When controlled for gender and racial identity workers did exhibit different issue rankings. Among non-white male respondents education was the top ranked issue followed by union security and workplace issues. White male respondents agreed on the top three issues but ranked them differently: union security, education and workplace issues. A difference was also noted in the intensity of issue importance. While a fifth of white male workers rated union security as their top issue, 27.7 of non-whites rated education as their first priority.

Despite the variation in top tier ranking it is significant that a very high percentage of white and non-white male workers considered union security (61.8 – 67.8)

and workplace issues (64.1 – 71.4) as “very important.” To be sure, such comparability was not sustained in all areas. For instance, 52.9 percent of non-white male workers felt that “affirmative action” was very important, while only 15.9 percent of white male workers agreed. Now in light of the past convulsive internal union struggles brought about by the implementation of Title VII (i.e., banning employment discrimination) of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, differences of this magnitude on racial equality should have predicted less agreement on the most important issues in the election (Stein 1998). Yet, it appears that race did not significantly affect a union member’s issue preferences. While variances did occur, non-white and white male workers prioritized the issues according to the union message of voting “according to the issues which effect me as a worker.”

Differences in issue ranking also occurred between male and female workers. One of the more striking variances was that women did not rank union security among the top three issues. Education (29.7 percent) was the number one issue for women, followed by abortion (17.9 percent), taxes (14.5 percent) and union security (11 percent). In a major departure with men, workplace issues lagged far behind with only 6.2 percent of female unionists ranking it most important. The relative lower ranking of union security and workplace issues for women may be explained in part by their over representation in this survey as part-time workers. However, despite differences in issue ranking, women displayed a strong appreciation of the importance of union security and workplace issues to their vote. A significant 91.4 and 84.8 percent respectively of female union members considered workplace issues and union security “important” or “very important” to their vote.

Party affiliation also generated rather stark dichotomies on issue importance and ranking. Where three-quarters of Democrats stated that union security was very important to their vote, a paltry 18.8 percent of Republicans felt similar. Thus, only 2.5 percent of registered Republicans, as compared to nearly 29 percent of Democrats rated union security as the most important issue. In addition, on every issue other than union security and the workplace, Republicans registered a higher level of importance than Democratic members. More importantly, however, Republicans were in general agreement with their junior party union members on the degree of importance of workplace issues. Nearly three-quarters of Republicans (and almost 90 percent of Democrats) noted that issues like minimum wage, health and safety, and workmen's compensation were either important or very important to their vote. While the above indicates that party affiliation is still relevant to how effective unions can be in parlaying dues paying into a labor vote, the nonpartisan importance placed on workplace issues suggests a significant role for union's to perform in influencing electoral behavior.

Perhaps the most troubling long-term difference in issue importance was between full-time and part-time respondents. While 65 percent of full-time workers stated that union security was very important, less than half (47.8 percent) of part-timers shared that judgement. In fact, on every issue other than union security and the workplace, part-time workers reported a higher percentage of "very important" scores than their full-time union brethren. More importantly, part-timers ranked issues differently. For instance, the number one issue among part-timers was abortion (20.3 percent). The fact that women were over represented in this group may have affected the over all-ranking. Also, perhaps reflecting their tenuous hold on the labor market, 18.8 percent of part-timers

identified “education funding” as the most important political issue (see Table 3 for classification comparisons).

Table 3.
Classification Comparison on Issue Ranking

<i>Ranking</i>	<i>White Male</i>	<i>Non-White</i>	<i>Full-time</i>	<i>Part-time</i>	<i>Female</i>
1	Union	Education	Union	Abortion	Education
2	Education	Union Security	Education	Education	Abortion
3	Workplace	Workplace	Taxes	Taxes	Taxes

Unlike their full-time colleagues union security and workplace issues were never ranked among the part-timers top three issues. These differences are relevant given the absence of any statistical difference between part-time and full-time workers’ access to the union’s political message. It appears that despite their union political education part-timers held to an issue agenda markedly different than their full-time union brothers and sisters. Difference, of course, is not necessarily a problem. Unions like the United Food and Commercial Workers, with a large part-time membership can negotiate maximum work hours and flexible scheduling to facilitate school attendance. The challenge for unions is to tie union identity and strength to the pursuance of interests of a particular workforce. In light of the fact that 30 percent of the United States workforce is employed in “nonstandard” job assignments, what issues part-timers’ prioritize has critical implications for organize labor’s political influence (*UNION Labor Report 1997a*, 298).

One final indication of how the union’s educational drive influenced workers’ issue preference is demonstrated by correlating the relationship between union sources of information with issue rankings. Multiple regression coefficients revealed that the union’s issue agenda was advanced where workers’ relied more heavily on union political material than other sources (see Table 4). In summary, it appears that unions succeeded

in communicating a political message about worker issues and furthermore, that a large majority of members voted on those issues.

Table 4.
Relationship Between Worker Reliance on Union
Political Material and Issues Most Important to
Vote

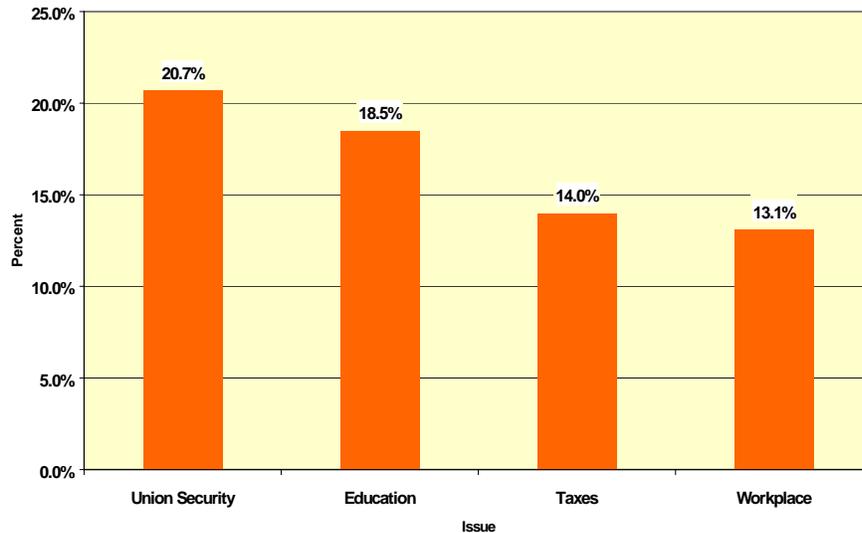
<i>Issue</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>
Abortion	-.2089
Education	.1114
Environment	-.1419
Crime	-.0451
Gun Control	-.0412
Union Security	.5445 **
Workplace	.4894 **
Job Growth	.3561 **
Taxes	-.0383
Welfare	-.0210

Note: ** All correlations are statistically significant at the .01 level. (2 -tailed)

P: 3. Union identity was positively correlated with a vote for union endorsed candidates.

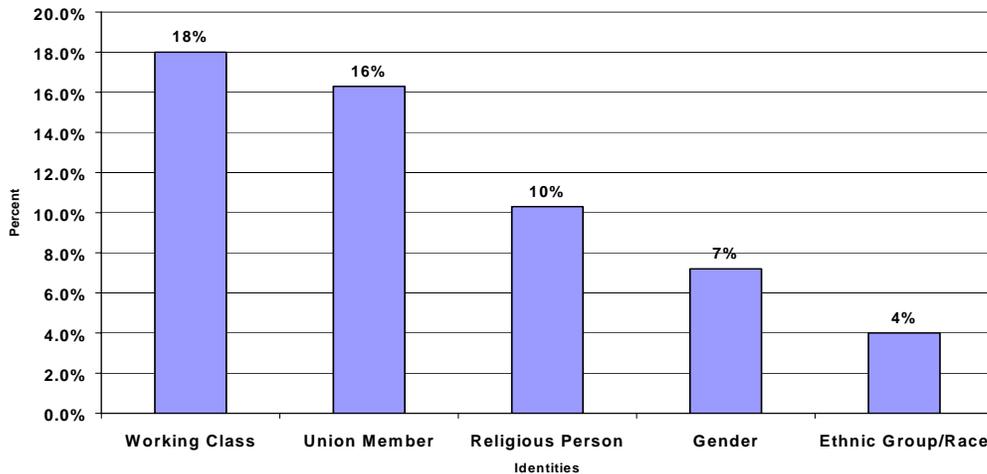
The final tally of Illinois voters revealed that neither Poshard nor Braun had been victorious. Labor’s endorsed candidates received nearly identical shares of the vote at 47 percent (Green 1998). But according to survey respondents not because of the labor vote. When it came to the importance of self-identification to voting, “union member” and “working-class” identity were more important self-identifiers in guiding voter choice than “religious person,” “male,” “female,” or “member of an ethnic, racial or cultural group” (see Chart 5).⁵ The expectations generated from past electoral behavior studies that suggested that when voting, workers would put gender; ethnicity, race or religious signifiers before their class or union identity were unfounded.

Chart 5.
Most Important Issues in Voting



Respondents across the board regardless of gender or race gave overwhelming support to Poshard and Braun. Among men, Poshard won 78.6 percent and Braun 70 percent. Women were not as enthusiastic with Poshard but still gave him landslide level support at 67 percent, while Braun did much better at 79 percent. In addition to a wide gender sweep, every union ethnic group (see Chart 6) heavily preferred labor's choice. In summary, the union vote for the two Democratic choices widely exceeded the non-union vote and was undoubtedly an important source of the candidates' electoral appeal.

Chart 6.
Self-Identity Most Important to Voting



Now an important question about the above is the relationship between self-description and acting politically. In other words, is there a correlation between what identity is most relevant to voting and whom one votes for? Specifically, what was the relationship between personal identities and pulling the lever for labors' endorsed candidates? Scholarship on political communication and reference group theory suggests that identification with the group helps members assume issue positions and to evaluate political candidates in accordance with the group's stated interests (Converse and Campbell 1968; Conover 1984). It would appear from the survey findings that the union local acted as a strong "priming" influence. Union voters of different ethnic identities not only uniformly favored the pro-labor candidates, but as revealed below, the only identity that was correlated in a significantly positive way to voting for Poshard (see Table 5) and Braun (see Table 6) was union membership.

Table 5.
Relationship Between Self-Identity
and Voting for Poshard

<i>Identity</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>
Parent	-.1660
Union Member	.4549 **
Working Class	.0654
Religious Person	-.1735
Gender	-.1677
Gun Owner	-.0377
Ethnic Group	.0070
Taxpayer	-.2805

Table 6.
Relationship between Self-Identity
and Voting for Braun

<i>Identity</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>
Parent	-.0791
Union Member	.4088 **
Working Class	.0755
Religious Person	-.3431 **
Gender	.0365
Gun Owner	-.3503 **
Ethnic Group	.2965
Taxpayer	-.2262

Note: ** All correlations are statistically significant at the .01 level. (2 –tailed)

A final test of the relationship between holding a union card and voting for the labor endorsed candidates, measures the effects of partisanship and political ideology. In order to do this the survey first measured how committed union members were to their institutions. When asked to respond to the statement “I support my union’s position on political matters,” only 26.6 percent of workers answered in the negative. In addition to the support shown for political action, 67.2 percent of workers agreed that the union did a good job representing the “economic interests” of members. Finally, 62.5 percent of respondents expressed “confidence” in how their union is performing. While these aggregate numbers are impressive, it is worth noting that support for union performance was not statistically altered when controlled for party affiliation. Registered Republicans accounted for only 16 percent of the survey participants (Democrats were 65.7 and Independents 14.3 percent), but 58.4 percent agreed with the political actions of their unions.

P 4: Union political education transcended racial factionalism and subsequently crafted a worker's vote.

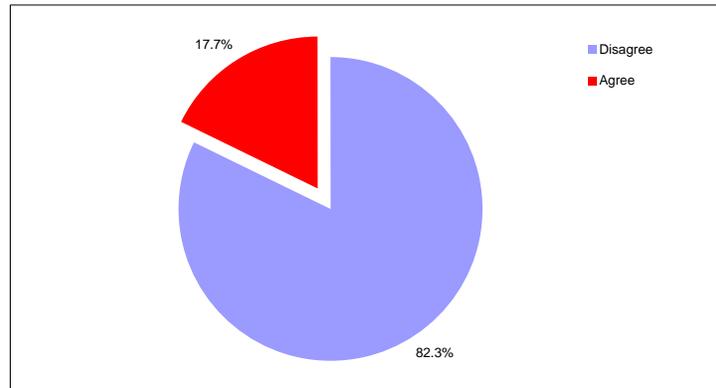
No test of a union-based vote can be concluded without directly assessing the degree to which workers put aside their different racial identities and voted their union card. If unions have successfully mobilized a class-based or at least a workplace-centered vote then racial differences should be minimized as a variable in predicting voting behavior. In other words, union voters would have to vote *against* the candidate who best represented them on some nonworkplace matters. To determine whether or not racial factionalism was transcended in the Illinois election, a special cohort of survey respondents was identified as “hardcore race conservatives.”

This sub-set of workers was selected using a two-step process based on several items as they relate to the contest between Moseley-Braun and Fitzgerald. Recall that incumbent had compiled a liberal voting record on social issues and that the challenger was considered to conservative by even the state's Republican hierarchy. First, all survey participants who self-identified as conservative were included. Then only those workers who said Fitzgerald best represented their views on “affirmative action” and “welfare policy,” and who “disagree” or “strongly disagree” that “Affirmative Action Programs promote equality in society” were cross referenced to create an eligible pool. Each of these items was selected as a way to approximate a theoretical group of union members who could be defined as hard-core conservatives on race-related issues. After applying the above two-step process 19 percent ($N = 122$) of the respondents were identified as *hardcore race conservatives* (heretofore as HRC).

Before attending to the survey findings a brief note about voting behavior theory is in order. Proponents of “spatial models” of candidate competition “assume that issues drive voting decisions” and that voters will generally vote for the “candidate closest to their views” (Erikson and Romero 1990, 1103). This approach further contends that issue correspondence is particularly deterministic with attentive audiences, like highly primed union members. Therefore, the theory would predict that HRC would vote for the senatorial candidate who best represented their views on issues like welfare reform and affirmative action. But in this case theory did not prevail.

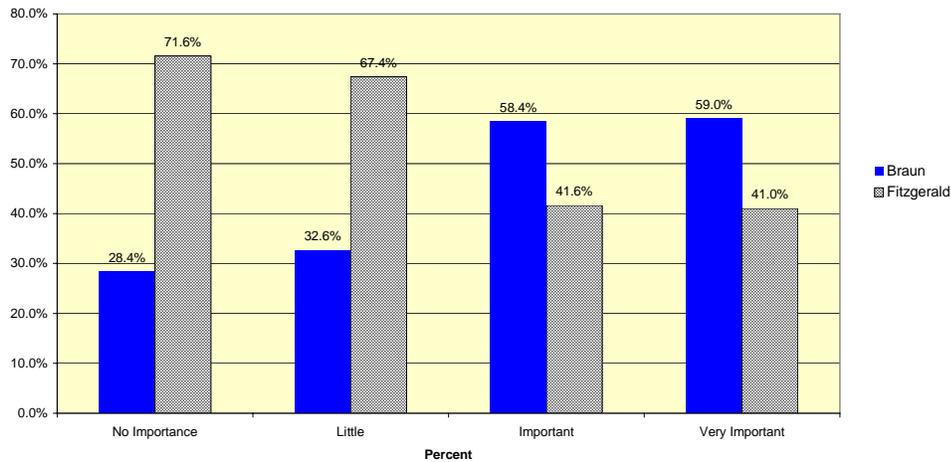
On the relationship between which candidate-represented workers on affirmative action and welfare reform, and their electoral choice, Braun did remarkably well. Despite believing that Fitzgerald represented them on welfare reform, nearly 45 percent of the HRC respondents voted for Braun. She did even better on affirmative action. The first-term Senator won 49 percent of the votes of those race conservatives who said she did not represent them on using race as a hiring and promotion variable in the workplace. Braun demonstrated further multi-racial appeal by winning an overwhelming 82.3 percent of the votes from all survey respondents who *disagreed* that affirmative action programs promote social equality (see Pie Chart 7).

Chart 7.
Braun Vote on Affirmative Action Promotes
Equality



In addition to the above items, roughly half of HRC voters said that Braun “understands the problems of people like me” and nearly four out of ten identified the incumbent as “best qualified” to be Senator. Most importantly, her ability to win union votes from HRC was strongly correlated with how important union literature was to influencing their vote. Among those workers who said union literature was unimportant, no more than a third believed that Braun represented their views on affirmative action. However, almost 60 percent who relied on union information as an educational source reported that Braun *represented* their views on affirmative action (see Chart 8).

Chart 8.
Importance of Union Literature on Senate Representation on
Affirmative Action Issue



The correlation between reliance on union literature and conservative votes for Braun was significantly positive (.4248). In addition, among those workers who ranked their union identity within the top three spots in influencing their vote, 63.3 to 51.4 percent of them believed that Braun represented their views on affirmative action policy. Finally, even where race conservatives ranked racial or ethnic identity as important, they were still likely to vote for Braun (.4601).

To further test for the significance of a racial variable, logistic regression was also run for all non-minority workers ($N = 385$). Findings here were strongly supportive of a union vote trumping a race-based choice. The weak coefficient (.1325) revealed that among white union members, race did not play a significant role in respondents' decision to vote for Braun. The lack of racial identity and race-coded issues as a significant determinant in voter preference consistently applied across union-types and geographical location.

It would appear from the above that the union's educational efforts overcame the dissonance between Braun's and rank-and-file conservative's views on race. Despite not

representing the issue perspectives of hardcore race conservatives, African-American-female-liberal-pro-union Braun won 54.4 percent of their vote. Unlike the conventional political behavior wisdom that union voters are fractionalized over race, conservative survey respondents, like their liberal brothers and sisters, went into the voting booth with their union cards held high.

Conclusion

What this survey revealed is that labor's direct educative function contributed to delivering the labor vote *as a labor vote* to pro-labor candidates. Workers rallied to the polls, voted their issues and made their presence felt as union members. The role of the union as *political educator* was formative, if not dominant. Workers voted an issue agenda that was positively correlated to their union membership. Candidates were selected and issues prioritized based on how it would advance and protect a voter's working and union status. Survey results indicated that workers who strongly identified with the union voted as union members, and therefore, were very likely to back the candidate whose record was strongest on a union identified agenda.

The survey did reveal problems, however. To institutionally mobilize an effective political path and to win votes requires, among other things, that organized labor not only aggressively organizes new members, but also specifically slows down the rapid growth in contingent work. As this survey suggested, part-timers, even unionized ones, are less likely than full-time, permanent union workers to protect union institutional needs. 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.

While the votes of a select number of Illinois unions in two statewide races cannot fully represent the political behavior of the American labor movement the implications taken from this survey seem undeniable. A large-scale effort by unions to politically activate their memberships around workplace issues has the potential for reintroducing to American politics the kind of rank-and-file worker influence that was the bedrock of an earlier class-oriented political order.

* My appreciation to University of Illinois at Chicago graduate assistant, Zheng Cai who completed the statistical work.

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- a, Table 6B. 1. 2
 - b, Table 6D. 1. 1
 - c, Table 6B. 2. 2
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Notes

- ¹ . Expected income was based on the period starting January 1, 1998 and ending December 31, 1998.
- ² . Oddly, the 1998 *Almanac of American Politics* described Poshard as a supporter of the Conservative Democrat “Blue Dog” agenda.
- ³ . Quotes from Fitzgerald’s answers to a questionnaire sent to all NRWC members.
- ⁴ . The papers included were the *Chicago Tribune* and *Sun-Times*, *Daily Herald*, *Journal Star*, *Pentagraph*, *News-Gazette*, *Register- Mail*, *Kankakee Journal*, and *Rock Island Argus*.
- ⁵ . A plurality (32.2 percent) of the respondents considered “parent” to be the most important identifier in casting a vote.