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## Your Workplace is Political and So Are You: Union Membership and Political Participation

Alex LeGrys  
*Bard College*

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Your Workplace is Political and So Are You:  
Union Membership and Political Participation

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
Alex LeGrys

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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## Dedications

To my participants, thank you for all your help and insight that made this project possible. You do such important work in both your occupations and your leadership in union activism and although you do not receive the recognition you deserve, your work does not go unnoticed. The colleges you work at are incredibly lucky to have you. I have learned so much from you and there is so much more to write about your insights that is not in this paper which I wish could have been included.

To my advisor Professor Mie Inouye, I would not have been able to write this without your incredible knowledge and guidance. After each of our meetings, I felt a little more hopeful that I would be able to write something half-decent. I'm not sure if I've achieved that, yet if I have in any way, it is entirely because of you.

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To my parents Maria and Lance LeGrys, thank you for always supporting me throughout my college career. This project would not have been possible without you either, because, as sociological research indicates, many successes individuals achieve are at least partially due to exterior factors outside of their control. Being born to a librarian and a Russian scholar who support their daughter in majoring in a field many do not respect is an advantage most Americans do not have.

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## INTRODUCTION

This study aims to examine how the union members interviewed view themselves as political actors and how their union membership may increase their political motivations and political participation. All of the participants either currently work or have previously worked on private college campuses, and the participant pool includes both rank-and-file union members and union staff. Their active and persistent involvement in their unions, according to this study, also is considered to be political participation. The research explores the ways in which the union members I have interviewed view their political beliefs in relation to their union membership, as well as how or if union membership affects their political motivations and participation (or vice versa). I argue that the members interviewed have experienced an increase in political participation and motivation as well as heightened political awareness since their union membership and becoming active in labor organizing. The increase in political participation outside of union activism is not as significant as the increase in political participation which includes labor-related issues.

This paper explores the methods of participation in which both union rank-and-file members and union staff politically participate within their respective unions and within other political organizations, including organizations which may advocate for causes which extend beyond the activity within their own union. Although this study only contains interviews from active union members who also serve as leaders in their respective unions, every union member, no matter how involved, is contributing *at least* union dues to the union which is a monetary endorsement of an organization that makes decisions which directly affects the material conditions of each union member. If they heavily identify as a union member in a positive way,

meaning they are in favor of the union they are a part of, this will likely affect their level of participation and engagement with the union.

For the purposes of this study, I define something to be “political” so long as it refers to any sort of engagement which involves collective action and self governance concerned with the allocation of resources. This is not necessarily the definition the participants of this study may hold, and the meaning of the term “political” shifts throughout the interviews depending on what form of collective action and self governance to which the participants are referring. For example, at times participants use the term “political” to explain their involvement in electoral politics as separate from their union involvement, while at other times they speak of the term “political” in direct relation to their union involvement.

Throughout this study, political participation will refer to any action which involves collective action and self governance. This includes actions such as voting in elections, attending protests, volunteering for political campaigns, but also actions directly involved in union membership such as becoming a steward or union chair. Political motivation refers to what motivates individuals to become politically involved. For example, a person who believes in abortion rights may feel politically motivated to vote for candidates who support abortion rights, attend protests in favor of abortion rights, donate to organizations which lobby for pro-abortion legislation, etcetera. These motivations may partially arise from the positionality of the individual— for example, part of the motivation to vote for pro-abortion candidates may be stronger among someone who has the ability to get pregnant. In the context of political motivation and union membership, a union member may be more likely to vote for pro-labor candidates, attend rallies for worker-related issues such as raising the minimum wage, and attend



union protests because they themselves are in a labor union and may feel more motivated to advocate on behalf of workers outside of their own workplace.

Many agree that an act of political participation such as voting is inherently political because voting involves a personal proposal to nominate a certain individual to regulate policies that affect how a governing body chooses to govern. However, engaging in electoral politics is not the only form of political participation. Individuals can engage in multiple forms of political participation outside of the electoral realm and, when properly organized, this can even allow them to exercise collective action and self-governance which strives for democratic agency when they feel as though the electoral realm does not allow them democratic agency. This being said, the terms political motivations and political participation should not be confused with acts which inherently establish democracy. However, when individuals who do not hold large amounts of political power, or in other words, non-elites, engage in political participation, they are contributing to a system which extends beyond themselves, and which has far more power than they do individually, while simultaneously participating in a system which will affect their own individual lives. This “system” could easily be a union as union membership inherently involves collective action and self governance concerned with the allocation of resources.

This study argues that even being a union member is a political act. In the case of unions, collective action and self governance is centered around the belief that workers not only have rights but need protection from employers and management. Unions also advocate for a certain allocation of resources. The specificities of such allocation is of course dependent upon the union in question, yet all unions are concerned and advocate for a certain allocation of resources. There are of course varying degrees of political participation amongst members in any union—

some are more active than others. For example, a union member who plays an active role in the direction of their union (ie. attending meetings regularly, taking on a role such as steward or chair, etc) engages in “more” political participation than a member who does not attend meetings and may only hold their union membership status because they chose an occupation with a closed-shop contract. However, even the most inactive of union members is still, to some degree, engaging in political participation whether or not they believe they are engaging in an act of political participation. Every union member inherently affects not only the individual union member but the union as a whole. The more members a union has paying dues, the more funding the union will receive. Additionally, the greater the number of union members, the greater the volume of the union’s political voice: with more active members, more active leverage is provided to fight behind the idea that management must be challenged in one way or another. There are of course a variety of ways in which unions operate and organizing techniques vary. This is why, when trying to understand specific union dynamics, we ought to be concerned with the political participation among union members and their political motivations.

Examining political motivations for union membership and how union members view themselves as political actors is especially important in this political and economic moment. Private sector labor union membership has and continues to decline; Rosenfeld cites Gallup polls which indicate that labor unionization has declined by approximately two thirds between 1953 and 2011 (Rosenfeld, 2014, 14). According to the National Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS, 2023), as of 2022, the union membership rate amongst private sector workers in the United States is merely 6 percent. However, union disapproval rates among Americans have never reached 50 percent, which would indicate that many Americans are in favor of union

membership (Rosenfeld, 2014, 14). Rosenfeld asserts that “the fact that union approval has not fallen further speaks to unions’ popularity among unorganized Americans” (Rosenfeld, 2014, 14). In spite of low union density and its continuous decline, many Americans favor an organized work force even if they themselves are not union members themselves. As for union members, we find that organized workers favor unions at rates exceeding 90 percent (Rosenfeld, 2014, 14). This would indicate that, generally speaking, union members are often pro-union and thus would not be in favor of the union density decline we are seeing across the country.

Materially speaking, labor union decline generally hurts the American worker. Labor unions provide their members with numerous benefits, one being increased wages: Western and Rosenfeld cite a study conducted by Dinardo and others which asserts that union decline appears to be responsible for almost a third of the increasing gap between the median wage and the ninetieth percentile (Western and Rosenfeld, 2011, 517). Yet this extends beyond monetary benefits. If union density is declining and unions are crucial for individuals to view themselves as political actors with democratic agency (which this study argues), this would indicate that in addition to losing material benefits, union decline threatens workplace democracy. Because of this continuous trend, exploring the ways in which union members on private college campuses view their union membership in relation to political motivation and participation is time-relevant.

There are of course ties to labor unions and electoral politics in the United States. We often associate pro-union sentiments with the ideology of the U.S. Democratic party because all elected officials who have expanded collective bargaining rights have been Democrats (Rosenfeld, 2014, 33). In 2011, 80 percent of Democrats voiced approval for labor unions whereas merely a quarter of Republicans supported collective bargaining (Rosenfeld, 2014, 16).

However, there are of course plenty of union members who hold conservative political beliefs, some of whom are registered in the Republican party. Although I was unable to interview members who identified with conservative political beliefs, all of the participants had known and interacted with many fellow members (including leaders) who held conservative beliefs and voted for Republican candidates.

There is of course an electoral political component which greatly affects labor unions—policy-makers can greatly affect the relationships between management and unions. The importance of personal identities and ideologies comes in because politics are quite personal; every individual is affected by policies and, to a certain extent, everyone must determine in what way they are involved in political processes. Historically, politics and unions have been intertwined; politicians have directly affected the nature of labor unions and their abilities to operate; research has found that, in the United States, unions generally favor the Democratic Party over the Republican Party (McGhee, 2006, 64). In terms of politicians and government at large, legislation does greatly affect labor unions: “decisions made by the Reagan, Clinton or G.W. Bush administrations are decisions or orders that can be viewed as pro union or pro employer” (McGhee, 2006, 16). This being said, politics are not reduced to federal legislation or even state legislation that affects unions. Rosenfeld asserts that “In order to update labor laws that have helped depress membership rates, unions will have to wait for the perfect political alignment, yet again” (Rosenfeld 2014, 27). This would be a bit defeating if we were to think that legislation was the only avenue for unions to regain their strength.

Individuals can participate in political participation on a much smaller scale, and the individual choice to even become a union member is in itself a political action. Union

membership requires a process of determining the relationship between workers and management, and unions help set policies in their contracts that set a precedent for how workers will be treated by management. Negotiations between unions and their respective managements result in the policies that will affect how workers are treated in their workplace and what rules they will have to abide by. Although these policies may not be entirely similar to politics on a grander political scale, I would argue that they are political for those involved: those involved being union members and management. Moreover, policies that either restrict or empower labor unions directly affect labor unions and their abilities to collectively bargain.

This study does not argue that union members who are more politically involved will inherently deem their union to be more important than members who are less politically involved. Because I was unable to interview members who do not consider themselves at least somewhat politically involved, this study has limited capabilities to speak to this. However, there is a participatory political aspect even among members who do not identify with the word “political” itself. Apolitical members still pay union dues, have opinions on what their contract should look like, and choose whether or not to regularly attend meetings. All of these things affect other union members and of course the union as an organization. In a period of private sector union decline, it seems particularly important to examine the ways in which union members and union staff engage with their unions.

Broadly speaking, unionization is a mode through which workers’ wills can be reflected and represented. The findings indicate that workplace democratization is a large motivation for union organizing and union involvement. This is not to say that all unions are democratic or perfectly reflect the will of the workers, yet unions bring workers one step closer to democracy.

Unfortunately democracy, or representation of the will of the working class, is difficult to come by in the United States. The will of the elite is represented quite well: Gilens and Page reveal that those within the economic elite and groups representing business interests have a sizable influence on U.S. government policies (Gilens and Page, 2014, 564). However, mass-based interest groups and average citizens have virtually no independent impact on policies (Gilens and Page 2014, 564). If the will of the American people is not properly reflected in government policies, unionization serves as a tool for the will of American workers to be reflected. With union density in decline, the possibility for democracy is further threatened.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

For this study, I read a great deal of sociological and political theory literature which examines union membership and political participation and ideologies, union membership and its relationship to identity (political and otherwise), and various facets of the American labor movement from the twentieth century. Some of the studies I refer to implement quantitative research methods, while others implement qualitative (and some implement a mixture of both). This includes studies examining union membership whose research ranged from macro, meso, and micro levels. I also explore Jane McAlevey's definition of organizing which she presents in her book *No Shortcuts*.

Previous literature examines union decline, the changes in union organizing tactics, and what that means for union members in the United States. In Jake Rosenfeld's book, *What Unions No Longer Do*, the author speaks to the historical changes of organizing techniques— one of these historical changes being the decline in strikes in the United States (Rosenfeld, 2014, 90).

Rosenfeld suggests that strike decline is unlikely to be representative of more efficient collective bargaining but rather it would seem to indicate that unions have lost leverage in collective bargaining power over the years (Rosenfeld, 2014, 92). Jane McAlevey's book *No Shortcuts* attributes this problem to the ways in which unions themselves interact with their own members and unorganized workers (McAlevey, 2016, 17-8). McAlevey examines three general processes of change: advocacy, mobilizing, and organizing (McAlevey, 2016, 2). Advocacy involves almost entirely the voices of those who already have a great deal of power: "lawyers, pollsters, researchers, and communications firms are engaged to wage the battle. Though effective for forcing car companies to install seat belts or banishing toys with components that infants might choke on, this strategy severely limits serious challenges to elite power. Advocacy fails to use the only concrete advantage ordinary people have over elites: large numbers." (McAlevey 2016, 9). It is not difficult to imagine how an advocacy model would prove unhelpful for an organization such as a labor union as this model does not involve the power in numbers that is needed to form a labor union and maintain it.

However, what seems less obvious to the labor movement, according to McAlevey, is the ways in which the mobilizing model is limiting (McAlevey, 2016, 10). McAlevey explains that although mobilizing has a distinct advantage over advocacy because it brings in larger numbers of people, it still fails to bring together individuals who do not consider themselves activists who, although they are active in participating and meetings and attending rallies, they are "without the full mass of their coworkers or community behind them. This is because a professional staff directs, manipulates, and controls the mobilization; the staffers see themselves, not ordinary people, as the key agents of change" (McAlevey 2016, 10). The mobilizing events these activists

attend rarely challenge those in power, and in turn do not successfully challenge the systems of power they are criticizing (McAlevey, 2016, 10). Leaders in New Labor, McAlevey argues, largely implement mobilizing approaches as opposed to organizing approaches (McAlevey, 2016, 18). New Labor leaders directed their efforts towards weakening employer opposition to unionization which, as the author writes, “made employers– not workers or their communities, the primary focus of New Labor’s energy” (McAlevey 2016, 18-9). This does not reflect a grassroots approach to labor activism, and so the will of the workers is not reflected in mobilizing approaches of New Labor.

Organizing, according to McAlevey, is the only social process which “can effectively challenge the gross inequality of power in the United States” (McAlevey, 2016, 2). McAlevey explains that organizing “places the agency for success with a continually expanding base of ordinary people, a mass of people never previously involved, who don’t consider themselves activists at all” (McAlevey 2016, 10). When explained in these terms, it is easy to see how organizing, as McAlevey defines it, is what has the greatest success in reflecting the will of any group of people, workers or otherwise. Agency being transferred to a mass of ordinary people is a process of democratization. The point of organizing is to motivate initially through the means of “specific injustice and outrage” and the main objective is the transferral of power from the 1 percent to the 99 percent (McAlevey, 2016,10). The motivation is not “political” as we often think of the word “political”, yet this is precisely how injustices are overcome. This directly ties into the pursuit of democracy, and in the case of unions, workplace democracy. Proper organizing helps establish democracy among those who are being organized as it involves



understanding and addressing the concerns of each individual in the group being organized (in the case of union organizing, each worker).

This reality narrows in on decisions of unions themselves rather than just the grander trend of labor union decline in the United States. One example can be seen in the decline in strikes. If unions are less likely to use labor strikes as a collective bargaining tactic, this indicates something about how rank-and-file union members and staff view themselves in relation to their union involvement *and* how much power they find themselves to have in relation to union negotiations. If unions do not strike, or have no-strike clauses in their contracts, this indicates that members view the withdrawal of their labor will not be effective in confronting injustices imposed by management. McAlevey stresses the importance of strikes in “restoring the power of the working class, not just for the better standards strikes can produce but also because they reveal high participation organizing” (McAlevey, 2016, 20). Certain tactics are more indicative of successful organizing than others, and because organizing is linked to the cultivation of democracy (whether it be in the workplace or otherwise), these trends show that perhaps unions themselves are becoming less democratic.

Because this study seeks to understand the ways in which union members view themselves as political actors, identity also serves as a component of this study. Identity is crucial to union membership— specifically the intertwined nature of social and personal identities (Fearon, 1999, 1). Fearon finds that “an ‘identity’ refers to either (a) a social category, defined by membership rules and (alleged) characteristic attributes or expected behaviors or (b) socially distinguishing features that a person takes a special pride in or views as unchangeable but socially consequential or (a) and (b) at once” (Fearon, 1999). How individuals view

themselves in relation to a group they are a part of greatly affects how that group will operate. From here we can look at a particular identity theory: social identity theory. This will allow us to better understand what identity means in relation to a group. “Social identity theory holds that individuals derive their self-concept from knowledge of their membership in a group (or groups) and that they place value and emotional significance on that group membership with resulting perceptual and attitudinal biases” (Green, 1999, 393). This ties into Fearon’s own definition of identity and its emphasis on the social and especially the “socially consequential” (Fearon, 1999), for identities shape the group just as the group shapes the identity. However, one must also remember that individuals can view their group membership in very different ways, and draw off of other aspects of their identities which in turn will result in different membership identities.

Roychowdhury conducted a participant observation and interview-based study of Vendors for Justice, a street vendor union in New York City (Roychowdhury, 2014, 22). The membership base of Vendors for Justice was primarily male though ethnically diverse and had an “occupationally segmented labor force” (Roychowdhury, 2014, 23). The author found that invoking certain ideas of brotherhood proved detrimental to the strength of the union (Roychowdhury, 2014, 22). All of this occurs even before bringing up overtly political components. However, identity in this abstract sense is directly relevant to union membership as Roychowdhury demonstrates. In the specific case of Vendors for Justice, leaders tried to strengthen union morale by calling upon members as brothers and requesting a sort of familial sacrifice: they were actively constructing and recruiting members around a collective identity, a notion of masculinity linked to militancy and courage” (Roychowdhury 2014, 22). Most obviously, using the language of “brotherhood” excluded the women in the union from a true

sense of solidarity (Roychowdhury, 2014, 34). Yet the men in Vendors for Justice also identified with masculinity and brotherhood in different ways. They expected different things from one another and this was directly tied to their own personal identities and relation to brotherhood. Beyond individual identity, however, this proved problematic as leaders were unable to properly relate to the rest of their membership. This strategy proved unsuccessful because, most prominently Bangladeshi and Senegalese members found that Vendors for Justice leaders were unable to be supportive of their status of stable breadwinners (Roychowdhury, 2014, 22). Union members (and leaders) viewed their personal relationship to the union in conflicting ways– the conflict was directly influenced because of each member’s identity in relation to their ethnicity, class, gender, and cultural background.

Roychowdhury cites Ackelsberg and Kurtz in explaining how this is an example of exclusionary solidarity, which is “solidarity based on an identity of ‘sameness’.” (Roychowdhury, 2014, 25). This chosen method of organizing did not prove successful– likely due to the decision itself as well as the limited resources to the union. This speaks to a failure of both the individual union leaders in Vendors for Justice and a failure caused by systemic inequities that lead to occupations such as street vendors being underrepresented by organized labor. The “identity of sameness” is not to be confused with uniting around a common cause. Labor unions must find a way to reach all of their members and convince them that issues in the workplace cannot be resolved without collective action (McGhee 2006, 92). In essence, labor unions have to organize individuals who carry a wide range of identities without undermining those identities.

Political ideology comes into play in Kerrissey and Schofer's "Union Membership and Political Participation in the United States", which found that union membership is associated with political activity such as voting, protesting, and association membership (Kerrissey and Schofer, 2013, 895). When first acquiring membership, workers often do not have an extensive foundation in political participation (Kerrissey and Schofer 2013, 898). Because of this, labor unions implement techniques to instill pro-union identities within members as well as teach them political strategies" (Kerrissey and Schofer, 2013, 898). Here we reach the intersection of identity, political participation, and union membership. This intersection is significant because it has direct effects on both individuals within a union, the union as an organization, and political matters that affect unions and union members. Members' ideologies greatly influence the strength of a union: Cornfield and Hudson found that members who joined unions for ideological reasons rather than purely for their own material gain, were more likely to be active union members (Cornfield and Hodson 1993, 600).

Schradie examines the intersections of political ideologies, digital activism, and labor unions by looking at two different labor unions: United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America Local 150 (UE150) and State Employees Association of North Carolina (SEANC) (Schradie, 2015, 1986). The two unions had very different organizing strategies: UE150 practiced "social movement unionism" whereas SEANC endorsed "reformist, lobbying unionism" (Schradie, 2015, 1989). SEANC focused on changing the ideas of elected officials and influencing the media, hence they held and maintained a prevalent social media presence (Schradie, 2015, 1992). UE150 found the internet much less helpful as an organizing tool (Schradie, 2015, 1997). Schradie explains: "They were interested in participatory democracy as

opposed to representative democracy.” (Schradie 2015, 1997). Both of these unions are very political, and their organizing tactics are directly linked to politics and the political ideologies of members. Yet their modes of political participation were quite different. UE150 challenged the political system and participated in civil disobedience protests such as Moral Monday in 2012, which was a reaction to the election of a Republican governor who, among other policy changes, imposed restrictions on public sector unions (Schradie, 2015, 1985) UE150 members were an integral part of the protest, and were some of the first to be arrested (Schradie, 2015, 1986).

SEANC renounced the decision of UE150, and made a point to announce this via twitter (Schradie, 2015, 1986). UE150 was more concerned with grassroots organizing and challenging the flaws of the political system itself (Schradie, 2015, 1997). Schradie asserts that this is political in a sense beyond the standard left-leaning vs. conservative way of thinking (Schradie, 2015, 2002). The author writes: “Organizing ideology also involves political strategies in terms of ideas, practice, and the organizations themselves” (Schradie, 2015, 2002). This brings a sense of political immediacy to the union itself and its members. Instead of so heavily relying upon outside legislation and governing bodies such as the National Labor Relations Board, unions such as UE150 are concerned with the democracy within the union itself and how the powers working against it can be combated. This falls in line with Jane McAlevey’s argument: “for movements to build maximum power—the power required in the hardest campaigns—there is no substitute for a real, bottom-up organizing model” (McAlevey, 2016, 206). The importance of grassroots collective bargaining makes it all the more important to look at membership and political identities of individual union members.

## METHODS

This project was conducted as a semi-structured interview-based qualitative study. Participants were recruited through the method of email and text using both purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Qualitative research allows for interviewees to provide nuanced responses that can provide insight as to how they, as union members, relate their union membership to political motivation and political participation. Purposive sampling, as explained by Ashley Rubin, involves selecting participants based on predetermined criteria (Rubin, 2021, 141). In the case of this study, participants are recruited because of their affiliation with the unions I am studying. Purposive sampling allowed me to recruit respondents who have experience with union membership, whether it be as rank-and-file members or as union staff representatives or union staff volunteer organizers. I implemented snowball sampling by asking participants who I selected through purposive sampling for contact information of other union members and union staff. When participants agreed to be interviewed upon my initial outreach, I asked them to read and sign a consent form if they still agreed to be included in the study.

Recruitment proved difficult— particularly recruitment of members with more conservative beliefs (I was unable to interview anyone who held conservative political beliefs), members who worked at institutions I had not had contact with prior to this research, and members who did not hold leadership positions in either as rank-and-file members or union staff. There may have partially been due to my own positionality as a college student at a notoriously left-leaning institution and the subject of my study blatantly addressing political motivations for labor union involvement. The participants who were the easiest for me to recruit and who

seemed to be accustomed to both speaking with and organizing students, all identified with left-leaning politics.

These interviews were generally about forty-five minutes to two hours in length and occurred in a space in which the participants felt comfortable. I gave participants the option to be interviewed over the phone, through Zoom, or in person. All participants were interviewed either over the phone or over Zoom, and all participants signed a consent form prior to being interviewed. The questions in the interviews were designed with anticipation of long, nuanced answers and should give participants the freedom to talk about how *they* think their position in the labor union relates to their political participation and role as political actors.

All of the respondents I recruited were not only pro-union, but were actively providing a union with time and money to an organization that affected both their lives and other members. An individual's political beliefs do not just reflect how the given individual wishes themselves and others to be treated by organizations larger than themselves, but can also have direct effects on how organizations affect the populace. A union, though an organization much smaller than, say, a state legislature, is one of these organizations. Each rank-and-file member and staff member has their own views on how they should be treated as workers and what concessions they are willing to make for the benefit of other union members. There are many political decisions that lie beyond the negotiations between union and management that directly affect the nature of any individual union, some examples include labor laws, the state of the National Labor Relations Board, how elected officials interact with unions, etcetera. Naturally because of this, examining union membership identity and political identity, motivations, and participation are worth looking at alongside one another. However, politics still exist within a union itself.

I interviewed rank-and-file union members and union staff who work on multiple private college campuses in the Northeast. Looking at any union is important to labor research, and the reasons for this importance will of course vary based on the specific unions being studied. If a labor union is particularly successful in acquiring the desires and needs of workers and fighting management, looking at components such as specific organizing techniques, type of work, the demographics and political ideologies of workers and staff can help us understand what would strengthen the labor movement. Conversely, a less successful union shows us both ways in which components such as organizing techniques may inhibit the union and the ways in which components such as demographics could be contributing to the undesirable outcomes.

These specific unions are especially relevant to the research question because the membership comprises a range of political affiliations. Interviewing members and staff of these unions can grant insight into how members and staff of different political affiliations interact with their union, as well as how they view their political participation and identity in relation to their union participation and identity. In spite of the range of political identities of members and staff, all of these members and staff decide to continue to be involved with their respective unions. This involves interacting with members and staff with different political beliefs, and it also involves compromising in order to reach agreements surrounding contracts, grievances, etcetera. In spite of their differences in opinion, members and staff must work together in order to maintain the strength of the union. The “political” extends beyond the individual, just as union membership extends beyond each individual member. Understanding how they interact with and identify politics in relation to their union membership allows us to better understand how unionization may allow individuals to view themselves in relation to a unit.



I was able to interview five rank-and-file union members, all of whom work at college campuses. In the case of this study, participants arrive from a large range of occupations. Some are professors, others hold occupations in carpentry and horticulture. Members of these unions are not particularly wealthy individuals, and union staff have made the decision to advocate for these workers. Because of this, both rank-and-file union members and union staff affiliated with these unions are not necessarily the most represented voices in political spaces. Some may be more interested in following political issues than others, some may be part of more privileged demographics than others, yet they are all advocating and part of organizations that advocate on behalf of self-identifying “middle class” or “working class” workers. More specifically, they challenge management. Better understanding the beliefs and needs of members and staff of these unions could indicate more of what these unions need in order to reflect the will of their membership.

A worker we may describe as something along the lines of “working class” or “blue collar” is serving a community that, generally speaking, we would assume to be at the very least “middle class” and certainly “educated white collar”. These colleges contain many students and professors who heavily identify with the word “political” and who are involved in political movements. The colleges these union members work at do differ in political climates, and ideally I would like to see how these environments may affect union members. This may also have an effect on union members’ political identities depending on how much of an influence professors and the student body communicate with and support the unions. This does not only entail the case of a union member changing their political identity to align closer to those of students and faculty they have encountered, it may also entail further solidifying their opinions

that conflict with those of student and faculty. Institutions and the workers they employ affect one another, making this all the more important to examine. Individual identities are not restricted to the individual.

### *POSITIONALITY*

My own positionality also affects the research and how respondents interact with me, in turn affecting their answers to the questions. As a middle class white college student who has never been in a union, I am arriving from a much different background than a lot of my respondents. I do not have the same shared experiences as they do, and they are far more knowledgeable about what it truly means to be in a labor union than I do. Because of this, I compiled questions that were concerned with respondents' experiences and gave them the opportunity to speak about themselves rather than abstract ideas such as union membership or political identity on a theoretical level. While interviewing, I avoided assumptions about the correlation between political identity and union membership as much as possible so as to leave room for the respondents to explain what they thought the relationship was between the two. However, because I told respondents that my project was on the relationship between political identity, participation, and union membership identity, they may have changed their answers to fit more of what they viewed as "politics" in their responses. I emphasized questions such as: "Do you think union membership is political?" so as to give respondents the opportunity to explain a bit of what they viewed as political while also better understanding how they viewed their union membership. This ties into my positionality as identifying as "political". This may differ from how many of my respondents identify, even among those who closely align with my own political affiliations.

My success in recruiting the participants I was able to recruit, and my lack of success in recruiting participants who were not as directly involved in discussing labor with college students likely ties into my own positionality as a college student.

Qualitative researchers argue about the use of the term insider/outsider status, and some argue that a researcher is constantly shifting between insider and outsider status depending on the different moments within their fieldwork (McCorkel and Myers, 2003, 204). Being significantly younger than all my participants, never having been substantially involved in union organizing or a member of a union, and having no experience in any of the occupations my participants held, it is clear I was most definitely an “outsider” in nearly all aspects of this research. However, I did hold a familiarity with private college campuses and student labor dialogues on college campuses, likely the two most significant commonalities in positionality I held with the participants of this study. Not only did these commonalities likely contribute to why I was able to acquire the contacts of these respondents, these commonalities also likely contributed to why participants were comfortable speaking with me and agreed to be participants in this study.

## FINDINGS

Seven union members participated in this study, all of whom held various positions of leadership within their respective unions. These positions included volunteer organizer, chair and vice chair, executive board member, union representative, and rank-and-file lead organizers. This means that all participants not only chose to join and/or organize a labor union, but also took on positions of leadership within their unions so that they could have more of a voice in

how their unions operated. Two of the participants entered the labor movement as organizers, and the other five were rank-and-file union members. Six of the participants are currently unionized by Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and one, although currently a volunteer organizer with different unions, has had experience working with SEIU. All of the respondents identified as white, five of the respondents identified as men and two of the respondents identified as women. Three of the participants identified as middle class, three identified as working class, and one described his class identity lying at the “intersection of the professional managerial job with the broad working class”.

Because I was unable to interview union members who did not hold a leadership position in their respective unions, the findings are likely different than they would be if I were able to interview participants with a wider range of positions in labor organizing. If I had interviewed members who were not as involved, some may have felt less motivation to be involved in the direction of their respective unions. Members who did not hold positions of leadership in their unions may have been less concerned with the direction of their union, and/or felt they had less agency in the direction of the union. They very well could be heavily involved in political activity outside of labor, and they may hold strong political motivations for any number of issues. Some union members may have only joined a union for their own material benefit, and did not view their union membership as something that extended beyond their own personal workplace situation.

### *IDENTITY*

The questions I asked participants were largely centered around political identity and the relationship between political identity and their union membership. One individual described

themselves as liberal, two identified as progressive and one respondent did not even place a label on his political identity and instead described issues that he cared about, often centering around the issue of class. Although three participants identified as socialist, not all participants who identified as socialist held the same beliefs. However, I found that the findings leaned more towards the relationship between political motivations and participation in relation to union membership, and how political participation changed over time since the beginning of their union activism up until the present day. Identity still played a role in the ways in which participants viewed themselves as political actors both directly within their union membership and outside of their union membership, yet identity was not as significant a factor in my findings as I had anticipated. The direction of each interview steered more in the direction of the political beliefs of participants and how that may be related to their activity as leaders in their respective unions.

The findings indicate that I had much easier access to participants who were already, in some capacity, in direct communication with college students. Two of the participants were college professors, who were likely both comfortable interacting with students and found helping a student working on her thesis a worthwhile use of their time (one of the professors even expressed to me that he took the time because he thought it was important to talk to me about it, whether this was because of undergraduate educational purposes or for the purposes of education about unions, or both, I am not sure). Two of the participants I had contact with prior to starting outreach for this study, as I already acquired their contacts from fellow undergraduate students who they had communicated with through a student labor dialogue. One of the participants explained that one of their skill sets was organizing students. One participant, although I did not

have contact prior to my outreach for this study, was also involved with talking to students about their labor situation. The only participant who does not currently organize on college campuses did begin his labor activism when he was an undergraduate student, and even helped found the student labor dialogue at the college he attended. Essentially, all of the participants had extensive experience interacting with college students and five of them have been involved in communicating with college students about labor via student labor dialogues.

### *MOTIVATIONS FOR JOINING A UNION*

Three of the participants interviewed entered a closed-shop union as rank-and-file members. Two of these participants spoke to the material motivations for choosing an occupation unionized by a closed shop. One respondent explained that a unionized job offered more benefits than his previous occupation, and coming from a union family, he was familiar with unions. When asked why he continued to remain in his union, he responded: “I think, especially since the pandemic, the global uncertainty about jobs and employment, the union does offer as much as it can, job security and a sense of protection from predatory management practices elsewhere.” The second respondent also explained that joining the union seemed like an obvious choice because of the offered benefits and job security. These motivations are not political, yet both of these respondents did hold political motivations for becoming more involved in the union once they were hired and began speaking to other members. The third respondent expressed more of a political motivation upon joining the union. Because they had previously been involved in local electoral politics prior to joining the union, and found that

because of their previous experience with putting together campaigns, they would be an asset to the union.

Two of the participants, who both entered the labor movement as organizers who were not rank-and-file members, had political motivations as well as material motivations for becoming involved in labor organizing. One participant who began heavily involving himself in the labor movement once he entered college, explained: “I started doing community organizing during the Occupy movement that actually more substantively intersected with the labor movement and was oriented toward it in a more explicit way. Which I think is, like all things in organizing is relational, right? One of the early Occupy mentors I had was a former ILGWU<sup>1</sup> organizer. [...] And so, you know, early on it was like, ‘we need to get you into the labor movement’”. This illustrates a political motivation to become involved in union organizing and is also representative of the ways in which social movements can work off of one another.

All participants were motivated to remain actively involved in their union for reasons that extended beyond their own material benefit from unionization. Allen, a volunteer organizer who has now helped organize and work with unions in various workplaces throughout the United States, explained: “You work a shitty job and recognize that your fate is tied in with the fate of your co workers and recognize that like, it will not get better unless you draw a line in the sand somewhere and find your backbone”. This sentiment suggests that, not only is management a threat, but there is a responsibility amongst workers to fight back against this threat, for the good of not only the individual worker, but the workplace at large.

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<sup>1</sup> ILGWU: International Ladies Garment Workers Union

I asked Christopher, who helped lead a union organizing drive at his workplace, why he believed that his specific union was important. He explained that there really was no other way to fight against the injustices workers were experiencing in his workplace. While organizing, he and other workers tried to negotiate with management for better conditions, yet they were unable to acquire the desired results through these attempts. He explained, “For all the years that we were organizing, we were simultaneously talking to the college about all of the issues we had identified. So one of the things that I did was actually put together an anonymous self study for the [workers] in which they could do things like self report their salary, self report, whether or not they negotiated with the college about their salary, self report about what sort of service responsibilities they have and then I compiled this information and we took it to administration [...] Then the college never did anything.” His reasoning also extended beyond his own immediate situation and he believed that unionization was imperative for the well-being of workers. When asked why he decided to become involved in the unionization drive, he explained: “I choose to do it, because I feel like the only substantive gains that have happened for laborers, whether you happen to be academic laborers or industrial laborers have been through collective action, and actually developing some sort of leverage”. This of course directly ties into “political” as this study defines it, as it is concerned with collective action and “gains for laborers”, which can easily be understood as allocation of resources. Christopher’s sentiment illustrates a political motivation within his workplace which is shaped by a broader scope of how he views labor in the United States.

#### *POLITICAL PARTICIPATION*



Whether directly related to union involvement or not, all participants were concerned with political issues outside of the political issues associated with labor. Kerrissey and Schofer found that union membership in the United States was associated with multiple forms of political activity such as voting, protesting, and association membership (Kerrissey and Schofer, 2013, 895). The authors cite previous empirical studies on unions and political participation which reveal that union members are more likely to vote than non-union members and have a tendency to vote Democrat (Kerrissey and Schofer 2013, 900). Beyond party affiliation, respondents reported that union activism had reinforced their political beliefs and in one case a respondent explicitly stated that his time in organizing may have pushed them further in the direction of the political left. Christopher explained, “I wouldn't say there's been any radical shifts in my political views, but except that I think I might have, prior to union activism, still had a part of me that thought, somehow neoliberalism could figure it out. But I just, I just don't think that anymore. I think it's, it's a dead end. So if anything, I've just been moved further along my own personal progression in the direction of the left.” Although he states that he has not had many drastic changes occur in his political views, this response is telling of the power union activism had on his political views. According to his response, since his union activism, he has now completely renounced the theory of unregulated markets being beneficial to society overall. Moreover, his response emphasizes the importance of unions and the faith he has in collective action.

All respondents reported that they regularly voted in local, state, and national elections. Beyond this form of political activity, political participation amongst respondents varied. In some respects, union organizing may have detracted from other forms of political engagement

for participants. Christopher and Elizabeth explicitly expressed that the mere time commitments of their union organizing limited their abilities to participate in other methods of political activity. However, both of these respondents were involved in other forms of political activity—Christopher was active in supporting his local Social Democrat school board member candidates through attending events and hosting events himself and Elizabeth attended rallies for workers' rights when she felt she had the time and opportunity to do so. She also realized that, as time went on in her organizing efforts, she felt she needed to continue being active in union work: "I really was hoping at one point that when we organized our union, when we won our union [...] that like that would kind of be the end of my work, but it's just the beginning of my work". This illustrates how initial organizing involvement leads to more of a commitment to a long-term process of continual organizing. She spoke of how she felt inspired by this work, and in turn this motivated her to continue a leadership role in organizing and an increase in other forms of political participation when she had the time. She explained, "I knew from the onset that we were stronger together than we ever were individually. But to see the results of that has been inspiring."

Some interviewees found that their time in organizing had an effect on their political engagement and outlook beyond activity within their own labor union. Elizabeth, one of the key leaders in her own workplace's unionization movement, expressed that, because a great deal of her time was spent labor organizing, she didn't have much time for other political work. However, since her time in labor organizing, she said that she had become more inspired to be involved in political movements: "I would say that it has eaten up any any anytime that I might have, I might have wanted to spend on other kind of political things that said, you know,

it's also you know, inspired me to to be more involved, in other things so I, I think there's been probably a very, very tiny uptick in my political engagement.” She attended political protests and rallies, some of which were for labor rights. Three respondents, Mark, a union representative, Allen, a volunteer organizer, and Carl, an Executive Board member, spoke about their involvement in political movements prior to union organizing yet found the majority of their efforts were best placed towards labor activism.

Everyone I was able to interview was a registered Democrat, though they all had qualms about the Democratic party in the United States. None of the participants fully ideologically identified with the Democratic party. One participant explained that although he operated within the Democratic party, this was quite separate from identification: “With a very, very developed capitalist class, I think you got to figure out how to operate on that specific electoral terrain so not an identification, but a tactical reckoning I'd say.” When answering the question of which party she identified with, a respondent, who more generally described herself as a liberal, expressed: “I am a Democrat. Yeah, I guess that's, that's my answer. I mean, you know, when it comes down to it, how many parties can we choose from really?” Another interviewee labeled themselves as progressive: “I would describe myself as a progressive. [...] [I] pretty much [agree with] whatever [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez] is saying. And if I disagree, it's probably because she's right and I just don't understand.” They spoke in favor of large government and believed the United States ought to model a government system off of European countries.

One respondent directly spoke to how he felt that Democrats in the United States had failed the labor movement, and he described this as the fault of both Democratic politicians and the compliance of labor unions: “The fact that unions ever hitched their wagon to the Democratic

Party, and didn't insist on performance and break away from them when it's not performing is the fault of labor.” This serves as an example of the different “levels” of political engagement in relation to labor organizing, and reveals the participant’s political motivations deriving from a place of being dissatisfied with electoral politics. Another participant emphasized the prevalence of class struggle and explained, “I don't know how to describe my political beliefs. I mean, I would say they're anti individualist. They're, you know, I wouldn't describe myself as a Marxist. Or a Marxian, but I think class is a real thing in the United States, and it's an ignored thing. In the United States, people think they are middle class when they are not, they are in fact working poor.” One respondent who identified as a socialist explained: “I think the other thing that sort of gets lost in how we talk about socialism is that you know, it also means the elimination of competitive markets”. Another respondent, who also identified as a socialist, believed in free markets, yet believed that they should be heavily regulated for the wellbeing of workers.

Although this study asserts that union organizing is political, and argues that participants have political motivations for their union organizing, the political motivations members may not always be the same as say the political motivation to vote in an election or volunteering for a politician’s campaign. Participating in a labor union is political because every member, in one way or another, holds a stake in this collective self-governance. However, not everyone may define union involvement as political. One may associate “politics” exclusively with electoral politics and law-making processes on local, state, and national levels. Throughout the findings of this study, the word “political” sometimes changes meaning depending on the context of the conversation. This occurs when distinguishing between politics on the local, state, or national level (whether this be electoral politics or legislation) and union organizing.

For example, Veronica, a vice union chair, responded: “Honestly, I’m not as politically involved as I probably should be. But I do contribute to certain like charities, somewhat politically. [...] I try to keep myself informed. But as far as being you know, involved. I am not particularly.” In this context she was answering a question which explicitly asked about political activities outside of her union involvement, yet when I asked her about relationships she developed with fellow union members she explained: “I sort of became friendly with, you know, a certain group of the other employees and they happen to be, you know, of my same mindset, which is more liberal, more actively involved in politics to the degree of, you know, the union itself, you know, being involved in what’s going on.” Within the same conversation, the meaning of the word “politics” and “political” changes when describing different forms of political activity. In the first statement she is referring to participation in electoral politics, whereas in the second she is referring to political participation within the union itself. I do not wish to assert that Veronica was using the word “political” in the exact way in which this study defines the term, though her second statement more closely aligns with this study’s understanding of politics.

Although some participants reported that they engaged in a number of forms of political activity and others were not involved in any other political organizations aside from their union involvement, all participants focused their efforts on union work. One respondent expressed “I have, in part just because I believe in the corruption of the political parties, I’ve really moved a lot of like that kind of political interaction to arm’s length. It’s not looking, where I’m looking to put my time anyway. When I really, really gear up towards more activism, it’s going to be on the labor side and not the political side.”. This serves an example of how the word “political” shifts

depending on the context of the discourse. In this statement, the respondent was referring to the “political” in the context of working with electoral politics, such as volunteering for the local Democratic party. He also made sure to distinguish the differences in the term “political” by explicitly stating “that kind of political interaction”. Similar to Veronica, he viewed himself as a political actor most focused on labor organizing.

### *POLITICS OF UNION INVOLVEMENT*

The question then remains: what exactly makes union involvement political? Union organizing is still political, yet it is distinctly different from engaging in electoral politics. None of the participants explicitly stated this claim, yet they seem to illustrate this when describing their union involvement as political activity. Veronica explained, “I am involved in politics. it just happens, you know, it's sort of the small scale, but of course, the small scale influences the bigger picture.” Veronica is demonstrating how she sees herself as a political actor within her union involvement. When referring to her union involvement as the “small scale”, she is describing a level of political participation. This level of political participation is very different from say, running for congressional office on the state or national levels, yet it is still political in nature, at least so far as this study defines political. This is because union involvement entails collective action in the ways in which members vote on issues within the union and come together to confront management about issues they are experiencing in the workplace. When Veronica speaks to the small scale influencing the bigger picture, this reminds us that the “small scale” is not something to be mitigated or dismissed and that it has broader implications.

When asked what made being involved in a union political, one participant responded: “I mean, you could say everything's political. The brand of cereal you eat in the morning, decisions that you make during the day all have a political base and have political repercussions.” In this statement, he uses the word “political” to characterize the ways in which actions such as buying a certain brand of a product influences an organization grander than oneself. This statement also speaks to how individuals can engage in actions that are political (as he characterizes the word political in his statement) without necessarily viewing them as political. Christopher, when asked the same question, responded: “I think politics is generally everything to do with power. And it's everything to do with power in a polis and hence the word, political. So it's social power to the extent that one social group is mobilizing in order to seize for itself increased power and through that, improve its conditions. I would consider that the exercise of politics. Now if someone didn't think of their union activism as politics, I don't have any quarrel with that.” This response, while not placing importance on the mere word “politics”, demonstrates that labor unions collectively work to gain power for the improvement of conditions.

I asked Mark what he would say to a union member who didn't view their union membership as political. I posited the hypothetical of a teacher who was a union member but didn't consider themselves to be a “political” person. He explained, “Using the teacher example, just like, you know, there's an elected school board that makes determinations as to how funds will be distributed to him to his students, right. So there's that. There's, there's State forces above that, who provide additional funding to public schools. And so like that was, those are political decisions that are being made about him and his co workers, right. And so like, you know, determining who those, who those forces are, it you know, is informed, you know, it

affects you it has a direct impact on you. And so, you know, so there's, there's that. That's what I would tell him, it's like, well, whether you're concerned with it or not like they're doing politics about you anyway". Here Mark is drawing the direct correlations between law-making processes and how this affects union membership, or in some classes, lack thereof. More than this, he is explaining how, whether or not one is concerned with politics, one is still affected by politics. Mark, as well as every other participant in this study acknowledges this and as a result, they have reclaimed some of their own political agency through their involvement as leaders in their unions.

Regarding the very politics of the unions themselves, two respondents reported shifts in the ways they thought about organizing and interacting with their fellow union members and colleagues. Although everyone I interviewed was on the political left, they all of course had to interact with members and colleagues who did not necessarily share their beliefs. However, with time they learned better ways as to how to meet people where they were at. One respondent found themselves having more sympathy for their co-workers who shared different political beliefs and learned how to find common ground when having one-on-one conversations in the organizing drive. When asked if they found that their beliefs had changed at all since union organizing, the participant described what they thought to be true of their co-workers resistant to unionizing their workplace: "They know, on some deep, deeply some submerged level, that they are incredibly vulnerable. And I think that that's most Americans." Mark, when answering the same question, explained that since becoming involved in union organizing he had "become far more pragmatic over the years" in his approach to union activism. He explained, "politics is just generally, you know, whether it be, you know, political organizing and in the electoral arena or



any of these different issues, labor, is an exercise of negotiation.” In the case of union activity, members have to negotiate with management, and as Mark said “have to pick their battles”. This is similar to the ways in which electoral politics operate and also the disappointment which comes along with outcomes of negotiation.

However, Mark still remains hopeful. He spoke explicitly about how he strived and hoped for his union work (as well as that of those he organizes with and represents) to serve as a good example for other unions and unionization efforts. He explained, “there is an opportunity to create the kernel, the kernel of potential of what the union could be, by, you know, by proof of a good example.” This is another example of a motivation which extends beyond the individual’s own material gain, and even beyond the gains of one specific workplace. Because it is concerned with collective action and self-governance, this study argues that this motivation would indeed be political. This is also relevant to McAleve’s definition of organizing, which consists of an expanding base of self-determining individuals (McAleve, 2016, 10). This motivation can also be seen with another participant who was a former union president; they explained how they selected the current leaders of their union: “Philosophically I think long term chairs are not a good thing for the bargaining unit. So I was never looking to be one of those. I’ve specifically seen how that’s detrimental [...] They retire out, there’s no one in the wings to pick up on the structure and run it. So I was very conscious about always grooming my replacements.” Although they did not explain this motivation as political, according to the definition of “political” posited in this study, this motivation also is political within the context of the union itself. It demonstrates a motivation to continue not only setting an example of a “good” union, but also a motivation to mentor other members to continue setting such an example.

*WORKPLACE DEMOCRACY*

It appears that the political aspect of labor organizing can be exemplified largely by the idea of workplace democracy. Participants brought up the concept of workplace democracy when answering questions which were not directly asking the correlation between political engagement and union organizing or what specifically makes union organizing political. One of the participants explained how, as soon as he joined his union he was concerned about making it more democratic: “I had a discussion with the chief steward about how they operate, my concerns, being particularly about openness, and democracy.” When asked why he thought unions were important, a union staff member explained: “Now setting aside whether we live in [a democracy] or not, most folks certainly don't work in one.” He referred to union decline in the United States and how few U.S. workplaces are unionized, and then explained: “forming a union democratizes your workplace.” Another member, when asked the same question, also described their union setting as a democracy: “it's a democratic setting, which you know, in these days, seems to be more and more difficult to find throughout the world.” Describing unions as a democracy, or as a democratizing force, shifts the conversation away from the direct benefits an individual worker may receive from union membership. Each member votes on issues that affect both themselves and other members, they have the ability to express concern to union presidents and stewards, and by paying dues, they financially contribute to a sort of collective voice which can challenge the decisions of management.

When asked to describe his relationships with fellow rank-and-file workers, James, a union president, emphasized the importance of striving for fairness: “The practices that one has

to carry out has to be done in an even handed and fair way, not show favoritism, to treat all concerns, no matter how trivial they may seem, with the same degree of interest and to try to come to a solution that would please the majority of our union members, and would stick to the guiding principles of our union and unions in general.” Although he does not explicitly say the word “democracy” in this statement, it has democratic sentiment and is a motivation concerned with more than the direct benefits he personally may receive from his union membership. Even disregarding any exterior forms of political motivations or participation James may have or in which he may participate, his statement on striving for fairness exhibits a motivation for being a union president which is centered around collective action and self-determination, thus making the motivation political. This may be a different form of political act than, say, volunteering for a politician’s campaign or protesting a law that was passed, yet it is political insofar as this study defines the word political.

## DISCUSSION

The findings illustrate that participants are concerned with the labor movement in the United States as a whole, not simply personal incentives for being members of a union. All of the participants spoke to the importance of unions in general, and one participant repeatedly spoke to the importance of collective action in general. Christopher emphasized the importance of collective action, whether it be in the form of a labor union or otherwise: “The more collective action, the better. The more support of the vulnerable, the better”. Respondents believed in democratizing their workplace through unionization, and some even explicitly spoke to how they wished to set an example for other workplaces through their union work. Because of this, it would appear that participants do in fact have political motivations for their union involvement.

Moreover, union involvement motivates participants to remain politically active and politically educated.

As this study defines the term “political,” among those interviewed, there is no doubt that political motivations exist for their work on behalf of their respective unions. However, participants did not have to explicitly say they were politically motivated to be involved in labor organizing for this to be true. They were also motivated to be involved in union work for the more obvious reason why one would join a union or organize a union: material benefits. Although all of the participants described themselves as left-leaning in one capacity or another, there was a wide range of political beliefs held amongst participants. Some were critical of capitalism, whereas others did not criticize capitalism but rather what they believed to be the lack of regulation of private markets. Two participants who disagreed politically spoke with one another about their political differences, yet organized alongside one another. One may argue that what makes all these individuals active union members is not an affiliation with an extensive political ideology or political party, it is the belief that, as laborers, they deem it necessary to form a collective voice for themselves in their workplace.

Referring back to Schradie’s study on SEANC and UE150, we can see that focusing on electoral politics and reaching out to elected officials via social media (Schradie 2015, 2002) is not necessarily the best way to maintain democracy in a labor union. In the case of this study, we can see ways in which participants speak to striving for workplace democracy. This ties into Carl speaking directly to his disappointment in the Democratic party, and believing that unions as a whole should separate themselves from the Democrats. In regards to his own political participation and preferring to spend time on labor activism as opposed to electoral politics, this

demonstrates how democracy, for him, could be best served in focusing on what he described as the “labor side” of activism. However, this is still political activity fueled by the political motivation to contribute to the labor movement.

Relating back to Schradie’s findings, the way in which participants are “political” in their union involvement extends beyond the conventional way of understanding politics as “left” versus “right” (Schradie, 2015, 2002). Participants regularly had to politically participate alongside and in solidarity with fellow union members who did not necessarily share the same political beliefs insofar as “left” versus “right” politics were concerned. In fact, if they did not organize and negotiate alongside them, they would have been acting against the principles of workplace democracy, which is what they all strove for in their union involvement. They were able to cross electoral political lines with fellow union members, and the successes their unions have had were because of this.

To better understand why this study argues why these participants all have high levels of political participation and political motivations, one ought to think of what participants are doing as part of a labor movement. This movement was often on a smaller scale, within their own labor unions, yet they were all concerned with expanding their organizing. Even in the case of Elizabeth, who initially anticipated her organizing work coming to an end once her union had formed, found this had changed. This indicates an increase in political motivation and political participation regarding union activism, and relates to the ever-expanding nature of proper organizing as described by McAleve (McAleve, 2016, 10). More specific to the research question, this demonstrates how union involvement has shaped her vision of herself as a political

actor and places her more within a movement of labor activism within her workplace (and potentially beyond) rather than an event.

small

### *LIMITATIONS*

Given the small sample size of this study, this research was unable to examine the full range of political perspectives in a single union. Therefore, the data gathered is not representative of the unions at large. Understanding the full range of political beliefs amongst members of a union, and how these beliefs have been shaped over the span of union membership would grant more insight into how, as a collective unit, the membership views themselves as political actors. In addition to a lack of diversity in political identification, I was not able to interview individuals with a range of racial identities. One respondent identified as Jewish and one respondent identified as white Hispanic, yet all seven participants identified as white. This article does not explore how racial identity may affect motivations to join a union and become actively involved, though interviewing a larger number of individuals who held a larger range of racial identities may have revealed more of how identity was incorporated into political motivation, participation, and union membership. To briefly give an example as to why this is deserving of further attention, empirical evidence has shown that unionization rates amongst black Americans has been far higher than that of white Americans for decades (Rosenfeld and Kleyklamp, 2012, 1460). Decline in union density has contributed further to black-white wage inequality in the United States (Rosenfeld and Kleyklamp 2012, 1460). These are more macro-level trends, yet the previously cited research illustrates that the sample size of

participants in this study is not representative of the identities and experiences of many union members in the United States.

Additionally, further qualitative research concerned with political participation in relation to union membership would greatly benefit from participant observation, which was not a component of this project. As a result, I was unable to properly compare and contrast the different overall political motivations and participation of different union members. A spatial analysis of specific unions, particularly those on college campuses, would reveal much more about how members view themselves when working at an academic institution and how that may affect their political participation and motivations.

## CONCLUSION

When examining the historical decline of labor unions in the United States, one can easily feel as though unionization is rapidly becoming further and further out of reach. Moreover, because of how little support elected officials in the United States have given labor unions, it may seem as though political participation will not be of any use to the labor movement. However, participants in this research speak to the way in which their labor organizing work can combat injustices within the workplace. This strengthens the argument that, in addition to materially benefitting their members, union membership can encourage members to become more politically involved. Being “more politically involved” can entail countless modes of participation, yet it is important to note that being a member of a labor union is one of many examples of being politically involved and can encourage members to engage in more modes of political participation after joining the union. Upon joining a union, whether it be as a rank-and-file member, as a staff member, or a volunteer organizer, the findings of this study

indicate that such involvement strengthens the belief that unionizing is crucial to democratizing the workplace and providing workers with the benefits they need.

Despite participants' frustrations with electoral politics, all of them found ways in which they could politically participate in ways that did best reflect their own will. This study highlights the ways in which the interviewed union members exercise their political agency to make their unions more democratic and the ways in which their union membership has increased and/or developed their political participation in ways that they think strives the most towards democracy. Although none of the participants had any drastic shifts in political beliefs, and many did not have time to participate in many other political activities because of their focus on labor, they did all become increasingly more involved in their unions since entering labor activism. This held true for both rank-and-file union members and union staff, which demonstrates how union involvement affected participants who were both inside and outside of a union shop.

Participants viewed themselves as political actors who had the most agency in union activism. This demonstrates how one can exercise political agency in places and strive for democracy even in a country which does not make laws that reflect the will of its people. More specifically, this study speaks to the importance of organizing in the fight for workplace democracy. In more somber news, the empirical evidence pointing to union density decline in the United States may indicate that fewer and fewer workers are viewing themselves as political actors with democratic agency, and thus the will of working Americans is not reflected or represented. Striving for workplace democracy, understanding and trying to address the needs of their fellow members, and being persistent in these actions over years of time are what have



made participants in this study political actors with, and in terms of their union involvement, political actors who engage in high levels of political participation.

Most importantly, successful union membership begins with the will of the workers being organized. This begins on a grassroots level, which is political, though it is not necessarily going to be assisted by electoral politics. Union members can exercise their political autonomy in spite of larger structural barriers, though this requires consistent organizing and the political motivations to do so. This study can make no broad claims or predictions about the future of American labor, yet it can provide examples of Americans currently committed to collective action amongst their fellow workers.

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Egan, P. J. (2020). Identity as Dependent Variable: How Americans Shift Their Identities to Align with Their Politics. *American Journal of Political Science*, 64(3), 699–716.

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Egan conducts a political science study that finds a small though noteworthy portion of Americans shift their identities to align more with either the Republican or Democratic party. Egan found that liberal Democrats were more likely than conservative Republicans to shift their sexual orientation to a lesbian, gay, or bi orientation, withdraw themselves from a religious affiliation, or identify with Latino origin. Conservative Republicans were more likely than liberal Democrats to switch their religious identity to one of born-again Christianity or Protestantism or identify with a non-Hispanic white national origin. These identity changes allow an individual to identify more with the general identity groups that comprise the two major parties. Egan works with social identity theory, which is concerned with defining the self by aligning with certain definitive characteristics of an identity group. This study is not relevant to the labor union membership aspect of my piece, but it does endorse the theory that social

identities change over time to accommodate political identities. This is important to keep in mind when examining labor union membership identity in relation to political identity and political participation as it helps answer the question: how much does labor union membership affect political identity and political participation and vice versa? Social identity theory is also helpful to keep in mind when trying to understand where labor union members see themselves as individuals in relation to union membership and political matters.

Fearon, James D. (1999). "What is Identity (as we now use the word)." Unpublished manuscript, Stanford University, Stanford, California.

Fearon helps define the word "identity" in the modern context and concludes that the word either refers to a social category characterized by membership rules and anticipated behavior and/or features an individual finds characteristic of a certain group and adopts because of this. The author finds that identity can help us better understand political actions and the ways in which people understand themselves. Fearon asserts that when defining "identity" in an academic context, we must also keep in mind the implications of what "identity" means to us in our daily vernacular. Fearon finds that there is both "social" and "personal" identity: social being a category such as "Americans", whereas "personal" identity consists of individual associations with more emotional/characteristic phenomena such as "I take pride in my identity being \_\_\_\_\_". The author finds that these two facets of identity are intertwined. This piece proves helpful in better understanding how individuals view themselves in relation to one another, which is relevant when exploring political identities and identifying with union membership.

Gilens, M., & Page, B. I. (2014). Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens. *Perspectives on Politics*, 12(3), 564–581.

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Kerrissey, J., & Schofer, E. (2013). Union Membership and Political Participation in the United States. *Social Forces*, 91(3), 895–928. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23361125>

Kerrissey and Schofer conduct a quantitative study on the relationship between union membership and political participation in the United States. This was done by examining three datasets addressing political behavior among American citizens from 1973 to 1994. The authors argued that because the AFL-CIO shifted union strategies to more “social unionism” in 1995, the influence on unions on participation of members would be either similar to previous years or stronger. Although union membership did not appear to have any notable effect on general volunteering, union members are 42 percent more likely to volunteer for a political campaign than their non union counterparts. The study results suggested that unions have the largest positive influence on those with low education levels. They especially have an enormous influence on protest participation among members with lower education levels. Most broadly, union members appear to be more politically active than nonmembers.

Although this is a quantitative study and I will be conducting qualitative research, this piece helps me contextualize my project. In the conclusion, the authors point to union decline among less educated individuals and imply that this will likely have an effect on political participation of people with lower education levels. This warning makes the project seem all the more important because I have the opportunity to see how political participation and union

membership may be related to one another among workers who are generally not as educated, or at least do not work in fields that require more than a highschool degree.

McAlevey, Jane. (2016). *No Shortcuts*. New York (NY): Oxford University Press.

McAlevey emphasizes the importance of numbers in the fight for effective unions and speaks to the importance of reviving the strike in revitalizing the labor movement. The author argues that organizing is the means to acquire such numbers to support such effective unions.

McCorkel, J.A., & Myers, K.A. (2003). What Difference Does Difference Make? Position and Privilege in the Field. *Qualitative Sociology*, 26, 199-231.

McGhee, Pamela (2006). "The Labor Movement To Labor Unions: A Longitudinal Study Comparing Public and Private Sector Labor Unions and The Effect of Legislation, Law, Economic, and Political Ideology on Union Membership Density". Doctorate of Public Administration, University of La Verne

McGhee's dissertation is a quantitative study concerned with union membership density in both the public and private sectors. The findings of the study indicated that legislation and laws did in fact influence private sector unionism (143) and that legislation and political ideology affects union membership density (143). This is relevant to my project because it reiterates that political ideology and legislation affect an individual's decision to join a labor union. In the literature review of the study, McGhee gives specific examples of ways in which Democratic politicians

have helped labor unions and ways in which Republican politicians have made the process of collective bargaining more difficult. The study points out the fact that the National Labor Relations Board is majorly influenced by the party affiliation of the U.S. president, as the president appoints the Board. McGhee also cites studies that argue unions must change the ways in which they operate to increase membership density. I found this an important argument to consider in light of “social unionism”, which incorporates more political movements. This is not technically a sociology study but rather a dissertation for a doctorate in public administration, it provides a great deal of evidence that indicates political ideology affects union membership.

Rosenfeld, Jake. 2014. *What Unions No Longer Do*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.

Rosenfeld’s book emphasizes the popularity of labor unions among American workers in spite of labor union decline in the private sector. I find this to be an important component to consider when conducting my own research because it speaks to a separation from policies and market trends that lead to union decline and the wishes of the individual worker. I will not be asking participants about what they think of union decline, yet I will be asking them what they think makes labor unions important. Rosenfeld also points out that individuals with lower income and education levels benefit more from unions than individuals with higher income and education levels. However, due to union decline in the private sector, these individuals are being represented less and less. Because I will be interviewing individuals with jobs which do not require a college degree, I think this fact is also important to keep in mind. Rosenfeld also writes about decline in striking in unions which is relevant to political participation within the union itself. Strikes no longer appear to be as helpful in securing wage gains for union members, so

understanding what modes of participation *are* important in the eyes of members and staff will be part of my research.

Rosenfeld, J., & Kleykamp, M. (2012). Organized Labor and Racial Wage Inequality in the United States. *American Journal of Sociology*, 117(5), 1460–1502.

<https://doi.org/10.1086/663673>

Rubin, Ashley. (2021). *Rocking Qualitative Social Science*. Stanford University Press

Schradie, Jen. (2015) “Political Ideology, Social Media, and Labor Unions: Using the Internet to Reach the Powerful, not Mobilize the Powerless”. *International Journal of Communication*.

Schradie conducts a study using both quantitative and qualitative data on two public employee labor unions in North Carolina and the differences in which the two participate politically. The study is focused on digital activism and argues that digital activism is molded by ideological differences in strategies of political participation. The study found that the union with less of a social media presence was more invested in engaging in the democratic process. The United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America Local 150 (UE150), which was characterized as bottom-up as opposed to top-down, found that digital activism was not effective in bringing members together and that it focused too much on politics based on individualism. The State Employees Association of North Carolina (SEANC), characterized as top-down, found the internet to be useful in directly engaging with lobbying government officials. Although my study will not be focused on digital activism, this piece examines the different ways in which

union members engage in political processes and how that shapes their political identities and union membership identities, which is quite relevant to my topic. I will examine the internet presence of SEIU Local 200 and pay attention to what union staff and union members find to be the most effective organizing strategies.

Western, B., & Rosenfeld, J. (2011). Unions, Norms, and the Rise in U.S. Wage Inequality. *American Sociological Review*, 76(4), 513–537. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122411414817>