

labor was never an easy task. In today's antiunion environment, with U.S. growers competing with firms in Central and South America, it is even harder.

Organizing highly competitive low-skill service industries has also proven exceedingly difficult. Despite the widely publicized organizing drives of the Justice for Janitors campaigns, the percentage of Hispanic janitors in labor unions has actually declined since 1990, along with the fraction of all janitors who claim union membership. This, of course, does not detract from the magnitude of SEIU's victory, nor should it dampen organizers' enthusiasms about replicating the tactics and lessons involved in Los Angeles, Houston, and elsewhere. The union won a series of dramatic victories that resulted in the organization of thousands of disproportionately Hispanic, disproportionately immigrant building cleaners who would not otherwise be unionized. But it ought to temper unions' and labor researchers' expectations about what the campaign means for labor's future, and for what role the labor movement may play in the upward assimilation of Hispanics. That these victories failed to reverse the broader trend of union decline simply highlights the challenging organizing environment all unions face in the twenty-first century. Today, only one in seven Hispanic janitors in the United States belongs to a union, down from one in five back in 1988, when Justice for Janitors began.<sup>63</sup>

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## 7

# The Ballot Box

## *Demunionization and Political Participation*



The labor movement has been active in elections for well over half a century. The passage of pro-union legislation in the aftermath of the Great Depression, most notably the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, laid the legal foundation for labor's rapid growth and bonded the nation's emergent unions to the Democratic Party. Throughout the decades following the Depression, many unions emptied their coffers and exhausted their organizing muscle during election drives, providing a counterweight to the campaign efforts of the nation's business lobby. Labor leaders enjoyed privileged access to top Democratic officials and served as key advisers, helping to devise domestic policy throughout the New Deal era.

Organized labor's political clout became increasingly clear during the reelection drives of Franklin Roosevelt. *Time* reported that Roosevelt's 1944 campaign was marked in part by the "emergence of organized labor as an independent political power. Sidney Hillman's P.A.C. got the voters registered, and then delivered them to the polls."<sup>1</sup> In return for his efforts, Hillman, already a close confidant of the president, reportedly received veto power over the selection of the vice president, an issue the president's political enemies tried to use to their advantage. During the campaign, Republican state committees purchased a million dollars worth of radio advertising to spread the phrase "Clear everything with Sidney." Roosevelt's opponents charged the president with issuing the order to staff members tasked with vetting vice presidential nominees

at the Democratic National Convention that August. Republicans and business leaders believed voters would recoil at the revelation of organized labor's tremendous power in politics. It didn't work. Sidney Hillman, at the time chairman of the Congress of Industrial Organizations' political action committee, "got the voters registered, and then delivered them to the polls," helping to ensure Roosevelt's fourth term. Roosevelt was deeply thankful, telling his friend, "One thing I want to make perfectly clear is my appreciation. It was a great campaign and nobody knows better than you how much you contributed to its success."<sup>2</sup>

We have met Sidney Hillman before, in Chapter 6. Hillman was a Lithuanian immigrant who founded and would serve as president of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (now part of the UNITE half of the UNITE HERE trade union). In addition to being a close friend and obviously influential adviser to Roosevelt, Hillman served on various government boards, including the National Industry Recovery Board, and he helped Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins draft what would become the Fair Labor Standards Act.<sup>3</sup> Like the president he had worked so hard to elect, Hillman did not survive the fourth term Roosevelt had won. He died of a heart attack in the summer of 1946. President Harry Truman commemorated the labor leader's legacy by remarking that Hillman was "a great humanitarian and an outstanding statesman in the field of labor-management relations."<sup>4</sup>

Not only did union leaders like Hillman support Democrats, but the strong link between organized labor and the Democratic Party extended down to the union rank and file, where it would persist for decades. In 1964, for example, fully 86 percent of union members supported the Democratic candidate for president, Lyndon Johnson.<sup>5</sup> But organized labor was too large and politicized a constituency for Republican officeholders to ignore completely. The 1964 race represented the high water mark for labor's Democratic vote share. In more typical elections, many unionists voted Republican. And unlike today, it was not uncommon for a Republican officeholder to maintain strong alliances with labor leaders.

Given labor's strength, politicians from heavily industrialized locales with a strong union presence simply had no choice but to court labor's vote, regardless of their own party allegiances. For example, labor-backed legislative initiatives to raise the nation's minimum wage frequently

gained the support of Republicans representing heavily unionized areas in the Northeast and Midwest. A House vote in 1966 to increase the minimum wage to \$1.60 an hour garnered 165 Democratic and 18 Republican votes. Of those Republicans who broke party ranks, twelve came from just three states: New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania.<sup>6</sup> All three states had a strong union presence. Similarly, efforts to tilt the country's labor laws in a more pro-union direction, such as a fight in the mid-1960s to repeal section 14(b) of the Taft-Hartley Act—the section allowing for states to enact right-to-work legislation—relied on the support of non-southern Democrats and pro-labor Republicans like Senator Jacob Javits of New York.<sup>7</sup>

Organized labor's strength was such that even during periods of Republican ascendancy, elected officials could not afford to disregard union leaders' advice when devising policy. Take the case of W. J. Utery Jr. Utery was a longtime labor activist who got his start as a cofounder of a local branch of the International Association of Machinists (IAM) in Georgia. For years he rose through the ranks of the IAM before President Richard Nixon nominated him to be assistant secretary of labor in 1969.<sup>8</sup> While Nixon was no great supporter of the labor movement, he understood that labor's assistance was essential for his legislative program. As he put it, "No program works without Labor cooperation."<sup>9</sup> President Ford followed Nixon's precedent, promoting Utery to secretary of labor in 1976.<sup>10</sup>

That was nearly four decades ago. Do unions matter in politics anymore? In the aftermath of the 2008 elections, many labor leaders anxiously waited for the newly elected president to press for passage of the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA). EFCA had been the signature legislative goal of the labor movement for years, and as a candidate Barack Obama had expressed his support for it on the campaign trail.<sup>11</sup> In its most robust form, the proposed legislation would radically recast how union elections are held in the United States, bypassing the traditional election campaign in favor of a "card check" policy in which a union is recognized after over half of workers sign up in support of collective bargaining. A compromise version of the bill would retain the secret-ballot election procedure, but would reduce election times, grant organizers greater access to employees on the work site, and institute binding arbitration if a contract had not been agreed upon after a specified period.<sup>12</sup> As Gerald McIntee, president of the American Federation of State,

Country, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) described it, quick passage of EFCA would be proper "payback" for all the efforts organized labor had expended on behalf of Obama and other Democrats during the campaign season.<sup>13</sup> Unions and their members had spent tens of millions of dollars and countless hours on the ground fighting to elect Democrats across the country during the 2008 contest, and they wanted legislative returns.

The "payback" AFSCME and other unions expected as a result of their 2008 campaign efforts never materialized. Once ensconced in the Oval Office, Obama expended no political capital on EFCA, and the legislation floundered during his first term. Unions were understandably frustrated by the lack of legislative gains from their election efforts.<sup>14</sup> But how significant were those efforts themselves? As I will explore in this chapter, the outcomes of other recent contests cast doubt on the organizing efficacy of unions during contemporary election drives and on the subsequent political clout of union leaders in shaping policy.

For example, early in the 2004 primary contest, ex-House leader Richard Gephardt secured the endorsements of over twenty labor unions, including the once-powerful Teamsters and Steelworkers. His campaign never took off, and he quit the contest prior to the first primary.<sup>15</sup> Howard Dean appeared set to lock up the Democratic nomination after two of the largest and most active unions, the Service Employees International Union and AFSCME, backed his candidacy. Dean lost the nomination to John Kerry. With the primary field cleared, organized labor backed Kerry, contributing manpower at the polls and tens of millions of dollars to unseat President George W. Bush. The election rested on the outcome in Ohio, a state with a disproportionately high share of union workers. Kerry lost.

During the protracted Democratic primary battle of 2008, labor unions diverged in their endorsements. Unions such as the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers came out early to back Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama secured the support of the Correction Officers' Benevolent Association in the fall of 2007 (but not many others, at least early on), and John Edwards's populist campaign attracted the Steelworkers and the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). It is unclear whether these endorsements affected the primary results; certainly the lack of big-name labor supporters did not doom Obama's

primary campaign. The labor movement eventually rallied around the Democratic candidate once the primary field cleared, contributing millions of dollars in campaign funds and promising to send legions of union members to the polls to outvote the unorganized. The money undoubtedly helped, but with a unionization rate lower than it had been in nearly a century, did the manpower?

Answering this question requires an investigation into organized labor's impact on recent elections. Unions' organizing muscle may influence elections in various ways. For example, union election efforts carry weight if membership boosts voting rates (what I term the "direct effects" of unions on voting), and if these union votes skew toward a particular party or candidate.<sup>16</sup> In what follows I address these two potential influences, paying particular attention to organized labor's influence on voting rates. After all, the broad impact of union members' partisan cast depends on whether organized labor is able to influence turnout in the contemporary era of shrinking union rolls. As I will show, this ability of unions to increase turnout among its membership has been drastically curtailed.

The answer to the question of whether or not unions matter in politics anymore carries repercussions well beyond the relative fate of the Democratic Party. Political participation is strongly influenced by socioeconomic status (SES). The more education and income one has, the more likely one is to participate in politics. Unions are uncommon among organizations in that historically they helped equalize participation across SES divides. Indeed, other than unions, only churches mobilize the less-advantaged on a mass scale. In the immediate aftermath of the 2004 presidential election, story after story in the nation's newspapers credited Bush's victory to the mobilizing efforts of predominantly white Evangelical churches.<sup>17</sup> But unlike Evangelical churches, unions remain unique in that they are a set of associations with the potential to mobilize non-elite voters to support economically progressive policies. No political party will advocate on behalf of the economic interests of the working and middle class without a constituency pressing for pro-labor legislation. The question of unions' political impact therefore speaks to whether non-elites have a vital political voice in this contemporary era of nearly unprecedented economic inequality.

Whether unions continue to serve their historical role equalizing political participation depends not only on their ability to boost voting

rates among members, but also on who these members are. As we have learned, most union members today are public-sector workers. And public-sector workers have, on average, higher education levels than workers in the private sector. The sectoral and educational shifts have implications for unions' ability to mobilize society's most vulnerable workers. After all, unions can mobilize the less-advantaged only to the extent that they represent the less-advantaged. Thus before turning to the analysis of union effects on voting, we first need to investigate the changing sectoral and educational makeup of today's labor movement.

### A Changing Membership Base

Union members' education levels have increased in recent decades, as employers began demanding high school diplomas and even college experience for jobs that once required nothing more than a union card. Analyses of Current Population Survey (CPS) May and CPS-MORG data indicate that in 1973, over 40 percent of male, private-sector unionists had never completed high school. Of these members, over two-thirds worked in manufacturing and construction. Thirty-five years later, the percentage of union members lacking a high school diploma had fallen into the single digits. In the early 1970s, only a tiny fraction of male private-sector union members had completed college—roughly 2 percent. In 2009, fully one in seven had completed a four-year college degree.

An increase in the educational attainment of Americans in general does not fully explain these rising educational levels of unionists. In earlier decades, the fraction of union members lacking a high school diploma was larger than among nonmembers. By 2008, the percentage of nonunion workers without a high school diploma was nearly double the corresponding percentage of union members.

The increasing educational levels of unionists contributed to a change in the class makeup of the labor movement. According to the political scientists Jan Leighley and Jonathan Nagler, the fraction of union members in the top third of the country's income distribution increased by 24 percent between 1971 and 2004. As the proportion of high-income unionists increased, the proportion of members with income levels in the bottom third of the distribution decreased by nearly 45 percent.<sup>18</sup>

The changes in the composition of union members do not end there. Related to the education and income gains by union members over the past decades is the sectoral shift among the nation's trade unions. Today, the total number of public-sector union members exceeds their private-sector counterparts. This marks a dramatic break with decades past, when private-sector union rolls dwarfed those found in the public sector. Figure 7.1 displays the percentage of all union members who worked in the public and private sectors between 1973 and 2009. In the early 1970s, less than 20 percent all union members worked in the public sector. By 2009, the majority of union members worked for the government.

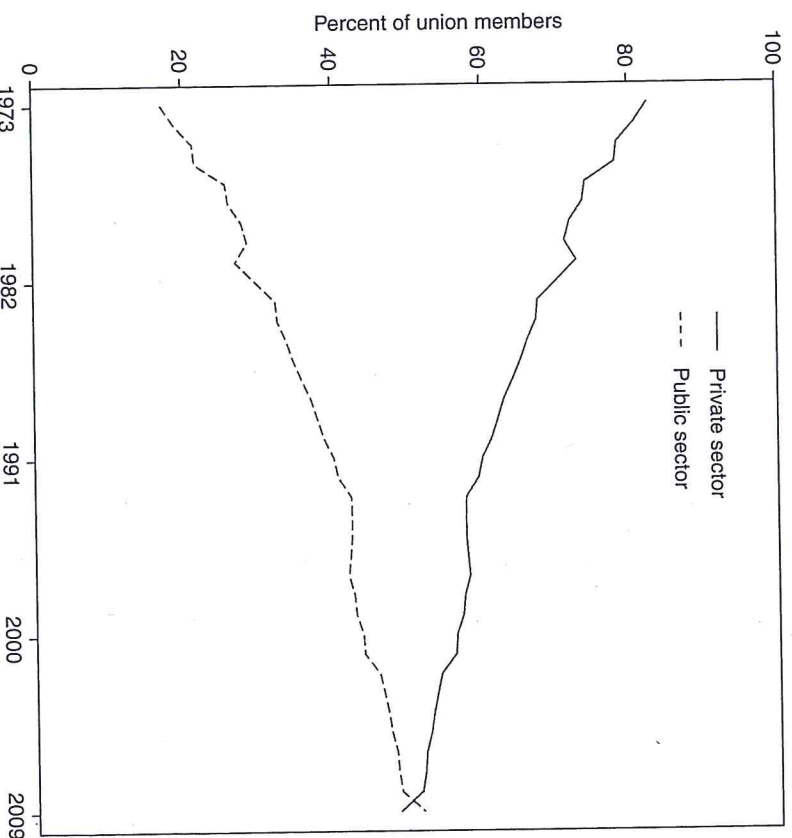


Figure 7.1. Union members in the public and private sectors, 1973–2009. Source: Hirsch and Macpherson's Unionstats database, based on CPS-May data for 1973–1981 and CPS-MORG data for 1983–2009. See [www.unionstats.com](http://www.unionstats.com).

Why might the changing sectoral composition of the labor movement matter for politics? Public-sector workers, on average, have higher levels of education than private-sector employees. This is also true when restricting the analysis to union members. Figure 7.2 shows the fractions of public- and private-sector unionists who dropped out of high school, completed high school, and who had completed at least some college for three presidential election years: 1984, 1996, and 2008.<sup>19</sup> The figure highlights two noteworthy developments. First, *within* each sector, union members have made impressive educational gains, as noted earlier. For example, the percentage of private-sector unionists with at least some college experience more than doubled between 1984 and 2008. Meanwhile, the fraction of private-sector unionists who failed to complete high school plummeted. In 1984, over one in five union members in the private sector had not graduated from high school, half as many as in the early 1970s. By the election of 2008, that fraction had fallen to fewer than one in twenty. Educational gains among public-sector union members were not quite as steep, largely due to the already high proportion of government workers who

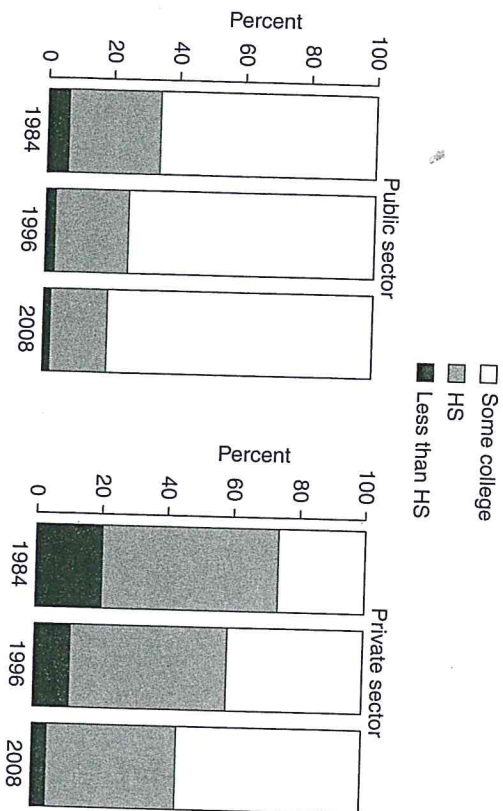


Figure 7.2. Educational attainment of U.S. union members by sector, 1984, 1996, and 2008. *Note:* Estimates limited to employed union members only; age eighteen and over, who are U.S. citizens. *Source:* Author's compilations, CPS-November data for 1984, 1996, and 2008.

had completed high school or more in 1984. But educational upgrading still occurred. Between 1984 and 2008, the proportion of public-sector unionists with at least some college experience increased by 23 percent.<sup>20</sup>

Second, *between* sector comparisons reveal large disparities in educational attainment. In 2008, for example, 40 percent of private-sector members had only completed high school—over twice the fraction of public-sector unionists. In 2008, the vast majority of public-sector members had attended college, with attendance rates 44 percent higher among governmental union members than among members in the private sector.

It is likely that unions' historical role in narrowing political participation gaps across income and educational divides was most pronounced in the private sector, where educational attainment—and political participation—was lower than in the public sector. Figure 7.3 presents voter turnout rates for public- and private-sector workers for all presidential and non-presidential (off-year) elections between 1984 and 2008. Even in those elections that galvanized the electorate, public-sector workers participated more than those in the private sector. The historic 2008 presidential contest witnessed elevated voter participation rates among both public- and private-sector workers, but public-sector employees outvoted those in the private sector by 13 percentage points. Sectoral differences are more pronounced during non-presidential election years, when overall turnout is depressed. In the off-year election of 1998, for example, public-sector workers outvoted private-sector employees by 23 percentage points. Overall, public-sector voter participation rates in non-presidential elections rivaled and often exceeded the presidential voting rates of private-sector employees.

The changing composition of organized labor limits unions' role in counteracting inequality in political participation. The majority of union members today are college educated, and the majority of union members today work in the public sector. The bond between education and civic participation is extremely strong. And the already high voter turnout rates and education levels among government workers, union and nonunion alike, leave little room for unions to raise turnout in the public sector. Thus, it is likely that the impact of unions on voting, and on equalizing the electorate, is even smaller than what is suggested by declining union rolls.

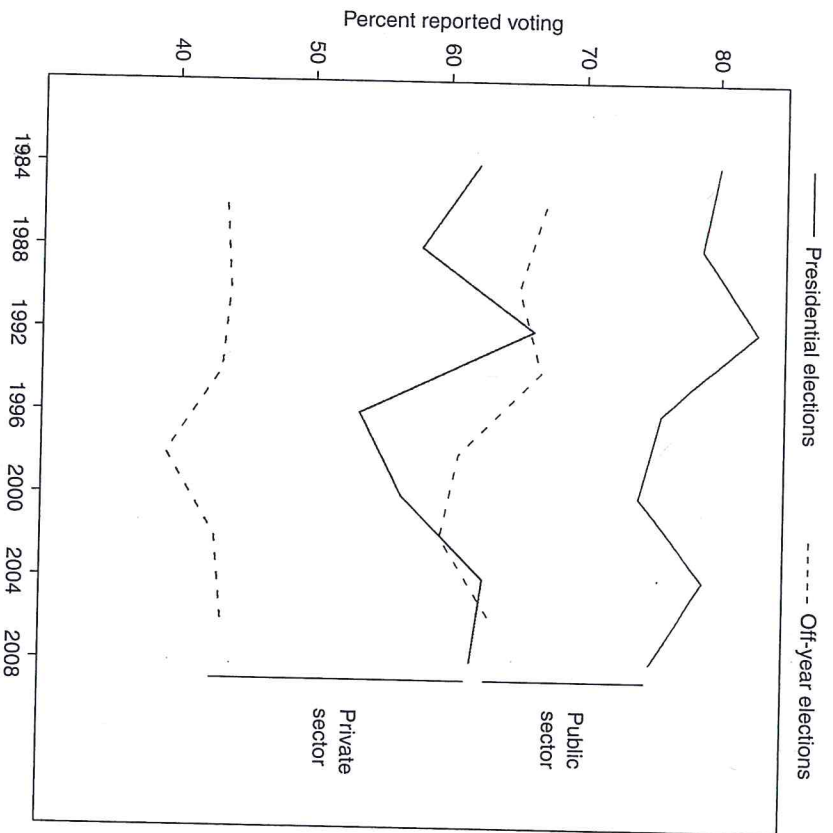


Figure 7.3. Voter turnout by economic sector, 1984–2008. *Note:* Estimates limited to employed U.S. citizens only, age eighteen and over. *Source:* Author's compilations, CPS–November data for 1984–2008.

### Measuring Union Effects on Voting

In this election as in so many others during the New Deal era, money was the least of the contributions labor offered the Democrats. Throughout the urban North the new unions recentered the party's electoral base, providing thousands of reliable precinct workers during each campaign season, and shifting to the Democratic column millions of new voters.

—Nelson Lichtenstein, 2002<sup>21</sup>

The 1936 presidential election reversed Republican dominance in the nation's largest cities. Traditionally, Democratic strongholds included rural western areas and the states of the old Confederacy. As described above by labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein, the nation's fast-growing industrial unions—made up disproportionately of immigrants and their children—helped ensure Roosevelt's landslide reelection. The vote in cities with a strong manufacturing base swung toward the Democratic Party, tethering the rapidly unionizing urban masses to the New Deal political coalition.

The above quote also points to the myriad ways in which organized labor may affect electoral outcomes.<sup>22</sup> Money has always mattered in American politics, and unions have long used their money to support political allies. During the 1936 presidential campaign, for example, the powerful UMWVA contributed a half million dollars to Roosevelt's reelection effort.<sup>23</sup> But as Lichtenstein suggests, it was through pathways other than financial contributions that unions historically had the greatest impact at the ballot box. Organized labor could never hope to match corporate coffers. In the holy contested (and incredibly protracted) 2000 election cycle, business-related interests outspent organized labor by a ratio of fourteen to one.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, financial donations in and of themselves do little to counter inequality in political participation. Organized labor's role as an equalizing political institution rests on its ability to motivate members to volunteer their time and effort to politics. For this reason, social scientists who research organized labor and politics focus primarily on unions' abilities to affect voter behavior.

Measuring the direct effects of unions on voting is not straightforward. Ideally, one could randomly assign union membership to a group of workers, follow them over time, and compare their political behavior to the group of workers—the controls—who were not assigned union status. As I discuss in prior chapters, it is extremely difficult to replicate these laboratory conditions when dealing with the economic and political behavior of individuals. Another strategy would be to follow an individual over time through various election cycles as he or she enters or exits a trade union, and compare the person's political behavior while unionized to that when he or she was not unionized. Unfortunately, such time-series data do not exist. Instead, researchers interested in isolating direct union effects on voting must attempt to control for all the confounding

factors thought to influence both membership in a union and voting behavior. The goal is to compare individuals who are observationally equivalent save for their union status and measure whether the union member votes more or less than the nonmember. The approach is similar to that of measuring union wage effects. The union vote premium, analogous to the union wage premium introduced previously, refers to the "difference in voting rates among persons with and without union attachment who have observationally similar characteristics," as the economist Richard Freeman has defined it.<sup>25</sup> Like the investigations of unionization (Chapters 5 and 6) and union wage effects (Chapters 2, 3, and 5), I use regression analysis to control statistically for the observed correlates of voting in order to isolate the impact of union membership.<sup>26</sup>

The Current Population Survey (CPS) November Voting and Registration files (CPS-November) and the National Election Study (NES) lend themselves to this analysis.<sup>27</sup> The CPS-November files are much larger than the NES and include a consistent measure for economic sector. They are most appropriate for the core analysis of unions and voting.<sup>28</sup>

#### Direct Effects of Unions on Voting, 1984–2008

Figure 7.4 displays the results of a cross-year investigation into the direct union effects on voting. The first set of columns shows raw turnout differentials between union members and nonmembers. They indicate that government employees outvote private-sector workers, a finding consistent with Figure 7.3. Averaged across nonmembers and union members, the sector voting differential is a full 18 percentage points. But these results fail to adjust for many of the dominant factors affecting one's probability of voting, such as education and income. The right-hand side of results do, and they reveal much narrower sector turnout differentials. After the adjustments, the sector difference in voting among union members is just 3.5 percentage points, while the gap among nonmembers is more than halved, from 18 to 8 points.

The results also indicate that unions continue to influence voter turnout in the contemporary United States, and that this influence varies by sector. First, the union vote premium: A weighted average of the sector-specific union vote premium (to account for the larger size of the private-sector workforce) indicates that union members' voting rates are approximately 5 percentage points higher than the rates of non-

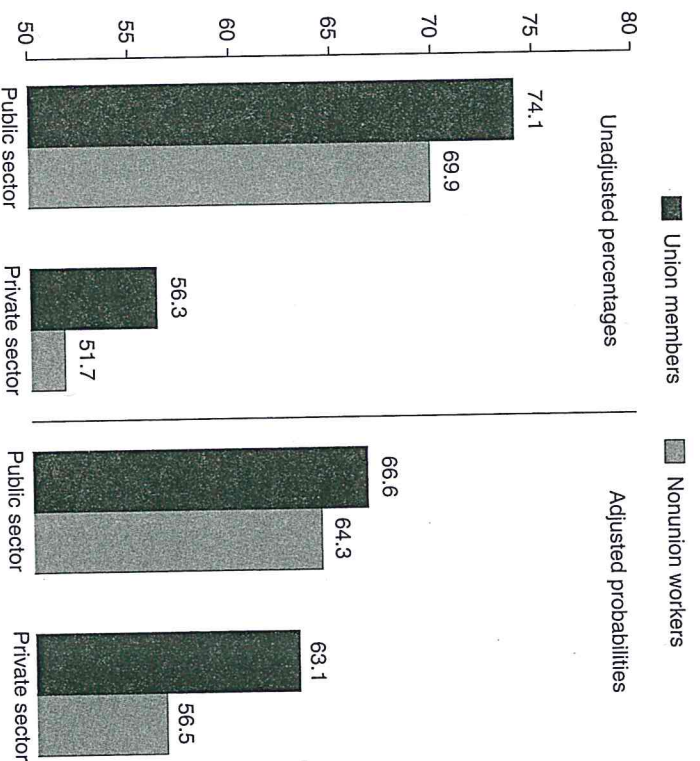
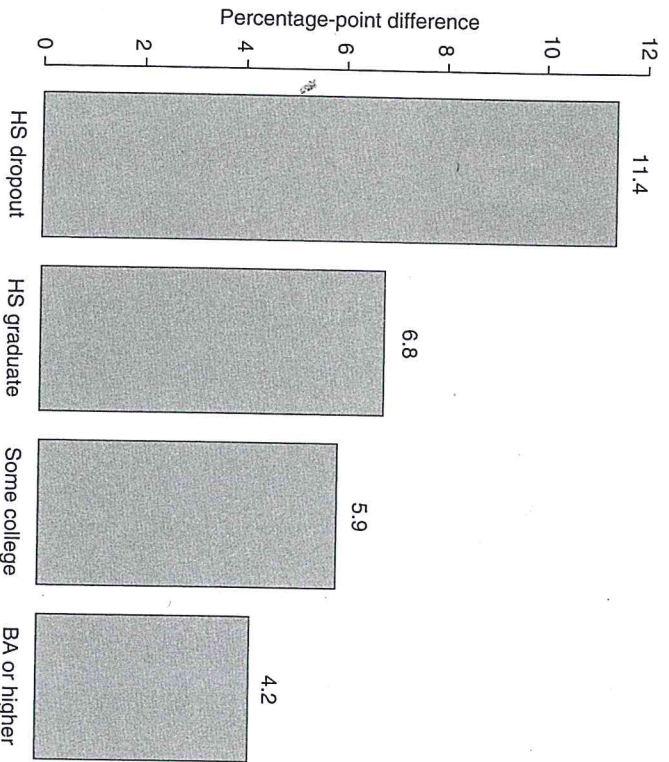


Figure 7.4. Probabilities of voting among union members and nonmembers by sector, 1984–2008. *Notes:* Unadjusted percentages represent voter turnout for various groups unadjusted for any other covariates. Adjusted probabilities generated from voter-turnout models that adjust for a range of demographic, economic, and geographic factors found to influence voting. Samples are restricted to employed citizens only, age eighteen and over. *Source:* Author's compilations, CPS-November data for 1984–2008.

members. This overall union vote premium is in line with what other research has found.<sup>29</sup> Second, sectoral differences in the premium: As shown, the ability of unions to influence political participation among their members is especially large in the private sector, where turnout rates run relatively low. The public-sector union vote premium is roughly a third as large as the private-sector union vote premium.<sup>30</sup>

These results reveal that the union vote premium is largest in the private sector, where unions have been receding for decades. As discussed earlier, today's organized workforce is increasingly an educated one. If organized labor's impact on voting is spread evenly among private-sector members, then the decreasing numbers of members at

the bottom of the educational spectrum leaves less room for unions to narrow educational inequality in civic participation. But what if the ability of unions to influence their members to vote is concentrated among the least educated? If so, then the overall ability of organized labor to affect political inequality is even smaller than suggested by the shrinking numbers of unionized, private-sector workers. Not only are there fewer unionists among the least educated, but the impact of unions on voting might diminish as one climbs the educational ladder. In Figure 7.5 I test this hypothesis by estimating union vote premiums among private-sector workers for major education levels.



*Figure 7.5.* Differences in turnout probabilities between union members and nonmembers in the private sector by education level, 1984–2008. *Notes:* Point estimates represent the difference in voting probability between a union member of a given education level and an otherwise similar nonmember. Probabilities generated from voter-turnout models that adjust for a range of demographic, economic, and geographic factors found to influence voting. Samples are restricted to employed citizens only, age eighteen and over. *Source:* Author's compilations, CPS–November data from 1984–2008.

Union vote effects are largest for the least educated. Among high school dropouts in the private sector, union members' probability of voting is 11 percentage points higher than for otherwise similar nonmembers. Further up the educational spectrum, the gap in turnout differentials shrinks. Nonetheless, the union vote premium among private-sector college graduates is nearly twice the public-sector premium, displayed previously in Figure 7.4.<sup>31</sup>

### Unions, Churches, and Elections, 1984–2008

The other major institution in the contemporary United States with the potential to equalize political participation across educational and income divides is the church. Research has consistently demonstrated that church attendance is associated with higher rates of voting, similar to the effect of union membership.<sup>32</sup> What is not clear is whether this relationship is stronger for low-SES churchgoers, mirroring the union membership pattern. For this analysis, the NES data set is more useful, as it includes measures of church attendance that the CPS–November files lack. In what follows I utilize the NES to estimate whether frequent church attenders (defined as those who attend at least once a month) were more likely to vote than infrequent and non-attenders during the 1984–2008 period. I then compare the results to an equivalent analysis on unions and turnout using the NES. However, unlike with the CPS analyses displayed above, because of data limitations in the NES I am unable to separate out the impact of unions on voting in the public and private sectors.

Figure 7.6 presents the results of an analysis similar to that displayed in Figure 7.5 but with a focus on the effects of church attendance on voting for various educational levels. Two results from this picture stand out. First, frequent church attenders are much more likely to vote than individuals who rarely or never attend. Among all respondents, those who attend church once a month or more outvoted those who rarely or never attend by an average of 11 percentage points across the 1984–2008 period.<sup>33</sup> Second, similar to the effect of union membership, the impact of church attendance on turnout is highest for those with the lowest levels of education. The effect of church attendance on voting for those with a college degree is just a third as large as it is among those with a high school diploma or less. Like unions, then, churches help



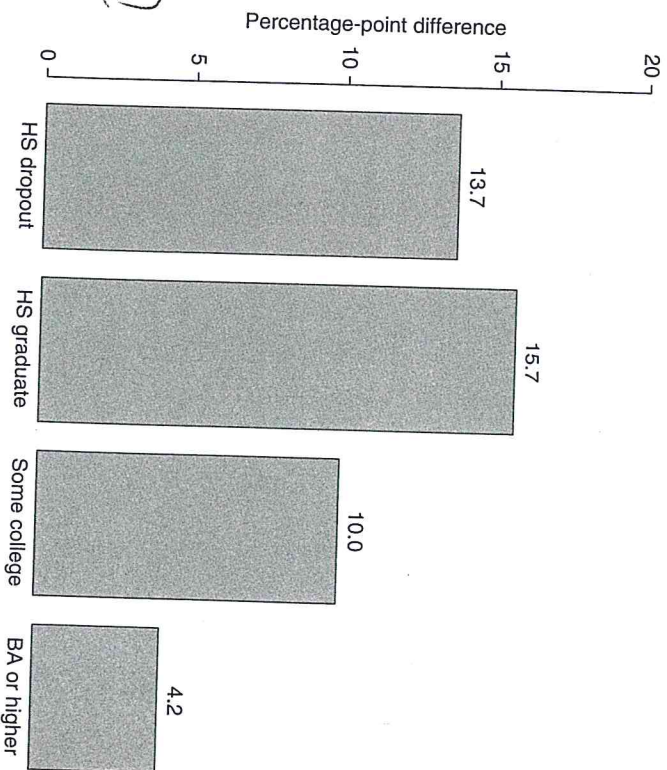


Figure 7.6. Differences in turnout probabilities between frequent and infrequent churchgoers by education level, 1984–2008. *Notes:* Point estimates represent the difference in voting probability between someone of a given educational level who attends church at least once a month and an otherwise similar respondent who attends church less than once a month or not at all. Probabilities generated from voter-turnout models that adjust for a range of demographic, economic, and geographic factors found to influence voting. Samples restricted to employed citizens only, age eighteen and over. *Source:* Author's compilations, NES Cumulative Data File for 1984–2008.

equalize political participation, although unlike the unionization differentials, the largest impact of church attendance on voting appears to be among those with just a high school diploma.<sup>34</sup>

How do these church attendance effects compare to that of union membership? The CPS results from Figure 7.5 show that the impact of union membership on voting is largest for individuals working in the private sector with less than a high school diploma. Among these respondents, union members had voting rates 11.4 points higher than otherwise similar nonmembers between 1984 and 2008. That effect is smaller than the largest vote differentials found between frequent

churchgoers and those who never or rarely attend, although it is still substantial. The union and church attendance analyses are not directly comparable, however, given that they rely on different data sets, and the NES lacks key information on respondents' labor-market position.<sup>35</sup> An analysis of union vote effects in the NES that adjusts for church attendance along with the respondents' state of residence, year of the election, age, race, and marital status reveals voting differentials broadly comparable to the union analysis using the CPS. Once again, the impact of union membership on voting is strongest among high school dropouts, who are 10 percentage points more likely than nonmembers to vote. And once again, the smallest effect is among union members with a college degree or more, who had voting rates only 2.5 points higher than nonmembers with at least a college degree. While these differences in voter turnout are sizable, especially among the least educated, church membership *appears* to be a more powerful predictor of voting.<sup>36</sup>

But the union and church attendance analyses are not directly comparable for another reason—a reason that suggests these churchgoing effects may be slightly inflated. For the vast majority of unionists in the United States, membership is a compulsory feature of working a unionized job. Attending church, for adults anyway, is a voluntary activity. If an underlying characteristic jointly influences an individual both to join a church and participate in politics, then the voting differentials we see in Figure 7.6 will be biased upward. What appears to be the influence of churchgoing on voting may result from this other factor—let's call it a “participatory tendency.” Selection of this sort is less of a concern with union members, who likely had little choice about their union membership.<sup>37</sup> A recent investigation that measured the effect of church attendance on voting before and after the repeal of so-called “blue laws”—laws that restrict commercial activity on Sunday—found that both church attendance and voting dropped in the aftermath of the laws' repeal.<sup>38</sup> That suggests that at least some of the effect of church attendance on voting is causal. However, without direct controls for an individual's “participatory tendency” it is impossible to tell what fraction of the church effect on voting is due to church membership, and what fraction is due to one's underlying inclination to participate in religious and civic life. Thus we should regard the results shown in Figure 7.6 as representing the upper bound of the true causal impact of churchgoing on voting.

I end this section with a brief examination into the party allegiances of politically active union members and frequent church attenders. While both church and union membership help raise voter turnout in the contemporary United States, the partisan cast of church and union members differs markedly. Figure 7.7 plots the fraction of frequent churchgoers and union members who voted for the Democratic presidential candidate during the elections between 1984 and 2008. Among all union members who voted for one of the major political party candidates, nearly two-thirds voted for the Democrat. Among all frequent churchgoers who voted for either a Republican or Democrat, less than half chose the Democrat. And, as the subsequent columns show, this

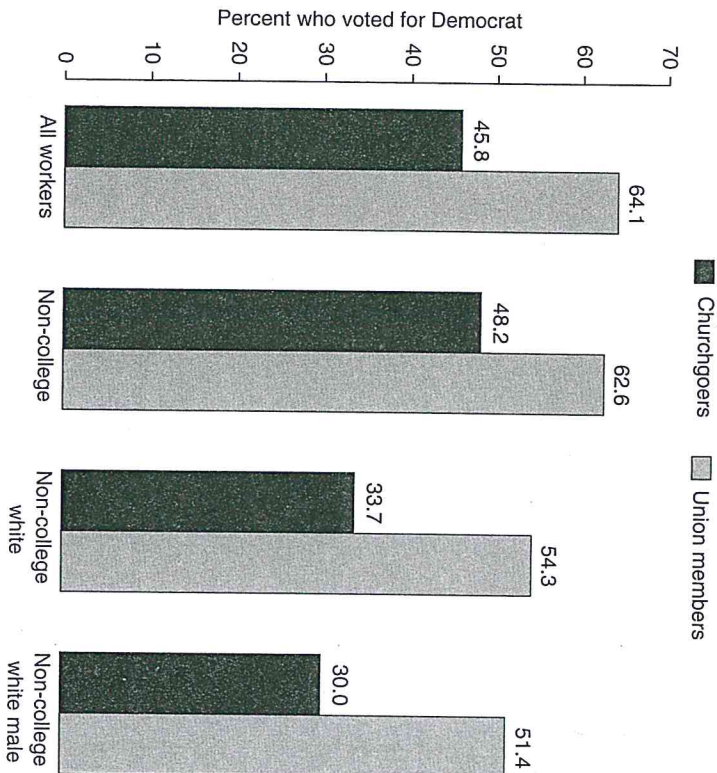


Figure 7.7. Partisan voting among union members and frequent churchgoers, 1984–2008, presidential races only. Notes: Point estimates represent the Democratic Party vote share for union members and frequent churchgoers for respondents who voted for either the Democratic or Republican presidential candidate. Source: Author's compilations, NES Cumulative Data File for 1984–2008.

partisan gap between union members and frequent churchgoers is especially large for whites and white male voters.

Whether pressing for increases in the minimum wage or fighting to alter the nation's labor laws to make organizing easier, Democrats have mostly been the ones in recent decades to champion the needs and policy desires of organized labor. The partisan behavior of union members reflects this alliance. The steep decline in unionization thus removes an important constituency for Democratic officeholders, forcing them to look for votes elsewhere. And as the dependence of Democrats on the labor movement decreases, so too does the movement's legislative impact. The policy desires of unions are not likely to sway officeholders no longer beholden to union members for their votes. Union decline therefore affects not only the relative electoral successes or failures of the Democrats, but also the type of legislation considered by our politicians.

Unlike union memberships, an analysis of the NES suggests that frequent church attendance has not declined appreciably over the past quarter century. This is especially true for white churchgoers, a constituency that leans heavily toward the Republican Party. White Evangelical churchgoers, in particular, have proven a durable electoral base for Republicans. And in recent decades it has been the Republican Party that has consistently blocked legislative efforts to narrow economic inequality, whether by contesting minimum wage increases, supporting tax cuts for top-end earners, or filibustering attempts to make labor organizing easier in the United States. Thus while unions and churches stand out as the major organizations that help narrow *participatory* inequality, the effects of unions and many churches on *economic* inequality are very different.<sup>39</sup>

## 2008 Reexamined

As the presidential fortunes of the Republican Party reversed in the 2008 election, stories emphasizing the GOP's success in motivating white Evangelicals to vote disappeared. A new election-related meme spread throughout the nation's press, this one focused on how a triumphant labor movement now expected legislative rewards for its campaign-related efforts.<sup>40</sup> Many reporters and editorialists simply declared that organized labor had played a pivotal role in expanding the Democratic House majority, and in delivering the Senate and White House to the



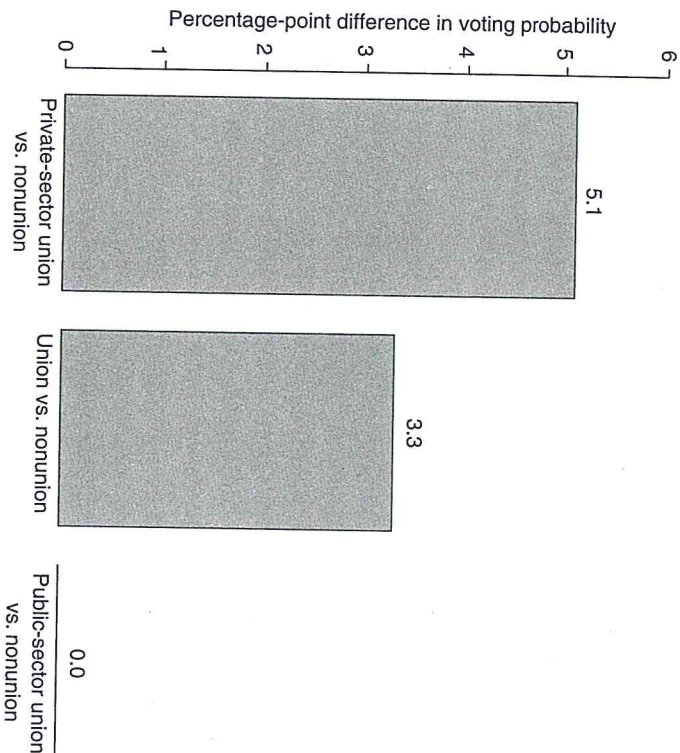


Figure 7.8. Union vote premium, 2008 presidential election. Notes: Union vote premiums generated from voter-turnout models that adjust for a range of demographic, economic, and geographic factors found to influence voting. Samples are restricted to employed citizens only, age eighteen and over. Source: Author's compilations, CPS-November data from 2008.

minorities or immigrants. Americans without college experience make up a segment of the electorate with comparatively low participation rates, partly due to the dearth of organizations that bother to target them. Unions and churches stand largely alone as buffers against greater inequality in political participation in the contemporary United States. Yet one of these buffers is rapidly eroding. Today, fewer and fewer unionists are drawn from the working class. Left behind are the millions of nonunion, working-class Americans lacking the organizational ties to lift them into the political realm.

While unions and churches both narrowed participatory inequality, only one of these sets of organizations has consistently championed measures to reduce economic inequality. For decades unions provided Democrats with a voting base and other resources in return for Demo-

cratic support of labor's legislative priorities. These priorities emphasized the economic needs of working-class and middle-class Americans. Many churches, especially Evangelical ones with predominantly white memberships, have similarly aligned themselves with a political philosophy, except their ties are to the Republicans, and their legislative agenda does not emphasize efforts to reduce economic inequality. And unlike unionization rates, church membership has held relatively steady over the past quarter century.

I should make clear what the preceding investigation does not find. My primary interest is on the role unions play in motivating Americans to vote. But labor unions also spend millions of dollars each election cycle on campaign-related activities, ranging from issue advertisements in the media, to increasing the coffers of candidates labor has endorsed. Unions clearly play a major role in our elections, even if their direct role in motivating members to vote has been drastically diminished. After all, money talks in contemporary American politics, and labor unions still have a lot of it.

Yet it is important to realize what the preceding findings mean for the civic inclusion of non-elites in our country. Unions do have a lot of money to spend on politics. The recent Supreme Court case *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* further erodes any impediments labor unions face in spending this money on campaigns. The case overturned prevailing law that had prohibited labor unions from running political advertisements mentioning a specific candidate's name within sixty days of a general election and thirty days of a primary. The ruling also allows corporations to spend freely on candidates and the causes they champion. For organized labor, competing with corporate donations will always be a losing battle. Organized labor was able to compensate for the financial power of the business lobby in the past through its advantage in manpower, motivating its millions of members and like-minded citizens to vote. In doing so, it boosted the political participation of non-elites, giving voice to the policy preferences of the working and middle class. As we have seen, this advantage, and with it the labor movement's ability to equalize civic participation, has been substantially weakened.

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