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The Voting Behavior of Labor Union Members in the 2016 Presidential Election

Daniel J. Gillis

All College Thesis in Political Science

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Introduction.....	1
History of Labor Unions	2
Unions in the United States in the 21 st century.....	3
Donald Trump and Labor Union Members	4
Literature Review.....	5
Voter Choice Literature	5
The Social- Psychological Model	6
Rational Choice Theory	9
Other Voting Behavior Models.....	10
Candidate Effects	11
Voter Choice Literature: Implications for the Behavior of Labor Union Members	11
Realignment Literature	12
Criticisms of Realignment Theory.....	15
The 2016 Election	16
Methodology	18
Analysis.....	20
Demographics of Labor Union Members	20
Labor Union Members in Presidential Elections from 2004-2012.....	21
Labor Union Members in the 2016 Election.....	24
Conclusions.....	26
Works Cited	30

Abstract

The conventional wisdom surrounding the 2016 United States presidential election suggests that Donald Trump, the Republican candidate, received significant support from labor union members. This has drawn attention, as labor union members have long been considered a crucial Democratic voting bloc. Previous studies have shown that Democratic support from organized labor groups has been declining over time. The stereotypical labor union member has long been a white working class male with a high school level of education in a private sector union, and recent work has primarily focused solely on these individuals. However, those traditional labor union members have been found to make up a declining share of labor union members. Therefore, there is a considerable gap in the understanding of who labor union members in the United States are. This paper will consider the changing demographics of labor union members, and analyze ANES data to consider their behavior in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

Introduction

“And for my nineteenth birthday
I got a union card and a wedding coat”
-“The River”, Bruce Springsteen

Labor union members and their traditional identity as blue collar, working class citizens have long been at the heart of the American identity. Bruce Springsteen is famous for his imagery of such workers, and cuts to the heart of how prevalent union jobs were in many areas of the country, describing gaining a union card as a coming of age moment in his song “The River”. Because labor union members represent a central piece of American identity, concerns that labor unions may be weakening draw considerable attention (Greenhouse 2016).

The changes that labor unions are facing derive from long-term economic trends towards globalization and mechanization of manufacturing, and a decreased importance of the manufacturing and mining sectors in the American economy (Packer 2016). The white male working class that formed the American unions of Springsteen and the New Deal is widely regarded to be in decline, and anger and fear over that decline is regarded as the heart of Donald Trump’s success as a candidate in 2016 (Greenhouse 2016, Higgins 2017). Testing this narrative and the proposed uniqueness of Trump’s candidacy to capture the emotions of this group of voters is the impetus for this paper.

Union members make up a significant, although shrinking, portion of the population of the United States. From 1983 to 2015, the union membership rate fell from 20.1% to 11.1% in the United States (Dunn and Walker 2016). This decline in the proportion of labor union members, as compared to all wage and salary workers, is primarily due to long term decline in the rate of private sector labor union members (Dunn and Walker 2016). Political science

literature shows that union members have historically been a significant Democratic voting bloc (Wolfe 1969; Beachler 2007).

However, many media sources have suggested that Donald Trump to have appealed strongly to that demographic in the 2016 U.S. presidential race, despite being a Republican (Bump 2016). That idea, if true, contradicts conventional political science understandings of voter choice, causing tension between what is believed to be true about the 2016 election, and what is known to be true about past elections.

Therefore, there is room for a meaningful scholarly study that explores this tension in understandings of voter choice. The American National Election Study is a reliable and significant data set, and collects, among other data, information on the voting behavior and union status of individuals, and will be used to perform an empirical study of the voting behavior of labor union members in the 2016 United States presidential election.

History of Labor Unions

Organized labor has had a foothold in the United States since the 19th century. The case *Commonwealth v. Hunt* was decided by the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court in 1842, and established the legality of labor organizing in the United States (Nelles 1932). It would be a number of decades later when the labor movement truly gained momentum. Near the turn of the century, smaller unions began organizing in blue collar, working class sectors including coal mining and manufacturing. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) was founded in 1886, and remains one of the most powerful labor unions in the United States in 2017.

Labor unions and the labor movement have traditionally been associated with the progressive movement in the United States. Wolfe (1969) demonstrates that the voting behavior of union members has long been studied, and has changed over time. Wolfe found evidence that

the majority of union members self-identified as working class (as compared to middle class) and that the self-identified were more likely to vote for Democratic presidential and congressional candidates, and that union members as a whole were more likely to vote for the Democratic candidate as well.

Unions in the United States in the 21st century

The face of labor unions in the United States has changed considerably in recent decades. Camobreco and Barnello (2015) analyze ANES data and show that private union membership has been in decline for a number of decades, while public union membership has either grown, or remained steady. They find that a significant factor in the steady numbers of public union members is the strength of membership in teachers' unions, which represent a more highly educated, higher class, and more female population than the traditional image of union members (212-214). One drawback of Camobreco and Barnello's study is that they focused solely on white labor union members, while other authors (Beachler 2007) have suggested that union members are increasingly non-white.

There are a few key considerations provided by Camobreco and Barnello's work. First, that public sector labor union members may exhibit different voting behavior from private sector labor union members. Such distinction is often not made in the consideration of labor unions in the literature (Wolfe 1969; Bruno 2000). Second, the recognition that, within changing dynamics of public union strength and private union strength, many of the new public union members are more highly educated than previous blue collar, industrial private union employees. This characteristic is particularly important, as it suggests that there is a relationship between education and union status as independent variables, and that the model used should recognize that relationship through an interaction term.

Therefore, there are multiple conflicting factors in diagnosing the potential voting behavior of labor unions members in the 2016 United States presidential election. First, unions are increasingly non-white (Beachler 2007). Second, unions are increasingly made up of female workers (Camobreco and Barnello 2015, 212-214). Third, union members are increasingly more educated than in previous decades, and finally, private sector union membership has decreased, while public sector union membership has been steady (Camobreco and Barnello 2015, 215-219).

Donald Trump and Labor Union Members

Donald Trump, The Republican presidential candidate in 2016, would not seem to have much in common with the traditional image of a labor union member in the United States. An east coast real estate mogul and reality television star, Trump is not the humble image of a blue collar union worker from America's heartland. Despite this, Bump (2016) and others have suggested that Trump had a unique appeal to labor union members (Higgins 2017; .Greenhouse 2016).

This suggestion of an appeal to labor union members rests upon both stylistic traits that Trump carries— plain-spokenness and a lack of political correctness, as well as policy positions including protectionist trade actions and immigration reform. Greenhouse (2016) argued that while labor union leaders encouraged members to support the Democratic Candidate, Hilary Clinton, many labor union members preferred the “tough talk” that Donald Trump portrayed on the campaign trail.

The gap between labor union members and labor leaders hints at a key question in studying labor union members. Rational choice voting models argue that individuals make voting decisions based off their self-interest- which is often defined as economic self-interest

(Downs 1957). Labor union members still view the Democratic Party as the champions of the labor movement (Greenhouse 2016). Donald Trump campaigned as a champion of labor union members (Bump 2016), but many news sources cite traits and character preferences as a cause for union members to support Trump, not economic self-interest (Higgins 2017).

Whether such traits actually appeal to labor union members in 2016 is unclear. There is a gap in political science literature regarding labor union member voting behavior in the 2016 election, and in the preceding elections as well. This paper considers the role that the Trump candidacy may have had on labor union member voting behavior.

Literature Review

There are two different strands of political science literature that must be examined in order to understand the theoretical expectations caused by such trends. The first is the individual level studies of voter choice, and the second is the structural level considerations in which party realignment theory is grounded. Both could hold possible explanations for changes in the voting behavior of labor union members that may be taking place.

Voter Choice Literature

Voter choice is among the most studied areas of political science because of its importance to understanding democratic functions, and the quantifiable nature of preferences. Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes (1960) provided an important step in the theoretical understanding of voter choice by placing an individual's identification with a political party as the primary explanatory variable in their model. An individual's party identification is thought to be influenced by demographic characteristics including gender, race, and religion (Campbell et. al. 1960).

One of the primary alternatives to this perspective is the rational voter model that was initially popularized by Downs (1957), which posited that voters act based on the utility they would receive from casting a specific vote. In order to operationalize this model quantitatively, the utility that voters receive is often thought of strictly as economic benefit gained from the party the select gaining political office.

The Social- Psychological Model

Campbell et al. conceptualized the voting choice process as a funnel of causality. The funnel begins wide, and the characteristics and decisions of an individual narrow down the possible voting behaviors to eventually lead to the voting decision at the narrow end of the funnel. At the wide end are the demographic or social characteristics including race, gender, and religion, among others, which lead to an individual's party identification. Party identification leads to an individual's perception of candidates and salient issues in a campaign cycle, which continues to narrow towards the voting decision (Campbell et. al 1960).

The social characteristics at the broadest area of the funnel have varying theoretical influences on voter choice. One variable often thought to have a strong impact on party identification- and therefore voter choice- is gender. Kaufmann (2002) suggested that there is evidence that white women were becoming increasingly likely to identify as Democrats, while white men were becoming increasingly likely to identify as Republicans.

Because of the major party presidential candidates who won their party's nomination in 2016, many anticipated a gender gap of historic size. Despite this, early literature that has been published following the 2016 election suggests only a slightly larger gender gap than previous elections (Burden, Crawford and DeCrescenzo 2016). These findings come despite previous literature suggesting that women are identifying as Democrats at higher rates, and the first major

party female presidential candidate in Democratic nominee and former Secretary of State Hilary Clinton. Burden, Crawford, and DeCrescenzo (2016) suggest that these results occurred because of high levels of partisanship in the electorate. In the electorate as a whole, gender does not appear to have had a significant impact on individual voting behavior in the 2016 presidential election.

Another variable at the broader end of the funnel of causality is race. As a social construct that holds deep impacts on individual experiences, race has been found to be highly correlated with voter choice in the past (Beachler 2007; Sheppard 2013). There are some broader electoral trends relating to race that may have an outsized impact on union voters. One finding that is frequent across political science literature is that non-white voters are less likely to vote than white voters (McKee, Hood, and Hill 2012; Cassel 2002). The possible explanations for this are numerous, as the race gap in voting may be caused by lingering voter disenfranchisement through policies like voter identification laws and the legacy of Jim Crow laws (McKee, Hood and Hill 2012). Another possible cause of the race gap is the historical gap in both education and income that exists between white Americans and most non-white racial groups.

The literature does suggest that when black Americans do vote, they tend to vote for Democrats (Beachler 2007). With that in mind, one consideration that must be made in studying the 2016 American presidential election is that the voting behavior of black voters should not be considered solely against the most recent, or even two most recent presidential elections. There is evidence that Barack Obama, as the first major party candidate to be black, received a greater proportion of black voters than a white Democrat would have (McKee, Hood, and Hill 2012).

In addition to biasing comparisons to the 2008 and 2012 elections based on race, Barack Obama's electoral success, particularly with black voters, provides evidence for the social-

psychological model. This evidence derives from the identity voting that likely took place to encourage greater proportions of black voters to vote for Obama, a Democrat. The higher proportion suggests that race is one of the foundational factors that individuals make voting decisions based upon. As the social-psychological model places race at the broad end of the funnel, it appears to have correctly placed race as a determinant of voter choice.

Another variable at the broad end of the funnel of causality is educational attainment (Campbell et. al 1960). Educational attainment is typically thought to be highly correlated with an individual's level of income, and likely with class as well (Becker 1960). The stereotypical union voter has long been a blue collar worker with a high school diploma or even a lower level of education (Wolfe 1969). Over the years 1952-1968 an average of 71.8% of the respondents in Wolfe's data set self-identified as working class. While not a direct consideration of educational attainment as a variable, there is reason to think that those results would look quite different by the time of the work done by Camobreco and Barnello (2015) who suggested that both in educational attainment and class identification there have been large shifts in the makeup of union voters.

Education has also been demonstrated to be highly correlated with voter turnout (Tenn 2007). Given that authors including Bruno (2000) and Beachler (2007) have suggested that union voters tend to turnout to vote more frequently than non-union members, the increase of highly educated union members (Camobreco and Barnello 2015; Schmitt and Warner 2009) may emphasize union voter turnout, giving union members and especially professional, highly-educated union members a potentially outsized effect in determining elections based off their proportion of the total electorate.

Rational Choice Theory

The rational choice theory that Downs popularized focuses on the parties as the primary actor, more so than the individual voter. Under rational choice theory, voters are typically conceptualized along an ideological dimension from left to right as a normally distributed bell curve (Downs 1957, 143). Political parties in a two party system are incentivized to minimize the ideological distance between their positions and those of as many individual voters as possible and thus to occupy the ideological median voter space.

The early conceptualizations of rational choice voting theory were derived from the field of economics, and predicted that voters would vote rationally based on their economic interests at stake in a given election (Downs 1957). Wolfe (1969) follows a similar logic in predictions that union voters would be more likely to support Democrats than non-union voters, as Democrats are traditionally viewed as the pro-labor party, supporting policies that protect union workers. Wolfe (1969) found support for that hypothesis in the 1950's, but suggested that by 1968 voters were considerably less likely to perceive electing a Democrat as beneficial for them economically. There is little evidence to suggest that the downward trend that Wolfe discovered has reversed course in the decades since.

Bruno (2000) suggested that while voters do perceive economic issues as highly important to them, many union voters feel that neither party accurately represented their economic interests. Under circumstances such as those Bruno describes, Downs' suggestion that voters choose the party they feel better represents their economic interests seems to hold little explanatory power.

There are some flaws to Downs' initial assumptions for the rational choice model, which have been demonstrated through later empirical work. First, individuals vote on more than

simply their economic interests, as there are other salient issues as well (Niemi, Weisberg, and Kimball 2011). In addition, the theory depends on individual's ability to comprehend complex macroeconomic policies impact on them. For these reasons, among others, rational choice theory is now primarily used to conceptualize the impact of issues within the larger framework of the social-psychological model.

Other Voting Behavior Models

There are other factors posited to influence voting behavior as well. One common assertion is that the partisanship that characterizes recent American electoral politics has direct implications on voter behavior. Bafumi and Shapiro (2009) describe the deepening the importance of party identification as a predictor of voting behavior as one effect of partisanship in the electorate. Notably, the "new" partisanship described by Bafumi and Shapiro is increasingly characterized by divisions over racial issues, social issues, and religious values rather than solely differences in economic issues.

Bartels (2000) demonstrated that despite conventional views of low trending partisanship in American politics into the 1980s and 1990s, rebounding partisanship was already reemphasizing party identification as a predictor of voter choice by the early 1990s. Coupled with the findings of Abramowitz (2010), who emphasizes the record levels of both partisanship and polarization exist in politics in the United States today, there is strong evidence to support Bafumi and Shapiro's (2009) hypotheses that partisanship is increasingly important as a predictor of voting behavior in the United States.

Bafumi and Shapiro (2009) give consideration to specific factors of partisanship in the electorate. One such factor that has been understudied in the behavior of labor union members is the influence of race. Bafumi and Shapiro demonstrate that race as a demographic category and

an issue set has become an increasingly partisan issue in the United States- and that Democrats have come to be viewed as the party of civil rights. Given the recent history of the Democratic party, which successfully elected the first black president of the United States with increased black voter turnout (McKee, Hood, and Hill 2012) there is no reason to suggest that such trends have reversed.

Candidate Effects

One of the motivations for this research is the suggested candidate effects of the 2016 presidential election. At the heart of a number of recurring opinion pieces in leading national news sources is the claim that the Republican Candidate, Donald Trump, held a unique appeal for labor union members, despite being a Republican. (Yeselson 2017; Capehart 2017). However, there are other specific candidate effects that need to be considered in analysis of labor union members in the 2016 presidential election.

The most significant effect is the fact that the Democratic candidate, Hilary Clinton, was the first female major party candidate. Evidence from past political science literature suggests that female candidates can be at a disadvantage, and early analyses of the gender gap in the 2016 presidential election suggest that female voters did not overwhelmingly vote for Hilary Clinton (Ditonto 2017; Burden, Crawford, and DeCrescenzo 2016).

Voter Choice Literature: Implications for the Behavior of Labor Union Members

Niemi, Weisberg, and Kimball (2011) provide a basis for raising some of the questions within the voter choice literature that have particular importance to understanding the voting behavior of labor union members. In the literature regarding the voting behavior of union members, perhaps the most commonly theorized impact on voting behavior is economic interests of union members (Wolfe 1969, Glasgow 2005, Bruno 2000). This has a strong logical

foundation, as union members' primary shared characteristics traditionally include blue collar status and industrial sector occupations that are perceived as being under greater threat of globalization than other occupations.

However, recent literature has concluded that traditional labor union members do not vote solely based on their economic interests, or even that such voters perceive the Democratic Party as having economic positions that benefit them. Beachler (2007) suggests that there was a drastic racial divide in the voting behavior of labor union members in the 2004 presidential election, with black union voters approximately 30% more likely to support the Democratic candidate (Beachler, 314- 315)). Much of the variation in white voter choice in Beachler's analysis demonstrated that identifying as an evangelical or born again Christian caused white voters to be far less likely to support the Democratic candidate. That finding fits a narrative that began developing as early as Wolfe (1969), that white union member's behavior is as likely to be explained by conservative social beliefs, rather than actual or perceived economic interests.

In addition, union members have the shared interest of electing the party that will expand their organizing and bargaining rights (Wolfe 1969; Schofield and Miller 2007). However, some authors have begun to ask if economic factors are weakening as determinants of voting behavior (Niemi Weisberg and Kimball 2011; Beachler 2007).

Realignment Literature

The alternative lens into labor union member voting behavior is the political science literature surrounding realignment theory. The primary difference between the two available lenses for the purposes of this paper can be summed as this: if indeed there have been shifts in the voting behavior of labor union members, voter choice theories will describe those differences as changes in the demographics, values, or decision making processes of union voters relative to

parties. Realignment theory would explain those same shifts as derived from the behavior or ideological positioning of political parties.

One of the foundational contributions to realignment theory is Key's (1955) study on selected townships from New England. Given data from this specific region of the country, Key identifies two "critical" elections that demonstrated a marked and lasting change in the partisan alignment of voters in the study- 1896 and 1928. A few of the lasting implications of Key's research are the practice of studying for realignments within specific regions, which is still performed by some authors (Petrocik 1987; Bullock, Hoffman, and Gaddie 2006). While conceptions of realignment theory consider the possibility of a more gradual change in the electorate, "critical" realignment theory first posited by Key (1955) has come to define the literature (Mayhew 2000).

There are also a number of things that Key's work does not do. Key does not attempt to characterize a national movement of voters in a realignment, as some later authors have (Meffert, Norpoth, and Ruhil 2001; Sundquist 1973). Key also does not suggest that critical elections have periodicity, a debated topic in later works in realignment theory (Mayhew 2000; Campbell, Miller, and Stokes 1960; Sundquist 1983).

Sundquist (1983) was among the first to begin to merge the theory that Key (1955) posits in arguing that critical elections realign the electorate, and Key's later work (Key 1959) which suggests that realignment may happen more incrementally. This is a step closer to one of the most critiqued elements of realignment theory, which is the supposed periodicity of critical elections (Mayhew 2000). Mayhew (2000) attributes the fully described notion of periodicity to Burnham (1965; 1967; 1970).

Sundquist (1983) also built upon the work of Schattschneider (1960) on one of the key forces in realignment theory, the notion of voter cleavages. This notion describes the phenomenon where a newly salient issue divides the constituents of one of the existing major parties in two, and becomes such an important issue that voters who do not see their viewpoint on the dividing issue taken up by the political party will break from their party identification (Sundquist revised 1983 35-36). An important note is that such cleavages may appear in a single election, rather than representing a durable, lasting change to the electorate. Such deviations are not considered realignments by the classical realignment scholars (Key 1955; Sundquist 1983; Schattschneider 1960).

The most common conceptualization of a realignment in recent work is derived primarily from the contributions of Key, Schattschneider, Sundquist, and Bunrham. Nardulli (1995) attempts to resolve some of the issues in realignment's theoretical foundation. Realignment theory posits that the electoral patterns in the United States remain the same for significant periods of time, until some stimuli causes an abrupt, large, and enduring shift in the partisan makeup of the electorate, referred to as a critical election (Nardulli 1995; Meffert, Norpoth, and Ruhil 2001; Key 1955). That definition is relatively consistent across the realignment literature.

Key, Schattshneider, and Sundquist in particular represent the foundational works of realignment theory. A great many authors have built upon their work, some with particular implications for the consideration of possible union voter realignment. Because this research focuses on labor union members as a specific social group, one that has traditionally been a part of the Democratic coalition as far back as the 1930s, Petrocik (1987) provides some useful considerations.

Criticisms of Realignment Theory

While authors including Key, Sundquist, and Nardulli (DATE) have provided a rich conceptual basis for realignment theory, empirical evidence of critical elections in specific years is less solidified, and realignment theory is not without critics. Mayhew (2000) is critical of a number of core pillars of realignment theory, and in particular the notion of the periodicity of realignments, which he attributes primarily to Burnham (1967, 1970). Mayhew argues that an insistence on periodicity leads to suggested evidence of a realignment where none exists, stating, “above all, it is important not to let periodicity dictate identity” (Mayhew 2000, 461).

Mayhew (2000) is also quite critical of the classical conceptualization of realignment theory- considering it too far reaching. Petrocik (1987) shares this critique, arguing that realignment theorist’s tendencies to overreach in their conclusions regarding American realignments. Attempting to describe present and or recent realignments as similar in cause or form to past realignments has at times led to convenient oversimplifications that diminish the complexities of realignments (Sundquist 1983). For this reason, Petrocik (1987) suggests a more limited conceptualization of realignment theory, going beyond Mayhew’s criticism to suggest an alternative (347).

Petrocik (1987) conceptualizes realignments as “changes in the social group coalitions which distinguish party supporters” (347). This shifted definition places greater emphasis on the social groups (and competing interests) that must coalesce into party coalitions to gain political power in a two- party system. In discussing issue cleavages, many realignment authors (Sundquist 1983; Schattschneider 1960) are more general in describing the ways that issue cleavages could separate a political party. The more specified suggestion given by Petrocik is useful in considering possible cleavages that could separate labor union members as a social

group from the Democratic Party coalition. This paper will use Petrocik's definition of a realignment to consider the behavior of labor union members because of its use of a more limited notion of realignment, which is more useful in identifying new realignments than the overly descriptive approach used by Sundquist and other early authors.

Attempting to predict realignments without the benefit of hindsight requires some considerable fortune telling skills. Given the theoretical requirement that realignments represent a durable change to an electorate, it is a theory that is "historical and descriptive" (Petrocik 1987) by necessity.

The 2016 Election

If Donald Trump did indeed hold a unique appeal to labor union members in the 2016 presidential election, more time will be needed to determine the meaning of such results. That meaning relies on an important component of realignment theory. Authors including Sunquist (1983) and Key (1955) distinguish between deviating elections and durable realigning elections. Deviating elections show short term divergences in voting behavior, which may only appear in one election cycle. Such divergences are likely better explained by candidate effects, or other electoral factors. Realignment theory is concerned with durable change in electoral patterns of groups of voters. By definition, understanding an election as a critical realigning election requires further hindsight than this paper is able to provide.

The alternative possibility relies on the suggestion that began as far back as Wolfe (1969): that labor union member's support for Democratic candidates has slowly waned over time. Bump (2016) even suggested in the Washington Post that Mr. Trump's appeal to union voters had actually been produced by Ronald Reagan in the 1980s- which Petrocik (1987) provides support for.

While existing literature does not demonstrate evidence of partisan realignment in labor union voters with any of the sharpness that realignment theory describes (Key 1955, Sundquist 1983), the most updated published study on labor union members extends only as far as the 2008 election, and presents that data in aggregate multiple previous elections (Camobreco and Barnello 2015). This emphasizes a need to consider the current status of labor union partisan alignment, and a better understanding of the alignment of labor union members in recent presidential elections as well.

The suggested uniqueness of Donald Trump's candidacy and appeal to working class union voters may represent a realigning election for labor union members if indeed labor members uniquely voted for Mr. Trump (and if that change proves to be durable in future elections). Mr. Trump's unique appeal may also prove the cause of a short term deviation- or candidate Trump may not have held such a unique appeal after all. Because of the traditional view of the partisan alignment of labor union members in national politics (Wolfe 1969; Bruno 2000; Beachler 2007), this paper will consider the possible movement of an important social group of voters through the lens of realignment theory.

The 2016 election results were surprising to many, and narratives explaining the results are abundant. Political scientists must evaluate these narratives to have an accurate understanding of the 2016 election, and to inform future analysis. This paper analyzes one narrative- that Republican nominee Donald Trump had a unique appeal to labor union members. This claim rests upon Mr. Trump's image as a populist candidate who will fight for the forgotten individual, of which union voters are included. However, this claim also would appear to rest on the conventional wisdom view of a union member as white, male, working class, and without a college diploma- an image that Camobreco and Barnello (2012) cast doubt upon.

Research as far back as Wolfe (1969) through Bruno (2000) and Beachler (2007) have demonstrated that white male union support for Democratic candidates has been in decline, and out of touch with conventional wisdom of those individuals as a Democratic voting bloc. Therefore, white male working class union support may have been present for the Democratic nominee in 2017, Hilary Clinton. However, that may not be a new occurrence in the 2017 election. Therefore, hypotheses 1 and 2 are as follows:

H₁: There is no clear evidence of traditional union voters supporting the Democratic candidate in the 2016 U.S. presidential election

H₂: The voting behavior described in H₁ occurred in previous elections as well

Recent literature (Beachler 2007; Camobreco and Barnello 2015) have focused solely on white union voters, which leaves a gap in the literature given the growing diversity of labor union members in the United States, which is occurring even as union membership as a whole declines (Farber 1990; Camobreco and Barnello 2015). It is based on these trends that the following hypothesis is made:

H₃: Non – traditional union voters were more likely to support the Democratic candidate in the 2016 presidential election than traditional union voters

Methodology

There is readily available quantitative data available to study union voters in the 2016 election. The American National Election Survey (ANES) provides a large, micro-level data set that includes information regarding union membership, voter choice, race, level of education, and other explanatory variables of interest. One advantage to this data set is that all members of labor unions are equally likely to be surveyed, while that is not true of all literature surrounding union voters.

Bruno (2000) selected union workers from a variety of occupations, including public sector workers. However, all of the occupations selected are typically viewed as blue collar or working class occupations. Camobreco and Barnello (2015) demonstrated that union voters appear to be changing in terms of class and level of education from the traditional picture of union voters set up by Wolfe (1969), among others.

Both Camobreco and Barnello and Beachler (2007) focus exclusively on white union workers. Despite finding increases in the racial diversity of labor union members over time in the demographic analysis of union members that Camobreco and Barnello, they focus solely on white union members for their analysis of the voting behavior of union members. The ANES data set allows for examination of trends across racial lines or educational attainment.

Therefore, cross tabulations of the data will be used to show variation across explanatory variable characteristics. However, at the time of this study, this analysis will require a different tact for the 2016 election than examinations for the three previous elections, which is included below. For the presidential electoral cycles from 2004-2012, the ANES cumulative data file is used, and it is possible to match respondents who have self-identified as union members to their presidential vote or planned vote within the sample. However, the 2016 survey data is not yet included in the ANES cumulative file, so that data will be drawn from the 2016 time series study. This requires an adjustment, as there is an issue in matching self-identified union member respondents to their vote within the data set.

The ANES survey question that asks whether the respondent is a member of a labor union appears in the pre-election survey questionnaire, and does not in the post-election, meaning that the data considered in this paper will be drawn from the pre-election survey. The best proxy for voting behavior in the pre-election sample is the feeling score variables for both

the Democratic Candidate and the Republican candidate. These questions ask respondents to rank their feelings regarding the candidate in question on a scale from 0-100 where 0 is the least favorable, and 100 is the most favorable. That variable is the focus of the results for the 2016 election below.

Analysis

Demographics of Labor Union Members

Camobreco and Barnello (2015) were among recent authors who have emphasized the changing face of labor union members in the United States. The ANES 2016 data is representative of this trend in multiple ways. Table 1 demonstrates that labor union members are almost as likely to be female than male, which fits with the recent demographic trends, while offering a stark departure from the labor union members Wolfe (1969) studied, or even those considered by Bruno (2000).

Table 1: Gender and Union Membership in the United States in 2016

<u>Union Status</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>
Non-Union	46.05%	52.74%
Union Member	55.40%	44.60%
Total	46.52%	52.26%

Source: ANES 2016 file, compiled by author

While labor union members in the 2016 ANES sample are slightly more likely to be female than those in 2000-2008 in Camobreco and Barnello’s study, they are actually slightly more likely to be white. In both cases, the differences are marginal, suggesting that the demographics of labor union members have remained relatively constant in recent years.

Labor Union Members in Presidential Elections from 2004-2012

There is a gap in political science literature in studying the voting behavior of labor unions in the 2016 presidential election. For this reason, and to study assertions that labor union members are realigning away from the Democratic Party, it is necessary to place this study in the context of recent elections. Table 2 describes the voting behavior in the three most recent presidential elections in the United States. For each year, self-reported voting data for union and non-union members are included.

Table 2: Union Status and Republican Presidential vote 2004-2012

<u>Year</u>	<u>Union</u>	<u>Non-Union</u>	<u>p</u>
2004	32%	53%	<0.001
2008	28%	33%	0.064
2012	33%	40%	<0.001

Source: ANES Cumulative File, compiled by author

Note: Percentages shown are the vote totals for the Republican Candidate. The *p* values are Chi-Squared Test results

Union members voted at fairly similar rates across each of the three most recent elections, at an average of almost 70%. These findings are similar, if perhaps slightly higher than Camobreco and Barnello (2015) observed in the most recent study of labor union voters. The year to year variation follows a logical pattern, as 2008 is considered a Democratic wave election, and swept Democratic candidate for President Barack Obama into office.

However, there is a greater story in recent election years as well. Previous studies including Beachler (2007) and Camobreco and Barnell (2015) have suggested that union status may be a less significant predictor of voting behavior than is conventionally thought of. This notion suggests that certain groups of union members find other issues to be more salient than protections for workers, or that Democrats are no longer viewed as a pro-labor party. Tables 3 and 4 demonstrate two of these cleavages within union members. There is clear evidence in

recent elections is that black union voters have dramatically supported Democrats, while white voters are more split.

Table 3: Union Voters by Race, 2004-2012

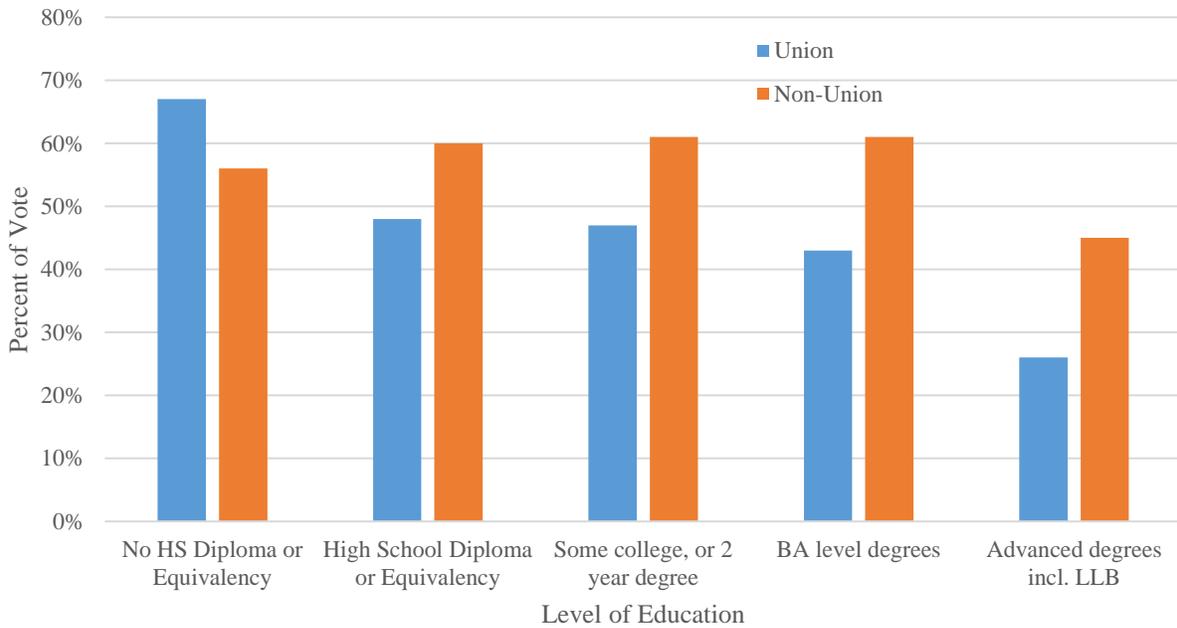
<u>Year</u>	<u>Race</u>	<u>Democratic</u>	<u>Republican</u>	<u>p</u>	<u>n</u>
2004	White	64%	35%	<0.001	74
	Black	93%	7%	0.108	14
2008	White	59%	41%	0.132	59
	Black	100%	0%	0.826	35
2012	White	53%	44%	<0.001	277
	Black	99%	1%	0.045	91

Source: ANES Cumulative File, compiled by author

One factor to consider here is the presence of Barack Obama as the first black president, as a reasonable explanation for the increased racial gap in union voters in 2008 and 2012. The evidence presented in table suggests that white union voters were considerably more divided in recent elections than were black voters, particularly in 2012. While other racial minority groups are represented in the ANES data used, there was often a very small sample of such individuals, so only the two largest racial groups of union voters are included here, with the sample size reported to demonstrate the constraints of this analysis.

Given the relatively small number of union members represented in the ANES data set each year, the ability to perform analysis of trends within racial groups is diminished. However because white voters are far more split than other racial categories, they are the racial group that requires the greatest in depth study. Table 4 presents pooled data across the presidential elections of 2004, 2008, and 2012, examining the correlation of level of education and presidential voting.

Figure 1: Republican Presidential Vote by Level of Education and Union Status



Source: ANES Cumulative File, Compiled by author

*Note, only white voters are included in this figure

For union voters of all races combined, level of education does appear to be an important predictor of voting behavior in 2004, 2008, and 2012. Across these elections, white voters were more slightly more likely to vote for Democratic candidates if they were more highly educated. However, for white labor union members, Table 4 demonstrates that less educated white labor union members were more likely to support the Republican candidate than non-union peers. This suggests that union workers in less skilled positions have no clear tendency to vote Democratic in recent elections. However, union voters hold more professional and highly skilled positions than ever before (Camobreco and Barnello 2015; Schmitt and Warner 2009).

Hypotheses 1 and 2 of this paper together suggest that traditional union voters have not strongly supported Democratic presidential candidates for some time. The results shown in Tables 3 and 4 support this hypothesis, as the high school educated (and particularly less than

high school educated) white labor union voters who were characterized by Wolfe (1969) and are still implied in the conventional usage of the description “union voters” today are shown equally likely or even more likely to support Republican candidates in recent elections.

Meanwhile, Hypothesis 3 suggest a counter trend, where the growing numbers of non-traditional labor union members such as people of color, and white individuals with college degrees and more highly skilled positions (such as teachers and nurses) demonstrate much stronger levels of support for Democratic presidential candidates. The same cross-tabulations also support this hypothesis—almost three quarters of white union members with an advanced degree supported Democratic candidates between the 2004, 2008, and 2012 elections.

This evidence has some important lessons to carry into analysis of the 2016 election. First, union voters are not a monolith, and should not be thought of as one. Union voters in recent elections show clear trends along racial lines, as well as level of education, which implies differences along socio-economic class lines as well.

Labor Union Members in the 2016 Election

Due to data constraints discussed above, cross-tabulations for the 2016 election use feeling scores as a proxy for voting behavior. This tool allows for a workable comparison to previous elections, though the ability to make direct comparisons is somewhat diminished.

One characterization that of the 2016 election that is unique is that both of the major party candidates were found to be historically unpopular within mainstream polling sources (Enten 2016). That frequently observed trend is clearly reflected in the non-union data presented in tables 5 and 6 below. Note that results displayed in table 5 are significant at the 0.107 level, just short of conventional statistical significance but close enough to give some level of confidence.

Table 5: Favorability of the Republican Candidate in 2016

<u>Favorability</u>	<u>Non-Union</u>	<u>Union</u>
Favorable	43%	38%
Unfavorable	57%	62%

Source: ANES 2016 file, compiled by author

However, the clearest trend of the overall view of labor union member feelings scores is that there is a clear preference for the Democratic Candidate. While a 52% favorability rating for the Democratic Candidate among labor union members may not be strong compared to the era of American politics studied by Wolfe (1969), the 38% feeling score for the Republican candidate would at least appear to be a strong rebuttal of assertions that Donald Trump held a unique appeal to labor union members.

An existing gap in the literature is the consideration of the voting behavior of non-white labor union members. One probable cause for this is that despite the gains in representation made among labor union members by individuals of color, white individuals are still a clear majority among labor union members. Compounded with the fact that the 2016 ANES sample only contains 364 labor union members, of which 298 or 81% identify as white, and there simply is not an abundance of data with a sufficient sample size to analyze the voting behavior of non-white labor union members. The one minority racial category with sufficient representation among union members is black voters, shown in table 6.

Table 6: Favorability of the Republican Candidate in 2016 by Race and Union Status

<u>Race</u>	<u>Union</u>	<u>Non-Union</u>	<u>p</u>
White	42%	47%	0.034
Black	20%	13%	0.184

Source: ANES 2016 file, compiled by author

Note: The percentages shown are favorability ratings using feeling scores. Feeling scores over 50% were considered favorable. The *p* values are Chi-Squared Test results.

These results lead to some important conclusions. First, Donald Trump sees a positive trend with black union voters compared to black non-union voters, but the reverse for white union members and non-union members. Second, the clear dividing line here is not the union status of individuals, but their race. These results fit the narrative described by Beachler (2007) in suggesting that union status may no longer be a strong determinant of voting behavior, as issues such as race come more clearly to the forefront.

Table 6 shows a departure in black union member voting behavior from previous elections. However, better measures of the exact amount of that departure will be available when the 2016 election cycle is added to the ANES cumulative data set. In addition, with Barack Obama no longer the Democratic nominee, some regression in black enthusiasm for Democratic candidates is reasonable.

Conclusions

Despite suggestions that the Republican nominee for President in 2016, Donald Trump, had a unique appeal to labor union members, this trend is not supported by ANES data as a whole. These data clearly show that traditional labor union jobs- characterized by blue collar, private sector, less-educated positions- are no longer the clear majority of jobs held by labor union members in the United States in 2018. More than ever, high skilled and highly educated workers such as nurses and teachers represent a large portion of labor union members. Confusion may be caused by the image of union voter in the United States, which remains to be the traditional voter described by Wolfe (1969), even though that image is outdated (Camobreco and Barnello 2015, Schmitt and Warner 2009).

Another reason that Mr. Trump's appeal to labor union members should not be considered unique is that the traditional labor union members referenced by Wolfe (1969) have

been shown to have drifted away from the Democratic Party for some time now. Observers including Beachler (2007) have noted this movement. To describe union voters as a whole as realigning or de-aligning is misguided. However, realignment could be suggested of white, male, working class union voters- for whom issues such as racial politics, and conservative cultural and social platforms often take precedence in voting decisions.

Such voters have been shown to be more likely to support Republican candidates than in the New Deal era over a number of election cycles now, through the work of Beachler (2007) and Bruno (2000). Therefore, this specific group of labor union members would meet Petrocik's (1987) criteria of a realignment, as a social or economic group that has formed a new coalition along the social fault line of conservative racial and cultural politics.

Union voters were a pillar of the New Deal Coalition that gave the reshaped the Democratic Party in the 1930's, and remain low-hanging fruit for political punditry. However, this paper adds to a political science literature that casts doubt on the importance of union status in determining voting behavior. There are a number of reasons that this phenomenon could be occurring.

One potential cause for labor union voters to not vote as a bloc as they once did is if their union status is not an important part of their identity. The ANES does not contain the necessary survey questions to study this phenomenon. However, further research could study the importance of union identity, as this question has been studied before (Bruno 2000). If labor union members value that component of their identity less, it would fall further to the narrow end of the 'funnel of causality' articulated by the socio-psychological model of voting behavior.

The one group that union membership does seem to be an important predictor for is black labor union voters. While the sample size of such voters is not large across recent elections, in

2016 there was a 7% gap in voting between black voters as a whole, and black labor union members- with the latter more likely to vote for the Republican candidate. There is no clear answer to why this is the case. However, one possible answer could be feelings of alienation from the Democratic Party.

In this case, it may be useful to think of being a black labor union member as an intersectional identity. Individuals that hold both these characteristics may be more likely than black voters as a whole to feel that the Democratic Party has not lived up to its promises. Wolfe (1969) suggested that labor union members of the 1960s did not feel that electing Democratic candidates created any significant economic benefit for them, and some still question whether Democrats are truly a pro-labor party today (Glasgow 2016; Archer 2007).

In addition, the Democratic Party is frequently charged with relying too heavily on black voters, yet not governing in ways that benefit those same voters (Thrasher 2017; Parnes 2017; Alexander 2016). Therefore, it is possible that black union voters have been given multiple reasons to distrust the Democratic Party--though none of this thinking should diminish the fact that 80% of black union members still held unfavorable feelings towards the Republican Candidate in 2016.

The results of this paper should give pause to several groups. First, it should be a lesson to political analysts and pundits who describe labor union members as a uniform group of voters, and fail to consider the increased diversity of labor unions. Second, it should be a counter to narratives that Donald Trump held a unique appeal to labor union members, when labor union members supported him at similar rates to recent Republican Candidates, and along similar racial lines. And finally, it should be a warning to those who feel that the Democratic Party has earned

or should earn the votes of labor union members, because the Democratic Party has struggled to do so in overwhelming numbers for some time now.

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