The Labour Vote in US National Elections, 1948–2000

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THE 2000 presidential election stripped the US democracy to its core. The Republican candidate, George W. Bush, lost the popular vote and yet became the President of the United States. After more than a month of legal and political battles on ballot recounts in Florida, Bush was elected President by 271 Republican electors, a majority of the electoral college, along with rulings from the Republican-dominated US Supreme Court. Now, organised labour and other progressives in the country struggle not only against the lack of choice within the two-party system but also against the nation's obscure presidential election system, found nowhere else in modern Western democracy.

Despite losing the presidency, Al Gore, the Democratic presidential candidate, was indebted to organised labour and minority groups for winning the popular vote. Fearing a reprise of the Reagan–Bush years, organised labour mounted an unprecedented grassroots get-out-the-vote campaign to elect Gore and working-family-friendly congressional and senatorial candidates around the country. Through a Gore victory, organised labour hoped to prove itself to be the most potent grassroots force in American politics.

The American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) endorsed Gore in his bid for the presidency early in October 1999, and most major international unions followed. In addition to contributing nearly $76 million to the Democratic campaign, organised labour focused on person-to-person contact in neighbourhoods, at workplaces, and on the phone. AFL-CIO members handed out 14 million leaflets at work sites, mailed out 12 million pieces of campaign literature, and made 8 million phone calls. John Sweeney, the AFL-CIO President, and other leaders went on a 'People Power 2000' tour, campaigning for Gore in battleground states where the labour vote was crucial to Democratic victory. This made a difference. Although organised labour represented only 13.5 per cent of the workers in 2000, union members and their families constituted 26 per cent of the voters, compared to 23 per cent in 1996 and 19 per cent in 1992.

As labour's campaign for the Democratic party was heating up, Al Gore supported granting China permanent normal trade relations (PNTR) status—despite fierce lobbying by labour. Labour rallied for the Democratic party, but the Democratic party turned its back on labour. Is this new in history? When the Democratic party pursues corporate interests against labour, to whom can organised labour turn? Now it is time for political scientists, labour historians and social activists to reflect on how organised labour has voted in national elections, and how the Democratic party has treated organised labour in national politics. To what extent has organised labour supported the Democratic party in national elections? Has the support increased, decreased or remained the same over the years? What historical, social, and political forces might have contributed to the pattern of the labour

Published by Blackwell Publishers, 108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JF, UK and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA

vote? Has the Democratic party taken the labour vote for granted? And, finally, what challenges does the labour movement face in influencing electoral politics?

Organised labour in the American political system

Unlike its Western counterparts with multiple political parties, the United States functions within a two-party political system and does not have a political party organised by labour. Critics have charged that there is no fundamental difference between the Democratic party and the Republican party in terms of their belief in the capitalist system and its fundamental principles of distributing wealth and income.[1] Yet since Franklin Roosevelt's administration, the Democratic party has managed to develop campaigns that appeal to economically disadvantaged groups and draw support from the working class. Since then, organised labour has relied heavily on the Democratic party to advance its legislative agenda.

American labour unions focus on improving the economic welfare of workers through collective bargaining between employers and employees. Politically, labour unions function primarily as a political pressure group attempting to influence public policy and legislation, rather than engaging in party politics *per se*. Labour's ability to influence legislation and policy depends on its ability to build political coalitions and networks within the Democratic party, its grassroots lobbying efforts, and its ability to mobilise its members to elect 'labour-friendly' officials to federal, state and local government.

Traditionally, labour unions have attempted to influence national electoral politics by making campaign contributions and through mobilising rank-and-file members, but their power ultimately rests on the latter. Since the 1970s, labour's overall ranking in campaign donations has fallen, and corporations have outspent unions in campaign finance. In the 1998 election, business donated $666.6 million while unions contributed $60.8 million.[2] Without matching financial resources, the labour movement counts on its members to influence the election results. With intense member-to-member political organising, union voters accounted for 22 per cent of total voter turnout in the 1998 election, helped retire five anti-union Republican members of Congress and held off much-anticipated Republican gains in the Senate. Although union members constitute only about 14 per cent of the workforce, in view of their effective grassroots mobilisation their electoral influence should not be overlooked.

On the basis of data from the National Election Studies (NES), this paper provides an extensive overview of the labour vote in US national elections from 1948 to 2000. After establishing the historical pattern of this vote, it will discuss the historical, political and social forces that might have contributed to its fluctuation.

The historical pattern of labour vote in US national elections

Since political action is an integral part of the labour movement, we would expect union members to be more politically active than non-union members, and also to encourage their family members to be active as well. Data from the US National Election Studies (NES) show this indeed to be the case, with substantially and consistently higher rates of turnout for union members than for non-unionised voters. According to the US Census Bureau and the Federal Election Commission, the voter turnout rate for presidential elections reached its record low (since 1924) of 49 per cent in 1996, and a corresponding record high of

63 per cent in 1960. The turnout rate for presidential elections was higher (above 55 per cent) prior to 1970, but remained below 55 per cent during the 1980s and 1990s. The turnout rate for elections outside presidential election year was much lower.

Voter turnout is influenced by various psychological, social and political conditions. Individuals are more likely to vote when they care about election outcomes, when issues of concern to them are involved, when there are clear contrasts between the policy stances of different candidates, when the race is close, when the government is controlled by one party, or when registration is automatic. The United States has a much lower voter turnout than other Western democratic societies. It is the only one with strict separation of powers between legislative and executive branches, the only one with localised electoral rules and the only one, except for France, with strictly voluntary voter registration. Franklin and Hirczy de Mino have argued that automatic registration may raise turnout by approximately 8 per cent, but cannot fully account for the lower turnout rate in the United States by this means, attributing it in part to the US separation of powers in the government—an institutional arrangement that reduces candidates' ability to enact their campaign promises, dilutes government accountability and reduces 'electoral salience'.[3]

To what extent has union affiliation created political division in national elections? Have union members voted as a unified group? Here the data show that people living in union households were significantly more likely to vote for the Democratic candidate in presidential, congressional and senatorial elections than were persons living in non-union households, though the gap between union and non-union-affiliated persons has fluctuated over the years. The support of organised labour for the Democratic party in presidential elections reached historic highs in 1948 (80 per cent) and in 1964 (86 per cent), but declined sharply after both elections. Labour support for the Democratic party fell 25 percentage points in 1952 and dropped further to 52 per cent in 1956. It then began to climb in 1960 and reached its historic peak in 1964, before dropping 36 percentage points in 1968 and reaching its historic low of 42 per cent in 1972. It rose again to 65 per cent in 1976 and remained at the range of 50–60 per cent during the 1980s and early 1990s. In 1996 it climbed to 67 per cent, the highest since 1964. In 2000, although labour brought more voters to the polls, the percentage of union votes for the Democratic party declined slightly.

The non-union vote for Democratic presidential candidates changed in the same direction as the union vote—except for 1992—but at different rates. The largest gap of vote choice between union members and non-union members was 37 percentage points in 1948. The gap remained at approximately 20 percentage points during the 1950s and early 1960s, and narrowed to less than 10 per cent in 1968 and 1972. The gap remained at approximately 20 percentage points since 1976, except in 1992, when it narrowed to less than 10 per cent.

Labour support for the Democratic party is stronger and less volatile in congressional elections than in presidential elections, and more stable outside presidential election years than in presidential election years. The labour vote for the Democratic candidates fell below 60 per cent only rarely in congressional elections, but in more than half of the presidential elections. The labour vote for the Democratic congressional candidate varied within the range of 20 percentage points, but for the Democratic presidential candidate by as much as 40 percentage points.

The historical, social and political contexts

The labour upheaval of the early 1930s and the federal legislation of the New Deal transformed labour relations in the United States. After the Great Depression of 1929, unemployment rose to an historic peak of 25 per cent and average hourly wages dropped to 44 cents by 1933. During the early New Deal, the labour movement grew militant and organised massive and violent strikes across the country, from the streets of Toledo, Ohio to Minneapolis–St Paul and San Francisco. More than 350,000 textile workers walked off the mills from New England to the south. The year of 1934 alone saw 1,856 stoppages, the largest number since the First World War.[4] In an attempt to ease the growing labour unrest, President Franklin Roosevelt and the Democratic Congress embarked upon a major programme of federal legislation, introducing legal rights and procedures for union recognition, contract negotiation and other workers' rights in the workplace. In 1935 Congress passed the National Labour Relations Act (NLRA), the first federal legislation guaranteeing private sector workers the right to organise and bargain collectively with their employers. This sparked off a boom in union organisation: in 1935 union membership was 14 per cent; by 1947 it had reached 32 per cent. Congress also passed the Fair Labour Standards Act in 1938, establishing the requirements for minimum wages, overtime pay and protection of child labour. The NLRA is enforced by the National Labour Relations Board (NLRB), an independent federal agency established by the Act, and the Fair Labour Standards Act is enforced by the US Department of Labor. The NLRB consists of five board members and a general counsel, who are appointed by the President with Senate approval. Since its inception, the NLRB has made rulings and developed labour policies that have had far-reaching effects on organised labour.

The New Deal brought the labour movement, the Democratic majority in Congress and the President into a tight alliance. The CIO leader John L. Lewis campaigned hard for Roosevelt's re-election in 1936, and Roosevelt had pledged to protect labour's cause. Roosevelt was returned by a landslide margin, and Lewis proclaimed that 'We . . . must capitalize on the election. The CIO was out fighting for Roosevelt . . . We wanted a president who would hold the light for us while we went out and organized.'[5] Lewis realised that the CIO must aggressively organise the steel and automobile workers and increase its membership in order to elevate labour's influence with the White House. Indeed, Roosevelt stood by the United Auto Workers (UAW) in the General Motors (GM) sit-down strike of 1937 and forced GM to negotiate with the UAW.

The growing power of labour unions during the New Deal elevated fears and antagonism among corporation owners and conservative politicians. The Second World War forced business to make peace with the labour movement and forced the labour movement to control its members to ensure the continuation of wartime production. Wartime control inevitably built up tensions among the rank and file. When the war ended, workers organised strikes across industries to demand wage increases. The public blamed unions for the postwar inflation and condemned 'big labour' and 'labour bosses'.

The death of Roosevelt brought Harry S. Truman to power in 1945. Truman soon found himself surrounded with more conservative Democrats. In Congress, Southern Democrats allied with northern Republicans, busily writing anti-labour amendments to the NLRA. In the 1946 election, Democrats lost 55 seats in the House and 12 seats in the Senate, giving Republicans a majority in both Houses

for the first time since 1932. Soon after, over Truman's veto, Congress passed the Taft–Hartley Act, which incapacitated labour unions by allowing states to pass 'right-to-work' laws and restricting secondary boycotts and picketing.

Up to 1947 organised labour had engaged in politics, but its political efforts had been diffuse and ephemeral. The passage of the Taft–Hartley Act intensified organised labour's political participation. Organised labour began to realise that it could lose all the gains made since the Great Depression if it did not take immediate and forceful political action. Lipset noted that 'The aftermath of Taft–Hartley was the abandonment by the labour movement of its traditional neutrality in national politics and its alliance with the Democratic Party.'[6]

In 1948 the AFL and the CIO jointly resolved that labour's top political priority was to secure the repeal of the Taft–Hartley Act. The two federations agreed on some other issues, such as higher minimum wages and improvements in social security; however, they differed on endorsing candidates for the presidential election, the AFL retaining its traditional non-partisan position, while the CIO endorsed Truman. Union members voted for Truman's re-election at an extraordinarily high rate, although earlier he had attacked labour by denying the miners the right to strike and threatening to draft railroad workers. Eighty per cent of union households voted for Truman, while only 44 per cent of non-union households voted for him, resulting in an historic gap of 36 percentage points. Truman was re-elected in 1948 and the Democratic party also regained control of the House and Senate.

Organised labour remained the single most effective political voice and mobilising force for the workers in the 1940s. The Democratic party depended on the labour movement for its support in political education, campaign funds, voter registration drives and voter turnout campaigns. Organised labour was able to draw upon broad-based support to influence 'social' legislation and public programmes, such as raising the minimum wage and improving social security, health care and education, because they addressed the needs of non-unionised workers, indeed, of all citizens. However, its aim of getting the Taft–Hartley Act repealed remained elusive, because its efforts to this end were seen as being made in a narrow and greedy special interest. Nevertheless, in spite of all the political obstacles, labour poured resources into the repeal effort.

The AFL broke with its tradition and began formally to endorse the Democratic candidate for the presidency in 1952. Adlai Stevenson, who was not especially sympathetic to organised labour, promised that he would work for repeal of the Taft–Hartley Act, while Dwight Eisenhower favoured retaining it. For the first time in history, the AFL and CIO endorsed the same Democratic presidential candidate, and together spent over $2 million on a political campaign. The result, however, fell short. Only 56 per cent of union members voted for Stevenson. For the first time since 1928 the Republican party gained control in both the executive and legislative branches of government.

In 1955 the CIO and AFL merged, mainly on the terms of the much larger AFL. The merger was intended to increase union membership as well as revitalise labour as a political lobbying force, but neither goal was realised. George Meany, the former president of the AFL, assumed the presidency after the merger, and Walter Reuther, the former president of the CIO, assumed the vice-presidency. Although both shared a commitment to the Democratic party, they disagreed over political programmes, ideologies and strategies. Reuther advocated a social democratic vision of the labour movement: progressive social

change for the working class, grassroots organisation and internal union democracy. Meany agreed with a broad role for the labour movement but repudiated any 'radical' program of social change and any challenge to centralised power in the union leadership. The political division within the AFL-CIO undermined its ability to organise and lobby in the years to come.

Although Eisenhower favoured Taft–Hartley and appointed more conservative members to the National Labour Relations Board (NLRB), he tried to lure union voters away from the Democrats and build a coalition with the more conservative sector of the labour movement. First, he chose Martin P. Durkin, an AFL craft unionist, to serve as Secretary of Labor. Later, he proposed amendments to Taft–Hartley, but they were inconsequential and appealed solely to AFL affiliates. Eisenhower's proposals were rejected both by conservative Republicans and their Southern Democratic allies, and also by trade unionists, particularly those in the CIO like Walter Reuther who considered them too 'timid'. Some union voters, however, did seem to be swayed by Eisenhower's effort: union votes for the Democratic party declined further in 1956 and Eisenhower was re-elected.

Ever since the New Deal, conservative Republicans have tried to associate organised labour with corruption, crime and violence. The McClellan Committee, established by conservative Republicans in 1958, investigated instances of crime and corruption in a number of unions. A year later a Democrat-dominated Congress passed the Landrum–Griffin Labor-Management Reporting and Disclosure Act, which subjected internal union affairs to strict state regulation and prohibited 'hot cargo' clauses in labour contracts. The passage of the Landrum–Griffin Act exposed both the weakness in labour's political influence within the Democratic party and the strength of the Republican–Southern Democratic congressional coalition.

From Kennedy to Carter

Organised labour continued to struggle with Taft–Hartley in the midst of domestic turmoil and foreign policy disaster during the 1960s. The labour movement united with the civil rights movement and played a significant role in securing the enactment of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964, 1965 and 1972. However, tensions built up among the rank and file concerning the impact of equal opportunity and non-discrimination employment laws on traditional union practices and traditions, such as seniority rights and access to apprenticeship.

John F. Kennedy was an ally of labour and an advocate of civil rights. He had proposed amendments to the Taft–Hartley Act during his tenure as a senator; as President, he extended collective bargaining rights to federal employees, which boosted membership of unions with jurisdiction in the public sector. Labour sided with Kennedy in the 1960 election and union votes for the Democratic party surged back after two terms of Republican administration.

Assuming the presidency after the assassination of Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson actively pursued close working relationships with both George Meany and Walter Reuther. Both labour leaders championed Johnson's advocacy of the Civil Rights Act. Eighty-six per cent of union members and 60 per cent of non-union members voted for Johnson in 1964. The election was a victory for the Democratic party: not only had Johnson won the presidential vote by a landslide, but Democrats held an historic high of 295 seats in the House against 140 Republicans.

The Democratic victory of 1964 provided the labour movement with another opportunity to get the Taft–Hartley Act repealed. Johnson supported the move,

and the House passed the repeal bill; but the Senate voted it down in the face of intense lobbying by the National Right-to-Work Committee and a filibuster led by the Senate Minority Leader Everett Dirkson. The defeat once more raised questions about labour's political strength within the Democratic party.

Labour support for the Democratic party took a nosedive in 1968, with the labour movement divided over both the reform of the Democratic presidential nomination process and the Vietnam War. George Meany opposed the reform and supported Hubert Humphrey's nomination through the traditional centralised 'political brokerage' system, while other major union leaders supported the reform and endorsed Robert F. Kennedy or Eugene McCarthy. The third-party candidacy of George Wallace further complicated the 1968 election, with Wallace diverting blue-collar voters by raising racial issues. Despite an intensive campaign by the AFL-CIO, only 50 per cent of union members voted for Humphrey.

The Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 may have saved the lives and health of millions of American workers, but for the most part the 1970s were gloomy for organised labour. Union density began to decline substantially for the first time since the Great Depression. The oil crises and global competition led to corporate downsizing and massive layoffs. Richard Nixon's administration worsened the prospects for labour. The NLRB and federal courts handed down rulings that were less supportive of union organising, unions lost more representation elections, and employers learned how to use the NLRB and labour laws to thwart union organising.

Despite Nixon's anti-union record, AFL-CIO leader George Meany refused to support George McGovern and declared neutrality in the 1972 presidential race, considering McGovern too far to the left on both domestic and foreign policy issues. Greenstone contended that the AFL-CIO's opposition to McGovern could not be explained by economic or political rationality but was rooted, rather, in conflicts over cultural ideology and issues of social diversity.[7] Many AFL-CIO affiliates and non-affiliates participated in the 'Labor for McGovern' movement even after Meany's declaration of neutrality. Nevertheless, the labour vote for the Democratic party reached the record low of 42 per cent in 1972.

Within the labour movement, the conflicts over the Democratic presidential nominating process and the centralisation of union leadership reached their climax in the 1970s. The women's movement raised women's political consciousness, and women joined people of colour in expressing dissatisfaction with Meany's monopoly of power in presidential politics. The Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (CBTU) was formed in 1972 and the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW) was formed in 1974 to reclaim rank-and-file participation and strengthen minority and women's voices within the labour movement.

The AFL-CIO leadership rejoined the Democratic party in the 1976 election. Meany did not like Jimmy Carter because of his ties with more liberal labour unions and his direct communication with voters, and Carter won the primaries without any union backing. However, President Gerald R. Ford, who was running for re-election, had vetoed legislation legalising 'common site' picketing; had Ford approved this bill, the AFL-CIO might have remained neutral. In the event, it came down on Carter's side.

After two terms of Republican administration, the Democrats reclaimed national power in 1976, providing another opportunity for labour law reform. The 1978 Labor Law Reform Bill called for 'mild' reforms: a simpler NLRB election procedure, more severe penalties for employer violation of labour laws, and

easier access to employees prior to a representation election. Carter helped prepare for the bill and the House passed it. Unfortunately, against intensive lobbying from business groups and a filibuster led by Orrin Hatch and Richard Lugar, the bill failed to make its way through the Senate, which returned the bill to the House; there it died.

Reagan, Bush and Clinton

Ronald Reagan accelerated labour's downward spiral. The Reagan administration was the most hostile towards organised labour since the 1920s. Reagan used state power to break the strike of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) and made it clear that he would not tolerate militant actions by trade unionists. Faced with an antagonistic political environment and unfavourable economic conditions, unions began to make major concessions to contract terms and replace confrontation with cooperation in dealing with management.

The 1980s also ushered in the rising influence over union members of conservative interest groups, such as the National Rifle Association, the Christian Coalition and the Family Research Council. Cultural and religious issues, such as gun control and abortion, split union voters. Union voters who cast their votes based on these social and cultural issues often voted in direct conflict with the economic interests of organised labour.

While many union leaders blamed Carter for the defeat of the Labor Law Reform Bill, they none the less supported for him for re-election in 1980; however, despite Reagan's anti-union record, only 50 per cent of union members voted for Carter, a decline of 15 percentage points from the previous election. With the future of the labour movement in jeopardy, the AFL-CIO devoted itself to the 1984 campaign more deeply than it had done for any previous election. But despite all their efforts, 44 per cent of union members voted once again for Reagan, whose victory in 1984 represented one of the greatest political defeats in the American labour movement's history.

The 1984 AFL-CIO campaign, however, was not entirely a failure. The NES data show that 56 per cent of union households voted for Mondale, an increase of 6 percentage points from the 1980 election. Moreover, the gap of vote choice between union households and non-union households was 19 percentage points, the largest since 1964. Using survey data collected in Pennsylvania, Juravich and Shergold found that 64 per cent of union members voted for Mondale.[8] They also found that union literature (e.g. newsletters) and personal contact (e.g. union meetings and phone calls) had a significant influence on members' vote choice. Although the labour movement failed to overturn the Reagan administration, it learned an important lesson. The AFL-CIO discovered how to make effective use of primaries and caucuses, and began to entertain a more active approach of grassroots mobilisation, even though that technique faced resistance from some local union leaders and was constrained by local union structures.

President Bill Clinton advocated free trade. He signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and pressed the Congress to grant PNTR status to China, both opposed vehemently by organised labour. Four years after the inception of NAFTA in 1994, the United States increased its net export deficit with Mexico and Canada by $47.3 billion and lost over 400,000 American jobs, mostly high-skill, high-paying manufacturing jobs. Similarly, the US trade deficit with China will increase by at least 80 per cent by 2010, resulting a loss of almost 900,000 jobs across different industries.[9]

On the other hand, Clinton conducted

the most 'worker friendly' administration in decades. During his first term he signed the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), the most pro-worker legislation since the passage of OHSA in 1972. He also appointed pro-labour board members and general counsels to serve on the NLRB, raised the minimum wage and called for health care reform. The FMLA is the first federal law granting workers the right to family leave. It requires employers with fifty or more employees to provide up to twelve weeks of unpaid leave and job protection in case of childbirth, family emergency or personal illness. Compared to parental/family leave policies in west European countries, that embodied in the FMLA is insignificant,[10] but in the United States it marked the threshold of a social welfare society.

In the 1992 presidential election union members were nervous about Clinton's position on free trade, and the labour vote for the Democratic party declined while non-union members' support continued to rise. The gap of vote choice was reduced to less than 10 per cent, the narrowest since 1972, when the third-party candidacy of George Wallace had distracted voters. Similarly, the third-party candidacy of Ross Perot might have diverted voters' attention in the 1992 election. However, organised labour returned to the Democratic party camp with strong support in 1996, when 67 per cent of union households voted for Clinton—the highest voting rate of union members for the Democratic party since 1964. Non-union households also increased their support for Clinton, but the gap of vote choice remained at 15 percentage points. Labour's criticism of Clinton over free trade was offset by his otherwise positive labour policies.

The 2000 election

The 2000 presidential election concluded with a daunting political drama. Just as organised labour had begun to establish a grip on political mobilisation, its effort was crushed by the undemocratic electoral system, the pitfalls of the two-party political structure and the political division within the labour movement.

Labour leaders tried hard to convince union members that Al Gore, the Democratic candidate, was definitely less evil than the Republican, George W. Bush, and launched a get-out-the-vote campaign to elect him. However, as labour was spearheading its campaign for Gore, he sided with Clinton on the China trade issue. Labour leaders had to brush the trade issue aside to continue its rally for Gore. In defending Gore, John J. Sweeney commented: 'This was clearly the President's bill. He [Gore] did very little lobbying. Al Gore stands on his commitment he made to the AFL-CIO convention that he will strive to include core labor standards, human rights standards and environmental protections in any trade agreement.'[11] He further indicated that 'On one hand, union members are critical of the administration on the China trade issue. But on the other hand, they recognize the contrast between the two candidates is so great. They realize that Gore by far will be much better for working families.'

Enraged by the passage of the China trade bill, major unions such as the UAW and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters delayed their endorsement for Gore and used Ralph Nader, the third-party presidential candidate, as leverage to put pressure on Gore on the trade issue. Ralph Nader, the Green Party candidate, opposed NAFTA and the World Trade Organization (WTO) and advocated the repeal of the Taft–Hartley Act and a living wage for all workers, allowing him to peel away Gore's union support. Nader also attracted the support of other political and social progressives by proposing universal health care and other social welfare programmes to bring the United States closer to the social democratic societies of western Europe.

Membership of the UAW had halved since 1970 because of the loss of unionised manufacturing jobs to other countries. Stephen P. Yokich, the UAW president, accused Gore of 'holding hands with the profiteers of the world'. He added, 'It's time to forget about party labels and instead focus on supporting candidates, such as Ralph Nader, who will take a stand based on what is right, not what big money dictates.'[12] Sweeney, meanwhile, warned that 'support for Ralph Nader might increase the chance that [Bush] will be elected.'

According to the NES data, 60 per cent of union votes went to Gore, 35 per cent to Bush and 6 per cent to Nader. Although the portion of union votes cast for Gore was slightly smaller than that cast for Clinton in 1996, exit polls showed that the percentage of voters who came from union households rose from 23 per cent in 1996 to 26 per cent, bringing in 4.1 million more union votes in 2000. Organised labour might have delivered its votes to the Democratic party, but the US Constitution dictates that the electoral vote, not the popular vote, decides the outcome of elections for president.

Conclusion

What have we learned from the history of the alliance between labour and the Democratic party? First, Dubofsky notes that 'labour and the Democrats had formed the strangest political marriage.'[13] Democrats rely on organised labour for its ability to mobilise voters; organised labour depends on Democrats for political influence. On the one hand, if Democrats gave labour too much power in the party, they would alienate masses of non-union voters. On the other hand, if organised labour tried to capture the party, it would destroy the only political institution through which it could influence national politics.

Historically the Democratic party has given labour more symbols than substance, but labour remains a core constituency and loyal to the party. Labour has been able to advance legislation that benefits non-unionised as well as unionised workers (e.g. OSHA and FMLA) and social legislation that has broad-based support (e.g. civil rights, health care and social security). Yet labour has repeatedly been defeated in its attempts to reform legislation specifically regulating labour relations (e.g. the effort to repeal Taft–Harley and the Labour Law Reform Bill of 1978)—even in the most favourable political environment, when Democrats controlled both the presidency and Congress.

The 2000 election might have illustrated Dubofsky's observation. Gore supported free trade, so fiercely opposed by labour, and did not even include labour law reform in his platform; yet labour launched a massive get-out-the-vote drive to elect him. Labour votes for Ralph Nader might have sent the greater evil to the White House. The two-party system in the United States leaves labour with little leverage in national politics. Until a multi-party system evolves and labour has the ability to run its own candidates for national elections, it has to mingle with the more 'labour friendly' one.

Second, racial, cultural, ethnic, religious, political and ideological diversity within the US labour movement may have prevented union members from voting uniformly. To revitalise labour as an effective political force, the labour movement has recognised, through hard lessons, the necessity of organising and building broad-based coalitions with other social movements, such as minorities, women and immigrant workers. In 2000 the US labour movement represented only 13.5 per cent of the workforce, within which millions of disenfranchised immigrants are forming a growing and unorganised element. For years, the AFL-CIO was antagonistic towards undocumented or illegal immigrant workers; but recently it acknowledged its 'common

bonds' with undocumented workers and supported legislation granting these workers legal status, and eventually citizenship and voting power.[14] Mobilised union families alone cannot make up for the exclusion of the unorganised work force from the political process. Like any other institution, the labour movement incorporates elements that resist change. With rapid innovation in technology and growth in the global economy, the labour movement can revive only as fast as it is able to transcend social, cultural and national boundaries.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Judi L. King for her helpful comments and advice on this paper, and Terre Weatherspoon for his assistance in data analysis.

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