Unions and Electoral Politics

Can Union Candidates Make a Difference?

The Center for Working-Class Politics

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Authors

Jared Abbott, Dustin Guastella, Benjamin Y. Fong, Fred DeVeaux, and Sam Zacher, with editing support from Jake Triola and Ned Rust

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The Center for Working-Class Politics is a research institution dedicated to studying the relationship between working-class voters and progressive politics. Its projects include regular surveys of working-class voters, statistical analyses of elections and polling data, and the construction of a comprehensive database of progressive candidate demographics, strategy, and messaging.

The Center for Work and Democracy was founded in 2019 to connect university research to the challenges facing working people in our increasingly undemocratic society. Inequality has reached historically unprecedented extremes, undermining avenues for social mobility and driving growing political extremism at the expense of social solidarity and collective care. It is the conviction of the center that the renewal of social solidarity and democracy will be driven by working people. Its mission is to rebuild the power and voice of working people and to facilitate a more inclusive polity, economy, and civil society.

Jacobin Foundation produces *Jacobin* magazine and *Catalyst: A Journal of Theory and Strategy*. Combined, its publications reach 3 million people monthly online and 80,000 readers in print.

Contact

Authors: jared@workingclasspolitics.org
Press: publicity@workingclasspolitics.org

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Introduction

Over the past half century, organized labor has experienced a dramatic decline in both economic and political power. Union density in the United States has fallen from more than 30% of the workforce in the 1960s to less than 10% today. As we document below, labor's direct influence on electoral politics has eroded in parallel: unions accounted for roughly 8% of all donations in congressional races in the 1990s, compared to closer to 2% today.

Historically, unions played a central role in anchoring working-class voters to the Democratic Party by both mobilizing union members in elections and giving class-based economic interests an organized presence in Democratic politics. As the strength of labor has declined, the connection between working-class voters and the Democratic Party has frayed, contributing to a broader class dealignment in American politics that has seen the Democrats steadily lose support among working-class voters. One of the clearest signs of this dealignment is the fact that unionized workers are no longer a reliably Democratic voting bloc; in 2024, more than 40% reported voting for Donald Trump. The appearance of Teamsters president Sean O'Brien at the 2024 Republican National Convention underscored the depth of this realignment.

In response to this period of historic weakness, unions and their allies have pursued a wide range of strategies to sustain labor's political influence. They've invested in pro-worker ballot initiatives, built union-aligned third parties, and formed new membership organizations designed to reach unorganized workers during election cycles and beyond. Taken together, these efforts reflect both labor's diminished leverage and the uncertainty surrounding how unions can most effectively intervene in Trump-era electoral politics.

Importantly, however, labor's retrenchment from American life and politics has occurred against a striking countertrend: public attitudes toward organized labor have grown more positive. Nearly 70% of Americans now approve of labor unions — a level of support not seen since the 1970s. At the same time, trust in political institutions, big business, and economic elites has deteriorated. In an era of widespread dissatisfaction with existing power structures, unions retain a unique reservoir of public legitimacy.

The central challenge, then, is not public hostility to unions but the movement's diminished capacity to translate popular support into political power. While many revitalization strategies are being tested, one promising approach has received comparatively little attention: the recruitment, prioritization, and election of candidates who come directly from the labor movement itself. Running union members and leaders for office offers a way to amplify workers' voices in government even as union density remains low. As this report demonstrates, union candidates represent an untapped political resource — one that holds potential not only for strengthening labor's influence over policy but also for reversing the Democratic Party's decreasing support among working-class voters.

To understand the importance and strategic value of union candidates, this report offers a broad picture of the contemporary role of labor unions in US elections, focusing on candidate selection, campaign finance, and governance. Despite its comparative weakness by historical standards, organized labor remains the primary vehicle for advancing the material interests of working-class Americans, so it is critical to understand how unions' political efforts are performing and to highlight opportunities for increasing unions' political leverage.

Drawing on original quantitative analysis of a unique database of congressional candidates with union backgrounds and on interviews with union leaders and candidates, we begin by documenting the sharp decline in unions' traditional electoral influence, showing that while unions continue to spend in congressional races, their contributions comprise a shrinking share of overall campaign finance and flow overwhelmingly to

incumbents. This trend underscores the limits of a political strategy centered primarily on campaign finance.

The report then shifts focus to union candidates themselves. We start by demonstrating why electing more union candidates matters. Across multiple measures, candidates and elected officials with union backgrounds are more likely to emphasize pro-worker rhetoric, support progressive economic policies, and advance worker- and union-friendly legislation once in office. Importantly, we find that legislators with union backgrounds are often more effective than other pro-worker officials, leveraging their credibility, networks, and institutional knowledge to influence policy and maintain stronger lines of communication with organized labor.

Next we provide an overview of the prevalence and characteristics of congressional candidates with union backgrounds between 2010 and 2022, drawing on both quantitative data and interviews to illuminate who runs, why they run, and the barriers that prevent union members from entering electoral politics. We show that union candidates remain a small and underutilized share of the candidate pool, despite evidence that they offer distinct political advantages.

In the following section we analyze unions' own strategies to support candidates and find a tension between short-term electoral logic and long-term coalition building. While unions are more likely to financially support candidates with union backgrounds — particularly in open-seat races where they might plausibly shape the future direction of the Democratic Party — they do not systematically prioritize working-class candidates or those running on strong pro-worker agendas. Interviews suggest this reflects a pragmatic focus on fundraising capacity and maximizing near-term Democratic victories, especially against anti-labor Republicans. But because unions invest relatively little in recruiting candidates, building pipelines, or developing independent resources for homegrown labor candidates, they leave most of the candidate-development process to the Democratic Party, individual aspirants, and activist groups. As a result, labor is repeatedly forced into a defensive posture, endorsing the most viable candidates available rather than shaping the field itself. The irony is that this short-term strategy of backing likely winners has contributed to a longer-term crisis for both labor and the Democratic Party: the persistent scarcity of working-class candidates rooted in labor who are capable of anchoring a durable pro-worker governing majority.

Finally, we highlight evidence that alternative approaches are possible. Case studies from states such as New Jersey and Alaska show that union-led candidate recruitment and training programs can help build sturdy pipelines of union and pro-worker elected officials. We conclude by arguing that unions could play a far more consequential role in shaping working-class politics — but only by investing more deliberately in candidate recruitment, long-term development, and independent political infrastructure, rather than relying primarily on campaign contributions.

Key Takeaways

1. Unions' donations to candidates are declining in relative importance.

a. The share of donations coming from unions has declined significantly. In the late 1990s, the average Democratic candidate received nearly 15% of all their donations from unions; by 2022, this had fallen to just 3.4%, a roughly fivefold decline.
b. This is mostly due to the massive rise in individual donations. Union donations have remained relatively stable.
c. When unions donate, they play it safe, donating primarily to incumbent candidates rather than pro-union challengers.

2. Politicians and candidates with union backgrounds are stronger advocates for the working class.

a. Candidates with union backgrounds run progressive, economic populist campaigns.
   - Our analysis of the language used by congressional candidates between 2010 and 2022 shows that union candidates were much more likely to use pro-worker and progressive economic language than other candidates.

b. Legislators with union backgrounds vote more pro-worker on economic issues.
   - Comparing the roll-call votes between 2010 and 2022 of all members of Congress, we find those who have a union background are more likely to vote left on economic issues.

c. What makes union politicians such effective tribunes for the working class?
   - We interview 20 legislators in state and local government between 2024 and 2025 and find multiple ways in which their union backgrounds make them more effective at fighting for working-class interests:
     i. Understanding worker issues: they bring sharper understandings of union collective bargaining agreements, workplace issues; less learning curve in office.
     ii. Legitimacy on labor issues: they have authority and credibility to speak on labor matters; others defer to them.
     iii. Labor-centered agendas: they are more likely to prioritize worker rights and union issues in policy.
     iv. Institutional power and access: they often maintain relationships with unions and create open channels for feedback and influence.
     v. Legislative strategy and coalition building: they know how to negotiate, build coalitions, and navigate democratic governance structures.
     vi. Voter engagement and inspiration: they inspire higher turnout and volunteering from union members and boost member-to-member efforts.

3. Despite their strategic value, union candidates and elected officials are not common.

a. We identify all congressional candidates between 2010 and 2022 and find that just 5% are union members, organizers, or leaders. We do this by scraping all candidates' campaign websites and determining any union occupations or mentions of being in a union.

4. Unions tend to back Democratic candidates with union backgrounds.

a. While unions donate almost entirely to incumbents, when they do donate in open races they tend to back Democrats with union backgrounds.

    i. We compare the average amount union PACs spent on union vs. nonunion Democratic candidates between 2010 and 2022 in open-seat races and find that unions donate more to candidates from union backgrounds. This holds even when we control for district ideology, so it's not about the places they run but the candidates themselves.
    ii. However, unions are not more likely to back candidates from working-class backgrounds in general or candidates who run on pro-worker, populist themes. While they do donate more to these types of candidates in absolute terms, this is explained by the districts in which these candidates run rather than the candidates themselves.

b. What unions can do to help union candidates:

    i. Use unions' organizing infrastructure to directly power union-member campaigns. When unions actively recruit candidates, mobilize members for canvasing and turnout, and provide early financial support, union candidates gain a critical edge.
    ii. Invest in union-run candidate training programs to build a durable pipeline. Labor-led candidate schools provide practical campaign skills, lower barriers to entry for working-class candidates, and create networks of mutual support; successful programs demonstrate that sustained training can dramatically increase both the number of union candidates and their electoral success.

The Missing Piece: Union Members and Leaders in Elected Office

Though existing research on labor's role in US politics is rich, a key area of research remains largely unexplored: the impact of union members and leaders holding elected office.[1] While researchers have studied how unions influence politics from the outside — through endorsements, PAC contributions, mobilization, and lobbying — we know much less about what happens when labor insiders step into formal positions of political power.

During this period of union weakness marked by shrinking density, declining workplace leverage, and limited access to traditional political channels, labor must be more creative about how it exercises influence. Important new strategies have emerged, from ballot initiatives to nontraditional forms of worker organizing (e.g., worker centers and alt-labor formations). These efforts reflect a growing recognition that labor must find new ways to build power under adverse conditions.

Yet electing union members and leaders to public office remains largely overlooked. This is surprising, given the potential of such a pathway to give workers a stronger voice in policymaking, improve class representation, and embed pro-worker priorities into legislative agendas. This report documents these possibilities in a subsequent section based on the experiences of past and sitting elected officials with union backgrounds.

1 See the online appendix for a detailed overview of this literature: cdn.prod.website-files.com/61b7a8b63fe8c230fa4bbc77/699f875a871b18c9a1922dfc_Unions_Report_Appendix_v4.pdf.

One of the only US studies to directly address this question is Aaron Sojourner's, which finds that the share of legislators from working-class occupations (e.g., construction workers or public sector employees) is higher in states where those sectors are heavily unionized. This suggests that unions may help to facilitate working-class candidacies. However, the study stops short of evaluating whether those candidates behave differently once in office. As Sojourner concludes, "In countries with a labor party, the rise of members to public office is common, but in the U.S., it has not received much attention."[2] An analysis of elected officials in Argentina directly addresses the question of how connections to labor affect legislative behavior. The study finds that, regardless of partisanship, legislators are more likely to focus on worker and labor-related issues in office than their colleagues.[3]

Recent comprehensive surveys of the role of unions in politics, such as John Ahlquist's and Ethan Kaplan and Suresh Naidu's, largely ignore the role of labor representatives in office as a potential avenue for union influence. Likewise, Melissa Arnold Lyon et al. focus on recruitment pipelines without assessing legislative behavior or policy impact of union elected politicians. Only J. Ryan Lamare directly addresses this question, finding that state legislators in California with union backgrounds are more likely to vote in favor of union-supported issues than other legislators.[4] In short, the question of what union members do — and whether they make a difference once they're in office — is an important gap in existing research, to which this report provides critical knowledge.

2 Aaron J. Sojourner, "Do Unions Promote Members' Electoral Office Holding? Evidence from Correlates of State Legislatures' Occupational Shares," *ILR Review* 66, no. 2 (2013).

3 Juan Pablo Micozzi, "Division or Union of Labor? Analyzing Workers' Representation in the Argentine Congress," *Latin American Politics and Society* 60, no. 4 (2018).

4 John S. Ahlquist, "Labor Unions, Political Representation, and Economic Inequality," *Annual Review of Political Science* 20 (2017); Ethan Kaplan and Suresh Naidu, "Between Government and Market: The Political Economics of Labor Unions," Working Paper No. 33295, National Bureau of Economic Research (2024); Melissa Arnold Lyon, Annie A. Hemphill, and Rebecca Jacobsen, "How Do Unions Create Candidates?," *Political Behavior* 46, no. 1 (2024); J. Ryan Lamare, "Union Experience and Worker Policy: Legislative Behavior in California, 1999–2012," *ILR Review* 69, no. 1 (2016).

SECTION 1

Unions in Congressional Elections

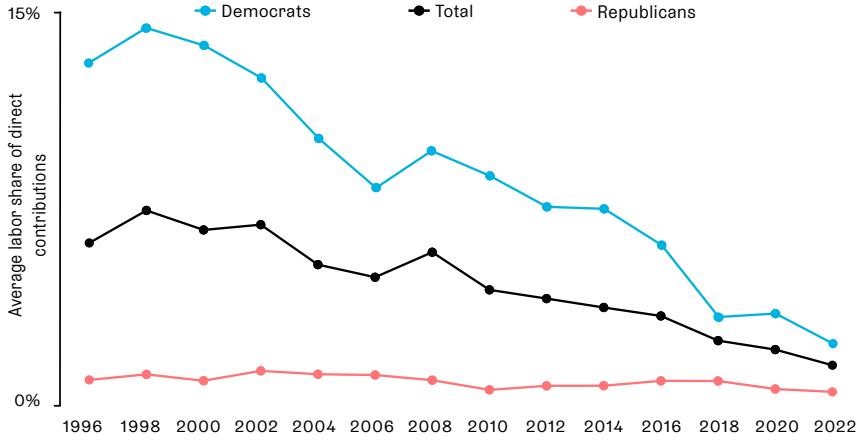
Since the 1970s, union power has eroded due to factors such as deindustrialization, hostile labor laws, and political marginalization. Private sector union density has fallen below 7%, marking a sharp decline in union influence across sectors. Previous scholars have found that declining union density has been accompanied — at least since the late 1990s — by a decline in unions' political power and influence. For instance, Kaplan and Naidu show that the share of campaign contributions from unions to Democrats fell substantially between 1996 and 2014.[5] This decline in union donations has coincided with an increase in donations from corporations and educated individuals, reflecting broader changes in political fundraising dynamics.

In this section, we present an updated overview of the declining role of unions in campaign donations. Over the past several decades, unions have become increasingly marginal players in electoral finance, especially in the competitive races where money matters most. This decline is largely driven by the explosion of individual donations and independent expenditures, which now far exceed direct contributions from all PACs — particularly labor PACs. In addition, unions tend to strongly favor incumbents and rarely support challengers or candidates in open-seat races. This limits their role in backing new economic populist candidates who challenge the Democratic Party establishment.

We present the declining share of labor donations in the left panel of figure 1. Between 1996 and 2022, the average share of donations that a congressional candidate for the US House or Senate received from unions declined from around 8% to 2%. This decline is especially pronounced for Democratic candidates, who historically received the vast majority of labor PAC support. In the late 1990s, the average Democratic candidate received nearly 15% of all donations from unions; by 2022, this had fallen to just 3.4% — a roughly fivefold decline. If we also take into account the rise of independent expenditures and dark money since Citizens United in 2010 (not featured in the graph), the relative importance of unions in congressional elections has been rendered even more negligible.[6]

The decline in importance of labor PAC donations to congressional candidates, 1996–2022[7]

FIGURE 1



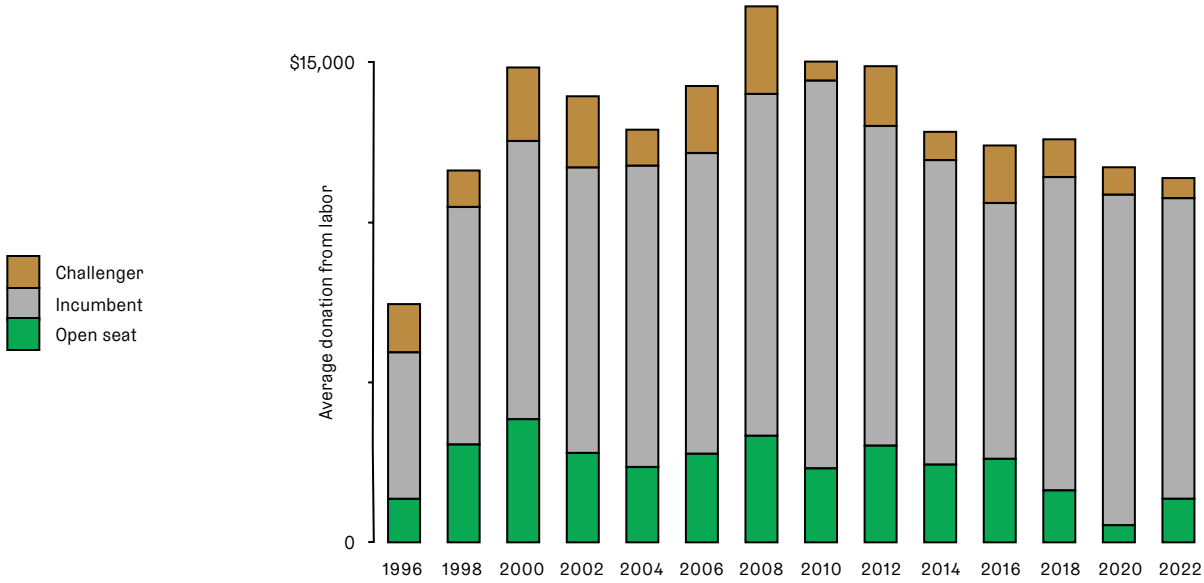
5 Kaplan and Naidu, "Between Government and Market."

6 The decline in union donations as a relative share of congressional candidates' donations is similar when looking at primary elections separately (see online appendix).

7 Adam Bonica, "Database on Ideology, Money in Politics, and Elections (DIME): Public version 4.0," Stanford University Libraries (2024).

The decline in importance of labor PAC donations to congressional candidates, 1996–2022

FIGURE 1 (CONT'D)



The first panel plots the average share of total donations that congressional candidates received from labor PACs of all direct contributions from PACs, individual donations and unitemized donations, between 1996 and 2022. The bottom panel plots the average total amount of contributions made by labor PACs to congressional candidates running as incumbents, challengers, or for open seats. Itemized donations come from OpenSecrets and unitemized donations come from DIME.[8]

The bottom panel of figure 1 plots the average total donations that labor PACs give to incumbents, challengers, and candidates in open-seat races. First, we see that total donations from labor PACs have remained roughly constant over the past two decades. Thus their declining relative importance is not due to reduced spending but rather to the rapid growth of other funding sources. Second, labor PACs overwhelmingly prefer to support incumbents, reflecting a conservative, access-seeking strategy common among nonideological PACs.[9]

Figure 2 further illustrates the explosion of funding from individual donors — both itemized and unitemized, including platforms like ActBlue and WinRed — along with independent expenditures. Such contributions have left more modest contributions from unions far behind. Unlike PACs, these new sources of funding are far more likely to support challengers and candidates in open-seat races.

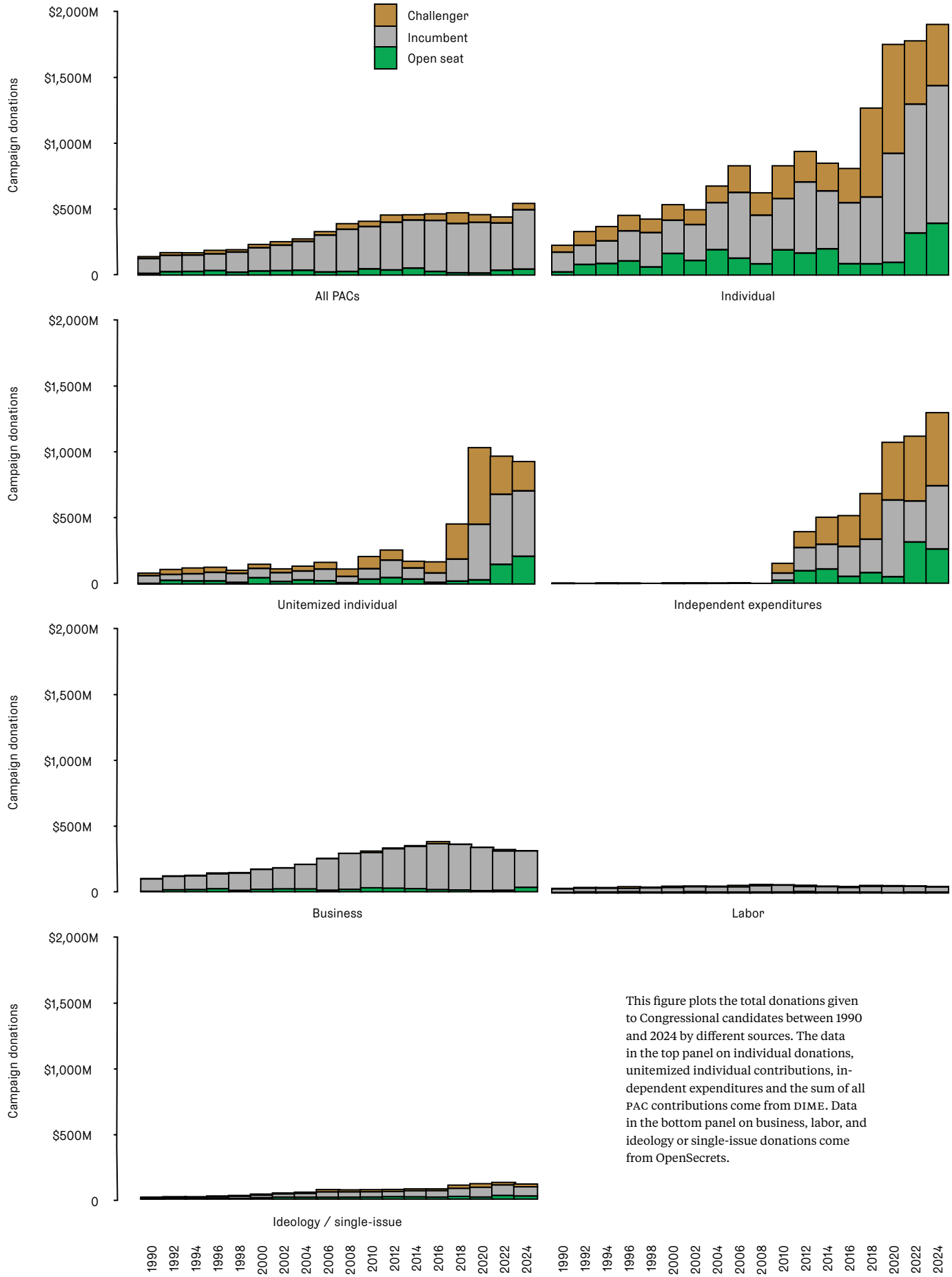
Taken together, these results paint a dismal picture for the role that unions play in campaign finance. Not only do unions account for an increasingly minuscule share of campaign donations; they are more likely to support incumbent Democrats than candidates challenging establishment figures. Clearly, unions are in desperate need of alternative forms of political influence.

8 Adam Bonica, "Database on Ideology, Money in Politics, and Elections (DIME): Public version 4.0," Stanford University Libraries (2024).

9 This is not simply a function of there being far more races featuring incumbents: for an average Democratic challenger or candidate running for an open seat, the share of donations they receive from labor PACs out of itemized direct contributions in 2022 is under 5%, less than half of the roughly 10% a typical Democratic incumbent receives (see online appendix).

Labor PAC donations fall behind individual donors and independent expenditures

FIGURE 2



This figure plots the total donations given to Congressional candidates between 1990 and 2024 by different sources. The data in the top panel on individual donations, unitemized individual contributions, independent expenditures and the sum of all PAC contributions come from DIME. Data in the bottom panel on business, labor, and ideology or single-issue donations come from OpenSecrets.

SECTION 2

Why Having Union Members in Office Matters

Though unions' capacity to influence electoral politics through campaign finance has waned over the years, there is another mechanism through which they can exert political leverage without greatly increasing the monetary resources they devote to elections: getting union members elected to office. In this section, we show that political candidates and elected officials who have a union background differ in important ways from other candidates — ways that influence how effectively they are likely to represent the interests of working people — and that union members in office have unique skills and priorities that make them particularly effective champions of working-class politics. We first analyze quantitative data and then describe the findings from 20 original interviews with union staff members and current and former elected legislators with union backgrounds.

Overall, we find that congressional candidates with labor union backgrounds differ from nonunion candidates in at least a few ways:

1. They are more likely to advocate in favor of worker issues on the campaign trail.
2. They are more likely to vote in favor of progressive economic policies once in office, regardless of partisanship.
3. Their experience in unions makes them more effective in advancing working-class and union issues.

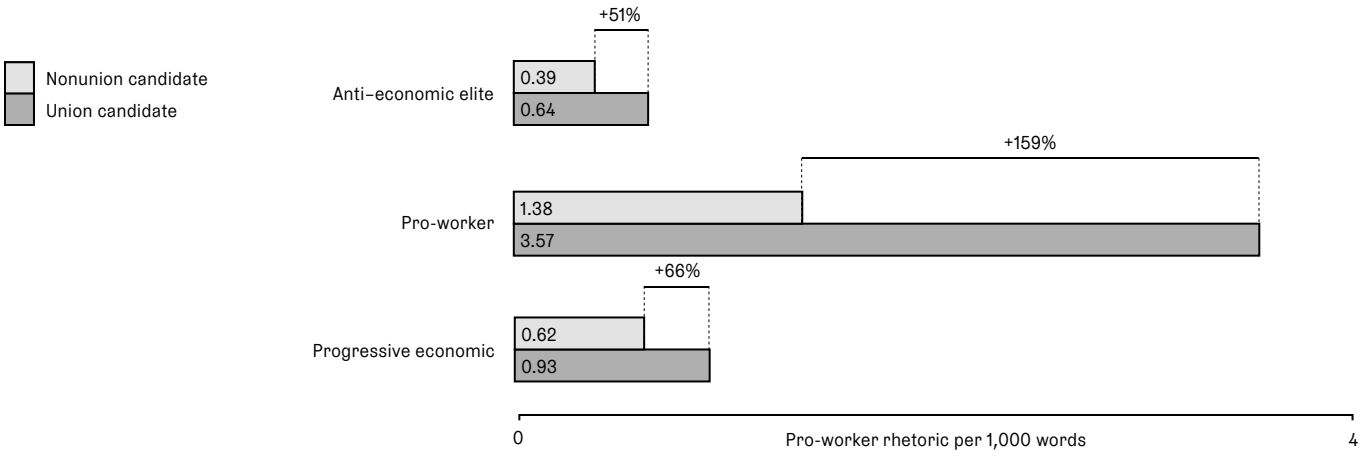
Union Candidates and Congresspeople Are Stronger Advocates for the Working Class

The most systematic way we can see how union candidates and elected officials might be important for advancing working-class politics is through the language they use. Our analysis of messaging by all congressional candidates between 2010 and 2022 shows that union candidates are much more likely to use pro-worker, anti-elite economic language and progressive economic language than other candidates. These categories capture important ways candidates signal alignment with labor's traditional priorities — speaking directly about workers, challenging the power of major employers and wealthy interests, and advancing policies aimed at improving economic conditions for ordinary people. Together, these offer a general picture of how candidates position themselves on issues central to labor's mission.[10] The figures below show that among all candidates across parties, those with union backgrounds use significantly more pro-worker rhetoric than nonunion candidates (159% more, relative to nonunion candidates). Moreover, these union candidates use 66% more progressive economic language and 51% more anti–economic elite language compared with nonunion candidates. In short, as we would expect given their at least partial acculturation in organizations focused on advocating for workers' rights, union candidates are far more likely to prioritize a pro-worker, economic populist agenda.

10 See the online appendix for the full list of dictionary terms.

Pro-union messaging used by congressional candidates

FIGURE 3

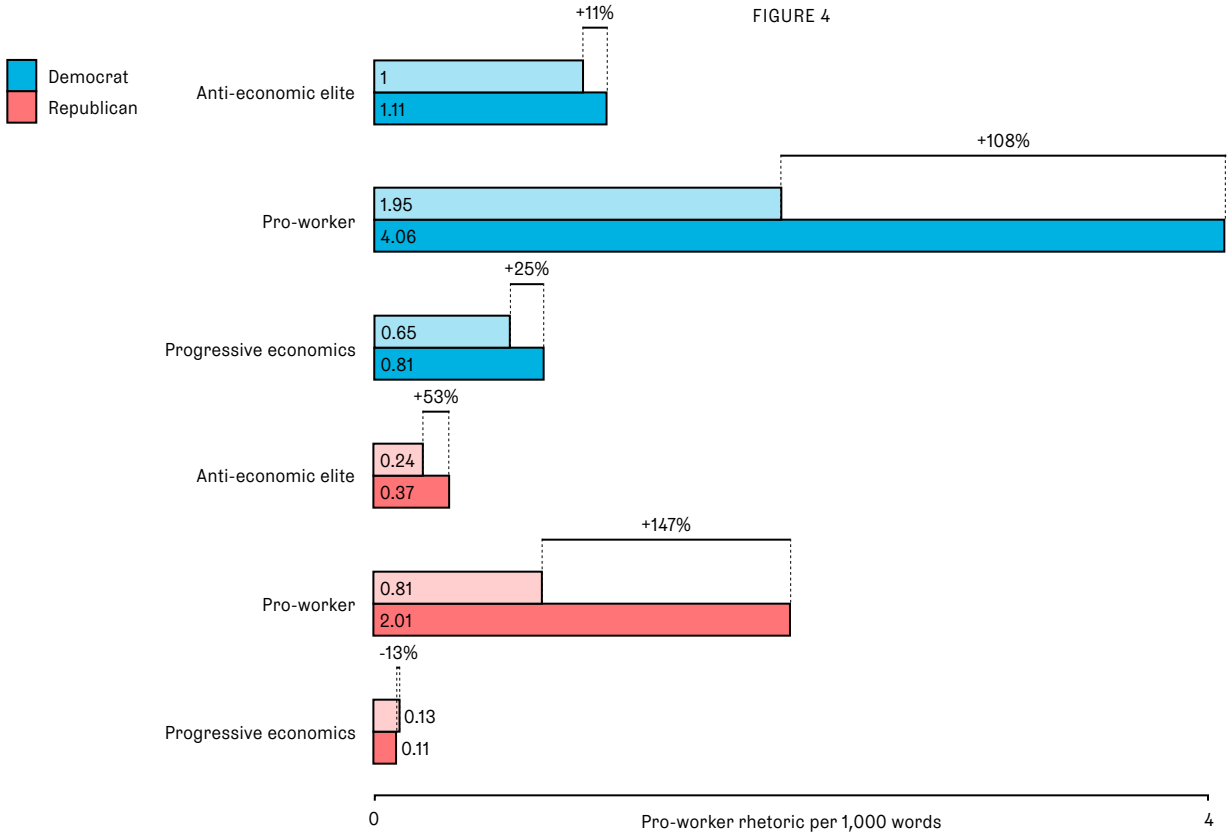


We present the results as words from each dictionary per 1,000 words for ease of interpretation, but they are substantively similar to the results if we were to instead use the percent of all rhetoric or the simple raw counts of words from each dictionary.

As figure 4 shows, the pro-worker results hold across parties, and the progressive economics results hold for Democratic candidates. But the difference in use of anti–economic elite rhetoric by union and nonunion Democrats is only marginal, while Republican union candidates were substantially less likely to use anti-elite rhetoric than their nonunion counterparts. In turn, both union Democrats and Republicans were substantially more likely to employ progressive economic rhetoric than their nonunion counterparts, though Republicans' use of this language was minimal overall.

Pro-union messaging used by congressional candidates across partisanship

FIGURE 4

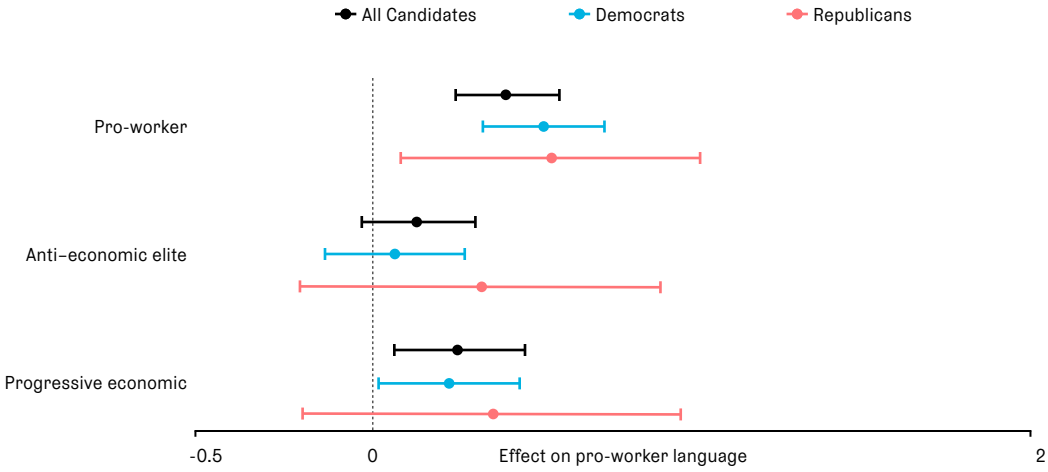


We present the results as words from each dictionary per 1,000 words for ease of interpretation, but they are substantively similar to the results if we were to instead use percent of all rhetoric or the simple raw counts of words from each dictionary.

The pro-worker results and progressive economics results largely hold when we run regressions controlling for district characteristics, year, party, and incumbency (see figure 5). In short, union candidates appear to emphasize pro-worker rhetoric — and among Democrats, progressive economic policies — more than their nonunion counterparts, even when competing in the same districts, not running against incumbents, and representing the same party.[11]

Effect of union status on candidate rhetoric

FIGURE 5



Regression analyses predict the effect of union candidate status (union background vs. no union background) on inclusion of pro-worker and pro-union language on campaign websites. Models include district and year fixed effects and controls for party, incumbency, and website length. Standard errors are clustered at the district level. Some Republican-only estimates are excluded due to insufficient sample size.

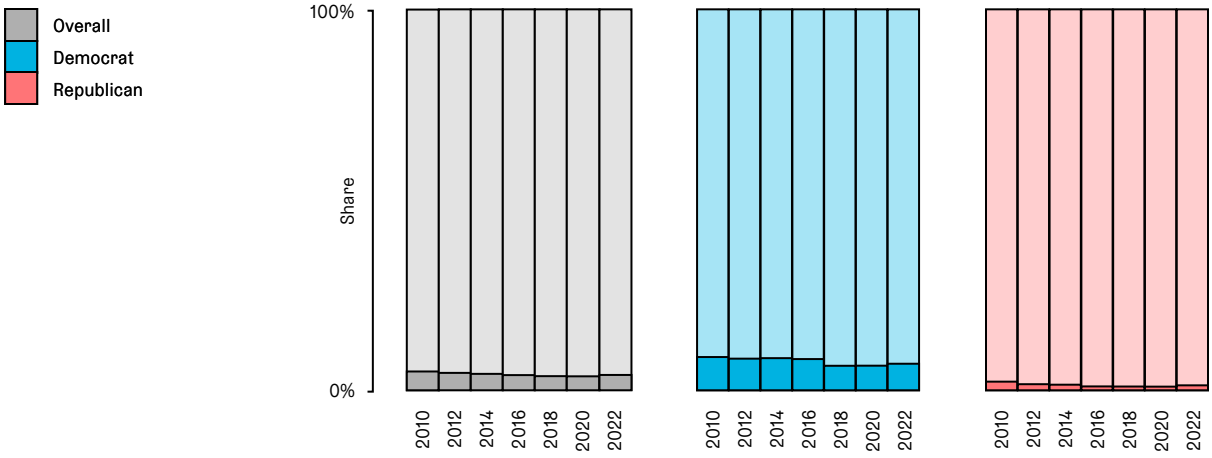
11 Full regression results reported in the online appendix.

Legislators With Union Backgrounds Vote Further Left on Economic Issues

Union ties remain rare on Capitol Hill. Over the past decade, only about 5% of members of Congress — roughly 23 lawmakers in an average year — had any union affiliation. Such ties are far more common among Democrats, where they constitute about 8% of the caucus, than among Republicans, where they are almost nonexistent.

Share of union-affiliated members of Congress by year, 2010–2024

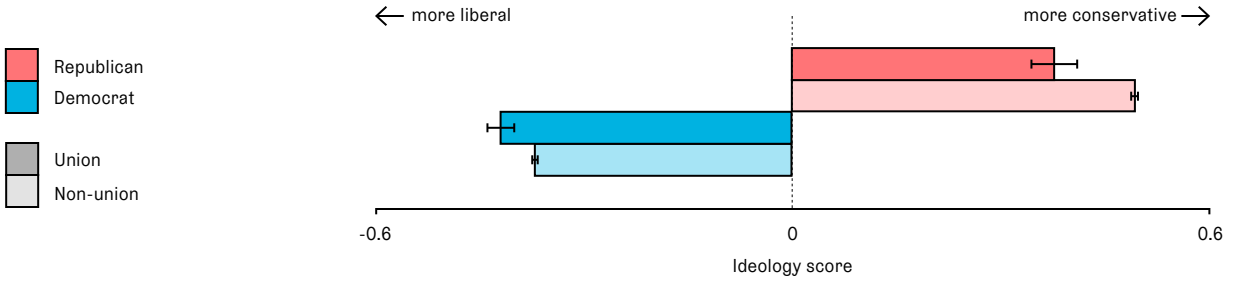
FIGURE 6



Union affiliation may be rare in Congress, but it is not politically irrelevant. Lawmakers with union ties vote to the left of their party peers, especially on economic issues. This can be seen by comparing legislators' average roll-call voting positions on the main economic dimension of congressional ideology (DW-NOMINATE). On this measure, union-affiliated members lean further left in their votes than those without union ties — not only overall but also within each party. Union-affiliated Democrats vote to the left of fellow Democrats, and union-affiliated Republicans vote to the left of fellow Republicans.

Congress members' ideology on economic issues, 2010-2024

FIGURE 7

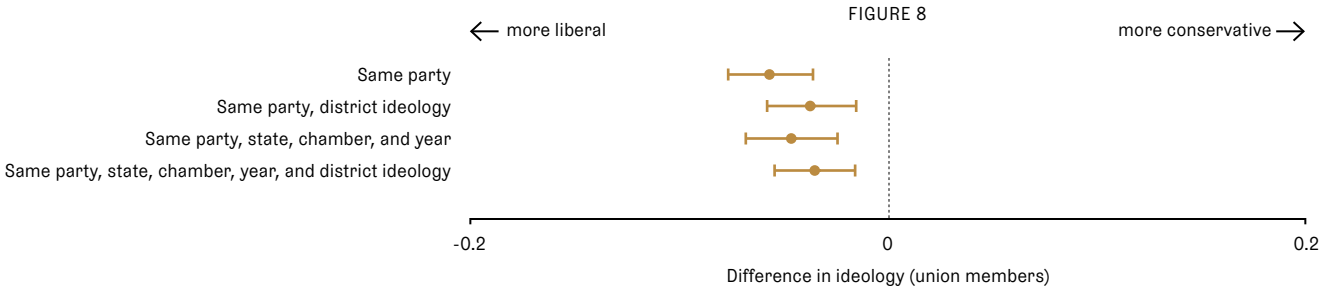


The figure shows average ideology scores for congresspeople by party and by whether members have a union background. Ideology is measured using DW–NOMINATE (first dimension), a standard measure based on members' roll-call voting records that captures positions on economic issues. Bars show group averages; vertical lines indicate 95% confidence intervals.

One possibility is that this pattern has little to do with union membership itself and instead reflects where union-affiliated lawmakers come from or who they are. To check this, we run several comparisons that gradually account for these differences.[12] Across all of the comparisons the result is the same: members of Congress with union affiliations vote further to the left than we would expect based on party, district ideology, or other personal characteristics alone. In short, union affiliation remains associated with more left-leaning voting even after accounting for where lawmakers come from and the political contexts they operate in.

Differences in congresspeople's economic ideology by union membership, 2010–2024

FIGURE 8



The figure shows results from four models, each comparing members of Congress with and without union backgrounds while progressively adjusting for other factors. Ideology is measured using DW–NOMINATE (first dimension), a standard measure based on members' roll-call voting records that captures positions on economic issues. All models adjust for party and political context and control for incumbency, gender, race/ethnicity, and income. Points show estimated differences; shaded bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

12 First, we compare lawmakers within the same party while adjusting for basic characteristics such as gender, race, and whether they are incumbents. Next, we account for how liberal or conservative their districts are. We then compare lawmakers serving in the same state, chamber, and year, so that they face similar political and institutional environments.

The Union Legislator Premium in Their Own Words

Does union experience actually make a difference in how politicians represent working people? According to virtually all the labor leaders and elected officials we interviewed, the answer is yes — though with important qualifications.

Our 20 interviews between spring 2024 and winter 2025 reveal multiple ways in which having a labor background can help to further labor and working-class interests.

Summary of union background impacts

TABLE 1

Understanding worker issues	Union candidates bring a sharper understanding of union collective bargaining agreements and workers' rights issues; less learning curve in office.
Legitimacy on labor issues	Union experience gives electeds authority and credibility to speak on labor matters; other legislators defer to them.
Labor-centered agendas	Union backgrounds lead officials to consistently prioritize worker rights and union issues in policymaking.
Institutional power and access	Labor legislators often maintain close relationships with unions, creating channels for feedback and influence.
Legislative strategy and coalition building	Union organizing teaches how to negotiate, build coalitions, and navigate democratic governance structures.

Union Experience Builds Stronger Understanding and Communication of Union and Worker Issues

We heard repeatedly in our interviews that elected officials who have spent time in unions — particularly those who've negotiated a collective bargaining agreement or held union leadership positions — bring a sharper and better-informed understanding of labor and worker issues into politics, even compared to otherwise very pro-worker and pro-labor candidates without a background in the labor movement.

As Adam Goode of the Maine AFL-CIO put it,

> Having union members who run and get elected and know about how unions work makes a big difference.… We have found that there are lots of people that want to vote for workers and want to say yes on our questionnaire, and they want to get a 100% score on our scorecard.… But if they haven't lived under a CBA [collective bargaining agreement], they're not as astute at explaining union issues. Even the most pro-working-class politicians take a while to figure this out. Union members have real experience that you can only get through a union.

Several interviewees noted that union candidates are often ready to lead on labor issues from day one — unlike others who have to learn on the job. As Anthony Verrelli, a carpenter and New Jersey state legislator, put it, "There's no learning curve with a labor candidate: they always already understand the issues working people face and are committed to addressing them."

Eleanor Chávez, a state representative in New Mexico, argued that a union background gives elected officials an innate understanding of union and worker rights that even the most progressive nonunion electeds do not possess:

> There are some progressives … [who] don't understand the union movement.… I love my progressive colleagues, but I think that having union folk in there is sort of different; it adds to and really moves, you know, pieces along.… One of the things [you bring to the table as someone with a union background] is really understanding what some of the workers' concerns are.… You know what it means to be in a union and be able to or have to defend worker rights.… People who

come out of unions have a sort of deeper understanding of how important it is to protect worker rights.

Similarly, real-world union experience can also help elected officials spot the implications of legislation others might miss. Congressman Donald Norcross, a former industrial electrician, described how this background shapes his work in Congress:

> [One time] I'm reading through the bills that are coming up this week on the plane, like I do every week … and as I'm going through 'em, I see something that jumps out at me. It talks about being able to waive requirements on certain job classifications.… [So I] called the office. "Would you look this up? Something doesn't seem right to me …" I do this probably a dozen times a year. Things that jump out at me; how does it affect the collective bargaining agreement? Does it impact Davis–Bacon [prevailing wage law], your registered apprenticeships? That's second nature to me because of where I grew up and what I used to do. Well, lo and behold, everybody's union started looking at it and saying, "Wait a minute."

Norcross believes that as a result of his initiative, they were able to stop the bill from being passed with language that would have hurt workers. He concedes that you don't need a labor background to understand labor issues, yet "there's a difference. I was an industrial electrician.… Why that is important, at least from my perspective, is that you see, you understand things at just a different level because you've been there. I love lawyers. My daughter's a lawyer, but I don't need 435 lawyers. I want a diversity." Yet some respondents also stressed that even union candidates often don't have a strong grasp of the movement or the landscape of workers' issues beyond their own sectors. Andrew Waxman of the AFL-CIO, for instance, explained that "public sector [candidates] don't know as much about private sector issues. They do need more guidance … building 'cross-sectoral' union consciousness." This, according to the AFL-CIO national director of political and field mobilization, Jennifer Rodriguez, is one of the reasons why labor-sponsored candidate training programs can be so important, as "they … help educate [union] workers to see the needs of workers more broadly beyond their own sector."

Another caveat to the idea that candidates with union backgrounds better understand union and worker issues is that this understanding depends on the kind of union experience candidates have had. As Washington state senators Steve Conway and Bob Hasegawa both pointed out, having a union card is not the same as having organizing or leadership experience.

According to Hasegawa, "Union membership is one thing, but they need more union members who've really been through the fight and know what's on the line. Most of the other labor people in the legislature don't have that experience." This isn't just theoretical. When Boeing lobbied the Washington State Legislature for tax breaks, Hasegawa was the lone no vote — because he understood the company's long game, having dealt with similar tactics as a Teamsters leader. Or as Conway put it, candidates "may have been in a grocery worker union … or doing some construction work. But Bob and I … spent decades negotiating contracts and running a union."

Finally, not all interviewees agreed that union experience alone was the key. Some argued that working-class identity — not simply union credentials — makes the biggest difference. For example, Alaska state representative Zack Fields contended, "Having a union member in office is kind of no different than having another rank-and-file working person in office.… They are in touch with working-class people about daily economic realities.… That's the benefit."

Former US representative Andy Levin had a similar view. Despite his decades of experience in the labor movement, he acknowledged that his solidly middle-class background set him apart from union colleagues with working-class backgrounds: "I'm not a working-class person.… Both my sets of grandparents went to college. My parents went to grad school … [so] I treat myself as an outlier." Levin sees class as a deeply underappreciated political identity in Congress, even among Democrats. Despite his long labor résumé, he believes more working-class people, not just labor allies, need to be in office.

This sentiment was echoed by US representative Mark Pocan — who has both a working-class and labor background — who noted that he often had to explain the basics of the labor movement to millionaire colleagues: "Half of my colleagues are

millionaires.… If you're coming from a labor, working-class background, you've actually lived it." For Pocan, the combination of union experience and working-class roots allows for a more intuitive grasp of how legislation impacts ordinary people:

> I'll give you an example of a conversation once.… There was a former secretary that was working on a bill around retirement savings. And the comment they made in a closed-door meeting was around "the average person" with "just" $200,000 in retirement savings.… So I did a little research, and that's about one out of eight people in the country. So their commonplace experience here in Washington, that of course you'd have all this money towards retirement so that you can, you know, drink piña coladas on beaches across the Caribbean in your retirement, is a different reality from someone who's hoping to get that RV maybe and be able to take some time off in winter.… I definitely notice that there's this mindset. It isn't anti–person of average income; it's just they don't have the lived experience of it.

Union Experience Gives Legislators Authority on Worker Issues

For many elected officials with a history in the labor movement, their background also lends them credibility in the eyes of their peers. That authority can become an important tool in shaping policy debates and encouraging others to act on labor and worker-related issues. As several interviewees emphasized, union experience equips legislators with the experience and legitimacy to be seen by others as the go-to labor experts in the room.

For example, Congressman Norcross has used his experience as an industrial electrician to shift the views of even his Republican colleagues — particularly when it comes to funding for the Department of Labor and workplace safety. "I sit on labor and education, and you can imagine the Labor Department and OSHA is a big deal," he said. "And my colleagues, particularly on the other side of the aisle, are always talking about how much of a burden it is, and it costs money." To counter this resistance, Norcross responds with stories from his time in the labor movement that can resonate across party lines. "I've been on a job three times in my career where somebody didn't go home, was killed on the job, and I remember them vividly," he explained. One story in particular, from a racetrack construction site at Garden State Park, has stuck with him for over 40 years:

> I was working late. The job shut down, everybody went home, but they still needed one of us on the job.… And it's dark, and there's two cars in the parking lot, mine and somebody else's. And I see somebody coming into the parking lot, and it's probably about nine o'clock at night. And a young lady gets out of the car, comes over, and says, "I'm looking for my dad's car. Can you help me?" Yeah, her dad was the one that got killed.

Norcross can make policy personal in this way, but his union background is what gives him the power to do so. "That's what the difference is, being a member that has been out there in the field and sees us firsthand."

Even in the most progressive cities where labor allies are common in elected office, union experience still confers special authority. Los Angeles city councilmember Hugo Soto-Martínez explained, "When there's issues of labor, people defer to me. They ask me, what's the thing to do in this moment? And that is helpful. I can speak from experience as someone who's come up with the rank and file."

Union Experience Makes Legislators More Focused on Labor Issues

While many elected officials profess support for working people, those who come from the labor movement tend to back up that support with consistent action. A union background not only grounds candidates in labor politics; it also makes them more likely to center union and worker issues once in office. Union leaders and elected officials repeatedly emphasized that union-affiliated legislators prioritize workers' rights in ways that others, even progressive Democrats, often do not.

Goode, of the AFL-CIO, described the work of former Maine State Senate president Troy Jackson, explaining that his background in unions and workers' rights advocacy had a clear impact on his legislative priorities:

> I've noticed it most coming from members of his caucus that aren't union members but like unions and want to vote for unions.… People just come to me that are in the senate Democratic caucus and say, 'You know, Troy knows how to center workers in the issue at hand all of the time. And he is always focused on workers.' And I think that just constantly helps remind people who they're there to represent.

That kind of focus is rare, according to New Jersey labor leader Charles Wowkanech. "Lots of people claim they care about workers and unions, but once they get elected, you don't hear from them anymore," he said.

Along similar lines, county commissioner of Essex, New Jersey, Leonard Luciano, argued that labor can't rely solely on allies: "We need to elect our own people to office in order to make sure we get what we need." The difference is more than symbolic. "Everybody promises to be union-friendly," he said, but New Jersey Democrats voted for Chapter 78 — legislation that increased health care costs for public employees. "Anybody who was an actual union member never would have voted for this."

Former Arizona representative Richard Andrade, a union locomotive engineer, also relayed his nonunion colleagues' clear sense that he was an unusually strong advocate for unions and workers' rights in Arizona politics:

> The executive director on the Arizona Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee … was like, You are the loudest voice of labor the state has ever had. You are the voice of labor in the state of Arizona.… And I would hear that all the time, I would hear it not just from unions but nonunions, I would hear it from other people, from lobbyists and everybody, saying, You know what, you really fight for worker rights or the unions. But they've never had that.

In an anti-union climate like Arizona's, he said, the pressure to advocate for workers was even stronger.

Joe Murphy of the Arizona AFL-CIO made a similar point from the union side. Union members in office, he said, are simply more responsive. He noted that former state representative and local union president Melody Hernandez became an unofficial labor caucus chair, and Murphy sees real value in having allies like her on the inside.

In Congress, Andy Levin drew directly on his years in the labor movement to shape his policy priorities. His top goal from the beginning was labor law reform, so he sought placement on the House Committee on Education and Labor. He recounted a time when House Democrats were working to pass the PRO Act in 2020. He'd helped write the Employee Free Choice Act years earlier and was now back on the floor defending its successor bill. Staffers on the committee were surprised at how deeply he engaged with the details. Levin was the main member of the committee duking it out in committee and on the floor against the Republicans, and he also gave the final speech on the House floor in support of the bill as well as the House radio address. All of that, he emphasized, "was because of my life in the labor movement."

Levin believes Congress would look very different if more people shared that background. "When you're in Congress, you are told you can only have three priorities," he explained. "So if you really had more people whose primary identity was in the labor movement, they'd be a lot more likely to put labor issues on that list." Much support for unions is transactional, because unions are still one of the largest sources of campaign funding. "It would make a big difference if there were more people who bled union." Representative Pocan approached his time in office with a similar aim: "One of my goals coming here was [to figure out how to] integrate labor more into Congress." That meant staffing up with labor fellows, building a formal labor caucus, and embedding pro-worker perspectives into the day-to-day operations of Capitol Hill. "To some degree, there is a bit of a class system here because half of my colleagues are millionaires," Pocan said. "So my job, cognitively, was [helping] to embed labor more into Congress … to make sure legislation was respecting working people, specifically labor, along the way."

Having Union Candidates in Office Shifts the Agenda Toward Labor

According to our interviewees, there is ample reason to believe that having union candidates in office — particularly in significant numbers or in leadership positions — really does help to shift legislative priorities toward a greater focus on labor and worker issues. When union members rise to positions of power within a legislative body or when a strong labor bloc coalesces, it can significantly reshape the legislative agenda and make labor concerns central to governing.

In Maine, Goode emphasized how transformative it has been to have a union activist, Troy Jackson, as president of the state senate. "The president of the senate sets the tone [for the chamber], and he is laser-focused on worker issues," Goode explained. Jackson, working with other union colleagues in the Senate — such as the chairs of the Labor and Housing committees — was able to pass a range of pro-union and pro-worker legislation during his time as senate president, such as a law to lower nurse-to-patient staffing ratios (a bill that passed thanks to strong backing from union members, including the House sponsor, a union nurse), a 2019 law to extend organizing rights to his fellow loggers, and a law authorizing project labor agreements for public works projects, among many others.

New Jersey AFL-CIO head Wowkanech offered a parallel account, pointing to an impressive track record of labor-led legislation in his state, where, according to his team, over 1,300 labor candidates have run for office at the local and state levels, with a 76% success rate over a 20-year period. Chairs of important committees in the New Jersey Legislature are regularly filled by labor legislators, who, according to Wowkanech, have "been able to pass first-of-its-kind legislation" such as New Jersey's 2002 Project Labor Agreement Act, its 2005 card-check law for public sector workers, and the state's paid family leave law, which was the second in the nation after California's. He also credited union leadership in Congress with helping to catalyze the formation of the Congressional Labor Caucus to foreground union issues at the federal level.

Once in office, union members' long-standing relationships with organized labor often translate into deeper, more continuous channels of communication that ensure labor's issues have a voice in the legislative process. Assemblyman Verrelli noted that union-elected officials tend to be "in constant contact with a wide range of unions just based on their experience in the labor movement," which keeps labor groups informed and engaged throughout the legislative process.

Jenn Puja, a union leader and member of the Common Council of White Plains, New York, has helped reshape how her city approaches development, hiring, and labor engagement. She worked with the local school district to launch a trade fair connecting students to union apprenticeship programs and civil service careers. "It was booming," she said of the second year's event, which drew over 250 students and more than 40 trade organizations. "I walked in, and I had goosebumps.… This is what it's about: getting this information to kids and youth so they see what opportunities they have." Thanks to her union perspective on the council, Puja believes that "our development conversations have shifted" and that even her colleagues are "asking questions about local hiring" that weren't being raised before.

Puja also created new structures for labor to influence city policy, like a "labor lunch every year where labor leaders in the community come, and they're the agenda."

"Now there's a direct line of communication," she said, adding that union leaders often follow up with her informally, since she sees them regularly in her other role as a labor council director. Though just "one voice of seven," she's helped make union concerns a routine part of council discussions.

For Leonard Luciano, being a union member in elected office has fundamentally changed the relationship between government and labor in Essex County, New Jersey.

> We [on the county board of commissioners] talk about budgeting all the time and make sure that our … labor unions' … contracts are always negotiated on time, … that we are always sitting down at the table with the leaders of those unions. I mean, listen, we're a governing body. We could shut the door and make the rules. But I've always said no, the door's gonna stay open.…I always say I want the door open for our public sector or private sector unions to be able to sit at the table.… I want them to also be able to talk to not just me.… I want you to sit at the table and talk to all of us, … even if they aren't part of our union, … to also understand that you

> respect them.… So yes, a lot of what I do has to do with the fact that I'm there thinking about legislating for the people I represent.

Luciano has pushed to elevate unions' visibility and respect. "At ribbon-cutting ceremonies, they didn't even recognize union leaders before I got in." He's prioritized project labor agreements in county contracts and has consistently insisted on using only union labor.

Luciano did concede that, given the strength of labor in New Jersey, it's likely that some of the legislation he's championed would've passed regardless of whether labor had one of their own on the county commission:

> Would there likely be a Project Labor Agreement? Yes. Even if there weren't union folks on the board. That just seems to be the nature of where things are going in the state of New Jersey. Union leaders are crying out, saying, Look, you gotta have a PLA agreement and help put local people to work. So in hindsight, it's hard to say, but I can surely say that it's [the relationship between labor and county government], night and day from where it was to where it is now.

Together, these accounts illustrate how having union members in elected office not only makes those officials themselves focus more on union and workers' rights but more broadly shifts the legislative agenda to focus more on those issues, often leading to significant victories that strengthen unions and improve the lives of workers.

Union Experience Can Make for More Effective Legislative Strategists and Coalition Builders

For many candidates, union experience provides direct training in how to build coalitions, negotiate, and get things done in government. Rodriguez emphasized that navigating a democratic organization like a union is ideal preparation for legislating:

> It's just not a natural thing.… It's also a practice. How do you come together, identify what values you have in common? What are the biggest priorities? You have to learn to talk to people and listen to people. You have to learn to compromise.… Those [experiences in a labor union] are all amazing training and what is needed once you get to the governing side of things.

Arizona House member Hernandez affirmed this point. "There are two hallmarks of how I chose to operate as a legislator. Number one is the mentality that it's not me leading everyone. It's us leading together, and that us needs to include our unions, my constituents, etc." She said her organizing background taught her to prioritize relationships and shared leadership. She also emphasized the importance of learning negotiation tactics, skills she developed by participating in union contract talks.

Levin also pointed to his organizing roots: "All the lessons [of being a nursing home organizer] I brought into Congress.… You have to be humble, not see yourself as the center of the story." Union experience helped him think strategically about power and relationships in Congress, just as he did in campaigns. Pocan said the same: "I know how to organize around [issues], … who to get to make phone calls if I'm trying to influence a bill. A lot of that comes from that labor background."

Los Angeles councilman Soto-Martínez had a slightly different take. For him, having labor legislators in political contexts where progressives are strong doesn't necessarily increase the likelihood of passing pro-worker legislation, but it does speed up the process.

> Me getting into office — I don't think it changes our ability to pass policy. It just makes it faster. I'll give an example. We passed a pretty transformative law in 2015 which raised the minimum wage for the entire hotel industry in the city of Los Angeles … [when] there were no people like me on the council. And yet we still passed it. However, it took years to pass that legislation, right? That was a three- or four-year campaign to finally get it. And so [with] me being in office, we can pass the same … policy [more quickly].… We're doing a … version of that now. The tourism ordinance — now, it is the same policy — but there are two things that are … different. Number one, what we're gonna get is better. And the timeline of achieving that policy, I think, will be a lot faster. But again, I don't think [having me on the council] truly changes the outcome of it. It's just made it faster and a little bit more ambitious.

SECTION 3

How Common Are Union Candidates and Elected Officials in the United States, and Why Don't More Run for Office?

Union candidates can be important drivers of working-class political representation, but how prevalent are these candidates in American politics? This section will show that, despite their strategic value for advancing worker and union issues, labor candidates remain comparatively rare, at least at the federal level. In turn, we summarize the key factors given by the labor and elected officials we interviewed of what motivates union members to run for office and what keeps many more on the political sidelines. Congressional candidates with labor union backgrounds, which we define broadly as anyone who reports being or ever having been a member of a labor union, are comparatively rare. Our analysis of all congressional candidates between 2010 and 2022 found that just 4.5% reported having a union background. For the most recent year included in our dataset, 2022, there were 55 union candidates out of 1200, of whom 35 made it to the general election, and of those about half (17) won.

Of these 17 candidates, two were elected union leaders: Stephen Lynch, an ironworker, and Donald Norcross, an IBEW electrician. And two were longtime rank-and-file union members prior to their political careers: Mark Pocan, a union painter and member of the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades, and Jahana Hayes, a public school teacher and member of the National Education Association.

Two other successful 2022 candidates worked as member-organizers in professional unions; Yadira Caraveo (SEIU interns and residents union) and Chris Deluzio (USW college faculty union). And two others worked as union lawyers or lobbyists: Nikki Budzinski and Andrea Salinas. The only two Republicans in the group had prior careers in law enforcement and were members of their respective police unions (Anthony D'Esposito and Pete Stauber). The remaining successful 2022 congressional candidates with union backgrounds either had very short tenures as union members or were effectively honorary members who were never part of a bargaining unit.

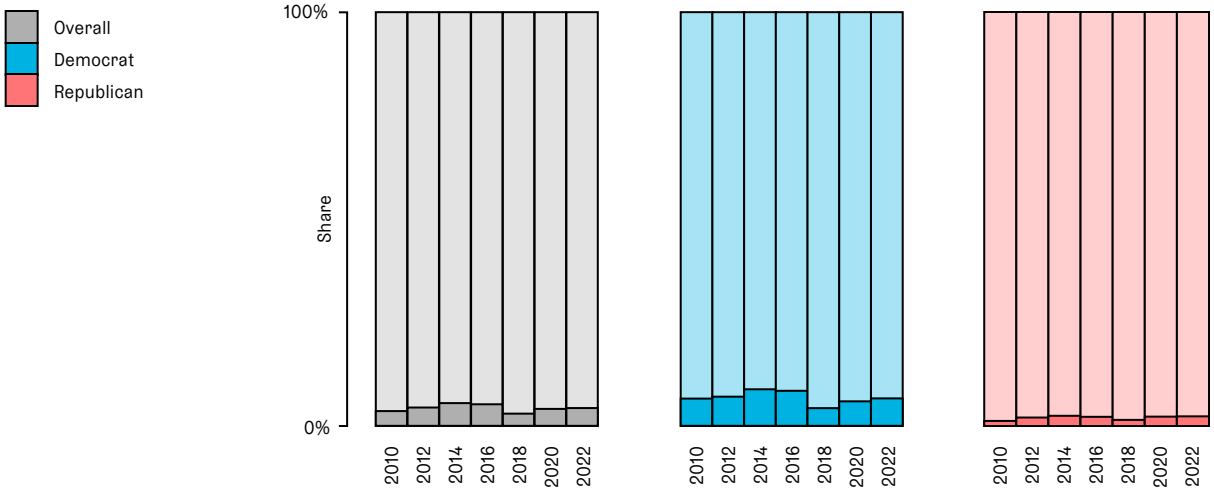
Figure 9 shows trends over time in the share of congressional candidates with union backgrounds from 2010 to 2022 and breaks selected patterns down by party. Overall, union-affiliated candidates make up a small but consistent portion of the candidate pool, typically accounting for about 3% to 6% of candidates in each cycle. Union representation rises through the mid-2010s, dips noticeably in 2018, and then partially rebounds in 2020 and 2022, indicating modest fluctuation rather than a steady long-term trend. Breaking the data down by party reveals a stark and persistent partisan divide. In every election cycle, candidates with union backgrounds are far more likely to run as Democrats than as Republicans. Among Democrats, union-affiliated candidates generally make up roughly 5% to 9% of the field, peaking in 2014. Among Republicans, by contrast, union backgrounds are rare, never exceeding about 3% in any cycle and usually closer to 2%.

As a result, the overall pattern is driven almost entirely by Democratic candidates. Across the entire 2010–2022 period, a candidate with union experience is consistently two to four times more likely to be running as a Democrat than as a Republican, underscoring how union background functions as a distinctly partisan characteristic in congressional candidacies rather than a neutral professional trait.

We offer a range of additional statistics about union candidates in the online appendix, including summaries of union candidates' occupational histories and demographic backgrounds, the primary unions represented among union candidates, and the most common states where they run. Among other interesting data points, union candidates are substantially more likely (by 32.9 percentage points) to have held working-class occupations than nonunion candidates, suggesting that they are also more likely to relate to working-class issues simply by virtue of their class backgrounds.

Share of union-affiliated candidates by year

FIGURE 9



Why Do Union Members Run for Office?

In the series of interviews conducted to inform the findings of this report, interviewees often shared their perspectives on the reasons why candidates choose to run for office and why other potential candidates do not. Individuals we interviewed largely reported that union candidates run for office because they were asked to do so and were backed by people working in politics.

New Jersey state representative Verrelli had been involved in pro-labor electoral organizing, and eventually there was an opening to run for local office. Someone told him, "You should run." He said, "Well, I'm not a lawyer," but he ran anyway. A couple years later, he ran for assemblyman. Both community members and his union encouraged him to run. New Mexico state representative Chávez said, "It wasn't my idea to run for office. In 2008, I got a phone call from a community organization, and they were exploring the possibility of supporting someone who could run against the incumbent in my district because he was a Democrat. But he was not good on worker issues and really had lost touch with the community." White Plains city councillor Puja added, "In 2019, I was asked to run for local office.… I didn't want to at first. I didn't like politics, but I went to my local Democratic committee to seek their support and was challenged but ultimately won their endorsement."

Further interviewees said that union candidates they know run for office with the motivations to truly shape public policy in service of workers and unions. Waxman, of the national AFL-CIO, said, "Union candidates generally have intentions, you'd hope, to 'shape my community in a positive way, support the efforts of my union at [the] policy level." Norcross: "He didn't want to run for office when he was in the leadership of the state AFL-CIO, but he was told by a union brother, 'If you're not at the table, you're on the menu,' so he ran for New Jersey State Senate." Hernandez: "Though some candidates do decide to run out of a sense of duty or obligation, one of my coworkers asked her if I was going to keep complaining about things or do something about it by running for office. I was not recruited. I decided to run on my own initiative. I tell people running that they need to decide what they're not willing to sacrifice. I decided to give up my time."

Why Don't More Union Candidates Run for Office?

Multiple interviewees pointed to the campaign finance system as a barrier to more union candidates running for office. They also pointed to systems in some states that allow candidates to access public (i.e., government) financing, also called "clean election" policies. Pocan, US representative from Wisconsin, said,

> I think the biggest barrier is money. Money in politics makes it so you can self-fund, and that puts you in many driver's seats. In some districts, it's really hard to run

for office if you're not already either personally wealthy or have money connections. If we had public funding of elections, I think you would see many, many more people of working-class and union backgrounds elected.

Goode, an AFL-CIO staff member in Maine, said, "I think if you're in a state where there's a fundraising challenge or you have to have a lot of money to run, that's a legitimate intimidation. But with clean elections, including public campaign finance, it's just creating a culture that working-class people run — that it's something that you do — and you make friends when you do it that are working class." Former Arizona state representative Hernandez said, "Money also became a factor in choosing to run for office. I'm thankful that, here in Arizona, we do have a clean election system at the legislative level. That created a pathway for me to be able to raise the amount of money needed to run a formidable enough campaign."

Research has found that while clean elections reduce the funding barrier to run for office, public campaign financing as an isolated solution hasn't produced large numbers of working-class candidates.[13] Former US representative Levin added, "First, there's class privilege. You need money to run for Congress. You need to be working overtime running for Congress. Unions can be really good at helping candidates, but unions should have more of a program for that."

An additional reason preventing more union candidates from running may be a lack of labor union programs to facilitate candidates. "There's no union candidate program in New York," said Puja. "I hoped that my campaign would be the catalyst, but it wasn't."

The goal of this report is to provide a broad picture of the contemporary landscape of union candidates and elected officials in the United States and to show the various ways in which having union candidates matters for advancing union and working-class interests, the extent to which unions themselves promote union candidates, and what steps can be taken to increase the ranks of union members among America's elected officials. This section has shown that union candidates have more often run as Democratic Party candidates, although the number of candidates with union backgrounds has been rather low from 2010 to 2022. Further, union politicians and union staff interviewed for this report described how labor union programs to facilitate candidates have been vital, while campaign finance schemes that advantage wealthy individuals prevent working-class and union candidacies.

13 Nicholas Carnes, *White-Collar Government: The Hidden Role of Class in Economic Policy Making*, Chicago Studies in American Politics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

SECTION 4

The Kinds of Candidates Unions Support and How Unions Can Help Elect More Union Members

As we showed in section two, candidates with union backgrounds are more likely to support pro-worker policies and champion labor's priorities once in office. But how often do unions actually support these candidates — and do they also back other candidates with working-class backgrounds who may similarly advance a pro-worker agenda?[14] Examining these patterns matters because unions are perhaps the most important institutions capable of providing the resources — financial, organizational, and strategic — that pro-worker candidates need to compete, especially in crowded Democratic primaries and tough general elections in swing districts.

Previous research offers modest support for the idea that unions focus their campaign finance efforts either on natural representatives of union interests (candidates with a working-class or labor background) or those who champion working-class or union issues on the campaign trail or once in office. For example, Nicholas Carnes finds that members of Congress from working-class backgrounds were more likely to receive labor union donations.[15] Other studies, such as Peter F. Burns et al., show that unions often direct resources to Democrats in competitive races and reward incumbents of both parties who vote for pro-labor legislation, and that legislators who receive the most union support are also those most likely to back pro-union policies.[16]

Yet the broader picture is less clear. Joshua Jansa and Michele Hoyman find that unions contributed less over time to Democratic legislators who supported free-trade agreements, suggesting that unions sometimes use campaign contributions to punish members who vote against their core priorities. Yet they also show that unions are reluctant to support Democratic challengers against incumbents, even when challengers are more closely aligned with labor on trade issues.[17] Earlier work by Richard Hurd and Jeffrey Sohl similarly finds that union support for candidates in the 1980s was often split between backing ideological allies and providing strategic assistance to more conservative candidates to maintain access to lawmakers. They also describe how the AFL-CIO's electoral strategy during this period emphasized identifying races where union help could be decisive, while individual unions often weighed a candidate's fundraising capacity alongside their AFL-CIO ratings when making endorsements.[18]

Our results in this section provide a similarly mixed, though largely negative, picture of unions' financial support for pro-union candidates. While on the one hand we find clear evidence that unions offer disproportionate support to candidates with a union background, we do not find that union money is more likely to go to working-class candidates or to candidates who promote a broadly pro-union agenda.

Union Support for Union Candidates

We first look at union spending on union candidates. In figure 10, we compare the average amount union PACs spent on union vs. nonunion Democratic candidates between 2010 and 2022, and the average share of all primary spending represented

14 Jared Abbott and Fred DeVeaux, working paper (2026).

15 Carnes, *White-collar government*.

16 Peter F. Burns, Peter L. Francia, Paul S. Herrnson, "Labor at Work: Union Campaign Activities and Legislative Payoffs in the U.S. House of Representatives," *Social Science Quarterly* 81, no. 2 (2000).

17 Joshua M. Jansa and Michele M. Hoyman, "Do Unions Punish Democrats? Free-Trade Votes and Labor PAC Contributions, 1999–2012," *Political Research Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (2018).

18 Richard W. Hurd and Jeffrey E. Sohl, "Strategic Diversity in Union Political Action: Implications for the 1992 House Elections," *IRRA 44th Annual Proceedings* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1992).

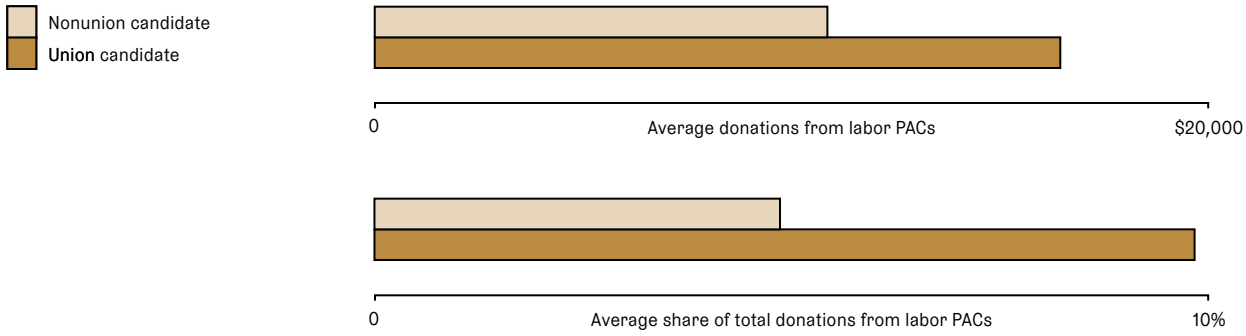
by union contributions in open-seat races where the donations may have impacted election outcomes. The figure both shows that unions spend considerably more on union candidates than other candidates and that their contributions make up a substantially larger share of all primary donations received by union candidates compared to nonunion candidates (9% vs. less than 5% of all primary donations). This suggests that, despite the fact that unions donate almost entirely to incumbents, to the extent they spend money in open-seat races, unions indeed do target union members in primaries, meaning that they likely serve, at least in part, as a vehicle for increasing the prevalence of union candidates in congressional elections.

And these differences don't disappear when we take a closer look. Even after adjusting for the kinds of districts candidates come from and for broader national conditions in each election year as well as incumbency, union candidates still receive more support from unions. This indicates that unions' preference for union candidates is not simply a function of the districts where they tend to run but rather reflects a genuine tendency to direct more resources toward candidates with union backgrounds.[19]

Union Support for Working-Class Candidates

Labor PAC spending by candidate union status in open-seat districts

FIGURE 10



We also examine whether union donations to candidates with working-class backgrounds are higher than those of other PACs. Given that working-class candidates tend to be stronger tribunes of working-class politics than other candidates, we also wanted to investigate whether unions tend to focus on electing working-class candidates.[20] The descriptive results below show a clear pattern: Democratic candidates with working-class backgrounds receive more labor PAC money on average than candidates without such backgrounds in open-seat primaries. Not only do working-class candidates attract higher absolute labor contributions, but labor spending also makes up a larger share of their total primary fundraising. Taken at face value, this suggests that unions may be particularly supportive of candidates who come from the kinds of occupations they traditionally represent.

Those differences, however, disappear under closer scrutiny. When we compare candidates running in similar kinds of districts and account for any possible incumbency effects, working-class candidates no longer receive more union support. This suggests that unions aren't favoring these candidates because of their backgrounds. Instead, working-class candidates tend to run in places where unions are already more active and more willing to spend. In other words, the districts explain the difference, not the candidates' class backgrounds themselves (see results in figure 11).

19 See full regression results in the online appendix.

20 Carnes, *White-collar government*.

Union Support for Pro-Union Candidates

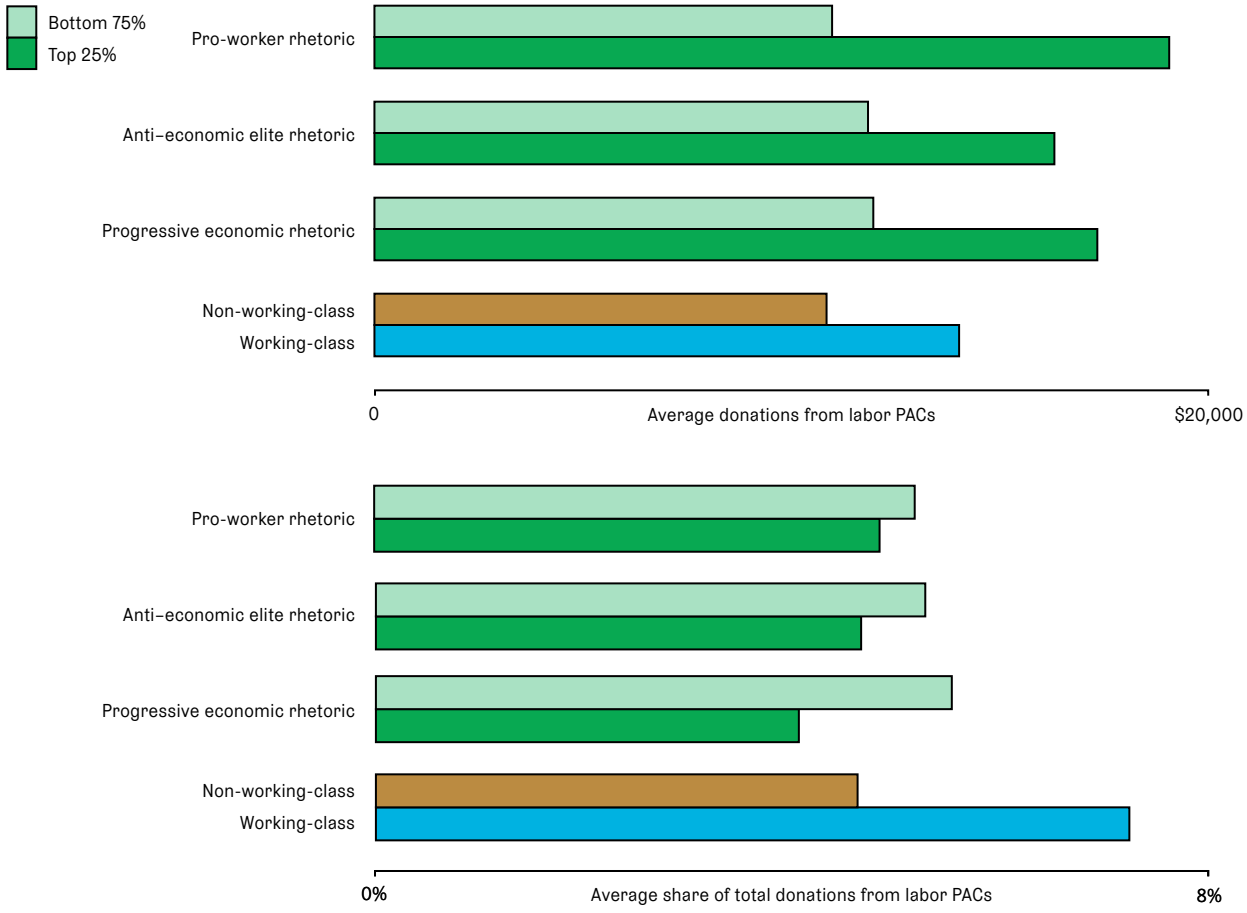
While we have shown that unions do target union candidates, that doesn't mean they target union candidates who are especially likely to advocate a pro-worker agenda. Indeed, as Rodriguez of the AFL-CIO explained, "Just because they're a union-member candidate doesn't mean [they support] the basics of worker rights." To assess the extent to which unions target candidates who advocate a pro-worker agenda, we analyze candidates' campaign rhetoric, focusing on three dimensions: pro-worker, anti-elite, and pro-progressive economics.[21]

Across several dimensions of candidate ideology and rhetoric, we find little evidence that unions consistently favor candidates whose messaging aligns with pro-worker or populist themes. Candidates who use more pro-worker language, criticize economic elites, or emphasize progressive economic issues do tend to receive somewhat more labor PAC money in raw dollar terms. But this does not translate into labor contributing a greater share of their total primary fundraising, which would indicate a stronger or more targeted preference. In other words, even if these candidates raise slightly more from unions, unions are not prioritizing them compared to other Democratic candidates for open seats.

Our more formal analysis points in the same direction (see figure 11). Once we take into account the kinds of districts candidates are running in and whether they are incumbents, we see no clear relationship between candidates' pro-union rhetoric and the financial support they receive from labor.

Labor PAC spending on candidates by candidate type

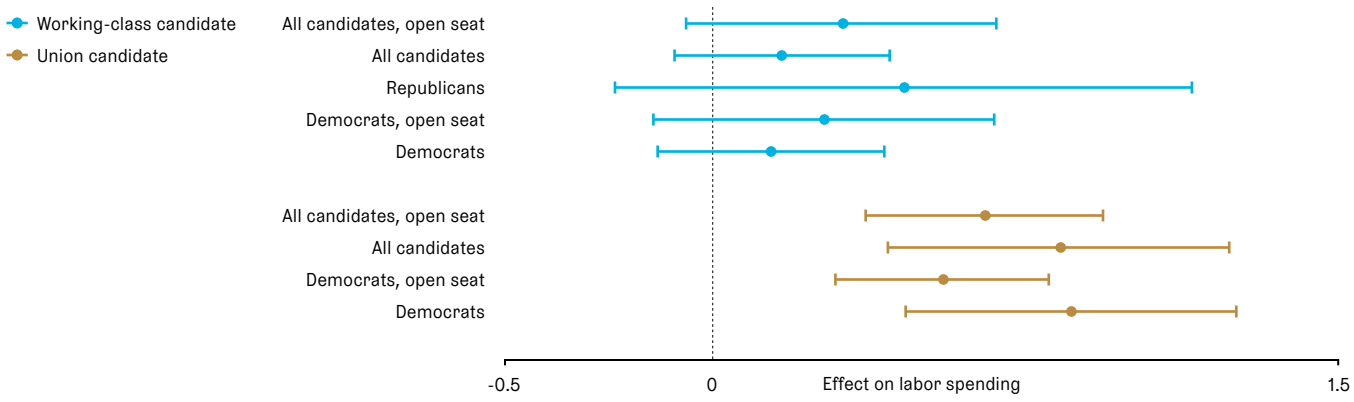
FIGURE 11



21 See discussion of why we focus on these three dimensions and how we measured them above in section 2.

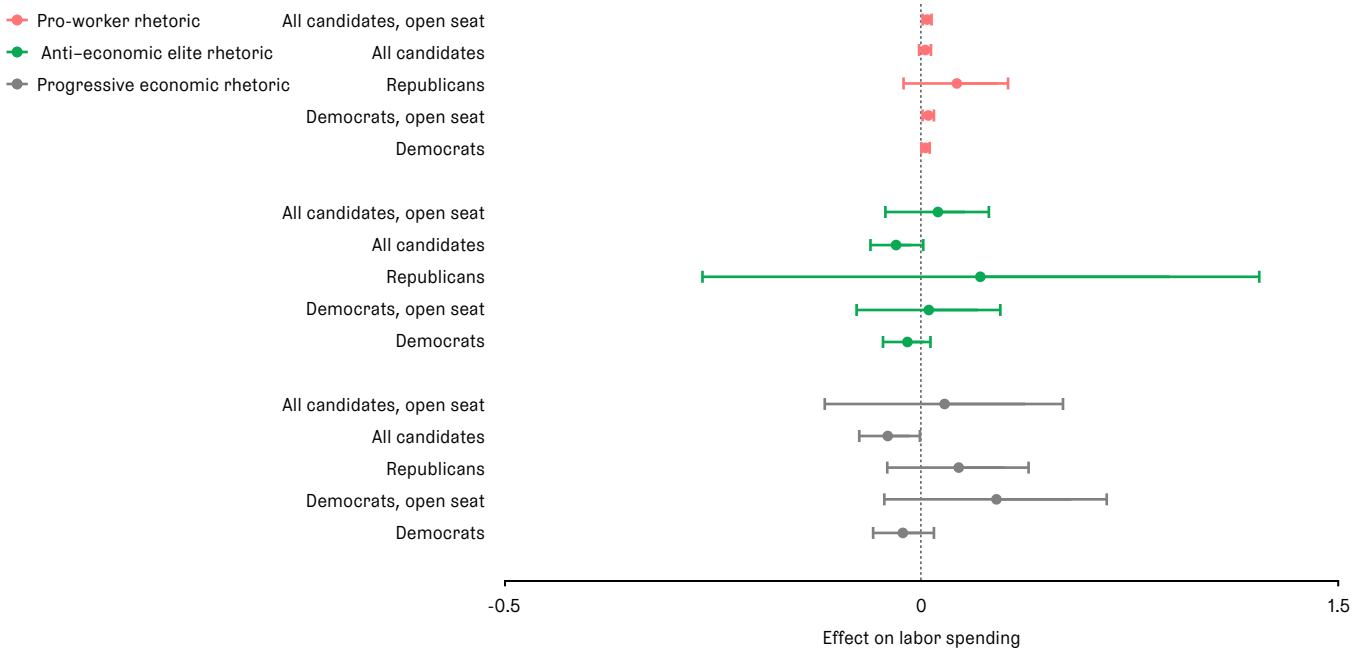
Effects of candidate background on labor PAC share

FIGURE 12



Effects of candidate rhetoric on labor PAC share

FIGURE 13



Regression analyses predict the effect of candidate rhetoric and background on labor PAC spending. Models include district and year fixed effects, controls for party, incumbency, and, where applicable, website length. Standard errors are clustered at the district level. Some Republican-only estimates are excluded due to insufficient sample size.[22]

Why Unions Don't Prioritize More Pro-Union Candidates

Interviews with union officials and candidates indicate that unions' decisions about which candidates to support are driven primarily — and rationally — by short-term strategic considerations. Leaders repeatedly stressed that while they may value having union members or working-class people run for office, their main concern is backing candidates who can win against Republicans. As Waxman of the AFL-CIO put it, "Unions, like most donors, tend to back candidates that can raise their own money and demonstrate a capacity to win." Joe Murphy of the Arizona AFL-CIO echoed this

22 See full regression results in the online appendix.

emphasis on viability, explaining that labor will only support a candidate "who can raise their own funds,… staff their own campaign,… knock doors,… send mailings,… without labor support — then the support will come in." Since prospective union or working-class candidates are more likely than others to fall short on these benchmarks, they often lack the fundraising base or organizational infrastructure needed to signal competitiveness.[23]

Consistent with our finding in section 1 that the vast majority of union campaign contributions go to incumbents, interviewees also highlighted unions' broader strategic caution and reluctance to take risks in competitive environments. Hernandez noted that in Arizona unions rarely have the bandwidth to cultivate union-member candidates from scratch, emphasizing that such candidates are usually not "ready-to-go." Chavez, the state representative in New Mexico, recalled that unions were hesitant to support her when she first ran against an incumbent, only stepping in during her subsequent campaign when the risk was lower.

Others agreed that recruiting union candidates is simply not a priority for most union leaders — not because they oppose the idea but because they feel constrained by limited resources and competing priorities. Rodriguez underscored this reality. She acknowledged that developing union-member candidates is important and praised state-level AFL-CIO programs that do it well (more on this later), but said the national federation simply cannot afford to expand such initiatives ("Man, I wish we had those kinds of resources.… We just don't have millions to put in"). For Rodriguez, the barrier is not lack of interest but the hard financial choices unions must make about where their efforts matter most.

Former representative Levin offered a sharper critique. He noted that many union leaders he worked with "didn't think this was important." Yet he was less pessimistic about the financial viability of investing in union candidate recruitment programs than Rodriguez. Unions spend "[millions] on campaigns." he noted. "What if they put 2% into getting their members elected?" Even a modest shift in priorities, he suggested, could dramatically expand the number of union members and working-class people serving in public office.

None of this, of course, suggests that unions never help union candidates. As shown above, unions are disproportionately likely to support candidates with union backgrounds, and when they choose to do so, their support can be critical, providing field capacity, political expertise, mobilization networks, and candidate training programs that many working-class candidates cannot easily build on their own.

It is also important to note that there are clear precedents for more robust national-level programs along these lines, such as the AFL-CIO's "Target 5000" program in the early 2000s and its precursor, the "2000 in 2000" program, which, according to the union, helped to elect "thousands" of union candidates to political office around the country.[24] And more recently, according to Waxman, whose team has compiled a list of union candidates endorsed by unions running for office around the country, nearly 700 union candidates were elected between 2018 and 2022, in part due to existing state-level union candidate training programs and the national AFL-CIO's Path to Power program, which, according to the union, has "trained hundreds of people to run for office."[25]

How Unions Can Help Elect More Union Candidates

Despite the evidence above that unions typically do not prioritize pro-union candidates, it's clear that they can and do often work to strengthen the electoral campaigns of their own members. Unions sometimes even recruit candidates to run for office.

One way unions can give their candidates an edge in campaigns is to motivate their members to get out the vote for their union brothers and sisters running for office. Councillor Puja said,

23 Abbott and DeVeaux, working paper.

24 Sojourner, "Do Unions Promote Members' Electoral Office Holding?"; Executive Council of the AFL-CIO, *Executive Council Report* (Washington, DC: AFL-CIO, 2009), aflcio.org/sites/default/files/2017-03/2009fullreportEC.pdf.

25 *2025 AFL-CIO Year-End Report* (Washington, DC: AFL-CIO, 2025), aflcio.org/2025.

> My [union] delegates were coming out weekend after weekend and got it. The apprentices in Local 30 were very helpful as well, and all of our sister locals. It was just such a collaborative effort. I share that victory with all of them. Just about every single weekend we were knocking thousands of doors, making so many contacts, and it works. I was a first-time candidate, a family name that was never in politics. The boots on the ground — it makes a difference. Because they're invested.

Get-out-the-vote methods such as canvasing can also influence union members to vote for union candidates. Former state representative Hernandez felt, "I wouldn't be where I am today without the unions. They poured support into my campaign. The number one thing they did for me was knock on doors and share their stories as union members and about why they wanted a fellow union member to represent them. They know the power that they bring."

Unions can also help candidates raise campaign funds. Former state representative Andrade said, "I was able to get some significant PAC checks from unions in my first campaign. That helped a lot. I was gonna run to represent my district, which was primarily Latino."

In addition to powering campaigns of union candidates, investing and building out successful union candidate training programs (e.g., in New Jersey, Alaska, Indiana, and Washington) could help build out the pipeline and put forward more successful campaigns. Goode of the Maine AFL-CIO reported that 75% of people in his candidate training program are union members and that the vast majority of the union candidates running for office went through the program. In total, he reported that, in 2024, 13 Democrats running for office out of 34 state representative districts in Maine were union members.

County Commissioner Luciano, a current instructor at the candidate labor school, similarly touted its training potential. He reported that the school made a big difference in his first campaign and helped him figure out the basics of how to run for office. He couldn't hire any "fancy political people," he said, which meant that he really needed the help. In turn, he believes that having the union — and not the Democratic Party — run the program really matters because there's a sense of everybody being on the same page.

City Councilmember Soto-Martínez also extoled the influence of labor candidate training programs: "The Los Angeles Labor Federation leader has a training academy to get more union folks into politics. I took one of those classes on civic engagement and was really inspired by it."

All interviewees involved in these training programs described the programs as very beneficial. "I took the candidate training program before running for office," said State Representative Verrelli. "My own union had a political director and he learned a lot, but the AFL-CIO candidate school brought everything together. It was soup to nuts, one-stop shopping."

By cultivating more union candidates, unions also help increase the political engagement of their own members and the likelihood that they will vote for pro-worker candidates. Specifically, Rodriguez explained that survey research conducted by the AFL-CIO found that union members were 36% more likely to vote for a candidate if they were a union member and 33% more likely to vote overall. This can create a virtuous cycle where increasing the number of union candidates leads to more political engagement of union members, some of whom may then become more interested in running for office themselves.

CASE STUDY

The Alaska AFL-CIO Labor Candidate Program

In 2022, the Alaska AFL-CIO welcomed the inaugural cohort of the Arthur A. Allman Labor Candidate School, an electoral candidate training program for union members. The program was made possible by a generous gift from Teamsters member Arthur Allman, who passed in 2021 and left his home in Anchorage to the Alaskan labor movement.

Brother Allman would be happy to know that the program that bears his name has already seen great success. According to the Alaska AFL-CIO leaders we interviewed, of the 26 trainees who have completed the program, 12 have run for office and 8 have been elected to offices ranging from the state senate and house to city council and borough

assembly. A 30% success rate for a new candidate school is a fairly remarkable outcome, and that's not even counting the trainees who still plan to run for office.

In the lead-up to its opening, Political Director Kim Hays and Deputy Political Director Alex Pieter Baker looked to other states, including New Jersey, Washington, Oregon, and Texas, for examples on which to model their own program. Ultimately they settled on a few key parameters. The training program would be in-person rather than via Zoom, acknowledging that face-to-face connections in local political networks are as important as the content of the training itself. They also wanted the program to be run by local labor people rather than consultants or national figures. The hope was that candidates could see themselves working alongside just about everybody they'd meet at the training, including local campaign directors, communications specialists, and other campaign staffers, thus minimizing the number of outsiders in the room.

The school runs for an entire weekend, starting on a Friday afternoon with an informal networking reception and dinner. On Saturday morning, the day begins with presentations from union members from building trades, the public sector, nursing, education, and other unionized industries in the state to help candidates understand the issues that unions care about and how to communicate them. "Project labor agreements" might be a phrase that trainees have never heard before, but they'll know all about them afterward. Then candidates learn about the nuts and bolts of campaigning: building a budget, fundraising, calculating votes to win, working with a voter database, crafting a narrative and campaign plan, and building a website and social media account. In all cases, the learning is experiential: candidates are shown how to build a budget, then actually build one for themselves.

On Sunday, the school runs a mock town hall, inviting in 20 to 30 people to pepper trainees with questions. What do you think about project labor agreements? Do you support raising the minimum wage? Do you support safe staffing ratios at hospitals? After the mock town hall, everyone then goes out canvasing, trying out stump speeches on the doorsteps of everyday Alaskans. The unofficial motto of the Labor Candidate School is "Get comfortable being uncomfortable." According to Baker, "Many new candidates for assembly or state house are so uncomfortable. They're not used to having their name plastered all over mailers or a website. They're not used to asking their friends for money. This training is the first barrier to break down that awkwardness for many people."

For those state federations looking to build a similar program, Baker recommended focusing on getting a good inaugural cohort:

> Think really intentionally about your first class because that's your foundation, that's your precedent.… Some of the candidates we've trained who ultimately were elected to state house or state senate come back and say, "I wouldn't be sitting here with you all if it wasn't for my brothers and sisters who helped train me and give me the resources I needed." When they're saying that to a room full of 200 people who can go back to their union of hundreds or thousands of members and spread the word, it becomes self-legitimizing. People can see, "Oh, I can be up there on that stage too."

CASE STUDY

The New Jersey AFL-CIO Labor Candidate Program

Since its founding more than two decades ago, the New Jersey AFL-CIO's Labor Candidate Program has become one of the most successful and distinctive political training operations in the country. With over 1,300 election victories and a win rate of over 75%, the program has helped union members win elected office at every level of government — from local councils to the state legislature and even Congress — firmly rooting labor's voice in the state's political infrastructure.

The New Jersey AFL-CIO approach takes advantage of significant state union density to employ a member-to-member organizing model for building candidate support. Union members who want to run for office must go through the AFL-CIO's candidate training program and secure their union's endorsement. And unlike many states', New Jersey's AFL-CIO requires candidates to go through their candidate training program

as a condition of endorsement. From there, the federation analyzes the number of union members in a given district, calculates how many votes it would take to win, and builds a campaign plan accordingly. The program now runs about 50 union-member candidates each year.

This "farm team" approach starts small — often at the municipal level, where races are cheaper and more accessible — and creates a clear path for advancement. US representative Norcross, for example, began his political career as a union electrician and city councilmember before advancing to higher office. Importantly, this model doesn't tie itself to one party. About one-third of labor-endorsed candidates in New Jersey are Republicans, and the state labor federation has found that it earns more respect from both parties by maintaining its independence.

The results speak for themselves. With labor-backed candidates in office, New Jersey has passed hundreds of pro-worker laws, including prevailing wage protections, measures against strike-breaking, paid family leave (enacted nearly 20 years ago), day-one strike pay, and one of the country's first card-check laws. These labor candidates have led the charge on many of these legislative victories. Many of those wins have been bipartisan.

Why aren't there more programs like this elsewhere? Charlie Wowkanech, president of the New Jersey AFL-CIO and founder of its candidate training program, told us that he has spent years asking that question. Wowkanech relayed that some states are starting to experiment with similar models. But most still rely on sending labor volunteers to party-controlled campaigns rather than building independent political power. In states with lower union density, labor may need to partner more with community organizations, but Wowkanech argues that even swing states with strong labor unions, unions have lacked vision and political will on this front.

Wowkanech rejects common arguments for why unions don't invest more in cultivating their own members as electoral candidates. For instance, he argues that the lack of union elected officials has nothing to do with not having enough suitable candidates, especially since so many union members and leaders have spent decades developing savvy communication and organizing skills that are easily transferable to electoral campaigns. And it's not because campaigns are too expensive — that's a problem New Jersey's AFL-CIO has solved by starting candidates in local races and working them up through the ranks to state and even federal office. While running for higher office remains expensive, New Jersey's program proves that starting small and investing in grassroots infrastructure can yield enormous long-term results.

Wowkanech thinks that unions' lack of commitment to cultivating candidates from among their own ranks has to do with rational risk aversion among union leadership. He believes national union leaders have just not been shown the value of investing more resources in union candidate training programs and are understandably not interested in diverting scarce resources to what they see as a program with unproven results. As a result, national labor leaders are often loyal Democrats who are reluctant to work outside the traditional box of Democratic politics to embrace the idea that union members should be candidates, not just campaign workers.

But with New Jersey's clear track record of success over decades as a foundation, there is no reason why momentum couldn't build in more union-dense states, from California and New York to Michigan and Nevada, to substantially scale up the program.

Conclusion

The findings in this report point to a fundamental imbalance in contemporary labor politics. While unions continue to participate actively in elections, their influence is increasingly constrained by a political strategy that relies heavily on campaign contributions and defensive endorsements. Union spending now represents only a small fraction of overall campaign finance, and those resources are overwhelmingly directed toward sitting officeholders. This pattern reflects rational short-term calculations, but it also limits labor's capacity to shape the composition of the political class or the direction of policymaking.

At the same time, unions occupy a distinctive position in American public life. Even as formal leverage has weakened, unions remain among the most trusted institutions in the country, particularly relative to political elites and corporate actors. This combination — high legitimacy paired with limited political reach — helps explain why traditional approaches to electoral engagement have yielded diminishing returns. The problem facing organized labor is not a lack of public resonance but a lack of durable mechanisms for translating that resonance into governing power.

One such mechanism, this report shows, lies in the cultivation and election of candidates drawn directly from the labor movement. Candidates and officials with union experience consistently demonstrate a stronger orientation toward workers' interests than their nonunion counterparts. They foreground economic issues central to working-class life, pursue more robust labor policy agendas, and use their experience in collective action and negotiation to exert influence once in office. Interviews with union-affiliated officeholders underscore how these advantages operate in practice, providing credibility in policy debates and strategic competence in legislative bargaining and coalition formation.

Despite these strengths, individuals with union backgrounds remain a marginal presence in the electoral arena. Our analysis indicates that, though they devote limited resources to open-seat races, unions do disproportionately offer financial support to union candidates who run for office. However, they generally do not prioritize building a pipeline of labor-rooted candidates; nor do they consistently back working-class or pro-union contenders more broadly. Instead, limited investments in recruitment and training leave unions dependent on candidate pools shaped by party organizations, donor networks, and activist groups. As a result, labor often faces a choice among imperfect options rather than the opportunity to advance candidates who emerge organically from the movement itself.

This pattern may carry long-term consequences. A political system with few leaders who possess firsthand experience in organized labor is less equipped to represent workers' interests or to maintain strong connections between working-class communities and progressive governance. Relying on short-term electoral viability has come at the expense of sustained capacity-building — both for labor and for the broader coalition that has historically depended on it.

Yet this trajectory is not inevitable. Evidence from select states illustrates that when unions invest in identifying, preparing, and supporting candidates over multiple election cycles, they can produce a deeper bench of officials who remain closely aligned with workers' priorities. These efforts demonstrate that labor's political influence need not be confined to lobbying or campaign finance but can extend into the composition and character of governing institutions themselves.

The broader implication of this report is that organized labor has greater strategic room to maneuver than is often assumed. By shifting resources toward long-term candidate development and independent political infrastructure, unions can strengthen their role as generators of political leadership rather than mere participants in elections. Doing so would not only enhance labor's policy influence but also help reconstruct a political alignment capable of delivering tangible gains for working-class Americans in an era of widespread disaffection with elites.