Organized Labour’s Impact on the 2020 Election

Cooper Pryde

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Organized Labour’s Impact on the 2020 Election

SUBMITTED TO

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BY

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for

SENIOR THESIS

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Table of Contents:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One: History of the Labour Movement</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two: The 2016 Election</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three: Platforms</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Four: Campaign Finance</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Five: Political Organizing</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Six: Congressional Elections</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objection and Rejoinder</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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I would also like to thank my parents for their support throughout the writing process. I know my dad would have preferred to use his office during April, but he ceded it to me, and I am grateful for that.

Lastly, I would like to thank America’s labour movement for helping elect Joe Biden because this would have been a depressing thesis had it not.
Abstract

Against all odds, Donald Trump won the 2016 election. A critical reason why this happened was his support amongst union members. Specifically, this helped him with the crucial Rust Belt swing states of Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. Joe Biden learned from this and ran on the most pro-labour platform in recent history. This platform ingratiated him with union leadership who donated generously to his campaign. Unions also spent considerable resources politically organizing for the campaign. Organized labour’s support was a vital reason why Biden won all three swing Rust Belt states and ultimately the presidency. Organized labour did not only focus on the presidential election though. They donated considerable money to Gary Peters’s campaign for Senate in Michigan as well as seven key House races across the Rust Belt. The labour movement’s support of these down-ballot races enabled the Democrats to take control of both chambers of Congress. The electoral success of labour-backed candidates in 2020 provided much needed hope to organized labour.
Introduction

In his statement about the results of the 2020 presidential election, AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka declared that “Union voters delivered this election for Biden and Harris.”\(^1\) Obviously Trumka was being hyperbolic as the Biden coalition was a big tent; however the idea behind his statement is true. Organized labour was a crucial force in delivering Democrats victories, not only in the presidential election, but also in congressional races. Unions were especially important in the three swing Rust Belt states: Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. There is high union density in these states and they provided essential electoral votes. In 2016, the Hillary Clinton campaign largely neglected unions and voters in these states, and this error cost her the presidency. In 2020, the Biden campaign made sure not to make the same mistakes. Biden’s plan for organized labour was ambitious and included policies such as the PRO Act and a $15 minimum wage, which excited union leadership. Additionally, Biden’s emphasis on shifting manufacturing jobs back to America was effective at energizing rank-and-file union members who blamed globalization for the deterioration of American unionization and the middle-class.

In response to Biden’s plan, unions spent unprecedented sums on the presidential election. Money went both directly to Biden’s campaign through PACs and to outside spending groups which pushed a pro-Biden message. Unions also spent considerable resources politically organizing for the Biden campaign. They phone banked, text banked, dropped literature, and canvassed. The financial support and political organizing that organized labour provided the Biden campaign is all the more impressive given that the COVID-19 pandemic decimated many

unions and radically changed how campaigning worked. Unions also spent considerable money on congressional elections. They donated money to Michigan Senator Gary Peters’s campaign and spent even more money attacking his opponent. Additionally, organized labour was critical in securing six seats for the Democrats in the House of Representatives in swing Rust Belt states. The time, effort, and money expended by unions during the 2020 election did not go to waste as they helped elect not only Biden, but a Democratic Congress as well. This result has restored hope in a labour movement which has been beaten down for decades.
Chapter One: History of the Labour Movement

Understanding the effect of organized labour on the 2020 election first requires an understanding of how the labour movement evolved in America. Its development provides context for analyzing the decisions made in 2020 as well as the political landscape and restrictions that labour operated within.

It is a common belief that the labour movement in America originated in the late 19th or early 20th century. That belief likely stems from the militant labour strikes that took place in that era. In fact, the first labour dispute happened in 1636 when a group of fishermen “fell into a mutiny” after their wages were not paid.\(^2\) Over the next century or so there was sporadic labour conflict, but it was not until 1768 that the first true strike happened when New York tailors refused to return to work following a wage reduction.\(^3\) The early strikes that happened in the mid 18th century were coordinated action, but labour was not truly organized yet. All of the strikes were one-offs and after they were either successful or crushed, the workers disbanded. The closest thing to unions were mutual aid societies but they did not have the same specific economic goals as unions. Instead, their stated purpose was to fulfill “customary fraternal obligations.”\(^4\)

American got its first union in 1794 with the founding of the Federal Society of Journeymen Cordwainers.\(^5\) It was in existence for twelve consecutive years and pushed for better working conditions and wages for its members, even in times when they were not striking. The

main difference between early unions and today’s is that they had highly restricted membership. Only skilled artisans could join and general labourers were specifically excluded. The goal was to maintain the artisans’ high social status which was at risk because the Industrial Revolution raised the wages of general labourers and narrowed the gap between them and the artisans.⁶

Until the early 19th century, unions largely kept out of politics. Political institutions had not been constraining their activities, so they had no reason to become political. That changed when the Journeymen Cordwainers of Philadelphia were taken to court by their employers following recurring strikes. During the proceedings, the judge said that the strike was “pregnant with public mischief and private injury” and that “a combination of workmen to raise their wages may be considered in a two-fold point of view; one is to benefit themselves […] the other is to injure those who do not join their society. The rule of law condemns both.”⁷ The judge’s statement encapsulated the judicial system’s early animosity toward unions. Courts still drew heavily from English common law, which prohibited the organization of workers.⁸ In 1815, the Pittsburgh cordwainers union was ruled to be an illegal organization in and of itself.⁹ The anti-union court rulings of the early 19th century forced unions to get involved in politics. They found allies in the Jeffersonian Republicans who believed that English common law was undemocratic and that the judges’ application of it was infringing on the freedom of the workers. Federalists saw unions as a significant threat to employers and to the economy. For just over a decade,

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unions tried to work with Republicans in local politics, but they soon realized that they were not seeing the results that they wanted and thus launched their own political parties.10

The early union-run political parties started in the late 1820s and 1830s and advocated for free public education, abolition of imprisonment for debts, a more progressive taxation system, anti-trust legislation, and improved working conditions.11 While they were completely separate from existing political parties, they did align themselves with Jacksonian Democrats who shared the unions’ disdain for monopolies. Union parties were not always completely committed to democracy. In 1829 workers in New York State essentially took over the election for state assembly through intimidation and elected a printer, two carpenters, a painter, and a grocer.12

The New York Workingmen’s Party was the most important of these early parties and it was led by Thomas Skidmore who held radical views about private property and wealth accumulation. Skidmore’s utopian socialism did not translate into electoral success though because union members did not make up a large enough percentage of the population to seriously contest election and support from non-union members was limited. The lack of success led to unions largely abandoning the idea of union parties.13

What replaced the union parties more closely resembles union’s political activity today. In 1845 George Henry Evans founded the National Reform Movement. He did not trust third parties and instead wanted to direct union votes towards major parties that supported issues that were important to union members. He had learned from earlier attempts to work within the

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11 Bruce Laurie, Artisans into Workers: Labor in nineteenth century America (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 54.
parties, so instead he amassed a large membership for the National Reform Movement and directed members to only vote for politicians who supported their union centric platform. If no candidates in an election did so, members were instructed to abstain from voting. This tactic got the attention of not only Democrats, but also Whigs who began integrating pro-union policy in their platforms because they were hemorrhaging support from urban workers and small farmers. The Committee ended up being instrumental in the passage of the Homestead Act of 1862 and its success was refreshing for unions that had struggled to influence politics up until that point.

By the late 1800s the labour movement became national. In 1866 the first important national union was founded, the National Labor Union. It largely stood for the same political goals that the previous regional unions did. It aligned itself with the Democratic Party and tried to work within it to achieve an eight-hour workday but it was unsuccessful in doing so. The Knights of Labor formed shortly afterwards in 1878 and they succeeded in amassing 700,000 members by 1886. The rise of the Knights made unions a major national topic. The New York Sun criticized their massive sway, saying that “Five men in this country […] can at any moment take the means of livelihood from 2.5 million souls […] they can stay the nimble touch of almost every telegraph operator; can shut up most of the mills and factories, and can disable the railroads […] they can array labor against capital, putting labor on the offensive or the defensive, for quiet and stubborn self-protection, or for angry, organized assault as they will.” As with many of the ambitious unions before them, the Knights also eventually collapsed. The Knights

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focused on economic warfare and neglected attempts to achieve political change.\textsuperscript{18} Once employers became better equipped to bust strikes through the use of strike-breakers and law enforcement, the Knights had nothing to fall back onto. Additionally, the Knights had radical factions that greatly hurt their credibility and the credibility of the labour movement as a whole. Their alleged involvement in the 1886 Haymarket bombing was the nail in the coffin for most members and their membership plummeted until the 1893 when an economic downturn eliminated any remaining influence they had.\textsuperscript{19}

The failure of the Knights left a gaping hole in the labour movement. The hole was filled by the American Federation of Labor (AFL). It was formed in 1881 after twenty-five different labour groups merged into one. It initially had a membership of 150,000 but under the leadership of President Samuel Gompers it grew to become the most important union federation in America.\textsuperscript{20} Unlike the Industrial Workers of the World, the AFL was more practical than radical. It was primarily concerned with the increasing pressure being put on unions by the judicial branch.\textsuperscript{21} Unlike in the early days of unions when courts drew upon English common law to justify opposing union activity, courts were now using the Sherman Act of 1890. At face value, it seems as if the Sherman Act would benefit unions. It was anti-trust legislation and outlawed explicit cartels and monopolies.\textsuperscript{22} But many judges interpreted the Act to brand unions as a form of monopoly and a roadblock for interstate commerce. The best example was \textit{Loewe v. Lawlor} where the Supreme Court ruled against the United Hatters because their union “restrained

\begin{footnotes}
\item[21] Ibid, 27.
\end{footnotes}
interstate trade.”23 The AFL was directly affected by these Sherman Act rulings in 1907 when the AFL affiliated Molders’ Union declared a boycott of Buck’s Stove and Range Company which was run by the National Association of Manufacturers president James Van Cleave. Van Cleave took the AFL to court over the boycott and had Gompers sent to jail.24 The AFL realized that because it could not directly influence the judicial branch, it needed to influence the Executive branch, which appoints the judges, and the Legislative branch, which confirms the appointments and creates the legislation that they interpret.

Gompers’s political strategy took heavy inspiration from George Henry Evans’ National Reform Movement that existed half a century earlier. Gompers did not want to be affiliated with any party in particular. Instead, AFL members formed councils that drafted policy demands. Those demands were passed on to local politicians whose responses were relayed back to the AFL members. According to labour advocate and historian Clayton Sinyai, the idea was that AFL members became a “highly knowledgeable, independent bloc of swing voters.”25 Their vote was not a given for any candidate, candidates needed to earn their votes. Gompers himself described the AFL’s political action as “aggressive nonpartisan political action,”26 noting that the only thing that the AFL was partisan towards was principle. By the early 1900s, the AFL began a practice that is still used today by unions, deploying full-time grassroots political organizers to key constituencies to try and swing close elections. This step showed that the AFL was willing to sink significant capital into political victories and had an understanding that the government could either be an ally or existential threat to organized labour.

26 Ibid, 83.
In 1906 the AFL sent a Bill of Grievances to President Theodore Roosevelt and both chambers of Congress. The list of grievances was extensive, but its chief demand was to exempt unions from the Sherman Act. The AFL said that it would only support candidates that adopted their policies. If neither major party candidate did so in a given race, a union candidate ran, and AFL members were urged to vote for them. The Democrats were somewhat open to the AFL’s demands and included a plank in their platform that exempted unions from Sherman Act injunctions. The Republicans, whose Presidential candidate was the notoriously anti-labour William Howard Taft, ignored the AFL’s demands. Despite the AFL withholding support from any Republicans and endorsing a litany of Democratic candidates, the Republicans still swept to power in 1908. This failure caused the AFL to switch tactics and begin directly working with the Democrats. During the 1912 election, the AFL worked with Woodrow Wilson’s campaign and the DNC to send union campaign speakers to competitive districts. Despite Theodore Roosevelt’s Progressive Party run for President, the Democrats still prevailed in 1912. To thank the AFL for their help during the election, Woodrow Wilson named William B. Wilson as the first Secretary of Labor. William B. Wilson was a United Mine Workers officer and his appointment made it clear that the Democrats were open to engaging in patronage politics with the unions.

The two decades following the 1912 election were a mixed bag for unions. There was progress by female labour activists like Florence Kelley and Jane Addams who were essential to legislation that eliminated child labour, regulated factory hours, and instituted minimum hours in several states.\(^{32}\)\(^{33}\) In fact, by the end of the Progressive Era thirty-eight states had adopted child labour laws.\(^{34}\) But the Great Depression was a major blow to unions. It is estimated that two million fewer Americans were unionized by 1933 than before the Depression.\(^{35}\) Moreover, lawmakers were becoming concerned with the increasing militancy of many unions whose strikes were slowing inter-state commerce significantly. Instead of cracking down on unions, Congress decided to pass the most important pro-union measure in American history, the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, which is better known as the Wagner Act. Senator Wagner said: “The right to bargain collectively is at the bottom of social justice for the worker, as well as the sensible conduct of business affairs. The denial or observance of this right means the difference between despotism and democracy,” but the real reason it passed had far more to do with making commerce more efficient.\(^{36}\)

The act was enforced by the newly formed National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) and it specifically forbade five unfair labour practices:

1. “Any interference, restraint, or coercion of employees in the exercise of the rights granted.

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2. Domination or interference with the formation or administration of a labor organization or contributing financial or other support to it.

3. Discrimination to encourage or discourage union membership, except that closed-ship contracts were not illegal if made with a union representing the majority of the employees in an appropriate bargaining unit and without illegal assistance by the employer.

4. Discrimination against an employee for filing chargers or testifying under this Act.

5. Refusal to bargain collectively with the legal representative of employees in an appropriate bargaining unit."

The Wagner Act passed in the face of considerable pushback from much of the press and powerful interest groups. Even though it overcame this stiff opposition, its detractors believed that it would be ruled unconstitutional because it fell outside the powers given to Congress through the “Commerce Clause” of the Constitution. Those detractors were shocked in 1937 when in *NLRB v. Jones & Laughlin Steel Corp.* the Supreme Court ruled the Wagner Act was constitutional. Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes said that Congress could regulate economic activity that was “intrastate in character when separately considered.”

The Supreme Court’s decision appeared to prime organized labour for an extended golden era. Unfortunately, this was not the case. The first issue was that the NLRB was woefully unequipped to handle its massive caseloads. The House Appropriations Committee largely consisted of anti-labour members, so the NLRB was routinely underfunded.

Additionally, since the NLRB was a new institution, nobody really understood its role. This ambiguity led to inefficiency. Lastly, the NLRB was unable to fine firms or unions that violated the Wagner Act. Their main power resided in their ability to send cease-and-desist orders which failed to deter many firms. Despite these

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drawbacks, the Wanger Act was still highly beneficial for organized labour. Between 1933 and 1947 union membership exploded from around three million to just under fifteen million.\footnote{Harry A. Millis and Emily Clark Brown, \textit{From the Wagner Act to Taft-Hartley: A Study of National Labor Policy and Labor Relations} (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1950), 35.}

The increased power of labour under the Wagner Act was treated differently by each union. More established unions like the AFL generally tried to resolve issues with employers before striking. On the other hand, newer, more radical unions opted to strike often and were able to shut down sizeable portions of the economy. Congress could stomach this for the first few years of the Wanger Act as it was understood that all actors, including firms, were still figuring out the new institutional landscape and their place in it. World War II then changed everything. When America entered the war in 1941, FDR announced a “No-Strike Pledge” that was signed by the AFL and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which was the other large union federation at the time.\footnote{Nelson Lichtenstein, \textit{Workers’ Struggles, Past and Present: A “Radical America” Reader} (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), 269.} Most other unions tacitly agreed to adhere to this pledge. Upholding the pledge was crucial for organized labour’s future because any act that undermined the war effort would undoubtedly be seen as unpatriotic and jeopardizing the lives of American soldiers. The major unions stood firm on the pledge, however some younger, more radical unions did not and the sporadic strikes that broke out were met with massive backlash from the press and the public.\footnote{Ibid, 273.} These strikes irreparably damaged organized labour in the eyes of many. This backlash enabled the National Association of Manufacturers to organize a movement to roll back the Wagner Act.\footnote{Harry A. Millis and Emily Clark Brown, \textit{From the Wagner Act to Taft-Hartley: A Study of National Labor Policy and Labor Relations} (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1950), 281.} The slogan behind the movement was “equalize the Wagner Act,” and it caught on. Organized labour has never recovered from the result of this movement.
On June 23, 1947 the Labor Management Relations Act of 1947, better known as the Taft-Hartley Act, passed into law. It significantly amended the Wagner Act and essentially declawed labour. The law is extensive, but it can be best summarized in the following eleven points. The Taft Hartley Act:

1. Recognizes the right not to organize or strike and prohibits unions from infringing on this. Employers and unions cannot use coercion in relation to organizing, strikes, or lockouts.
2. Forbids the closed-shop. A union shop is only allowed when majority of workers in the bargaining unit agree.
3. Bans professional employees from being in the same bargaining unit as non-professional employees.
4. Stops unions from making employers discriminate against non-union workers
5. Bans strikes and boycotts for the purpose of requiring the employer to assign employees to a specific job.
6. Allows employers to express their opinions about unions.
7. Allows employers to ask for an election to see if the union represents the employees.
8. Enables employers and unions to raise suits in federal court about breach of contract.
9. Bars the NLRB from being involved in labour disputes unless union officers have sworn that they are not communist.
10. Enables the government to intervene in strikes if it is deemed that they endanger public safety.
11. Separates the investigating and prosecuting departments of the NLRB from the judiciary function.44

The most consequential of these points is number two, the ban on closed shops. The closed shop is a type of union security agreement where an employer is only permitted to hire members of a specific union and employees at that firm are required to remain members of that union. The closed-shop eliminated the free-rider problem which makes it difficult for latent groups to form.45 Without the closed shop, workers realized that they could get the same benefits of collective bargaining without having to pay union dues. When no workers feel an incentive to be

unionized, the union collapses, and nobody gets collective bargaining. This has been the case for countless union locals across the country.

Fortunately for unions, the Taft-Hartley Act did not ban the union shop or the agency shop, the two other main types of union security agreements. The union shop requires that employees must join the elected union within thirty days, or they are fired. Many union contracts contain union shop clauses, but often employers and unions act as if the contract calls for an agency shop. An agency shop is when employees are not required to join the union, but they must pay dues.46

The free-rider problem is compounded by “right-to-work” legislation. Right-to-work legislation is allowed under the Taft-Hartley Act but must pass on a state-by-state basis. It bans all union security agreements, including the union and agency shop.47 This means that workers have little incentive to be a part of a union besides other incidental benefits that are given to union members. Taft-Hartley, in conjunction with the twenty-eight states that have passed right-to-work legislation, has effectively crippled organized labour in America. Since the unionization rate peaked in the early 1950s at 28%, the rate has plummeted. Free riding has dropped the unionization rate to just over 10%, a record low since the beginning of the 20th century.48 Ever since 1947, unions have been fighting tooth and nail to repeal the Taft-Hartley Act and to bring back the Wagner Act and the glory years of unions. It has fundamentally shaped the political aspirations of unions and indeed had a profound effect on the way that unions acted in Rust Belt states during the 2020 election.

Following the Taft-Hartley Act, organized labour knew that it was in serious trouble. Unions scrambled to find ways to regain political support. The most influential strategy was devised by the “right-wing” faction of the CIO. They were not conservatives, but they were certainly not leftists. Their plan was to align themselves with the progressive wing of the Democratic Party and to focus on presidential politics. The thought process was that the President controlled the NLRB and thus had the most direct influence over the well-being of unions. They did realize that overturning the Taft-Hartley Act required congressional support, but they banked on a strong President being able to craft the party line and to be the driving force behind legislation. This strategy made sense given the recent changes in presidential politics.

Before FDR, the policy agenda was largely crafted in the legislative branch. Occasionally some measures would originate in the executive branch, but it was relatively rare. Generally, the only times Presidents would advance their policy agenda was during the State of the Union address. FDR changed this pattern because he crafted and advanced the policy agenda during his time as President. His presidency established that a President must be “assertive, energetic, and solve problems” and the public began to expect that out of Presidents.

President Truman was ending the second year of his presidency when the Taft-Hartley Act passed, and he had already established that he planned to be just as assertive as FDR. In May of 1946 railway workers were striking across the nation. In response, Truman gave a speech to Congress where he called for legislation to draft all railroad strikers into the military. While this did not end up happening because the railway workers ended up striking a deal, it showed

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that Truman was prepared to push for drastic measures and was not willing to stand for the hardball tactics of certain union leaders. He even penned a letter to Congress where he called on veterans to “eliminate” the union leaders involved in the strike, implying that he wanted them killed. That being said, Truman was generally a pro-labour President. He vetoed the Taft-Hartley Act, but the veto was overridden in the Senate. Labour was just not Truman’s first priority; it was national defence. That is why he occasionally took anti-union measures, like seizing control of the nation’s saw mills during a strike in 1952.52 Truman’s actions both for and against unions made the CIO’s presidency-centric approach seem prudent.

In 1952, labour supported Democrat Adlai Stevenson who represented the liberal wing of the Democratic Party. His adversary was the former Supreme Allied Commander of Europe and war hero Dwight Eisenhower. Eisenhower was not anti-union, but he was not going to drive pro-union policy. The CIO endorsed Stevenson on August 14th and the AFL followed on September 23rd. While the CIO’s endorsement was expected, the AFL’s was not. It was the first time the AFL had ever endorsed a presidential candidate.53 Labour unified behind the candidate who gave them the best chance to repeal Taft-Hartley and craft new pro-union legislation. Despite all of labour’s effort, Stevenson lost the electoral college 442-89 and the popular vote 55.2% to 44.3%. Stevenson was only able to carry the Deep South, Kentucky, and West Virginia, and made no inroads in any major union state.

Organized labour realized that it was unprepared for the 1952 election. They seriously underestimated the amount of effort needed to sway a presidential race and knew they had to be better prepared for 1956. On December 5, 1955 organized labour’s political action became much

more coordinated because the AFL and CIO merged to form what is still the largest federation of American unions to this day, the AFL-CIO. The newly formed federation wasted no time and formed the Committee on Political Education (COPE), the successor to the CIO’s Political Action Committee and the AFL’s Labor’s League for Political Education. Its goal was to ensure that union members voted for union endorsed candidates. The AFL, through an internal study, found that approximately 10% of members had disregarded the union’s endorsement and voted for Eisenhower. It was well established that union members voted at a much higher rate than non-union members so COPE knew that if they could direct their votes effectively then organized labour could begin to have a significant influence on presidential politics. In order to determine which candidates to spend time and resources on, COPE created a pro-labor index which tracked the votes of every member of Congress. It was a predecessor to the scorecards that many interest groups have for members of Congress today. COPE hoped that the unified efforts of organized labour alongside a more strategic approach would lead to a better result for Stevenson in 1956 who was once again the Democratic nominee. But Stevenson lost the electoral college 457-73 to the Ike-Nixon ticket and only mustered 42% of the popular vote. This result was not surprising. Ike was at the helm of a stable economy, he ended the Korean War, and leading up to the election he tactfully dealt with foreign policy crises in both Hungary and Egypt. Realizing that Stevenson had little chance, COPE did not entirely focus on the presidential election. In fact, they spent most of their resources on congressional elections with the intention of having enough seats to override Eisenhower’s vetoes. This goal was not achieved in the short

57 Ibid, 176.
run. Democrats only picked up two seats in the House and no states changed hands in the Senate elections.\(^{58}\) The lack of change in 1956 was disheartening for organized labour, but by no means did they quit. Just as organized labour has done from the start of their political engagement, they learned from their mistakes and pushed forward.

The midterm election in 1958 was COPE’s first large-scale victory. Between 1956 and 1958 pro-business groups organized right-to-work initiatives in several states including California and Ohio. These initiatives energized organized labour and they were a driving force behind the blue wave that washed over Congress in that election.\(^{59}\) Republicans lost forty-eight House seats, thirteen Senate seats, and seven governorships. The influx of northern and western Democrats into Congress made GOP control of either chamber of Congress a practical impossibility for the next two decades. Republicans did not regain control of the Senate until 1980 and they were the minority in the House until 1994. The long-lasting effects of this victory saved the labour movement from right-wing attacks for decades.

Finally, in 1960 the Democrats regained control of the presidency. Democratic nominee John F. Kennedy was able to carry some of the most union-dense states like New York, Michigan, and Illinois with the help of union support. Interestingly enough, organized labour was not as unified as it had been in the previous two presidential elections. The International Brotherhood of Teamsters, which was led by Jimmy Hoffa and had recently been kicked out of the AFL-CIO, endorsed Republican Richard Nixon because of Hoffa’s feud with the Kennedys.\(^{60}\) During the first debate, JFK even stated “I’m not satisfied when I see men like Jimmy Hoffa, in

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charge of the largest union in the United States, still free.” Hoffa’s dissent was not strong enough though and organized labour was poised to make considerable gains.

There was significant progress made under the Kennedy administration. Executive Order 10988 recognized the right of federal workers to collectively bargain. This right has been crucial to the continued survival of organized labour because union members are disproportionately public employees today. Unions hoped that the Taft-Hartley Act would also be repealed during a Kennedy administration. As a freshman House member, he voted against its passage. Also, only a year before his election, he gave a speech criticizing President Eisenhower’s use of the Taft-Hartley Act to break strikes in the steel industry. He called the act an “ace-in-the-hole” for corporations and noted that it left workers “broke” at the end of the year while “companies end it with record profits.” Moreover, in a 1954 Atlantic cover story Kennedy argued that the effects of the Taft-Hartley Act in the south had been disastrous for manufacturing elsewhere in the country. He aimed to fix it with “positive action” that would raise wages for southern workers. Even during his term as President, that positive action never happened.

Unions did not fare any better under JFK’s Vice-President, Lyndon B. Johnson. There was hope that Johnson would include organized labour in his “Great Society” domestic program.

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LBJ instead focused on Medicare, immigration reform, education, and civil rights. At this point organized labour had given up hope that the entirety of the Taft-Hartley Act could be repealed. They were instead pushing for Section 14B to be repealed, the section that enabled right-to-work legislation. This had not happened, despite the Democrat’s control of Congress and the presidency, because fifteen states had right-to-work laws in 1964. A lot of these states were southern Democratic states whose members would never repeal Section 14B. Southern Democrats’ influence in Congress stifled a lot of pro-union legislation until the last years of the 20th century. The closest unions ever got to repealing it was when Senate Republican leader Everett McKinley Dirksen offered AFL-CIO President George Meany a deal. Dirksen would stop opposing the repeal of Section 14B if Meany went along with a constitutional amendment to overturn Baker v. Carr, a 1962 Supreme Court case. The case upheld that courts could hear redistricting cases and introduced the “one person one vote” standard which meant that each person had to be counted equally in redistricting. Meany claimed that he did “not want it that badly. And the Senate Minority Leader and all his anti-labor stooges can filibuster until hell freezers over before I will agree to sell the people short for that kind of a deal.” Thus, right-to-work legislation stayed, and the impenetrable wall erected by it around the Deep South continued to frustrate organized labour.

Organized labour thought they might have another opening in 1968. Hubert Humphrey was LBJ’s VP and had long been a darling of organized labour. When COPE began operations, he was exactly the type of liberal Democrat that they wanted to transform the party. Since

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67. Ibid.
68. Ibid.
1955, Humphrey’s liberal credentials had dulled due to the Johnson administration’s unpopularity among progressives because of the Vietnam War. Nonetheless, Humphrey was still labour leadership’s choice and after LBJ announced that he was not running for re-election, all eyes turned to Humphrey. George Meany called Humphrey asking him to announce his candidacy but was turned down. Meany then called LBJ to ask that he demand Humphrey announce. That request was similarly turned down. Eventually, on April 27, 1969, Humphrey announced that he was running. From the onset, LBJ advised him that Rust Belt states would be central to his victory. This made the symbiotic relationship between Humphrey and labour clear as Humphrey needed labour to carry those key states in a general election and labour needed Humphrey to end the decades long decline that they had been suffering through. Despite desperate attempts from Senators Eugene McCarthy and George McGovern, Humphrey secured the nomination by over a thousand delegates and faced off against Richard Nixon and segregationist third-party candidate George Wallace in the general election.

As much as labour wanted Humphrey to win, they were unable to deliver many of the all-important Rust Belt states to him. This failure was partly due to labour’s inability to persuade their own members to vote for Humphrey. Many white union workers were drawn to Wallace’s rhetoric. He criticized the “pointy-headed bureaucrats” that he claimed were asking the working class to foot the bill for civil rights and welfare programs. He further berated bureaucrats in his stump speech, saying “our lives are being taken over by bureaucrats, and most of them have beards,” indicating that the government was controlled by hippies and leftist academics.

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73 Ibid.
Moreover, his relatively blatant racism, anti-Semitism, and xenophobia were well received by a lot of union workers who were looking for someone to blame for the alienation they were feeling in an increasingly hierarchical and automated workplace. While Wallace did not win any Rust Belt states, he did potentially swing the result in some of them. Nixon won Ohio by just over 90,000 votes while Wallace got almost 500,000 votes. A lot of Wallace’s votes were undoubtedly white union workers who broke with their leaders’ endorsement and voted for him instead. The situation was similar in Wisconsin and Illinois. Had Humphrey won all three of those states, no candidate would have reached the required 270 electoral votes and the next President would have been whoever gave Wallace a better deal to secure his electoral votes, including a say over Supreme Court nominations. While Humphrey’s defeat cannot be solely placed at the feet of labour, they certainly have to shoulder some of the blame. As disappointing as this episode was for organized labour, it certainly taught them a lesson. They learned that when a former Vice-President who is friendly to organized labour is running for President against a candidate that frequently uses racially charged rhetoric to energize their base, significant organizing is required in order to ensure that the labour friendly candidate wins.

During his second term, Nixon utilized a similar cultural message that Wallace used against him in the election. Nixon’s “blue-collar plan” won over white, working-class voters who paid their taxes on time, believed in traditional values, and supported the Vietnam War. Nixon dubbed this constituency the “Silent Majority.”74 Their antithesis was the “New Left” which consisted of civil rights leaders, hippies, and liberal academics.75

The Hard Hat Riot of 1970 best exemplified culture war that the Nixon administration fostered and profited from. A group of students were protesting the Vietnam War on Wall Street when they were confronted by a group of union construction workers who brutalized them. Soon, a melee of approximately 20,000 people formed and one hundred were left injured. Police were present but failed to step in. After attacking the protestors, the “hard hats” went to City Hall where they raised the flag which had been at half-mast to honour the victims of the Kent State shooting.

Instead of disavowing the violence, Nixon leaned into it. He invited Peter Brennan, the president of the Building and Construction Trades Council of Greater New York, to the White House. Brennan presented Nixon with a hard hat inscribed with “Commander in Chief” which Nixon happily accepted. Nixon’s tacit support of the Hard Hat Riot ingratiated himself with white union members who saw him as an ally against the “radicals” of the era.

The remainder of the 1970s saw a modest decline in union membership but no dramatic changes. Then in 1980, former Screen Actors Guild union leader Ronald Reagan swept the nation, winning 44 states and 489 electoral votes. Similar to Wallace before him, Reagan recognized that he could still court union votes even if he was despised by the leadership of almost every union in America. The AFL-CIO did an admirable job of trying to stop a repeat of 1968. They distributed several million four-page newsletters to union members about Reagan’s past opposition to collective bargaining rights, occupational health standards, and safety law provisions in California. The United Auto Workers acted similarly, spreading an even longer

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document amongst their workers which decried not only Reagan’s economic policies but also his foreign policy which they claimed brought America closer to war. These efforts were not enough to stop Reagan, and given the weak economy of the late 1970s, the oil shocks, and Reagan’s dominance in his one debate with Jimmy Carter, there was likely nothing organized labour could have done to prevent Reagan’s victory. The ensuing dozen years were the worst for organized labour since 1947.

A sizeable amount of what damaged unions during the 1980s was not policy specifically directed to cripple unions in the way that Taft-Hartley was. Some damage stemmed from a philosophical change that swept over both Washington and the nation. Rugged individualism and conservatism permeated America and monumentally changed the power relations between firms and unions. It would be easy to attribute the shift to Reagan’s policies. While this is certainly true to some degree, it is important to note that the only reason Reagan was in power in the first place was a conservative cultural wave. Americans were increasingly mistrustful of government following Nixon’s Watergate scandal and the bloodshed in Vietnam. Additionally, many white Americans were drawn to conservatism in response to their frustration with the increasingly integrated and multicultural society that emerged during the 1960s and 70s. This cultural shift was antithetical to the goals of organized labour. The solidarity that unions preached was antiquated in the new individualistic age. Thus, even without considering Reagan’s policy, it is no wonder that unionization rates plummeted in the 1980s.

The cultural issues that unions faced were compounded by the militant attitude Reagan had towards unions. This can be seen by looking at his federal appointments. He initially

appointed John van de Water as chair of the NLRB, but he was denied by the Republican majority Senate because he cut his teeth as a management consultant advising companies on how to break unions.\footnote{Warren Brown, “Reagan Nominees Lean Towards Management,” The Washington Post, September 7, 1981, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1981/09/07/reagan-nominees-lean-toward-management/948cf5c4-c17b-4df8-bfcd-d3b2e2fda63/.} Donald Dotson, who ended up being confirmed as chair, was not any better for unions. He was called a “staunchly anti-union crusader” by Senator Jesse Helms.\footnote{Joan Flynn, “A Quiet Revolution at the Labor Board: The Transformation of the NLRB, 1935-2000,” \textit{Ohio State Law Journal} 61, no. 1 (2001): 1385.} Unions were running out of options now that one of their only legal sources of recourse was firmly on the side of employers.

The most dramatic assault on unions came on August 5, 1981 when Reagan fired 11,345 air traffic controllers. They were all federal employees and Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) union members.\footnote{Bryan Craig, “Reagan vs. Air Traffic Controllers,” University of Virginia Miller Center, August 3, 1981, https://millercenter.org/reagan-vs-air-traffic-controllers.} Leading up to August 5th, PATCO and the government disagreed about how much air traffic controllers’ salaries should be raised. The government offered an 11.4% increase. In the Reagan administration’s eyes this was a relatively generous offer and was a reward for PATCO being one of the only unions to endorse Reagan in the 1980 election.\footnote{Joseph Anthony McCartin, \textit{Collision Course: Ronald Reagan, the Air Traffic Controllers, and the Strike That Changed America} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 240.} PATCO was not satisfied with this proposed raise. PATCO members only earned $36,613 annually, which was 18% less than the private sector, and over the previous decade PATCO wages had not increased on par with the consumer price index. PATCO countered the government’s offer by demanding an immediate $10,000 wage increase for all controllers, a 10% wage increase after one year, a 1.5% wage increase for every one percent increase in the consumer price index, a 30% bonus for training, and a four-day workweek with three
consecutive days off. The two sides were clearly very far apart but the aggressive position taken by PATCO was more of a bargaining tool than an actual expectation. When negotiations formally began in 1981, it was clear that the Reagan administration was taking a private sector approach to public unions. The government hired Morgan, Lewis, & Bockius, a law firm who, according to historian Joseph Anthony McCartin, were “known for aggressively representing employer clients in labor negotiations.” Despite the government’s bold move, some progress was made during the spring of 1981. A tentative proposal was agreed upon by negotiators on June 22nd, but PATCO members resoundingly voted it down on July 29th. This made the strike that began five days later inevitable. Very few PATCO members crossed the picket line on August 3rd and the Reagan administration was backed into a corner as it was estimated that the strike would cost the country $150 million per day. In response, Reagan issued PATCO an ultimatum; if PATCO workers did not return to their jobs in the next 48 hours, they would be fired. Reagan was not bluffing. After two days he fired all of the striking PATCO members and barred all of them from working for the federal government for life.

The PATCO strike emboldened employers to not give into the demands of unions and discouraged potential strikers across the country. It showed that the best tool unions had, the strike, was not omnipotent. It was a rude awakening to the new neoliberal age that America was entering and marked the beginning of an even steeper decline in union membership that is yet to cease.

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87 Ibid, 258.
Although no President since Reagan has taken as drastic a step as busting the PATCO union, there have been significant actions taken by Presidents since. The most important development during President Clinton’s term was the North American Free Trade Agreement. Obviously, the impetus behind NAFTA was increased efficiency stemming from trade liberalization, but it had the unfortunate side effect of exporting many American union jobs to Mexico. It became economically unwise for firms to pay union wages in America when they could pay pennies on the dollar to move their operations to Mexico. As of 2019, there has been a 17% reduction in automotive manufacturing jobs in America.\(^89\) This has severely impacted Rust Belt states like Michigan. This trend is not unique to auto manufacturing. A similar decline has been seen across manufacturing industries, many of whom are largely unionized industries.

Following Clinton, the Bush administration was generally not positive for organized labour. A 2008 report from the Government Accountability Office criticized Bush’s Secretary of Labor, Elaine Chao, on a number of fronts, including failing to investigate wage claims made by low-wage workers and facilitating the “deterioration” of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.\(^90\)

The Obama administration was certainly a welcome change for unions, but Obama was not their saving grace. He did not promise anything miraculous in his 2008 campaign. His main offering to labour was that he would end tax breaks for firms that outsource jobs, which he did.\(^91\) Moreover, he did issue a number of pro-union executive orders that were applauded by labour leaders. This did not do much to stop the bleeding and by the end of Obama’s eight years a

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smaller percentage of the work force was organized than when he began. One of the key reasons that unions shrunk under Obama was that a number of states adopted right-to-work legislation during his presidency. Chief among them were Wisconsin and Michigan. In the year after Wisconsin passed right-to-work legislation, the unionization rate dropped by 3.4%.93

Organized labour has not had a true ally as President since FDR. Unions have consistently been let down because either their preferred candidate loses or if they win they do very little to improve labour legislation. The mounting setbacks faced by labour has left it in a dire situation. Just like the early unions who were repeatedly being ruled against in court, modern unions have no choice but to focus on achieving change through politics. Even though it has not been effective for decades, the only way that labour will ever return to its heyday will be if they not only have an ally in the White House, but also sufficient congressional support to usher in a new era that emphasizes the working class.

Chapter Two: The 2016 Election

On Tuesday November 8, 2016, millions of Democrats turned on their TV, flipped the channel to CNN or MSNBC, and expected to celebrate as Hillary Clinton was announced as the first female President of the United States. As the night progressed, disconcerting results started to stream in. Relatively early on in the night the major networks called Ohio for Trump.\(^\text{94}\) That one result did not sink Clinton’s chances, but it was not a good sign because the winner of Ohio had gone on to become President in every election since 1964. Only minutes later Trump took Florida’s twenty-nine electoral votes and not long after that he won North Carolina.\(^\text{95}\) These were all states that Obama won in 2008. Pollsters believed Clinton would carry at minimum one of them. This left Clinton with three states that she absolutely needed to win: Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin. FiveThirtyEight’s election forecast gave Clinton a 77% chance to win Pennsylvania, a 78.9% chance to win Michigan, and an 83.5% chance to win Wisconsin.\(^\text{96}\)\(^\text{97}\)\(^\text{98}\) Overall, that gave Clinton a 50.7% chance of carrying all three states. But the results coming in did not reflect those odds. Trump looked poised to take at least one of those states, if not more. At 2:30AM on November 9\(^\text{th}\), it became clear that not only had Trump won one of those states, he won them all. Before the night began, there was a projected 0.8% chance of that happening. To call Trump’s victory a shock would be an understatement.

\(^{95}\) Ibid.
The surprise that Democrats and even many Republicans felt on Election Day was reasonable. All of the polling indicated a Clinton victory. In hindsight, it becomes increasingly clear why Trump won those three key swing states to clinch the election. All three states are working-class states whose economies are dependent on manufacturing. The percentage of Wisconsin and Michigan’s population working in manufacturing is almost double the national average of 7.9% and Pennsylvania is still well above it at 9.5%. Manufacturing used to be the core of the American economy and a heavily unionized industry. At its peak in 1968 manufacturing’s employment as a share of the American economy was just over 25%. The point is that American manufacturing had been dying for almost fifty years in 2016. This trend is especially dramatic in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania where the entire economy used to revolve around manufacturing. A 1960 survey of Detroit residents found that 40% of them worked in manufacturing. Although more manufacturing does happen in urban centers like Detroit, it still goes to show how many good paying manufacturing jobs have left the Rust Belt.

A mass exodus of jobs over a multi-decade period has had a profound effect on many of the people who live in these states. It created feelings of being left behind by society. The

economy moved past the era when manufacturing was the centerpiece of the American economy and people in these states were not taken with it. There was not a sufficient welfare state to support the people who lost their jobs because the Reagan administration, and many administrations since, have greatly reduced the social spending programs that were put in place during the New Deal era and under LBJ as a part of his Great Society domestic plan. Higher education was not an option for many people because the cost to attend college has outpaced inflation. The National Center for Education Statistics found that since 1968 the inflation adjusted price of public college tuition has increased 340%.\textsuperscript{105} Many people in these manufacturing states have been the victim of a modernizing economy but no effective remedy was offered to them by the government.\textsuperscript{106} This left a golden opportunity for opportunist politicians. They could use the region’s discontent to their advantage by offering a solution. Whether that solution is economically wise is beside the point because downtrodden, forgotten people are willing to accept any type of solution.

Where did those jobs go? Most of them have either gone overseas or have been automated. Going after automation is a tough sell for politicians. They would appear to be Luddites, not a popular message across the vast majority of the country.\textsuperscript{107} That leaves bringing jobs from overseas back to America as the obvious policy choice for politicians looking to ingratiate themselves in the Rust Belt.

Protectionism is reviled by almost every mainstream economist. The cost to the economy for every job saved is wildly expensive. During the 1980s there were protectionist policies put in


place to save American jobs in textile production. The tariffs cost American consumers $24 billion annually but saved 170,000 jobs.\textsuperscript{108} That means for every job saved the American consumer footed a $140,000 bill. The cost is even higher for manufacturing jobs. Saving jobs in the machine tool industry costs $350,000 per job.\textsuperscript{109} It is obvious that protectionism is not a smart idea. That is why for decades, with the exception of Pat Buchanan, few directly challenged the consensus of free trade and voters in Rust Belt states had nobody to rally around. That is until 2016 when Trump campaigned aggressively on bringing jobs back home as a part of his “America First” platform.\textsuperscript{110} This platform was so successful at courting union votes that the Washington Post called Trump’s support with union members “Reagan-like.” That statement is not an exaggeration either. In 1984 Reagan won 46% of the union household vote and in 2016 Trump won 42%.

Trump’s specific brand of protectionism was not solely focused on bringing jobs back to America because it would help American workers. Another element of his message was far more compelling to Rust Belt voters, xenophobia. Pennsylvania and Wisconsin are both very white states. In 2016, 87% of Wisconsin voters and 82% of Pennsylvania voters were white compared to the national average of 76%. Michigan was still above the average at 79%.\textsuperscript{111} This lends these states to be more susceptible to xenophobic messaging from politicians because majority groups are subject to the psychological phenomenon known as “Group Threat Theory.” Put simply, the theory states that when minorities grow in size or power, the majority group feels vulnerable.\textsuperscript{112}

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.
In America, both are happening. In 1980, white Americans made up just under 80% of the county’s population. By 2020, that numbers had dropped by almost 20% to 60.1%. It is estimated by the Brookings Institute that by 2045 America will be minority white. White people are also losing power. Power is a hard concept to quantify but looking at POC representation in Congress can provide a rough visualization of minorities’ growth in power. In 1960 there were only a handful of POC members of Congress and even in 2001 there were only sixty-three. The Congress elected in 2016 had one hundred and six minority members, a considerable increase just within the 21st century. But consider that POC that are not American citizens also had a substantial impact on American society. As stated before, an increasing number of American firms were moving their production overseas. Globalization has allowed the world to compete for what used to be “American” jobs. Thus, POC all over the world have power that affects white Americans.

The combination of the increasing power of POC at home and abroad was threatening to white Americans and many looked for a way to express their fear and frustration. This is supported by University of Pennsylvania political scientist Diana Mutz’s findings. Using a nationally representative panel survey she found that “White Americans’ declining numerical dominance in the United States together with the rising status of African Americans and American insecurity about whether the United States is still the dominant global economic superpower combined to prompt a classic defensive reaction among members of dominant

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groups."\textsuperscript{116} For the vast majority of Americans, outright racism was not an option they would consider. It was too taboo and almost everybody knew that racism is baseless and morally corrupt. On the other hand, xenophobia is much more palatable for white Americans. It allowed them to voice their anger without appearing to be directly racist. Trump fuelled white America’s xenophobia with his rhetoric about Mexico and China. In his campaign announcement speech, Trump infamously said, “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re not sending you. They’re not sending you. They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.”\textsuperscript{117} The narrative of Mexican immigrants being violent criminals that are defiling America is not a new one, however it has been decades since it was so explicitly used by a mainstream American politician. Trump made it clear to voters that he was unashamed to blame foreigners and immigrants for America’s woes. In their paper explaining why people voted for Trump, Marc Hooghe and Ruth Dassonneville argue that this xenophobia was a central cause for Trump’s success. Using the Cooperative Congressional Election Study’s questions on political trust and anti-immigrant sentiments, they found that Trump’s “negative attitudes toward ethnic minorities and immigrants swayed independents and some Democrats to opt for candidate Trump, thereby considerably strengthening his electoral-support base.”\textsuperscript{118} The Clinton campaign was not predicting xenophobia to have such a powerful effect on outcome of the election.

\textsuperscript{118} Marc Hooghe and Ruth Dassonneville, “Explaining the Trump Vote: The Effect of Racist Resentment and Anti-Immigrant Sentiments,” \textit{Political Science and Politics} 51, no. 3 (2018): 530.
Trump’s rhetoric about China was more relevant to Rust Belt voters. In the first presidential debate alone, Trump claimed that China was stealing American jobs and using America as a “piggy bank.”\textsuperscript{119} He said that all of these factors have combined to make America “a third-world country.” Trump’s claim that China was taking advantage of and destroying America would have sounded reasonable to many white Rust Belt voters who either lost their job or had to take a low paying job because of manufacturing jobs moving to China. It also gave them a vilifiable target. Moreover, by Trump making these statements as the presidential candidate of the Republican Party, it gave them legitimacy and allowed for xenophobic rhetoric to be woven into the mainstream. He shifted the Overton Window to include xenophobia.

Trump’s statements were particularly effective in gaining support from the Rust Belt because he took an economic problem and transformed it into a cultural issue. He was able to do this because politics in many rural Rust Belt towns used to be defined by business owners and labour leaders.\textsuperscript{120} With the decline in unionization, business leaders focused politics on economic development which alienated voters. This primed them to be swayed by Trump’s populist cultural message of China being responsible for the Rust Belt’s woes.

Without an “enemy” like China, voters would have to consider how economic policies are affecting their livelihood. This includes everything from tax policy, to infrastructure investment, to unemployment programs, to education spending. Understanding how all of these policies affect one’s personal wellbeing is difficult and time consuming for people who are not particularly interested in politics. On the other hand, the cultural concept of the evil foreigner is a


relatively simple one to latch on to. Furthermore, cultural issues play into the Group Threat Theory and are thus readily accepted by many white Americans. All of this amounted to a startling rise in xenophobic discourse and broad support for Trump in many parts of America.

Trump’s culture war strategy to win votes bears a striking resemblance to Nixon’s “Blue-collar strategy.” Both realized that white, working-class Americans thought they were not represented by status-quo politics and were being attacked by an increasingly powerful group that they not only viewed as their adversary, but as completely alien. For Nixon the group his silent majority disdained were hippies, civil rights leaders, and liberal academics. This ascendant group did not stand for the same cultural values of patriotism and hard work that the silent majority stood for. For Trump the increasingly powerful group was minorities and foreigners. Nixon leveraged events like the Hard Hat Riot to ingratiate himself with white male members of the working class, many of whom were union members. Trump was less subtle and relied on his bombastic rhetoric to achieve the same goal. Both were able to achieve high levels of support from groups that from an economic standpoint should never vote for them.

In sharp contrast to Trump, Hillary Clinton was the quintessential “Washington insider.” She had been in Washington since the man Trump emulated, Richard Nixon, was in office. During Nixon’s impeachment proceedings Clinton worked with the House Judiciary Committee to research the history of impeachment. Since then, she has been First Lady, a Senator, and Obama’s Secretary of State for his first term. Historically, such extensive experience would have

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been an advantage for a presidential candidate. Her long history also meant that everybody knew
what she stood for and what they could expect from a Hillary Clinton presidency. Clinton had
long been a moderate Democrat. That is why even though she had some progressive portions of
her platform, it rang hollow to most people. She proposed to “protect worker bargaining power,”
“encourage companies to invest in workers,” and “protect workers from exploitation.” While
all of these things sound like positive changes for the working class, they are vague and not
believable since she has never prioritized those goals during her career. Her lack of dedication to
the issue is also highlighted by the fact that the entirety of her plan for “Labor and worker’s
rights” was only 492 words. That is just under 11% as long as Biden’s in 2020. Clearly her
campaign was not focused on the plight of the working class. The only major concrete proposal
in Clinton’s whole plan was to raise the federal minimum wage to $15 which hardly came off as
sincere since in 2015 she came out against a $15 minimum wage in favour of a $12 minimum
wage. Clinton also angered a lot of Rust Belt voters when she claimed that half of Trump’s
supporters were a “basket of deplorables.” Her psychoanalysis of his voters failed to
appreciate why Trump’s cultural message got through to so many Americans and cemented her
as an elitist candidate who did not understand working class Americans. This was similar to
Obama’s claim in 2008 that working class voters in industrial towns were “bitter” and “cling to
guns or religion.”

125 “Labor and worker’s rights,” The Office of Hillary Rodham Clinton,
https://www.hillaryclinton.com/issues/labor/.
126 “The Biden Plan to Ensure the Future is “Made in All of America” by All of America’s Workers,” Biden Harris
127 Alex Seitz-Wald, “Hillary Clinton: ‘I favor a $12 an hour minimum wage’,” MSNBC, November 3, 2015,
https://www.msnbc.com/msnbc/hillary-clinton-i-favor-12-hour-minimum-wage-msna716741.
128 Domenico Montanaro, “Hillary Clinton’s ‘Basket of Deplorables,’ In Full Context of This Ugly Campaign,”
full-context-of-this-ugly-campaign.
129 Ed Pilkington, “Obama angers Midwest voters with guns and religion remark,” The Guardian, April 14, 2008,
Republicans used these statements to highlight how out of touch the Democratic party was with the values of the Rust Belt.

Trump’s plan for labour was not terribly comprehensive either, but what really differentiated the two candidates in the eyes of many was their stance on free trade. If somebody knew nothing about Hillary Clinton and just read her 2016 campaign website, they might come away with the conclusion that she is also a protectionist. Her site said that China is not “playing by the rules” and that trade deals like the Trans-Pacific Partnership do not meet “her high standard of raising wages, creating good-paying jobs, and enhancing our national security.”

Clinton’s history tells another story. She was First Lady when NAFTA was passed and supported it at the time. Ordinarily this would mean less since the First Spouse typically does not play a significant role in policy making, but Clinton was an exception to that as she played an important role in both foreign and domestic policy during Bill’s presidency. She later criticized the deal as a Senator but came back around once she was named Obama’s Sec. of State. At that time, the administration promised to renegotiate the deal, but Clinton never did that. Additionally, when Clinton was Sec. of State, she called the TPP the “gold standard in trade agreements,” a stark contrast from her position during the 2016 campaign. Her inconsistency and political opportunism on the topic of globalization made any promise she made during the 2016 campaign next to meaningless. People living in the Rust Belt knew that nothing changed for them when she had power previously and there was no reason to expect that anything different would happen if she became President.

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132 Ibid.
Despite Clinton’s shaky resume on labour issues, she still received significant support from unions. This is not because union leadership was excited about a Clinton presidency, rather they were scared of a Trump presidency. They knew that Clinton would not do anything catastrophic to the labour movement and that Trump’s unpredictability and history of treating his workers in the private sector poorly meant anything could happen. Overall, organized labour poured just over $29 million dollars directly into Clinton’s campaign as opposed to only $17,754 for Donald Trump.\footnote{“Sector Totals to Candidates,” OpenSecrets, https://www.opensecrets.org/pres16/select-sectors?sector=P.} Overall, organized labour spent $167 million on the election season, almost all of it going to Democrats.\footnote{Dave Jamieson and Paul Blumenthal, “Labor Unions Spent A Record Amount On The Elections. But Not As Much As These 5 People,” Huffington Post, November 8, 2016, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/labor-union-election-2016_n_58223b92e4b0e80b02cd7259.} Union’s donations were part of the reason why Clinton was able to open a wide gap in fundraising between her and Trump. Clinton’s campaign committee was able to raise close to $770 million while Trump was only able to raise just over $433 million.\footnote{“Sector Totals to Candidates,” OpenSecrets, https://www.opensecrets.org/pres16/select-sectors?sector=P.} Clinton’s massive war chest allowed her to spend over $300 million on retaining the services of GMMB, one of the largest political consulting and advertising firms in America and the architects of Obama’s 2008 advertisement campaign.

Spending such large sums of money, Clinton dominated the airwaves throughout the campaign. The issue was that she did not dominate the pavement. The Clinton team had a formulaic approach to the campaign, and it did not include grassroots campaigning like door knocking. Their logic was that Clinton was a household name, therefore having supporters hand out literature letting voters know about her was pointless. At one point, a group of unionized construction workers showed up to a Clinton campaign office in Michigan looking to hand out literature but were turned away because the office did not have any.\footnote{Edward-Isaac Dovere, “How Clinton lost Michigan – and blew the election,” Politico, December 14, 2016, https://www.politico.com/story/2016/12/michigan-hillary-clinton-trump-232547.} The volunteers that the
Clinton administration did have on the ground were generally tasked with filling out voter information forms that went largely unnoticed by anybody with any sway within the campaign. If anybody had done a quantitative analysis of the forms, they would have seen that Clinton had far less support among white, male union members than what was expected.

The other critical sin that the Clinton campaign committed was that it was spent few resources on the Rust Belt. The campaign operated on the faulty premise that it had won those states before a single vote had been cast, so they almost entirely disregarded them. The majority of Michigan voters did not see a Clinton ad until the last week of the election. Moreover, an internal estimate stated that the campaign only spent about 3% of the resources in Michigan and Wisconsin that they did in Florida, Ohio, and North Carolina.\footnote{Edward-Isaac Dovere, “How Clinton lost Michigan – and blew the election,” Politico, December 14, 2016, https://www.politico.com/story/2016/12/michigan-hillary-clinton-trump-232547.} It viewed those as the real battleground states because the campaign had a massively overinflated sense of their support. Clinton still lost Florida, Ohio, and North Carolina even though the campaign spent so much money in those states. Whether it was hubris or faulty internal polling, it is clear that the lack of attention spent on the Rust Belt was the nail in the coffin for her campaign.

It was important that the Biden administration learn from the Clinton campaign’s mistakes. The lessons were: have a comprehensive plan for labour that is both progressive and believable, foster grassroots support, have a ground game, focus on the Rust Belt, and work with unions to achieve all of those goals. Union leadership wants a Democratic victory. Using them as a resource to help win union-dense battleground states is imperative. Furthermore, do not alienate rank-and-file union members. Leadership can only do so much to sway their vote. An effective strategy requires courting both leadership and members.
Chapter Three: Platforms

Although Joe Biden’s father was wealthy when Joe was born, hard times meant that he grew up in the working class. His father was a used car salesman and his family lived in Scranton, Pennsylvania, a city with a long history of unionization. This background is a stark contrast from Donald Trump who was born into luxury in New York City. Although Biden’s father was not a union man himself, Biden can still lay claim to knowing the meaning of hard work and what life is like for the average American. He was also not a politician who cashed in on his celebrity. When he left Congress in 2007, he was ranked as the 13th poorest lawmaker in Washington despite being one of the longest tenured. Additionally, his wife, Dr. Jill Biden, is a community college instructor and a longtime member of the National Education Association. Biden’s relatively modest means, his wife’s union membership, and his folksy stories about his formative years in Scranton and Wilmington, Delaware make him a relatable figure to union members.

Biden has largely been accepted with open arms by organized labour. He was quickly endorsed by many unions after it became clear that he was going to be the Democratic nominee. As well, he launched his 2020 campaign with a speech at a United Steelworkers of America union hall and he is a friend and confidant of International Association of Fire Fighters president Harold A. Schaitberger. The 2020 campaign was the first-time unions felt that the Democratic nominee for President had any real tie to organized labour in a long time.

All this being said, Joe Biden is not George Meany. His aesthetic populism does not perfectly translate to his voting record or actions. Before his 2020 campaign, Biden had only visited a picket line once before; during the 1988 presidential campaign, before a plagiarism scandal ended his effort prematurely. Moreover, Biden was a key vote that labour needed in 1977-8 in order to break the filibuster holding up the Labor Reform Bill, a piece of legislation aimed at expanding the NLRB and expediting union elections. Biden went back and forth on the issue before finally deciding to vote against cloture, killing the bill. Additionally, Biden had long been a supporter of increased free trade. He was a vocal supporter of both NAFTA and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). While some unions leaders might forgive Biden’s support for TPP because it was an important step towards reducing China’s regional hegemony, there is still animosity towards Biden on the issue because it could have exported a significant number of union jobs overseas. There is also frustration over what Biden did not do. Although he was Vice President in the Obama administration and was not orchestrating the White House’s policy agenda, the lack of labour reform in the first two years of the administration was noticeable. During those years, the Democrats had fifty-nine senators and 255 representatives, more than enough to pass almost any legislation that they wanted, but labour reform just was not a top priority. Of course, the administration was attempting to dig America out of an economic crisis and there were some provisions in the American Recovery and Rehabilitation Act (ARRA) that helped unions. The ARRA included $48.1 billion in infrastructure spending and the construction

was done by union workers because of the Davis-Bacon Act. However that does not change the fact that the Taft-Hartley Act remained intact during Obama’s presidency.

All of this is not to say that Biden is the arch-nemesis of organized labour. In fact, it is quite the opposite. Biden’s labour plan and generally positive relationships with union leaders made organized labour very excited going into the 2020 election. All this is meant to point out is that Biden has not been the perfect pro-labour politician and that doubts existed about how strong his commitment to labour actually was.

Biden’s varied history with organized labour would have typically won him a warm, but not enthusiastic response from labour. What had many union leaders excited about the 2020 race was Biden’s platform for labour. “The Biden Plan for strengthening worker organizing, collective bargaining, and unions,” gave hope that he would actually be the most-pro union President ever, as he had promised. The plan was audacious but labour unions had reasons to curb their enthusiasm.

Platforms are not what they used to be. In previous decades, party platforms were written before the convention and the nominee would run on that platform. The contents of the platform were important to many voters and it was crafted with specific constituencies in mind. Nowadays, few actually read party or candidate platforms. With the widespread availability of political news on television and online, voters are far less likely to read about specific policy proposals. This had led to politicians caring less about their platform and more about their perception in the media. Biden was likely not fully committed to everything in his labour

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platform. But even if he only accomplishes a small portion of his plan, unions could claim a victory.

Biden’s plan has three parts. He plans to “check the abuse of corporate power over labor and hold corporate executives personally accountable for violations of labor laws, encourage and incentivize unionization and collective bargaining, and ensure that workers are treated with dignity and receive the pay, benefits, and workplace protections they deserve.” Each of the different parts include several specific policy proposals.

The first part of the plan, to check corporate power, is the most significant. It includes the Protecting the Right to Organize Act (PRO Act). The PRO Act was first introduced in May of 2019 by Virginia Rep. Bobby Scott where it garnered one hundred cosponsors in the House and forty in the Senate. It passed the House on February 10, 2020 by a margin of 224-194 but it died in the Senate after Republican Senator Lamar Alexander, the chairman of the Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, decided that the committee would not consider the bill. Unions were so excited about this bill because it would radically change labour relations in America. As International Union of Painters and Allied Trades organizer Ryan Kekeris put it, the PRO Act “modernizes and updates a lot of the loopholes and the brokenness of U.S. labor law.” One way the PRO Act achieves this is by vastly increasing the powers of the NLRB. As previously noted, the NLRB has long been unable to financially punish firms that violate labour laws. The PRO Act would not only allow the NLRB to monetarily punish companies for violations, but it would also allow it to declare employers who were involved in violations to be

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personally liable. The bill also compensates for the NLRB’s high case load by automatically reinstating employees while their case is pending and allowing employees to seek recourse through the judicial system if the NLRB fails to prosecute their case.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the Pro Act is that it overrides right-to-work legislation. It would allow unions and employers to agree to union security agreements that allow unions to collect “fair-share fees” from workers who are benefitting from collective bargaining but are not a part of the union. This measure would allow unions to be viable again in the twenty-eight states with right-to-work legislation, including Michigan and Wisconsin. This provision would likely stabilize unionization rates, if not slightly increase them. Unions could go back on the offensive, aggressively pursuing new union members in parts of the country that have long been out of reach.

The PRO Act also attacks what economist David Weil calls “fissured workplaces.” They are workplaces where workers are labelled as contractors so firms can deny them higher pay, benefits, and liability in the case of workplace injury. The act closes loopholes that enable employers to improperly classify employees. Lastly, the bill prevents employers from influencing the results of union elections. Firms facing unionization efforts often require workers to attend anti-union information sessions and to read anti-union literature. The PRO-Act enables the NLRB to force employers that are caught engaging in these activities to bargain with any union that is formed. The bill has far more provisions, but these parts are of particular interest to organized labour. If the Biden administration does nothing else for organized labour than win

151 Ibid.
passage of this bill, it would still make this administration the most pro-union administration since FDR’s.

Biden’s plan goes further. The “encourage and incentivize unionization and collective bargaining” part of Biden’s plan states that he also wants to bring back the “card check” process as an initial option for organizing a union. The card check process allows for a union to form as long as over 50% of employees sign authorization forms which indicate that they want a union. Currently unions are formed through secret elections held by the NLRB after 30% of employees indicate that they would like to form a union. Unions prefer the card check method because it saves them the cost and time associated with an election. Moreover, the card check system does not give employers time to mount a counterattack against unionization in the leadup to an election. Unions are likely to believe that this is a credible promise because Biden was an original co-sponsor of the Employee Free Choice Act in 2007, which aimed to bring back card checks.

An additional part of the “Encourage and Incentivize Union Organizing” portion of Biden’s plan is to increase public unionization. He supports both the Public Safety Employer-Employee Cooperation Act and the Public Service Freedom to Negotiate Act. The former bill was introduced in the House in 2019 and had two hundred and twenty-seven co-sponsors, but it never came to a vote. The bill requires the Federal Labor Relations Authority (FLRA) to ensure that states provide public employees with the right to form and join a union, to have their

union recognized and bargained with, and to have binding interest arbitration available in the case that an agreement cannot be reached. The latter bill was initially introduced by Democrats in response to the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Janus v. AFSCME*. It was a landmark 2018 case that ruled that public sector unions cannot collect any type of fees from non-union members who are covered by collective bargaining on the grounds that it violated the First Amendment. In response, the Public Service Freedom to Negotiate Act aimed to set “a minimum nationwide standard for collective bargaining rights that all states must provide to public sector workers.”

This minimum includes recognizing majority elected unions and bargaining with them. States that fail to do this would be subject to intervention by the federal government. While this would certainly not repeal the *Janus* ruling, it would bolster public unions in deep red states where the state government refuses to recognize or meaningfully negotiate with organized labour.

Biden’s plan includes a cabinet-level working group that has the sole directive of promoting union organizing and collective bargaining. This includes both private and public organizing. Additionally, Biden’s plan includes provisions to protect striking workers. Many strikers, especially in low-skill jobs, are permanently replaced and fired. Biden’s proposed regulations would ban this, which would make striking an effective tool for unions in all industries, not just those where workers are difficult to replace permanently. Lastly, he promised to allow contractors to organize and collectively bargain. Unlike the PRO Act, this change is aimed towards workers that are correctly classified as contractors. Previously, these workers have been unable to unionize because of their employment status. Biden’s plan attempts to ensure that all workers, even contractors, can unionize. Although these workers may prove

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difficult to organize because they are such a disperse group, it opens up a new avenue to unions that was previously closed off to them.

The final part of Biden’s plan is entitled “Ensure that workers are treated with dignity and receive the pay, benefits, and workplace protections they deserve.” The hallmark policy of this part of the plan is increasing the federal minimum wage to $15.\(^{159}\) Initially, it might seem odd that unions would want an increased minimum wage. The average private sector union member earns $23 an hour and few union members make less than $15.\(^{160}\) But unions have spearheaded the fight for an increased minimum wage because many union contracts are tied to the minimum wage. For example, a deal UNITE Here Local 57 signed in Pittsburgh stipulates that for every increase in the minimum wage, “minimum wage [in the agreement] shall be increased so that each will be at least fifteen (15%) percent higher than such legal minimum wage.”\(^{161}\) It is estimated that the increase in California’s minimum wage in 2016 raised the wages of about 223,000 union members because of similar clauses in union contracts.\(^{162}\) Moreover, raising the minimum wage reduces the incentive for firms to hire non-unionized labour because the difference in price between the two is reduced. It is no wonder that the Service Employees International Union spent $1.6 million getting the necessary signatures for minimum wage legislation to move forward in California. If the federal government adopted a $15 minimum wage, millions of union workers would see an immediate pay raise.

Biden’s plan is essentially a union leader’s wish list. It would have a significant effect on the economy and even out the sizeable imbalance in bargaining power between employers and


\(^{161}\) Ibid.

\(^{162}\) Ibid.
employees. It is unlikely that Congress will pass most of this legislation. Like Obama, Biden is entering office during a crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only caused hundreds of thousands of deaths, but it has also hurt the American economy. Whether any of Biden’s proposed labour legislation gets passed is dependent on whether he includes unions in the rebuilding process, whether the filibuster is abolished, and whether all moderate Senate Democrats can be convinced to support it. Union leaders believed that change was possible and unwaveringly supported the Biden campaign.

The Biden campaign knew that labour policy was not the only thing that rank-and-file union members cared about. As shown by the 2016 Trump campaign, union members also cared about protectionism. The Biden campaign knew it had to contest Trump in this arena. It attempted to do this with the “Biden Plan to Ensure the Future is ‘Made in All of America’ By All of America’s Workers.” The plan promises to create “millions of new manufacturing and innovation jobs throughout all of America” and consists of four parts: “Make it in America, Innovate in America, Invest in All of America, and Stand Up For America.”

The main component of the Buy American portion of the plan is that a greater share of government procurement will be from American manufacturers. Specifically, Biden promised to “invest $400 billion in his first term in additional federal purchases of products made by American workers.” In 2019 the government spent $586.2 billion on procurement, so that means that just over a sixth of the total procurement would be shifted to American manufacturers. That would clearly strengthen American manufacturing, but it is important to note what parts of

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163 “The Biden Plan to Ensure the Future is “Made in All of America” by All of America’s Workers,” Biden Harris Campaign Website, https://joebiden.com/made-in-america/.
the government are spending the most on procurement. Just over 65% of all procurement is done by the Department of Defense, with $120.1 billion alone being directed towards the Navy.\textsuperscript{165} This has important implications for organized labour in Pennsylvania because only six states receive more defense spending than Pennsylvania. In 2019, $18.1 billion of defense spending went there.\textsuperscript{166} As well, Wisconsin saw one of the largest increases in Pentagon spending between 2018 and 2019. Since the industry is expanding there, it is reasonable to expect that increased American procurement would significantly help unions in Wisconsin and increase union employment across the Rust Belt.

Biden’s Invest in America plan is relevant to union members because it strengthens the social safety net that has been eroded for the last number of decades. It plans to provide free job training programs, community college, and four-year degrees to families earning less than $125,000 annually.\textsuperscript{167} Historically when workers were laid off after their job moved overseas, they had little to no other job prospects because many of their skills were highly specialized to their job and not marketable. This plan allows dislocated workers to have a chance of finding a similarly high paying job after being fired by gaining skills that are appealing to employers. As important as this is, the central part of the Invest in America plan for rank-and-file union members is the “Pro-American Worker Tax and Trade Strategy.” It directly addresses union members’ concerns about jobs being exported. The plan is highly critical of China and points to many of the same issues that Trump does including “currency manipulation, anti-competitive


\textsuperscript{167} “The Biden Plan to Ensure the Future is “Made in All of America” by All of America’s Workers,” Biden Harris Campaign Website, https://joebiden.com/made-in-america/.
dumping, state-owned company abuses, and unfair subsidies.” Moreover, Biden’s plan calls the Chinese government the “key contributor” for the decline in American steel and aluminum production because of their intentional “overcapacity in these industries.” By singling out China, Biden was attempting to impart a similar cultural message that Trump does without framing it in an explicitly xenophobic way.

Another Biden plan that intends to create jobs is the “Biden Plan to Build a Modern, Sustainable Infrastructure and an Equitable Clean Energy Future.” The plan outlays $2 trillion to rebuild America’s crumbling infrastructure. The Rust Belt is a prime candidate to manufacture the machinery needed to complete such a herculean task. Wisconsin leads the nation with fifty-three construction machinery manufacturing businesses, almost 9% America’s total.

The Trump presidency was undoubtedly disastrous for organized labour. Trump allowed the “fiduciary rule” to lapse. It mandated that financial institutions must put their client’s financial interests ahead of their own when making recommendations for retirements investments such as 401(k)s. The fiduciary rule saved union members millions of dollars and allowed them to live comfortably in retirement. Wall Street had to spend close to $5 billion just preparing to comply with the rule, which indicates that much of the advice that they were giving to retirees previously was self-serving. Fortunately, the Securities and Exchange Commission

168 “The Biden Plan to Ensure the Future is “Made in All of America” by All of America’s Workers,” Biden Harris Campaign Website, https://joebiden.com/made-in-america/.
(SEC) was able to stop some of the damage by updating its Standards of Conduct Rules by improving investor protection measures.\(^{173}\) Despite the changes made by the SEC, union members will still end up losing a significant amount of money in retirement. Trump also revised overtime protections, lowering the annual salary that entitles employees to overtime to $35,308 from the previous level of $47,476. This means that 8.2 million workers who would have otherwise been guaranteed overtime are no longer guaranteed it.\(^{174}\) Although most union workers are guaranteed overtime as a part of their collective bargaining agreement, it was an attack on the labour movement nonetheless and is evidence that Trump’s rhetoric about caring about the working class is purely performative.

Another way Trump stacked the deck against unions was by appointing pro-management politicians and bureaucrats to the Department of Labor and the NLRB. Trump’s first Sec. of Labor was Alex Acosta. For eight months during George W. Bush’s presidency Acosta was a member of the NLRB and was called a “reliable conservative vote” by former acting Sec. of Labor Seth Harris.\(^{175}\) Following his time at the NLRB, Acosta moved to the DOJ. Years after he left, a DOJ report came out stating that Acosta enabled his deputy, Bradley Scholozman, to factor ideology into his hiring decisions.\(^{176}\) Despite Acosta’s conservatism, organized labour viewed him as the lesser of two evils. Trump initially picked anti-union fast-food executive Andrew Puzder for the role which former NLRB member Wilma Liebman called “a real screw


\(^{176}\) Ibid.
you to the labor movement.”

The only reason Puzder did not get the role was an allegation of domestic abuse and evidence that he employed an undocumented housekeeper. Trump also appointed Peter Robb to be general counsel of the NLRB. Before taking up that role, Robb was known for representing the Reagan administration in its dispute against PATCO. In his time as general counsel, Robb argued that Uber and Lyft drivers should not be considered employees and attempted to settle a case against McDonalds so the company would not have to deal with the ramifications of an adverse decision. On top of Acosta and Robb, there were dozens of other Trump appointees that regularly sided with management over unions. This made it difficult for unions receive help from the government, even in cases of gross misconduct by businesses.

A favourite target of the Trump administration was union elections. Trump’s NLRB weakened Obama era rules that “streamlined” elections. The changes to the “Representation Case Procedure” were supposedly made in order to “permit parties additional time to comply with various pre-election requirements,” but in actuality they were changed in order to stop momentum generated during an organizing effort. The AFL-CIO sued the government over this change. A federal judge ruled that portions of the law were invalid because they were not truly procedural changes and thus required consultation from the public. This small victory for unions was overshadowed by the fact that the NLRB went forward with the changes which were not invalidated and significantly slowed down union elections.

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180 Ibid.
attacked union elections by enabling employers to essentially gerrymander them. Workers vote on unions as a part of a bargaining unit. The Obama NLRB ruled that bargaining units need to be comprised of workers that share a “community of interest.” Trump’s NLRB overturned this so now employers can add a significant number of workers who are unlikely to unionize to a bargaining group with workers who are largely going to vote to unionize. The result is that more often than not the vote fails. Perhaps the most blatant of all of Trump’s attacks on union elections was when his NLRB ruled that employers can delegitimize the result of a union election if they have proof that the union did not receive majority support. At face value, this might not seem like an absurd rule; however, the issue is that the burden of proof falls on the union. According to the Economic Policy Institute, “If the union wants to get its status back, it must file a petition for a new election and prevail in that election.” There is no guarantee that a second election would have the same result as the first. Many workers might be demoralized by having to vote a second time and end up not voting to unionize.

Trump’s tenure was particularly bad for public union workers. In December of 2018 the government shutdown for thirty-five days, the longest shutdown in history. Trump directly led to the shutdown because he could not agree with Congress over the appropriations bill for the following year. The main point of contention was that Trump demanded $5.7 billion in order to fund his proposed border wall on the America-Mexico border. The shutdown left many federal workers without a paycheck, many of whom were union members. Moreover, Trump proposed

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182 Ibid.
in both 2019 and 2020 that there be a pay freeze for all federal workers for the following year.\(^{184}\) Fortunately for unions, neither time the freeze actually went into effect, but it showed that Trump was more than willing to lower the real wages of federal employees, regardless of union affiliation. Trump also failed to live up to his campaign promise of spending $1 trillion to improve America’s crumbling infrastructure.\(^{185}\) Instead of tens of thousands of union jobs being created to revitalize America’s infrastructure, which the American Society of Civil Engineers rate as a C-, almost no work was done, and no jobs were created.\(^{186}\) Additionally, Trump issued an executive order which severely limited the “official time” that federal union members are afforded. Section 7131 of the Civil Service Reform Act defines official time as time to “engage in representational activities, discussions of grievances, dispute resolution, labor relations training, labor-management relations, and new department initiatives.”\(^ {187}\) Trump’s executive order limited federal union representatives to using 25% of their time to help colleagues file grievances. This especially stung federally employed union members because two weeks before that Trump’s Office of Personnel Management cut federal employee compensation by $143 billion.\(^{188}\)

The Trump administration also hurt labour in more indirect ways. Trump’s three Supreme Court nominees are all conservative, some more than others, and some of their rulings have already had negative effects on labour. The *Epic Systems v. Lewis* decision stated that employees cannot band together in legal action for issues that happen at work, meaning that they


\(^{188}\) Ibid.
cannot bring class action lawsuits against employers.\textsuperscript{189} Although unions can address some collective problems through collective bargaining, it still limits union employees’ access to courts to rectify issues. The Supreme Court recently heard arguments for another case with important ramifications for organized labour. \textit{Cedar Point Nursery v. Hassid} involves the constitutionality of a 1975 California law pioneered by union organizer Cesar Chavez which allows unions limited access to farm fields so they can attempt to unionize workers.\textsuperscript{190} If the Supreme Court decides in favour of Cedar Point Nursery and deems the law unconstitutional, it would pose an existential threat to the United Farm Workers (UFW), which would then have a very short period of time that they could organize seasonal workers every year. A case challenging the same law was declined by the Supreme Court in 1976, but the makeup of the court is far more conservative today.\textsuperscript{191} There will certainly be more labour cases taken up by the Supreme Court in the coming years and Trump’s three appointees will all likely still be on the court, a painful reminder of Trump’s legacy to unions. Labour surely knew that four more years of Trump would likely mean that he would get at least one more appointment to the court, as every four years there are an average of 2.25 justices appointed.\textsuperscript{192} If he was able to fully pack the court, then it would be decades before organized labour could rely on the Supreme Court.

Throughout his presidency, Trump’s favourite weapon was Twitter. Unions were not spared from Trump’s twitter barrages. On Labor Day in 2018 Trump tweeted “Richard Trumka, the head of the AFL-CIO, represented his union poorly on television this weekend. Some of the

\textsuperscript{191} “Fruit growers ask the Supreme Court to restore the right to turn away union trespassers,” Pacific Legal Foundation, https://pacificegal.org/case/cedar-point-nursery-v-gould/.
\textsuperscript{192} “FAQs – Supreme Court Justices,” Supreme Court of the United States, https://www.supremecourt.gov/about/faq_justices.aspx.
things he said were so against [sic] the working men and women of our country, and the success of the U.S. itself, that it is easy to see why unions are doing so poorly. A Dem!“193 For AFL-CIO members who were content with their union this tweet would have rung hollow and indicated that it was Trump who was not attuned to the working class. For workers who were not happy with their union or were predisposed to believe Trump, this message would have led them to disregard their unions’ political messaging. They would have believed that their union does not have their best interest at heart, only Trump does. The same can be said for similar Trump tweets which attacked UAW Local 1999 President Chuck Jones.194 This was one of the main ways that Trump drove a wedge in between union leadership and rank-and-file members.

While Trump damaged unions in many regards, he did debatably help them in one specific way, protectionism. One of Trump’s key policies was revising NAFTA. The newly named USMCA especially helped the domestic auto manufacturing industry, which was understandably appreciated by the UAW. The new trade agreement stipulates that every car sold in one of the three member countries must be 75% made of parts assembled in one those countries. This is a 12.5% increase from the NAFTA regulation.195 The Trump administration claimed that this change would create 76,000 auto jobs, a 7% increase in auto workers. Although the International Trade Commission found the number to be only 28,000 jobs, it was positive for the UAW regardless.196 The most important change in the USMCA for unions at large was the strengthening of labour laws. Historically, a lot of union jobs left for Mexico because the

196 Ibid.
workplaces there did not have to adhere to the same stringent regulations that American workplaces do. The USMCA created an interagency committee that is tasked with monitoring Mexico’s compliance with labor obligations, which means that fewer jobs will leave America.\textsuperscript{197} This change is the chief reason why AFL-CIO president Richard Trumka applauded the USMCA.

The trade war with China was another protectionist policy. Trump has long decried the “unfair deal” that America has with China, referring to the large trade deficit the U.S. maintains with the world’s second largest economy. In 2018, in order to combat the perceived unfairness of the trade relationship, Trump placed significant tariffs on China. By November 2019 it is estimated that $520 billion worth of Chinese exports to America had been subjected to tariffs while $120 billion worth of American exports to China had been subjected to tariffs, approximately 80\% of all American exports to China.\textsuperscript{198} At its peak in mid-2019 both countries were taxing the other’s exports at just over 20\%, a stark contrast from the just under 4\% that America was previously taxing Chinese goods at and the 8\% that China was taxing American goods at. Between July 2018 and July 2019, American exports to China dropped by just under 17\%.\textsuperscript{199} Although any basic economic analysis would tell you that society is worse off from a trade war because fewer goods are exchanged at higher prices, both union leadership and rank-and-file members perceived themselves as winners despite the fact that the trade war did not create any union jobs in the Rust Belt.\textsuperscript{200} In fact, during Trump’s presidency manufacturing


\textsuperscript{199} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{200} Sandra Polaski and David Dollar, “How have Trump’s trade wars affected Rust Belt jobs?,” Brookings Institute, October 19, 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/podcast-episode/how-have-trumps-trade-wars-affected-rust-belt-jobs/.
employment fell by 300,000. Moreover, it fell in all three Rust Belt swing states in 2019 as Trump’s trade was intensified. The AFL-CIO came out in support of the trade war; however, they rejected the idea that it even was a trade war. Instead, they classified it as the government “enforcing trade rules.” They believed that it could help revitalize American production of steel and aluminum, creating thousands of more union jobs. Even though an economic analysis of the trade war shows that even unions did not benefit from it, the belief that they did led to many union members supporting Trump.

Leading up to the 2020 election, Trump did not offer anything radically different to unions than what he offered during his four years in office. His main selling point to unions was still protectionism and he made no promises to do anything like appoint somebody that was remotely pro-labour to the Labor Department or NLRB. His target was not support from union leadership, but from members. This strategy for winning over union members worked in 2016, so as the old adage goes, if it ain’t broke don’t fix it.

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Chapter Four: Campaign Finance

All of the strengths of Biden’s platform on labour would be politically meaningless if they did not translate into strong support from both union leadership and rank-and-file members. Fortunately for Biden, he was able to secure a sufficient amount of support from both groups to win all three key Rust Belt states that doomed the 2016 Clinton campaign. Just as in 2016, those three states ended up being consequential. Had Trump won all three, as he did four years prior, he would have won two hundred and seventy-two electoral votes, two more than the threshold required to win. Moreover, just as in 2016, all three states were close. Biden won Michigan by 2.78%, Pennsylvania by 1.17%, and Wisconsin by a mere 0.63%. Organized labour was integral to all three victories. Union leadership provided Biden with monetary support, endorsements, and efforts to energize their members. Rank-and-file members showed their support with their ballots and efforts to get out the vote.

Just as in 2016, union leadership spent considerable money on the presidential election. In all, organized labour gave $27.5 million to the Biden campaign. This sum tells us that unions did not feel burned after Clinton’s defeat in 2016 and were willing to donate about the same amount of money to Biden’s campaign. It would have been reasonable if unions looked at the money that the Clinton wasted on ineffective campaign techniques and decided to abandon spending millions of dollars on the presidential election. Biden evidently gave them hope that their contribution would be worthwhile.

Union’s continued support of Democratic presidential candidates is especially impressive given the COVID-19 pandemic. Unemployment peaked during the pandemic at 14.8%, up from just under 4% when the pandemic began. Although union workers had better job security during the pandemic than non-unionized workers, tens of thousands were still fired and economic conditions have worsened for almost everyone.\(^{209}\) In Michigan, 86% of respondents to a University of Michigan survey reported that the pandemic either had a “significant” or “crisis-level” impact on the economic conditions in their community.\(^{210}\)

UNITE Here, a union representing hospitality workers, has more than 307,000 members.\(^{211}\) In 2019 it collected $65 million in union dues. The pandemic crushed them. Hospitality workers became obsolete at the outset of the pandemic because hotels had to close their doors. Nearly all of its members were either furloughed or fired. Accordingly, UNITE Here’s revenue stream dried up almost overnight. They cut union officer salaries across the board by between 5 and 20% and many officers were laid off. The union even had to pay for a drive-thru food bank for 6,000 of their members in Las Vegas because they could not afford food.\(^{212}\) While not every union was devastated, the financial well-being of unions is linked to the financial well-being of workers. Workers fared poorly, especially during the early portion of the pandemic, so almost all unions financially suffered to some degree. Unions could have decided that spending their scarce resources on the presidential election was simply not worth it given the


\(^{212}\) Ibid.
financial hit they took and looked forward to the midterm elections in 2022. Instead, they donated almost the same amount of money to the Democratic presidential nominee they did in 2016.\(^\text{213}\)

Just because unions gave $27.5 million to Biden does not mean that any of that money went to the Rust Belt. The Hillary Clinton campaign spent little in the Rust Belt because it took those states for granted. The Biden campaign did not make the same mistakes. Biden focused his ad spending on a few key swing states, including the Rust Belt swing states. Close to 90% of all television advertisement spending by the Biden campaign was concentrated in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, North Carolina, Florida, and Arizona.\(^\text{214}\) Biden’s team learned from 2016 and recognized the effectiveness of Trump’s cultural appeal in those states.

Clinton spent almost all of her money retaining the services of GMMB.\(^\text{215}\) Biden’s top expenditure was on “Media Buying & Analytics” which has since been discovered to be an alias for Canal Partners Media.\(^\text{216}\) Creating this “firewall agency” was done to circumvent Federal Election Commission regulations. It is a DC and Atlanta based firm that worked with the 2016 Bernie Sanders campaign and has a track record of effectively sparking grassroots support.\(^\text{217}\) Unlike the Hillary campaign, the Biden campaign did not put all of its eggs in one basket. It also secured the services of GMMB but spent 47.6% as much on GMMB as it did on Canal

Partners. Diversifying the ad spending achieved a number of things for Biden’s campaign. It hedged the campaign’s bet on Canal Partners. The firm had never worked on an election of this scale before and it was reasonable to assume that they might experience some issues born out of inexperience. Spending heavily on GMMB as well meant that GMMB could pick up the slack if Canal Partners faltered. Moreover, the progressive approach of Canal Partners and the more mainstream approach of GMMB meant that the campaign could effectively reach a wider spectrum of voters. Hillary’s campaign infamously fell flat with progressives so hiring a media agency that previously worked with the Sanders campaign meant that progressive voters would not feel alienated by Biden’s ad campaign.

The Biden ad campaign bested Hillary’s in content. The Hillary campaign’s ads were largely focused on Trump. Her ads pointed out his xenophobia, racism, sexism, and vulgarity. This approach failed in the Rust Belt because Trump’s cultural warfare won him significant support in those states in the first place. The Biden campaign learned from this and worked with Civis analytics to determine what content would resonate with the voters in the six key states that the campaign’s ads were focused in. What Civis found through a series of focus groups was that voters did not want to be “lectured” about Trump’s obscenity. Democrats being more polite than Trump was not a compelling message to most voters. The result was that Biden’s ad campaign was more focused on making a positive argument for the former Vice-President instead of making a negative one against Trump. As well, Biden’s ad campaign featured a lot of

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unconventional ads, many of which featured frontline workers.\textsuperscript{221} This approach would have been particularly effective at reaching union members who were frontline workers. Teachers, service employees, nurses, and police officers are professions that are frontline workers and heavily unionized. The content of these ads was personal to them. On the whole, the lack of Trump and inclusion of frontline workers made the content of Biden’s ads effective at reaching union members in swing Rust Belt states.

As impressive as the contributions to Biden directly were, they do not properly capture the scope of organized labour’s financial impact. In all, labour donated just over $71 million directly to Democratic candidates in the 2020 election cycle. This figure includes the $27.5 million donated to Biden. Almost an additional $71 million was pumped into the election through political action committees (PAC).\textsuperscript{222} A PAC is a vehicle for raising and spending money during a campaign. The Center for Responsive Politics defines a PAC as a committee which “can give $5,000 to a candidate committee per election. They can also give up to $15,000 annually to any national party committee, and $5,000 annually to any other PAC. PACs may receive up to $5,000 from any one individual, PAC or party committee per calendar year.”\textsuperscript{223} On top of the money spent on PACs, labour spent $180 million on the election through outside money groups.\textsuperscript{224} These groups are typically either Super PACs or dark money groups. Super PACs are PACs that have an unlimited contribution limit but cannot contribute or coordinate with campaigns. Labour’s massive amount of spending on PACs, Super PACs, and dark money


\textsuperscript{223} “What is a PAC,” OpenSecrets, https://www.opensecrets.org/political-action-committees-pacs/what-is-a-pac.

groups mean that the $27.5 million dollar figure they directly gave to Biden’s campaign belies their true impact on the presidential election. In fact, labour unions spent 11.5% more on the 2020 election than the 2016 election.

A top recipient of labour’s outside spending was the Priorities USA Action Super PAC. It received $5 million from the Laborers’ International Union of North America (LiUNA), $1.8 million from the American Federation of State, City and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), $1.5 million from the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), $1 million from the National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC), and $1 million from the International Brotherhood of Teamsters.225 Although Priorities USA is a Super PAC and cannot privately communicate with the Biden administration about how and where to spend the money, there are well established ways to create lines of communication. One of these ways is creating public, but difficult to find, websites for the campaign to send signals to the Super PAC. This makes it no surprise that the ads created by Priorities USA were targeted towards almost the exact same states that the Biden campaign’s ads were targeted towards. One of Priorities USA’s largest ad buys was a $6 million TV and digital campaign in Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Florida.226 The ads in that campaign focused on Biden’s proposed solutions to the COVID-19 pandemic and included visuals of Biden meeting with rural voters and members of the armed forces. In another Priorities USA ad, Biden was shown meeting with members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) which was a clear attempt to appeal to union voters.227 By focusing these ads

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227 Ibid.
on the Rust Belt and visually displaying Biden’s commitment to unions, these ads worked in conjunction with the campaign’s ads to energize union voters in the Rust Belt.

Much of unions’ spending went towards union-specific Super PACs. The SEIU’s Super PAC was by far the best funded. The SEIU’s Super PAC worked with digital advertising firm Precision Media to create ads intended to win over voters in swing states, notably Pennsylvania.\footnote{Jason Delgado, “SEIU launches pro-Joe Biden digital ads in Florida, other battleground states,” Florida Politics, July 15, 2020, https://floridapolitics.com/archives/349309-seiu-launches-pro-joe-biden-digital-ads-in-six-battleground-states/} The ad campaign cost $11 million and focused on civil rights and creating an economy that “rewards work, not just wealth.” The dual messaging of the ad achieved two goals. The emphasis on work was clearly meant to win over not just union voters, but working-class voters more generally. The focus on civil rights aimed to increase the voting rates of POC. In 2016, 60% of eligible black voters voted as opposed to 65% of eligible white voters. Even fewer non-white Hispanic voters went to the polls as their figure was 48%.\footnote{Ruth Igielnik and Abby Budiman, “The Changing Racial and Ethnic Composition of the U.S. Electorate,” Pew Research Center, September 23, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/2020/09/23/the-changing-racial-and-ethnic-composition-of-the-u-s-electorate/} Additionally, the focus on civil rights made sense because 40% of SEIU members are POC.\footnote{“SEIU: Snapshots,” SEIU, https://www.seiu.org/cards/the-complete-stewards-manual/seiu-snapshots/p7#text=Almost%20three%2Dquarters%20of%20our,the%20workforce%20as%20whole.}

On top of its own Super PAC and Priorities USA, the SEIU also gave $6 million to United We Can, a Pro-Biden Super PAC. They gave millions more to For Our Future and the Strategic Victory Fund, both of which supported Biden\footnote{“Service Employees International Union PAC Profile,” OpenSecrets, https://www.opensecrets.org/political-action-committees-pacs/C00004036/summary/2020.} Overall, the SEIU spent $20 million on the election, primarily focused on the Presidential election which made it one of, if not the most impactful private sector union.
Although the SEIU spent more than almost any other union, it had far greater plans that never came to fruition. In February 2020, the SEIU announced that it intended to spend $150 million to defeat Trump. Union president Mary Kay Henry justified the massive spending by saying that the 2020 election was a “make-or-break” moment for unions and workers.\textsuperscript{232} The campaign was supposed to span forty states which might initially seem odd because more than ten states are essentially guaranteed for one candidate or the other, but the plan was surprisingly focused. It only intended to reach six million voters in very specific pockets of those states. Moreover, of those forty states, only Colorado, Florida, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Wisconsin were to receive special attention. Even more specifically, the cities of Detroit and Milwaukee were identified as the most important cities for the ads to play in.\textsuperscript{233} If the SEIU’s plan had not been derailed, it would have had a monumental effect on the election. Unfortunately for organized labour, the COVID-19 pandemic killed the plan because many of the SEIU’s members were service workers who were furloughed or laid off which reduced dues and thus the money available to spend on political campaigns.

The AFL-CIO’s influence on politics throughout the second half of the twentieth century was unmatched by any other union. However, in recent years its financial support of campaigns has begun to dwindle. The majority of the AFL-CIO’s money was funnelled into its Super PAC, Working America, which spent just under $6.3 million on the election.\textsuperscript{234} As opposed to the previously mentioned Super PACs, Working America did not focus on television advertisements. Instead, it spent almost half of its money on Facebook advertisements. Social media has become

\textsuperscript{233}Ibid.
an increasingly important battleground in elections. Working America’s ads were narrowly focused on union voters and urged union members to visit www.workersfirstvoteunion.com where they would find a list of pro-union candidates to vote for. Historically, social media advertisements have been successful at reaching a younger audience. This is no longer the case with Facebook as its user base is aging, so the ads were almost certainly targeted at middle age union members. This was important because many of the other pro-union PACs mostly neglected social media advertising. Working America’s targeted ads filled this gap and reached voters that traditional advertisements may have missed.

Both the SEIU and AFL-CIO, alongside most other union organizations, spent most of their money in the 2020 election cycle on the presidential election. This might strike some as odd given that Democratic control of the Senate would be necessary for most of the ambitious legislative goals in Biden’s platform, like the PRO Act, to pass. There are a number of reasons why they did so. First, any legislation would need to either be signed into law by the President or override a presidential veto. Given the composition of the Senate leading up to 2020, it was not realistic to assume a veto would be overridden in the foreseeable future, so the presidency was just as important as Congress to pass legislation. Second, the President picks justices on the Supreme Court. As previously mentioned, public unions recently were severely weakened by the Supreme Court in the Janus v. AFSCME decision. Since then, Trump nominated two more conservative justices to the Supreme Court. In order for major case law to be overturned in organized labour’s favour, more liberals need to be appointed to the court which could only happen under Biden. Furthermore, if any important pro-labour bills are passed under the next President, they would likely be subject to a court challenge. Another Trump term would have

seriously threatened pro-labour legislation. Third, the President has control over both the Labor Department and the NLRB. Trump’s NLRB was under the control of pro-management lawyer John F. Ring and it consistently ruled in favour of employers. Fourth, the success of a presidential candidate can help congressional candidates of the same party. This is because of the coattail effect which states that a party’s success in the legislative branch is affected by that party’s prospects in the presidential election. A Biden victory, the thinking went, meant a greater chance of Democrats winning congressional seats. Finally, many of the competitive Senate races were in states with low unionization rates, namely Georgia, Iowa, Arizona, and North Carolina. Unions care less about these states because they do not have as many members there.

The National Education Association (NEA) led all unions with approximately $47.5 million spent during the 2020 election cycle but they spent almost nothing on the presidential election. An NEA associated PAC, the NEA Fund for Children and Public Education, donated just over $10,000 to the Biden campaign, but that was the extent of their donations to Biden. The rest of their money went to down ballot elections. But the NEA was very effective at getting their members to donate to Biden. It operated an advocacy group called “Educators for Joe” which persuaded teachers to support Biden. Biden took in close to $68 million from individual donations from teachers compared with just over $8 million for Trump. Part of the reason for its

\[236\] “Has the NLRB lost its way?” IBEW, September 4, 2019, https://www.ibew.org/media-center/Articles/19Daily/1909/190904_NLRB.
\[239\] “NEA Recommendation for President,” Educators for Joe, https://educationvotes.nea.org/2020/03/14/educators-for-joe-biden/.
success was that teachers are a highly unionized profession at just under 70%.\textsuperscript{240} It is impossible to isolate the percentage of those donations that were spurred by education unions’ efforts. But teacher contributions during the 2020 campaign cycle were 3.6 times the amount donated in 2016, which suggests that education unions probably had an important role. Traditionally only about 70\% of donations by teachers went to Democrats, but in 2020 that number was just under 90\%, which makes it even more plausible that the Educators for Joe group was effective.\textsuperscript{241} Trump only received $296,401 in donations from unions. Most of Trump’s union donations came from police unions.\textsuperscript{242} About three-quarters of all police officers are unionized so police unions are not as concerned about passing the PRO Act because their unionization rate is already quite high.\textsuperscript{243} The reason that police unions support Trump is because Trump has been a staunch supporter of police, even in instances of obvious police misconduct. Following the murder of George Floyd, Trump called the protestors “THUGS” but made no mention of what prompted the protests.\textsuperscript{244} Additionally, after a seventy-five-year-old man was violently pushed to the ground by Buffalo police, Trump took to Twitter to call the man an “ANTIFA provocateur” and accused him of attempting to interfere with police communications systems.\textsuperscript{245}

\textsuperscript{240} “Total number of public school teachers and percentage of public school teachers in a union or employees' association, by selected school characteristics: 2015–16,” National Center for Education Statistics, 2016, https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/hts/tables/Table_TeachersUnion.asp.
a time where police are increasingly controversial, having a supporter in the White House was important for police unions.\textsuperscript{246} That being said, police unions could not spend a lot of money on the election, partially because it would not have been terribly popular with their members. Individual police officers donated more to the Biden campaign than Trump’s during the election.\textsuperscript{247} Despite that, police unions, alongside air traffic controller unions, were the only unions to show Trump any significant level of support.


Chapter Five: Political Organizing

As important as financial contributions were to Biden’s campaign, they could only achieve so much. Americans are exposed to so many political advertisements during election seasons that they become jaded to them. A Yale study of 34,000 people found that during the 2016 campaign, ads had a relatively weak effect on potential voters.\(^\text{248}\) This finding is an inversion of the common view of campaigns, which puts a lot of stock in advertisements. But given the failures of the Clinton campaign this should not come as a surprise. The Clinton campaign spent almost all of its time and money on big budget advertising campaigns and not nearly enough grassroots mobilization. The Biden campaign made a far greater effort to reach out to union leadership and members. Additionally, unions themselves held many events to promote Biden, urged members to phone bank and text bank, and distributed pro-Biden literature. This political organizing was a major reason for Biden’s success in the swing Rust Belt states.

The COVID-19 pandemic complicated traditional union political organizing. Historically, unions hosted massive rallies and events to support candidates. For example, the “Turn Around America Rally” in 2008 was hosted by the AFL-CIO for Senator Obama and featured speeches from important members of the labour movement, including AFL-CIO president John Sweeney.\(^\text{249}\) The event was so large that it needed take place in a convention center in Denver. In 2020, such large-scale events were impossible because of COVID-19. The pandemic forced events online, which limited their effectiveness. There is something to be said for physically attending an event. In the same way that watching a concert online is not comparable to

\(^{248}\) Mike Cummings, “Political ads have little persuasive power,” YaleNews, September 2, 2020, https://news.yale.edu/2020/09/02/political-ads-have-little-persuasive-power.

attending one, watching a livestream of a rally or event is not comparable to participating in it. Moreover, it is harder to geographically target online events. The 2008 Obama rally was held in Colorado because it was an important swing state. Bush won it in 2000 and 2004 but it was a state that Clinton carried in one of his elections and was a winnable nine electoral votes. Had it been possible, it is likely that Biden would have mounted similar large-scale events in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania. Despite these restrictions, organized labour still did its best to reach out to members and draw out Democratic voters. In the end, it was enough to push Biden over the finish line in all three swing Rust Belt states.

As America’s largest union federation, the AFL-CIO can reach nearly every one of America’s 14.3 million union members. There are fifty-six unions that make up the federation and they represent about 12 million current or retired union members, most of whom are in America. This scope makes the political organizing activities of the AFL-CIO the most important of any union organization. It endorsed Biden in May, well after he had effectively won the Democratic nomination. In the endorsement, AFL-CIO president Richard Trumka said: “Joe Biden is a lifelong supporter of workers and has fought his entire career for living wages, health care, retirement security and civil rights. Our members know Joe has done everything he could to create a fairer process for forming and joining a union, and he is ready to fight with us to restore faith in America and improve the lives of all working people.” The endorsement included a paragraph urging members to “mobilize and help the Biden campaign using COVID safe methods like virtual phone banks, peer-to-peer texting, digital actions, and […] union member-to-union member conversations.” It has become commonplace to disregard the role that political

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endorsements play in shaping voting preferences. That is misguided. Endorsements are important to a decent number of voters. When polled, 24% of registered voters said that they were “much more likely” or “somewhat more likely” to vote for candidates if they were endorsed by labour unions. It is true that most people responded that they either had “no opinion” or that there was “no difference either way,” but the effect on almost a quarter of voters is significant. Looking only at people who voted for Donald Trump in 2016, 16% of them said that they would be much more likely or somewhat more likely to vote for a candidate endorsed by labour unions. The strong endorsement the AFL-CIO gave of Biden potentially caused some of these voters to vote for Biden. Data is not available for how much union endorsements affect the voting patterns of union members; however, it is safe to assume that it would be much higher than the 24% figure for registered voters at large.

The AFL-CIO also held a number of events to support the Biden campaign. The most significant was a Labor Day livestream of a conversation between Biden and Richard Trumka. NBC’s livestream of the event has been watched over 216,000 times on YouTube. The AFL-CIO’s Facebook livestream does not reveal how many viewers watched it but the 1,100 reactions and 1,600 comments on the livestream indicate that thousands more watched there. These are notable viewership numbers, but the previously mentioned issues associated with it being a livestream as opposed to a live event still apply. Even so, Biden made a convincing and personal

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case for union members to vote for him. He said that unions are important because they provide employment stability to the working-class. Specifically, he told a story about how his father was fired from his non-union job, lost his pension, had no form of recourse, and ended up having to live apart from his family for an extended period of time while he got back on his feet. He added there was “a lot we can do” to stop instances like that from happening again by increasing unionization. On top of Biden’s rather moving stories, the livestream also had a message at the bottom which urged viewers to register to vote, request their absentee or mail-in ballot, and to sign up to work at the polls. Since voting was affected by the pandemic and done primarily through the mail in 2020, reminding union members to take the extra step of requesting their mail-in ballot was wise.

While the national level AFL-CIO pushed for members to phone bank, state and local level organizations organized these phone banks. In Wisconsin, the state level AFL-CIO organization urged people to phone bank by pointing out that Biden aims to “end so-called ‘right to work’ laws that weaken union freedoms” and has the experience to lead America through the pandemic and the economic downturn that came with it. Even with this incentive, phone banking can still be unnerving. Most union members have never phone banked before so doing it for the first time can be daunting. Accordingly, the Wisconsin AFL-CIO ensured that training and support were available to everyone who volunteered. The Michigan AFL-CIO also held phone banking sessions, but its greatest success was organizing large canvassing events late in the campaign. It was able to do this by bringing in celebrities to encourage participation. At one point, Michigan AFL-CIO president Ron Bieber was joined by Michigan Governor Gretchen

Whitmer at a volunteer event. More impressively, the Michigan AFL-CIO, in conjunction with United Auto Workers Region 1A, brought in SAG-AFTRA union member and movie star Kerry Washington to canvass in Wayne County on the eve of the election. Since almost all unions did not canvass early in the campaign because of the pandemic, it was vital to boost attendance late in the campaign with celebrity appearances.

One AFL-CIO union that phone banked constantly was the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE). Michigan-based Local 1658 held nine phone banking training sessions a week as well as twenty-seven hours weekly set aside for phone banking. Local 1658 also worked with Local 3239 to do literature drops which is another COVID safe way of getting out the vote. The dedication shown by a government employees union makes a lot of sense in light of the Janus v. AFSCME decision which prohibited unions from collecting fees from non-members even if they benefit from collective bargaining. A Biden presidency could mean more liberal justices on the Supreme Court and potentially the eventual reversal of the Janus decision.

Another AFL-CIO affiliated union that worked hard to sway union voters in the Rust Belt was the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE). According to the 2020 fourth quarter edition of their magazine, Bulletin, IATSE members phone banked in “thirteen battleground states leading up to the election,” including Rust Belt states. In total, IATSE

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members reached 17,686 union members by phone and sent mail to an additional 35,372 members.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) is the second largest teachers union in America and it has a close partnership with the National Education Association (NEA). Like the NEA, the AFT also had a significant impact on the election. They had a five-pronged plan to mobilize union members to vote for Biden in swing states like Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania.\textsuperscript{264} The first was dropping literature, which they did in lieu of knocking on doors to discuss candidates and issues. The second was text banking which the AFT used for the first time in 2020. Text banking is effective because it allows each text banker to reach hundreds of union members an hour. The issue is that it lacks the personal touch that phone banking has. The third prong was an app the union developed called the AFT Votes app. It sent updates and reminders about the election to prompt members to take actions to get out the vote. The union also phone banked as most other unions do. Their numbers were exceedingly high though. Every single month that the phone banking program ran, AFT members called over 100,000 of their fellow members to talk about the Biden campaign.\textsuperscript{265} These calls were generally made by over 3,000 teachers each month. At that rate, the AFT was able to reach a solid percentage of their members, certainly most of the members in swing states. The last prong of their plan was a bus tour. The bus went all over America but stopped in both Michigan and Pennsylvania with the express purpose of promoting Biden. In non-swing states the bus focused more on local issues. Despite how exhausting a year it was for educators, AFT members managed to be active and organized


\textsuperscript{265} Ibid.
during the 2020 election season. They hope that going forward the Biden administration will reward them with increased education spending. So far, it is looking promising for teachers.\textsuperscript{266}

Perhaps the most impressive political organizing of any union across America was by UNITE Here, the union who had 98\% of their workers fired or furloughed.\textsuperscript{267} Because many of its members were out of work, they had time to knock on doors for their union to support the Biden campaign. They especially focused on Philadelphia where they visited 575,000 Philadelphia voters, over a third of the city’s population.\textsuperscript{268} Each member got $15 an hour, the wage the Biden is fighting to make the federal minimum wage, and visited upwards of seventy-five houses daily.\textsuperscript{269} Most full-time canvassers, about five hundred people, worked six days a week for ten hours a day. UNITE Here’s focus was on the primarily POC neighbourhoods of the city because POC voting rates are generally lower.\textsuperscript{270} Speaking on that depressed voting rate, UNITE Here Local 634 President said “[black and brown people] had lost hope in the system so they did not vote last election, and they may not have this year either. But we went to them to help them find their voice, to let them know their vote matters.”\textsuperscript{271} Another reason why UNITE Here’s work to energize POC voters in Philadelphia was crucial was that Biden was not an

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attractive candidate to a lot of black and brown voters in the city. Despite his association with Obama which helped him in places like South Carolina during the primary, Philadelphia voters remembered him for his role in bolstering America’s prison industrial complex.\textsuperscript{272} Many of the people UNITE Here members talked to said that they supported Sanders in the primary.\textsuperscript{273} Without a conversation with a union member, it is possible that many POC voters might not have voted. UNITE Here’s efforts to energize POC voters in Philadelphia was especially important because Trump made several stops in the city in order to repeat his upset victory in Pennsylvania from 2016.\textsuperscript{274} UNITE Here was one of the only unions who relied on door knocking in 2020, but that is not to say that they did not get out the vote other ways. UNITE Here members made over ten million calls phone banking for the Biden campaign and between their door knocking and phone banking 462,135 infrequent voters said that they planned to vote for Biden.\textsuperscript{275} Despite Trump’s best efforts, Philadelphia received nearly 20,000 more Democratic votes in 2020 than it did four years prior and Biden’s margin of victory in the city was a healthy 63.54%. The wide margin of victory in Philadelphia and narrow margin of victory in the state overall were made possible by the efforts of UNITE Here.

The United Auto Workers (UAW) have been an important part of the Democratic coalition in Michigan for decades. Biden was a particularly attractive candidate to many UAW

members because of the Obama era bailouts of GM, Ford, and Chrysler.276 The Biden campaign realized his appeal with auto workers and scheduled two events with the UAW. The first was a speech in Warren, Michigan where Biden discussed his plan for the government to purchase UAW produced goods.277 The second was an online event with both Biden and Elizabeth Warren where labour laws and healthcare were discussed.278 The special attention paid to the UAW by the Biden campaign certainly won him favour with many members. Additionally, the UAW produced videos highlighting how Biden was central to bringing back thousands of jobs from Mexico during the Obama administration and how he will continue to have the backs of UAW members.279 Evidence of the effectiveness of Biden’s events and the union’s videos can be found in the election results of UAW member dense areas. In 2016 Clinton lost by 11.5% in Macomb county, home to a large Chrysler production plant and former home to a GM plant that was closed down in 2019.280 In 2020, Biden received almost 48,000 more votes than Clinton and narrowed the gap with Trump to only 8%.281 Anger over the GM plant’s closing, the visit by Biden to the county, and the UAW’s videos certainly helped reduce Trump’s dominance in the county.

The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) has been active in Rust Belt politics in the last number of years. It vigorously supported Democrat Tony Evers in Wisconsin

280 “Electors of President and Vice President of the United States,” Macomb County, November 22, 2016, https://clerk.macombgov.org/sites/default/files/content/government/clerk/electionresults/2016/November16/105.htm l.
281 “Electors of President and Vice President of the United States,” Macomb County, November 17, 2020, https://electionresults.macombgov.org/m31/5.html.
in 2016 when he defeated Republican Scott Walker. Walker was the leading force behind Wisconsin’s right-to-work legislation and was a vehemently anti-union politician. In that race, the IBEW donated over $100,000 which ended up mattering as Evers only won by 30,849 votes.\textsuperscript{282} In 2020, the IBEW spent millions of dollars on Super PACs like Unite the Country, but more importantly they had a strong political organizing apparatus. The IBEW’s Political Affairs Department provided their members with the “IBEW Votes 2020 Dashboard” which included information about why the IBEW endorsed Biden, why members should fight for the Biden campaign, IBEW policy positions, access to the AFL-CIO political knowledge base, tutorials on how to phone bank, phone banking software, templates for pro-Biden mail, a platform to organize events, and links to Biden merchandise among other things.\textsuperscript{283} The extensive resources available to IBEW members made phone banking easy. The IBEW’s phone banking effort stepped up in the two weeks leading up to the election. The IBEW International President Lonnie R. Stephenson sent a letter to all locals twelve days before the election urging members to join upcoming phone banking sessions.\textsuperscript{284} The letter also said that “the soul of the country is at stake” and that the IBEW intends to make as many calls as possible because they do not want to let Biden down.

Like the UAW, the IBEW organized a virtual event with Biden. It also featured Georgia gubernatorial candidate Stacey Abrams and Nevada Senator Catherine Cortez-Masto.\textsuperscript{285} Receiving that much attention from the Democratic establishment was a signal to the IBEW that

a Biden administration would look out for them. This incentivized the IBEW to work even harder towards guaranteeing a Biden victory.

Although many unions showed enthusiastic support for the Biden campaign, some unions were not quite as eager. The United Steelworkers (USW) are the seventh largest union in America and are especially prevalent in Pennsylvania.²⁸⁶ Historically, the USW has been active in elections. During the 2006 midterm election the USW had a political mobilization program that employed three-hundred and fifty full-time organizers who aimed to educate and organize union members. On election day, over 5000 USW members volunteered to get out the vote including one thousand in Pennsylvania alone.²⁸⁷ The USW did not show the same kind of resolve in 2020. Bob Kemper, the grievance chairman of USW Local 1299, shed light on why in an interview with The New Yorker. He said that Obama promised the unions in 2008 that if labour was attacked, he would “put on a comfortable pair of shoes” and “walk on that picket line with you.” But when right-to-work legislation passed in Michigan and Wisconsin, “Obama didn’t come out with his shoes and march with us.”²⁸⁸ Kemper said that this neglect makes it hard to make an enthusiastic case for the Democrats to union members. He said the union would still “phone-bank for them, canvas for them, and defend them to the death out on the shop floor,” but the USW did not organize to the extent that UNITE Here or the AFT did. The lacklustre effort of the USW definitely hurt the Democrats in the Rust Belt, especially in Pennsylvania, but it did not do enough damage to cause a repeat of 2016.

The Trump campaign did not have any unions politically organizing on his behalf though he did get endorsements from twenty-seven unions representing about 600,000 workers. All were police unions except the Philadelphia Firefighters and Paramedics Union which had to hold a vote on the endorsement because it faced so much internal backlash. By far the largest of those unions was the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP) which represents 355,000 workers in law enforcement.\textsuperscript{289} A 2018 study by Harvard University PhD candidate Michael Zoorob analyzed the impact of the FOP’s endorsement. Using a difference in difference model, Zoorob found that in Michigan the endorsement resulted in a 15,400 vote swing for Trump.\textsuperscript{290} Since Trump won Michigan by just over 10,000 votes, Zoorob concluded that the FOP endorsement ended up helping Trump win both Michigan and the presidency. As well, the study found that the endorsement won Trump additional 31,800 votes in Pennsylvania. Although police unions that endorsed Trump did not actively phone bank or canvass on his behalf, just their endorsement was meaningful and likely won Trump a few thousand votes.


Chapter Six: Congressional Elections

Even though the President is more important to organized labour than Congress, both are needed to pass meaningful reform. The Democrats enjoyed a substantial majority in the House of Representatives going into the election so most of the attention turned to the Senate. Prior to the election the Democrats controlled forty-seven Senate seats, but they only had to defend fifteen. The Republicans controlled the other fifty-three seats but had more to lose as they had twenty-three seats up for election. The only Senate seat up for election in the three swing Rust Belt states was in Michigan, where Democratic incumbent Gary Peters defended his seat against Republican veteran and businessman John James. Organized labour knew that if the Democrats had any chance of taking control of the Senate, then Peters had to win the election, therefore they gave a good deal of money to his campaign. They did not make much effort to politically organize for Peters because unions’ main focus remained on Biden.

If one were to only look at the history of Peters’s seat, it would seem absurd that organized labour would sink much money or effort into his campaign. In 2014, Peters defeated Republican Terry Lynn Land by 13.5% and won counties all across the state, not just near metropolitan areas.\footnote{“Michigan Election Results,” The New York Times, December 17, 2014, \url{https://www.nytimes.com/elections/2014/michigan-elections}.} Even that margin of victory was relatively small compared with victories by his predecessor. Carl Levin held the seat between 1978 and 2014, and consistently won by more than 20%. But more recent history did not bode as well for Peters. The other Michigan Senator, Debbie Stabenow, was challenged by James in 2018. She too had previously enjoyed wide margins but only won by 6.5%.\footnote{“Michigan,” CNN Politics, \url{https://www.cnn.com/election/2018/results/michigan}} If the 2016 election was not a good enough indication
that the state was turning redder, then Stabenow’s close call certainly worried both Peters and organized labour.

Peters is a relatively moderate Democrat. On his campaign website he pointed out that he was ranked as the twelfth most bipartisan Senator and that he was awarded the U.S. Chamber of Commerce’s Jefferson-Hamilton Award for Bipartisanship.293 Something notably missing from his campaign website was any mention of organized labour.294 This omission was a calculated move. Although labour unions have a high national approval rating of 64%, there is a clear partisan divide in the support. Democrats have an 83% approval rating of unions compared with only 45% for Republicans.295 Since Peters was clearly trying to win support from more moderate and conservative voters, it makes sense that he did not highlight organized labour in his campaign materials.

Actions speak louder than words, and Peters was quietly an ally for labour during the Trump presidency. In January of 2020, Trump issued a memorandum entitled the “Delegation of Certain Authority Under the Federal Service Labor-Management Relations Statute.” In short, the memorandum permitted the Secretary of Defense to exclude Pentagon employees from the law that guarantees federal workers the right to unionize. Trump claimed the move was necessary because of the need for flexibility.296 This move was damaging to the AFGE, which represents tens of thousands of the 750,000 civilian DoD employees. This figure includes the civilian staff of the Coast Guard, Defense Logistics Agency and the Defense Contract Management Agency. Peters was a co-author of a letter sent to Secretary Esper which condemned the memorandum

and argued that unionization in the DoD was necessary because “a unionized workforce allows DOD to recruit and retain highly-skilled employees who might otherwise work elsewhere.”

This instance of Peters’s support for unions did not go forgotten by unions when he came up for election.

Another instance of Peters’s support for unions was in 2019 when he joined a UAW picket line during the General Motors strike. The workers were striking because they made significant concessions to GM when the 2008 recession hit because it was likely that the company would have gone under otherwise. Specifically, the union agreed to 401k retirement plans instead of pensions, the elimination of cost-of-living wage increases, and an extended wage freeze. Since then, GM returned to profitability, but workers’ wages continued to stagnate, so 46,000 UAW members went on strike. When Peters visited their picket line, he called on GM to stop using temporary workers during the strike and said that he agreed that the workers deserved “better wages and benefits.” Moreover, he tweeted “When the auto industry was in crisis the @UAW and its members stepped up to the plate in the spirit of shared sacrifice and they and their families in Michigan and across the country deserve to benefit during periods of profitability.”

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300 Senator Gary Peters (@SenGaryPeters), “When the auto industry was in crisis the @UAW and its members stepped up to the plate in the spirit of shared sacrifice and they and their families in Michigan and across the country deserve to benefit during periods of profitability.” Twitter, September 15, 2019, https://twitter.com/SenGaryPeters/status/1173385901365506448?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1173385901365506448%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.wilx.com%2Fcontent%2Fnews%2FSenator-Peters-meets-with-UAW-strikers-561893491.html.
cause a recession in Michigan. This show of support highlighted to unions that Peters had their back even when they were opposed by powerful forces like GM and the media.

Peters’s support for Pentagon union members and UAW members on strike is unsurprising given that he came from a union household. Peters is on record saying that his mother formed a union because she felt “underappreciated and underpaid” in her job as a nurse’s aide. She went on to be an SEIU union steward. Additionally, his father was a public school teacher and an NEA union member. Growing up with two union parents surely fostered an appreciation for organized labour in Peters.

The Peters campaign received $436,380 from organized labour, $368,700 of which came from PACs. When compared with the vast sums that they raised for Biden, this amount does not appear to be much money. However, when it is contextualized it becomes a consequential amount of money. Senate races are typically unable to raise the hundreds of millions of dollars that presidential elections are able to. This is especially true in Peters’s case because most donors did not initially believe this race would be as close as it would become. In total, Peters raised just over $50 million since 2015. Additionally, most of the money raised was from individual contributions. Only just over $3 million of the money he raised came from PACs. When looked at that way, over a tenth of the money Peters raised from PACs came from unions. The only sectors that raised more PAC money than labour were finance and “single-issue” ideological

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305 Ibid.
causes. In fact, Peters was the #1 recipient of money from public sector unions out of any member of Congress.

With the money he raised, Peters hired Screen Strategies Media, a successful media consulting and placement firm that has worked with Senators Tammy Duckworth, Patrick Murphy, Brian Schatz, Kay Hagan, and Jeff Merkley as well as interest groups like Planned Parenthood, the Washington Education Association, and the Center for Gun Responsibility. Many of the ads Screen Strategies produced appealed to rank-and-file union members. In particular, an ad entitled “Safe” touted how Peters has always “been tough on the Chinese government” and how he supported the China travel ban. Moreover, the ad said that Peters was aiming to take back production of pharmaceuticals from China to Michigan. The closing line, “Made in America has always worked for Michigan,” is the kind of protectionist rhetoric that was so successful for Trump in 2016. However, Peters presented it in a way similar to Biden so that it was not explicitly xenophobic.

While unions did spend a fair amount of money on Peters campaign, they spent a lot more money against John James. The National Education Association’s PAC, the NEA Advocacy Fund, spent no money making a positive argument for Peters but spent over $1.5 million on attack ads against John James. Its most widely shown ad did not focus on education at all. It criticized James for his healthcare plan which it claimed would “take away protections for 4.1 million Michiganders with pre-existing conditions” and leave twenty-three million Americans uninsured. While focusing on healthcare may seem odd for a PAC representing

educators, it was a wise choice given voter preferences. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the flaws in the American healthcare system and many Americans came to believe that change is needed. In fact, in 2020 Gallup found that healthcare was the number one issue that Americans considered to be “extremely important.”

The reason that the NEA was so focused on stopping James from winning the Senate seat was that he had ties to teacher unions’ greatest enemy, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, who, during the pandemic, threatened to withhold federal funding from schools that did not open up. The DeVos family financed the Better Future Michigan Fund, a Super PAC that spent $7.1 million supporting James during the 2020 election season. Individual members of the DeVos family also donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to the campaign and James even hired Betsy DeVos’ niece, Olivia DeVos, to be his assistant communications director. An ad was put out by the Senate Majority PAC around the same time as the NEA’s that highlighted James’s ties to DeVos, so the NEA did not feel the need to focus their ad on that as well.

Another union that spent significant money trying to defeat James was the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). It represents government employees at all levels of government, including federal employees despite their omission from

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the union’s name.\textsuperscript{315} The AFSCME realized that criticizing James for the threat he posed to
government employees’ salaries and benefits was not a message that was going to garner much
sympathy since 26\% of people are supportive of pay and benefit cuts for government
employees.\textsuperscript{316} So, they went the same route as the NEA and focused their ad on healthcare as
well. Their ad showed Sarah Fraser, a Michigander with multiple sclerosis, talking about James’
proposed healthcare plan. She said his plan allowed insurance companies to “discriminate”
against people like her.\textsuperscript{317} It was a powerful ad that aimed for a sympathetic reaction from
viewers. In total, the AFSCME spent just under $1.2 million attacking James and only $16,787
in support of Peters.\textsuperscript{318} Clearly both the NEA and AFSCME saw James as a vulnerable candidate
so they directed all of their resources to attack him.

On top of the monetary support Peters’s campaign received, it was also endorsed by
twenty unions on Labor Day, including the Michigan AFL-CIO, International Brotherhood of
Electrical Workers, the Michigan Nurses Association, the American Federation of Teachers
Michigan, Service Employees International Union Healthcare Michigan, and the United Auto
Workers. Michigan AFL-CIO president Ron Bieber specifically noted Peters’ commitment to
increasing apprenticeship opportunities in a statement about the endorsement.\textsuperscript{319}

\textsuperscript{315} “Protect Federal Government Employees and the Services They Provide,” AFSCME, July 20, 2018,
https://www.afscme.org/about/governance/conventions/resolutions-amendments/2018/resolutions/11-protect-
federal-government-employees-at-the.
\textsuperscript{316} Steve Sebelius, “Poll: Public doesn’t think their employees overpaid,” Las Vegas Review-Journal, March 2,
employees-overpaid/.
\textsuperscript{318} “Michigan Senate 2020 Race,” OpenSecrets, https://www.opensecrets.org/races/outside-
spending?cycle=2020&id=MIS1&spec=N.
\textsuperscript{319} Craig Mauger, “U.S. Sen. Gary Peters endorsed by 20 labor groups on Labor Day,” The Detroit News, September
labor-day/5737501002/.
Unions did not do much in the way of political organizing for the Peters campaign. Organizing was much more difficult in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic and all of the available resources needed to be directed towards the presidential election. Even the SEIU, the union Peters’ mother was a steward for, did not organize any phone banking for his campaign. The SEIU did support the Peters campaign through social media posts. They shared a video of Peters talking about the importance of unions and frontline workers. Additionally, the Michigan AFL-CIO attacked James a number of times on Facebook, comparing his platform to Trump’s. The Michigan AFL-CIO also featured Peters fairly prominently in some of their literature. The primary point of the literature drops was to campaign for the Biden-Harris ticket, but the knob hangers that were left on Michigan voters’ doors also noted that re-electing Peters was the only way to “rewrite labor laws and strengthen unions.” Although the AFL-CIO did not hold a large-scale phone banking event for Peters, featuring them on their literature was important nonetheless because no union has a greater reach than the AFL-CIO.

Although there was a general consensus that Democrats were going to retain control of the House of Representatives, unions still contributed to a number of close races in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania. In Michigan, there were three races organized labour focused on, Districts 3, 8, and 11.

In District 3, Democrat Hillary Scholten ran against Republican Peter Meijer. Scholten is a former attorney in the Obama Justice Department and the central message of her campaign was providing healthcare to people with pre-existing conditions and Christian values. Meijer is an

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army veteran and heir to the Meijer supermarket fortune. Despite Meijer’s familial wealth, Scholten outraised him during the campaign by just under $800,000, and part of the reason for that was organized labour’s support. Of the almost $3.8 million that Scholten raised, $129,143 came from organized labour. The NEA, UAW, and AFSCME were all among her top donors. On the other hand, Meijer did not raise a single cent from union PACs and only raised $208 from union members individually. Despite Scholten’s financial strength and union backing, she still fell short and lost the election 53.1% to 46.9%. The fact that she came that close was impressive because District 3 was fairly conservative. The seat was vacated by Rep. Justin Amash, who famously became the first member of the Libertarian Party in Congress after he switched allegiances in April 2020. Although parts of the district, namely Grand Rapids, are trending Democratic, Meijer’s support in the rural parts of the district was insurmountable.

Unions also spent heavily on District 8. In total, union PACs spent $244,000 on Democrat Elissa Slotkin’s campaign, just under a third of all the money she received from PACs. She first won the seat in 2018 and during her first term she received a perfect score from the AFL-CIO. She received support and a strong endorsement from the AFGE because she was a senior manager in the Department of Defense and, according to the AFGE, “knows firsthand how arbitrary caps, mandated furloughs, and hiring freezes can make it difficult for federal offices to recruit and retain talent.” Moreover, they applauded her effort to resist the

privatization of the Department of Veterans Affairs. On top of the AFGE, the SEIU were also among her top donors. Slotkin’s opponent was Paul Junge, a former local news anchor. He did not raise any money from organized labour and was outraised by more than a 4:1 ratio. She needed that advantage because District 8 is, with the exception of East Lansing, almost entirely rural. In the end, Slotkin eked out a 4.2% victory.

The last key district in Michigan for organized labour was District 11 where incumbent Democrat Haley Stevens defeated challenger Eric Esshaki. The election was very close as Stevens, who was the chief of staff to Obama’s auto task force, won by only 2.4%. Stevens raised $267,500 from union PACs, which was the largest amount from any sector besides “Ideological/Single-Issue.” This robust fundraising allowed Stevens to hire Screen Strategies Media, the same firm hired by Gary Peters. Williams was vocal in her support for unions during the campaign and even produced a six-minute-long video addressing how the COVID-19 pandemic was making union elections difficult. Moreover, her best remembered moment in Congress was her impassioned defence of the Butch Lewis Act. It aimed to establish a Pension Rehabilitation Administration within the Department of the Treasury which intended to save failing union pension funds. The United Steelworkers even posted a video of her speech on their website. Unions knew they needed to keep such a strong defender of organized labour in Congress which is why they donated so much to her campaign.

In Pennsylvania, there were also three elections to which organized labour paid special attention. They were in Districts 7, 8, and 17. In District 7, incumbent Democrat Susan Wild received substantial funding from organized labour. The $259,000 that union PACs donated to her campaign was over a quarter of the money she received overall from PACs. In only two years in office, Wild established herself as a strong ally of organized labour. She was an original cosponsor of the PRO Act and fought to pass $15 minimum wage legislation out of the House Committee on Education and Labor so it could come to a vote on the House floor. Additionally, she spoke at the USW Annual Legislative Conference where she claimed that America “can only have a strong middle-class if we have strong labor unions.” Wild had a strong pro-worker ad campaign during election season. It was created by Snyder Pickerill Media Group which also worked on defeating right-to-work legislation in Missouri. The ads talked about how her mother took her to picket lines as a child which taught her the importance of worker’s rights. Wild’s opponent, businesswoman Lisa Scheller, has a history of being anti-worker. During her time as a Leigh County commissioner, she proposed capping raises for employees at $1000 while restructuring some contracts to be more incentive-based while guaranteeing less. The election ended up close, with Wild winning by 3.8%, a much closer margin than her 2018 margin of 10%. The PAC contributions from unions like SEIU were

334 “Rep. Wild to United Steelworkers: We Can Only Have a Strong Middle-Class if We Have Strong Labor Unions,” Congresswoman Susan Wild, July 16, 2019, https://wild.house.gov/media/press-releases/rep-wild-united-steelworkers-we-can-only-have-strong-middle-class-if-we-have.
important. Without them, it is possible that Scheller would have won the additional 14,000 votes she needed to win the election.

Representative Matt Cartwright won re-election in District 8 with the help of $314,500 from union PACs. The Carpenters & Joiners Union, SEIU, and United Food & Commercial Workers Union were all among his top donors. Although Cartwright did not have a perfect score from the AFL-CIO, as many other union backed candidates did, he came to unions’ defence after the Janus decision. He sponsored the Public Service Freedom to Negotiate Act of 2018 which aimed to create a minimum standard of collective bargaining that states have to provide to public employees. The bill received bipartisan support but stalled in committee. However, the bill remained relevant because it was adopted as a part of Joe Biden’s platform. It seems more likely than ever that Cartwright’s bill will end up helping public sector union members. In 2018, Cartwright defeated investment advisor John Chrin but only outraised the Republican by about $100,000. In 2020 Cartwright outraised his opponent, Jim Bognet, by over $1.3 million and ended up winning by 3.6%. The money from unions was clearly needed to keep the architect of the Public Service Freedom to Negotiate Act in Congress.

The last key district in Pennsylvania was District 17, which was won by incumbent Conor Lamb. District 17 is interesting because it was a Republican stronghold for an extended period.

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342 “The Biden Plan to Ensure the Future is “Made in All of America” by All of America’s Workers,” Biden Harris Campaign Website, https://joebiden.com/made-in-america/.
period of time. Republican Tim Murphy controlled the seat between 2003 and 2017. During that
time, he ran unopposed twice. He only lost control of the seat because he was forced to resign
over an extra-marital affair and accusations of staff harassment.\footnote{Mike DeBonis, “Rep. Tim Murphy resigns from Congress after allegedly asking woman to have abortion,” The Washington Post, October 5, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/powerpost/rep-tim-murphy-resigns-from-congress-after-allegedly-asking-woman-to-have-abortion/2017/10/05/7a68a414-aa08-11e7-850e-2bdd136be5d_story.html.} In the first half of the 1990s,
the seat was controlled by the exceedingly conservative future Senator and presidential candidate Rick Santorum.\footnote{“Rick Santorum Fast Facts,” CNN Politics, April 26, 2021, https://www.cnn.com/2013/05/13/us/rick-santorum-fast-facts.}

Trump claimed that the reason Lamb had done well in the district was because he was secretly a Republican. He said that Lamb claimed to be similar to the President on the campaign trail and that he “sound[ed] like a Republican.”\footnote{Elaina Plott, “Trump Says a Democrat Won in Pennsylvania Because He’s ‘Like Trump’,” The Atlantic, March 14, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/03/trump-on-the-lamb/555668/;}\footnote{John Nichols, “The One Thing Democrats Should Learn From Conor Lamb,” The Nation, March 15, 2018, https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/the-one-thing-democrats-should-learn-from-conor-lamb/.} Richard Trumka saw Lamb’s campaign differently. He said that “Conor Lamb won this race because he proudly stood with unions, shared our agenda and spoke out for our members.”\footnote{Ibid.} Indeed, Lamb was a strong advocate for labour on the campaign trail. On the night of his election in 2018 he said “Organized labor built Western Pennsylvania. Let me tell you something, tonight, they have reasserted their right to have a major part in our future.”\footnote{Pennsylvania District 17 2020 Race,” OpenSecrets, https://www.opensecrets.org/races/summary?cycle=2020&id=PA17.} His overall stance on unions was called “militant” by progressive outlet \textit{The National} and he worked closely with the USW, the most prominent union in Pennsylvania. Thus, it makes sense that Lamb was heavily funded by unions. Organized labour represented just under half of the $706,060 Lamb raised from PACs. His strongest financial supporters were the Carpenters & Joiners Union, SEIU, and USW.\footnote{Ibid.} Their
contributions were especially important because Lamb, unlike every other congressional
candidate discussed in this paper, was slightly outspent by his opponent. He faced veteran and
author Sean Parnell who received $543,763 from PACs representing the finance, insurance, and
real estate industries. Lamb ended up winning re-election by 2.2% and fittingly gave his
acceptance speech at a Steamfitters union hall.

Union leadership’s financial support of Lamb was immediately repaid. Lamb was one of
Biden’s most important surrogates in Pennsylvania and was able to secure Biden a fair number
of union votes. Talking to union members, he claimed that Trump was “offering chaos” and
“civil war in America,” and urged them to vote for Biden. There is a symbiotic relationship
between Lamb and union leadership, and he will likely continue be one of labour’s strongest
voices in Congress for years to come.

The only competitive House race in Wisconsin was District 3 where Democrat Ron Kind
won re-election over former Navy SEAL Derrick Van Orden by 2.6%. Kind has never been a
staunch supporter of organized labour, which is likely why he received the least amount of
money of any congressional candidate discussed in this paper, $95,500. Kind was a strong
supporter of the TPP and in 2015 union members protested outside of his office in an attempt to
get him to change his mind, he did not. Additionally, Van Orden was somewhat sympathetic
to unions. He criticized Kind for opposing the Keystone XL pipeline because it created

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thousands of union jobs. Van Orden did not get any money from unions, but it potentially reduced how much Kind received. Kind still won the election, but it was a closer election than it needed to be as it was a district that was trending more Democratic.

It is clear that organized labour played an important role in the House races in Michigan and Pennsylvania, and to a lesser extent Wisconsin. Only one race that was heavily labour backed lost. These victories ended up being especially important because the Democrats did much worse than expected in House races across the country. Democrats lost thirteen seats, which brought their total down to two-hundred and twenty-two seats, only four more than the two-hundred and eighteen needed to control the House. Winning these seats now has implications on future elections because incumbent House members generally have around a 90% re-election rate. In 2016 the rate got as high as 96.7%. Democrats’ odds in 2022 will not be that high though because mid-term elections usually favour the out-party. Recent examples of this include the Republicans losing forty seats in 2018 and the Democrats losing sixty-three seats in 2010. The last time the in-party gained seats in a mid-term election was 1998 and before that it was 1934. It will be difficult for Democrats to maintain the House in 2022 but it would be essentially hopeless if organized labour did not propel pro-labour Rust Belt candidates to victory. In order for ambitious pro-labour legislation to pass, Democrats need to control both chambers of Congress and the presidency, abolish the filibuster, and gain the support of moderate Democrats in the Senate. These labour-backed candidates’ victories make that one step closer to happening.

355 Derrick Van Orden, “11,000 Union jobs gone. @RepRonKind, about to start tweeting about The Packers.” Twitter, January 23, 2020, https://twitter.com/derrickvanorden/status/1352954025361043458.
Objection and Rejoinder

This paper has argued that unions tipped the scales in favour of Democrats in the presidential, Senate, and House elections in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. But how much did they tip the scales? In order to answer that question, we must put organized labour’s contribution to the election into context. In total, about $14 billion was spent on the 2020 election. Organized labour’s spending was only about 2.4% of the total.\footnote{“2020 Presidential Election,” OpenSecrets, https://www.opensecrets.org/2020-presidential-race.} Does this mean that the extent of organized labour’s influence on the 2020 election has thus far been greatly exaggerated? Absolutely not. Taking this reductionist view of unions’ impact not only fails to acknowledge political organizing, but it also fails to account for the fact that union voters in the three swing Rust Belt states were a crucial constituency that sealed Hillary’s fate in 2016 and pushed Biden over the line in 2020. Elections are won at the margins and the labour movement’s impact on the election really did make a difference.


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  \item \footnote{“Exit Polls,” CNN Politics, November 9, 2016, https://www.cnn.com/election/2016/results/exit-polls/michigan/president.}
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political organizing undertaken by unions, those numbers would look significantly different. If Biden won union household votes at the same rate Clinton did, he would have lost 52,997 votes in Michigan and 13,699 votes in Pennsylvania. Biden only won Michigan by 154,188 votes and Pennsylvania by a mere 20,682. The increased Democratic support by union households alone in those two states almost equals Biden’s margin of victory. That does not even account for the non-union household voters swayed by the Biden campaign’s ads funded by unions, the hundreds of thousands of phone banking calls made by union members to non-union households, the ads paid for by union Super PACs’ effect on non-union households, or the literature distributed across the Rust Belt by union members. Taking that all into account, it becomes obvious that unions were integral to stopping Trump from sweeping Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania again.

Unions’ impact on House of Representative elections is less subject to debate. Almost all of the elections that unions focused on were only separated by a few thousand votes and union PACS generally supplied somewhere between a quarter and half of all of the PAC money received by the Democratic candidates in those races. For many of the races, unions were the financial backbone of the campaign. While unions did not engage in as much political organizing directly aimed at promoting House candidates, they were generally included in the pro-Biden literature in some capacity. All in all, unions’ financial support of the seven key house races in the swing Rust Belt states was the difference between many of those Democrats winning and losing their races.

Organized labour’s effect on Gary Peters’s election might initially seem to be not quite as large as their impact elsewhere in the 2020 election. Most of the money spent on the election by unions was spent attacking his opponent instead of funding Peters’ campaign. Additionally, there
was not substantial political organizing done to support Peters’ candidacy. Nevertheless, when it came to election day, union members showed up to support the man who supported them on the UAW picket line in 2019. Peters won 65% of the union household vote while John James only won 33%. That was significant because, like the presidential election in Michigan, it was a close race. Peters won 361,320 more union household votes than James in an election only decided by 92,335 votes. In 2018 when Debbie Stabenow beat James, she only won 24% more union household votes than him. If Peters had won union household votes at that rate, he would have received 90,330 less votes, meaning that the election would have been decided by 2,005 votes, essentially a tie. So even in the Michigan senatorial election, unions were important because rank-and-file union voters showed up en masse to support Peters.

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Conclusion

After one-hundred days of the Biden presidency, it looked as if organized labour had made a sound investment in Biden. He had already fired pro-management general counsel to the NLRB Peter Robb, provided union pension funds with $86 billion in the COVID-19 stimulus package, and released a video in support of unionization during a union election at an Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama.\(^{366} 367 368\) It had been a long time since union leaders had seen such pro-union action and rhetoric from a sitting President. In his remarks to a joint session of Congress on April 28th, Biden made it clear that he intends on keeping his campaign promises, saying “Wall Street didn’t build this country. The middle class built the country, and unions built the middle class. So that’s why I’m calling on Congress to pass the Protect the Right to Organize Act, the PRO Act, and send it to my desk so we can support the right to unionize. And, by the way, while you’re thinking about sending things to my desk let’s raise the minimum wage to $15.”\(^{369}\) Biden could have neglected to draw attention to these promises, citing difficulties overcoming the Senate filibuster or winning the votes of moderate Democrats like Joe Manchin or Kyrsten Sinema. Instead, with the whole nation watching, in front of every member of Congress, he stood in solidarity with unions and called for action. If unions had not financially supported his campaign directly, given money to pro-Biden Super PACs, phone banked, dropped literature, and canvassed, all while dealing with the devastating effects of COVID-19, it is likely


that it would not have been Biden giving an address but Trump. There is no chance Trump would have stuck up for unions and supported the PRO Act and a $15 minimum wage. Unions now have a true ally in the White House and, for the first time in a long time, the labour movement has hope again.

There was a particular line in Biden’s address which indicated that he actually does understand the plight of rank-and-file union members in the Rust Belt. He said, “So many of you, so many of the folks I grew up with feel left behind, forgotten in an economy that’s so rapidly changing. It’s frightening.” That is precisely the frustration being felt by many union members in the Rust Belt, being left behind. Globalization and technological advance have rendered many American workers obsolete. It is tough for many people to grapple with the fact that colossal and unstoppable global forces are the reason that they lost their job, or their wages have not gone up with inflation. In 2016, Trump’s rhetoric captured this frustration, but he directed it in unproductive directions. Biden clearly understands what workers in the Rust Belt are going through, and it is evident that he wants to resolve the source of the that anger by advocating for pro-worker legislation. Only time will tell if Biden will be able to achieve his goals for labour policy. He will need the help of Rust Belt members of Congress like Gary Peters to do it, and even then, it will still be an uphill battle. However, if anybody is going to return organized labour to its former glory, it is going to be the man unions delivered to the White House, Joe Biden.

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