

UNIONS AS CONDUITS OF DEMOCRATIC VOICE FOR NON-ELITES: WORKER POLITICIZATION FROM THE SHOP FLOOR TO THE HALLS OF CONGRESS

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In a presidential election year that saw candidates spend record sums to show they can best represent middle class voters, data reveals politicians have become significantly wealthier than their middle class constituents. This paper proposes an initial model for understanding how unions facilitate and support economic non-elite political candidates, thereby helping to increase political pluralism. Drawing upon social identity theory, we argue that unions enable economic non-elites to develop political skill sets through experience in the traditional industrial relations process and access to union membership opportunities. We test this model through case study analysis and propose opportunities for further research.

INTRODUCTION AND MOTIVATION FOR STUDY

In a 1984 correspondence with New York journalist Bob Grady, U.S. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan explained that he needed the money earned by writing and lecturing outside of his job in the Senate to help pay the bills. The senior senator from New York lamented the fact that while nearly half of the senators qualify as millionaires—a group he did not belong to—only earnings, not the capital gains income of his wealthier colleagues, were limited by recently enacted ethics laws. He concluded that carving out an exception in ethics rules that seemingly only protected the income streams of the super-wealthy “could become a problem for democracy.”¹

Since Sen. Moynihan wrote these words in 1984, Congress’s wealth disparity has only increased. In the time span from when Sen. Moynihan wrote his letter in 1984 to 2009, the median net worth of a member of the U.S. House of Representatives more than doubled. Not counting home values, the median worth of a congressman serving with Sen. Moynihan in 1984 was \$280,000 after adjusting for inflation. The median worth of a congressman in 2009 was \$725,000. During this time, the corresponding median net worth of an Ameri-

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¹ DANIEL PATRICK MOYNIHAN, A PORTRAIT IN LETTERS OF AN AMERICAN VISIONARY 466 (2010).

can family has dropped from \$20,600 to \$20,500.² Put another way, the typical legislator today is far less likely to be an economic non-elite, someone who cannot draw upon great individual wealth.

This increased likelihood that a member of congress today comes from the economic elite coincides with the growth in economic inequality and corporate dominance in politics. As Hacker and Pierson observe, “[i]f the total income growth [during the years 1979–2005] were a pie . . . the slice enjoyed by the roughly 300,000 people in the top tenth of 1 percent would be half again as large as the slice enjoyed by the roughly 180 million in the bottom 60 percent.”³ This is also the period of time that has witnessed the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the National Federation of Independent Businesses, and other corporate lobbying outfits dramatically expand operations. Today, lobbying is a \$3 billion per year industry in Washington, DC.⁴ Of course, today we also see more industrial deregulation, increased privatization in the public sector, growing disparities in tax cuts between the rich and everyone else, and a sustained attack on collective bargaining and the right of workers to organize unions. Stated simply, there appears to be a clear consequence to the diminishing voice of non-elites in our country’s democratic processes.

Keeping such outcomes in mind, the comments of Mitt Romney, the Republican presidential candidate in 2012, raise an intriguing question. Romney recounted what his father George Romney, former governor of Michigan, once advised him: “[N]ever get involved in politics if you have to win an election to pay a mortgage.”⁵ The data on congressional pay suggest this is true—individuals who are becoming involved in politics and winning seats do not need the pay provided by the position.

So, how are economic non-elites able to get into politics? One obvious place to start the search is the labor movement. It is not a secret that unions play an influential role in electoral politics. We know they financially support candidates, educate their memberships on the important issues, and mobilize voters. What we know less about is the role that organized labor plays in developing and supporting union members, likely economic non-elites, to successfully run for public office.

In this paper, we seek to formulate an initial model for understanding how unions enable and support workers who want to directly participate in politics, even those who need to win an election to pay the mortgage. Our model connects the traditional role unions play in enabling voice at the workplace with their role in supporting non-elite candidates for public office. We argue that it is through the process of traditional industrial relations (and the presence of a

² Peter Whoriskey, *Growing Wealth Widens Distance Between Lawmakers and Constituents*, WASH. POST (Dec. 26, 2011), http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/growing-wealth-widens-distance-between-lawmakers-and-constituents/2011/12/05/gIQR7D6IP_story.html.

³ JACOB S. HACKER & PAUL PIERSON, *WINNER-TAKE-ALL POLITICS: HOW WASHINGTON MADE THE RICH RICHER—AND TURNED ITS BACK ON THE MIDDLE CLASS* 3 (2010).

⁴ *Id.* at 114.

⁵ Sarah Kliff, *Perhaps George Romney Was Right: Study Says Higher Salaries Linked to Worse Politicians*, WASH. POST WONKBLOG (Jan. 9, 2012, 12:24 PM), http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/post/george-romney-was-right-study-says-higher-salaries-linked-to-worse-politicians/2012/01/09/gIQABtrjIP_blog.html.

union) that non-elites become politicized and gain attributes that allow them to successfully run for elected office, and frame this argument around concepts gleaned specifically from social identity theory.

LABOR'S ROLE IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS

Our efforts to better understand how labor facilitates the voice of non-elites in the halls of American democracy contribute to a long-running body of social science literature examining labor's role as a political actor. This section briefly reviews this previous work to establish the foundation and context for our study. In doing so, we examine the historical role of unions in politics and consider previous studies of union political activity.

That there would be so little known about how unions enable economic non-elites to directly participate in the political process speaks to organized labor's historic position in U.S. politics. As evidenced by Samuel Gompers's 1919 declaration that "an independent political labor party becomes either radical, so-called, or else reactionary, but it is primarily devoted to one thing and that is vote-getting," the role of U.S. unions in politics has been one of political pressure, not party creation and politician cultivation.⁶ In fact, up until 1947, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) chose not to align itself with any particular party. Rather, the federation took a path of voluntarism, supporting any political party or candidate who endorsed its political priorities.⁷

This nonpartisan strategy set the U.S. labor movement on a very different course than its brethren across Europe who were intricately connected to party politics. Unions such as those in Britain established a formal Labor Party that was a direct extension of the labor movement. Conversely, in countries like Sweden, Italy, and France, political parties created unions for workers to join.⁸ In either form, unions and political parties existed as one; undoubtedly, this interweaving of workers and political party structures was related to a far higher degree of class-consciousness experienced by European workers than their American counterparts. Through both strong class-consciousness and an inviting party structure, economic non-elites represented by unions in these countries held an organic path for direct participation in their governments. No such path, however, existed for American union members.

In the late 1930s, an indirect path began to emerge for U.S. economic non-elites to influence the political discourse as labor's adherence to voluntarism subsided. The movement toward a more active role in politics started when the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) broke away from the AFL. In the midst of organizing the massive factories of the day, the CIO benefited from President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal policies—particularly passage of the National Labor Relations Act in 1935. Realizing how critical Roosevelt's re-election would be in 1936, the CIO established Labor's Non-Partisan League, an organization tasked with educating members about the

⁶ SAMUEL GOMPERS, SHOULD A POLITICAL LABOR PARTY BE FORMED? 10 (1918).

⁷ Harwood Lawrence Childs, *Voluntarism in Action*, in *LABOR AND AMERICAN POLITICS: A BOOK OF READINGS* 97, 97 (Charles M. Rehmus & Doris B. McLaughlin eds., 1967).

⁸ Wolfgang Streeck & Anke Hassel, *Trade Unions as Political Actors*, in *INTERNATIONAL HANDBOOK OF TRADE UNIONS* 335, 339–40 (John T. Addison & Claus Schnabel eds., 2003).

importance of Roosevelt's reelection, mobilizing them in support of the President, and collecting large sums of monetary support for his campaign.⁹ In 1943, the League would become the Political Action Committee (PAC), supervised by Sidney Hillman and designated with the task of engaging in "nonparty, non-partisan" politics.¹⁰

On the heels of the Taft-Hartley amendments, the AFL joined the CIO in 1947 as a full time player in American politics. It formed Labor's League for Political Education, which later became the Committee on Political Education (COPE) in 1955 when the AFL and CIO merged. The unions tasked COPE with getting "as many union members, their wives and families, and working-class and minority group citizens registered as possible."¹¹ This political program still operates today, playing a key role in both local and national politics.

Since the CIO's all-out push for President Roosevelt's reelection in 1936, organized labor has remained closely aligned with the Democratic Party, functioning most clearly as a special interest group. Unions have played a leading role over the years in developing national convention platforms, recruiting candidates at all levels, funding campaigns, and mobilizing voters.¹² It is a role that labor has been quite proud to play, with former AFL-CIO president George Meany once calling his federation "[one of] the most powerful and active political forces in the U.S."¹³

Despite such self-praise, labor's political power has been on the wane in recent years. Unions lost ground in the economy since Meany's time as head of the AFL-CIO in the 1970s. In 1973, 24.2 percent of American workers belonged to a labor union.¹⁴ In 2011, that number stood at 11.8 percent, with only 6.9 percent of private sector workers belonging to a union.¹⁵ The decline in membership meant less money to finance political work and fewer members available to participate in political programs. Perhaps most despairingly for unions, some scholars declared the "labor vote . . . nonexistent" by 1980, when 45 percent of union members voted for Ronald Reagan.¹⁶

At the same time that labor's role in politics diminished, other actors created avenues for economic non-elite politicization. Community groups, religious institutions, and even political organizations like the Tea Party presented, and still present, non-elites a way to indirectly participate in politics. These groups, however, are generally unable on their own to offer the same type of voice for workers in democracy as unions. As Barbara Fick argues, these organizations lack the internal democratic features allowing member control.

⁹ Marick F. Masters & Ray Jones, *The Hard and Soft Sides of Union Political Money*, 20 J. LAB. RES. 297, 302 (1999).

¹⁰ Harry M. Scoble, *Organized Labor in Electoral Politics: Some Questions for the Discipline*, 16 W. POL. Q. 666, 666 (1963).

¹¹ REHMUS & McLAUGHLIN, *supra* note 7, at 201.

¹² See Scoble, *supra* note 10, at 667.

¹³ RICHARD B. FREEMAN & JAMES L. MEDOFF, WHAT DO UNIONS DO? 191 (1984).

¹⁴ *Union Membership, Coverage, Density, and Employment Among Private Sector Workers, 1973–2011*, UNIONSTATS, <http://unionstats.gsu.edu/Private%20Sector%20workers.htm> (last visited Jan. 1, 2014).

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ Charles M. Rehmus, *Labor and Politics in the 1980s*, 473 ANNALS AM. ACAD. POL. & SOC. SCI. 40, 46 (1984).

Instead, they offer ideas on the “supply-side” and sell them to their memberships, unlike unions, that operate by worker-initiated mandates.¹⁷ Organized labor, therefore, continues to represent the most formidable entity for politicizing economic non-elites (though it should be noted that in some instances unions have begun to closely align themselves with religious and community groups, particularly when mobilizing marginalized voters). According to the Center for Responsive Politics, unions represented twenty-four of the top 100 political contributors from 1989 to 2012. Of those 100 top contributors, unions represented eighteen of the top fifty donors and five out of the top ten on the list.¹⁸

Along with tracing organized labor’s political endeavors, social scientists have also sought to measure their effectiveness. Several studies looked at the effect of unions on political participation, with many finding increased rates of voting among contacted members.¹⁹ A recent study by Benjamin Radcliff on the issue found that members of a union household hold an increased likelihood of voting in an election, and greater union density increases the probability of all people voting.²⁰ A study of Illinois union members also found that union political education played an important role in shaping how members evaluated candidates and the issues. The study notes, “[i]t appears . . . that [members] connected their lived experiences with union security and material gain, and voted as union members.”²¹

On the question of interest in this paper, even less research exists about labor’s ability to promote the direct participation of economic non-elites through political office. Carnes provides perhaps the closest analysis, by assessing the role played by a legislator’s working-class identity in affecting policy formation. Carnes uses the legislator’s occupation (in which he defines laborers, soldiers, and union officers as working class legislators) as a proxy for working-class identity. Carnes confirms that although politicians themselves ascribe importance to the issue of occupational identity effects on legislator voting,²² the literature has essentially neglected to study this influence since an

¹⁷ Barbara J. Fick, *Not Just Collective Bargaining: The Role of Trade Unions in Creating and Maintaining a Democratic Society*, 12 WORKINGUSA: J. LAB. & SOC’Y 249, 254 (2009).

¹⁸ *Top All-Time Donors, 1989–2012*, OPENSECRETS.ORG, <http://www.opensecrets.org/orgs/list.php?order=A> (last visited Jan. 1, 2014).

¹⁹ See Carole J. Uhlaner, *Rational Turnout: The Neglected Role of Groups*, 33 AM. J. POL. SCI. 390, 396, 398 (1989); see also John Thomas Delaney et al., *Unionism and Voter Turnout*, 9 J. LAB. RES. 221, 221 (1988); J. Ryan Lamare, *Union Influence on Voter Turnout: Results from Three Los Angeles County Elections*, 63 INDUS. & LAB. REL. REV. 454 (2010); J. Ryan Lamare, *The Interactive Effects of Labor-Led Political Mobilization and Vote Propensity on Turnout: Evidence from Five Elections*, 49 INDUS. REL. J. ECON. & SOC’Y 616 (2010); Arthur C. Wolfe, *Trends in Labor Union Voting Behavior, 1948–1968*, 9 INDUS. REL.: J. ECON. & SOC’Y 1, 1 (1969); but see David J. Sousa, *Organized Labor in the Electorate, 1960–1988*, 46 POL. RES. Q. 741 (1993).

²⁰ Benjamin Radcliff, *Organized Labor and Electoral Participation in American National Elections*, 22 J. LAB. RES. 405, 406–07 (2001).

²¹ Robert Bruno, *From Union Identity to Union Voting: An Assessment of the 1996 Election*, 25 LAB. STUD. J. 3, 25 (2000).

²² Nicholas Carnes, *Does the Numerical Underrepresentation of the Working Class in Congress Matter?*, 37 LEGIS. STUD. Q. 5, 5, 10 (2012).

initial round of descriptive work in the 1950s and 1960s.²³ The results of Carnes' study conclude that, between the 1970s and the 1990s, U.S. Congressional representatives classified as having a working-class identity were more supportive of federal policies designed to benefit the working-class than were other legislators.²⁴

Research conducted by Sojourner also speaks to the issue. His study takes a macro-level approach, examining the occupations of state legislators and the union density rates of these occupations in the states. Looking at police officers, firefighters, teachers, and construction workers, he finds that, when holding other factors constant, these occupations appeared in the membership of state legislative bodies at a rate corresponding with level of union density. This provides evidence at the macro level that unions do help non-elites gain direct voice through political office. Sojourner's study ends with a call for a more concrete, micro-level evaluation of how unions support the political aspirations of economic non-elites.²⁵ Our study takes a first step in doing this.

THEORY AND MODEL

Our study of the association between union membership and political participation can be rooted in social identity theory (or, more specifically, social identification theory). Essentially, the concept of social identity views individuals as rational choosers who glean self-perception from selecting themselves into particular categories based around, for instance, their workplace environment, their affiliation with a religious group, or their ethnicity.²⁶ In associating themselves this way, individuals develop a sense of belonging to the group,²⁷ and in some instances engage in either conscious or subconscious behavioral discrimination, whereby they view their own group as being superior to others.²⁸

Union membership constitutes a clear example whereby an opportunity occurs for individuals to engage in what might be termed "positive behavioral discrimination," in which a perceived association with the union yields a behavioral change favoring the policies promoted by the union.²⁹ However, few scholars have explored this notion in depth. There have been some suggestions that union organizing efforts, as well as strong union leadership, serve to encourage social identification and spread the values and policies promoted by

²³ DONALD R. MATTHEWS, *THE SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF POLITICAL DECISION-MAKERS* 28–30 (1954).

²⁴ Carnes, *supra* note 22, at 16, 23.

²⁵ See generally Aaron J. Sojourner, *Do Unions Promote Members' Electoral Office Holding? Evidence from Correlates of State Legislatures' Occupational Shares*, 66 *INDUS. & LAB. REL. REV.* 467 (2013).

²⁶ Henri Tajfel & John C. Turner, *The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior*, in *PSYCHOLOGY OF INTERGROUP RELATIONS* 7, 16 (Stephen Worchel & William G. Austin eds., 2d ed. 1986).

²⁷ Blake E. Ashforth & Fred Mael, *Social Identity Theory and the Organization*, 14 *ACAD. MGMT. REV.* 20, 20–21 (1989).

²⁸ Rupert Brown, *Social Identity Theory: Past Achievements, Current Problems and Future Challenges*, 30 *EUR. J. SOC. PSYCHOL.* 745, 747 (2000).

²⁹ See Ashforth & Mael, *supra* note 27, at 29–30.

the union throughout much of its membership.³⁰ This transmission occurs, broadly speaking, through encouraging individuals to shift their behavior from passivity to activism.³¹ The clearest expected consequence of this shift is that, on the whole, social identification around a labor group should promote loyalty to the union, as well as activism on its behalf.³²

Although social identification theory is useful in developing a basis for understanding worker politicization through union membership, the literature lacks a model that explicitly explains the causal relationship between organized labor and the promotion of direct participation by economic non-elites in politics. In this paper we take the first step in considering what a model might look like by proposing that workers' participation in the industrial relations process creates leadership and skill development opportunities that enable them to successfully run for elected office.³³ Our model asserts that organized labor's role in politics goes beyond lobbying legislators, mobilizing voters, and funding campaigns. As the next section explains in more detail, we argue that working in a union-represented job exposes economic non-elites to the quasi-political, broadly democratic process of industrial relations. This system of collective bargaining and contract administration provides workers with experience in the mechanics of shaping policy, albeit on the shop floor. When unions are able to create direct political participation amongst their members, those individuals who become involved in politics contribute a non-elite viewpoint to the public policy debate. As this debate is increasingly likely to include *only* the country's elite (a point discussed in the introduction of this paper), the identification between workers and their unions on policy issues potentially creates an outcome effect of increased political pluralism in this country.

SHOP FLOOR DEMOCRACY: ACCESS TO EXPERIENCE AND LEADERSHIP FOR NON-ELITES

We propose that an obvious, though under-researched, starting point for where unions enable and develop workers as economic non-elite to serve in elected political office is at the workplace. In the U.S. model of decentralized

³⁰ See generally JOHN KELLY, *RETHINKING INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS: MOBILIZATION, COLLECTIVISM AND LONG WAVES* (1998); Steven L. Blader, *What Leads Organizational Members to Collectivize? Injustice and Identification as Precursors of Union Certification*, 18 *ORG. SCI.* 108 (2007); Caroline Kelly & John Kelly, *Who Gets Involved in Collective Action?: Social Psychological Determinants of Individual Participation in Trade Unions*, 47 *HUM. REL.* 63 (1994); Melvina Metochi, *The Influence of Leadership and Member Attitudes in Understanding the Nature of Union Participation*, 40 *BRIT. J. INDUS. REL.* 87 (2002).

³¹ See CHARLES TILLY, *FROM MOBILIZATION TO REVOLUTION 52-90* (1978); Christina Cregan et al., *Union Organizing as a Mobilizing Strategy: The Impact of Social Identity and Transformational Leadership on the Collectivism of Union Members*, 47 *BRIT. J. INDUS. REL.* 701, 703 (2009); KELLY, *supra* note 30, at 38; Bert Klandermans, *Mobilization and Participation: Social-Psychological Expansions of Resource Mobilization Theory*, 49 *AM. SOC. REV.* 583 (1984).

³² Cregan et al., *supra* note 31, at 703.

³³ Recent research has also tried to explain how active involvement in union activities enables and supports civic engagement by union members in areas outside electoral politics. See generally Veronica Terriquez, *Schools for Democracy: Labor Union Participation and Latino Immigrant Parents' School-Based Civic Engagement*, 76 *AM. SOC. REV.* 581 (2011).

industrial relations, it is at the workplace level where workers directly engage in collective bargaining and contract administration through unions.³⁴ The decentralized model also means workers can develop a communal base through participation in union locals, the organizational level most proximate to the workplace. In this section we argue that the combination of exposure to the industrial relations systems and participatory opportunities created by union membership politicizes and prepares economic non-elites to directly participate in politics by running for office.

At a technical level, the traditional industrial relations system provides “the design and modification of work rules and work organization” and “the management of conflict and the delivery of due process.”³⁵ In doing so, it makes an important policy contribution—namely, stabilizing the labor-management relationship and ensuring uninterrupted production. It uses the mechanisms of collective bargaining and contract administration to achieve these ends. In deploying these mechanisms, industrial relations provides workers an avenue for skill development in democratic processes.

Workers select a slate of leaders from among their ranks to serve as representatives in the collective bargaining and contract administration processes. While typically supported by lawyers, contract specialists, and other professional staff, these elected workers become key actors in the development and enforcement of the collective bargaining agreement. They will negotiate contract language, represent workers in the grievance process, monitor the application of work rules, and counsel colleagues on a whole host of concerns and complaints. Over the course of time, a worker who may not have held any formal training, legal, economic, or public policy experience, will become an expert in labor and employment law, pay and benefits systems, and workplace policy. He or she is also likely to become a skillful negotiator, a consensus builder, and a group leader.

While these worker-leaders are developing expertise and skills through experience, they also benefit from sophisticated training through their unions. A 2002 survey of national unions found that a majority of unions, covering 90.6 percent of the AFL-CIO’s members at the time, operated independent education departments. These departments primarily train workers in the traditional areas of bargaining, contract administration, union building, and organizing. A considerable percentage also provide political education, leadership skills, and economics training to workers.³⁶ This training further develops critical skills for policy development—in the context of the workplace, it is the collective bargaining agreement—and provides economic non-elites with a knowledge base that they may not otherwise be able to access.

At the same time that these workers are developing specific skills and a knowledge base through industrial relations, they are also building a sense of agency, which is a key component of their social identification around the

³⁴ THOMAS A. KOCHAN ET AL., *THE TRANSFORMATION OF AMERICAN INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS* 81–82 (1986).

³⁵ *Id.* at 82.

³⁶ BARBARA BYRD & BRUCE NISSEN, UNIV. CAL. BERKELEY CTR. FOR LABOR RESEARCH & EDUC., *REPORT ON THE STATE OF LABOR EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES* 16, 20 (2003), available at <http://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/publications/stateoflabor.pdf>.

union. This sense of agency comes from the knowledge that, in negotiating a contract and protecting the rights of coworkers, their actions directly and positively impact lives. In carrying out the functions of their leadership roles, workers involved in collective bargaining and contract administration can point to the fact that they took part in forming workplace policies and ensuring that they are carried through by management, the most powerful actor in every employment situation, whether at a small repair shop or a Fortune 100 technology company. This is a type of shop floor politicization not readily accessible in the at-will environment.

In combining the politicized mindset of worker-leaders in a union with the skill sets and social identification they develop through carrying out the functions of their roles, we propose that a connection occurs between the technical work of the industrial relations process and politics writ large. By way of their job, these workers become shop floor politicians, directly participating in workplace-based democracy. Viewed from a broader perspective, they are completing the same functions expected of an elected political figure—crafting policies through negotiations with different interests, protecting and expanding constituent rights, listening and responding to the petitions of the populace—only on a smaller scale in the workplace. It is experience, knowledge, and skills that non-economic elites can use as part of convincing voters of their qualifications for elected office.

Of course, holding any number of technical qualifications does not guarantee electoral success. For starters, a standard rubric of proper qualifications for a given public office does not exist. And a cursory glance at current and past office holders confirms that voters do not select candidates based on simply technical pedigree. Candidates must convince voters that they support policies that are in the voters' interests, and that they can see to it that the policies are implemented. With the need to broadcast one's credentials to a wide swath of the public in the face of an opponent doing the same, it is a daunting and expensive proposition—the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) expects potential candidates running for a House seat to raise at least \$250,000 within three months of announcing their candidacy.³⁷ Here again, unions help economic non-elites.

THE LOCAL UNION: ACCESS TO A COMMUNITY NETWORK

In addition to exposing workers to the industrial relations process, unions offer workers the opportunity to join an extensive network. We propose this second aspect of our model is also crucial to a union's development and promotion of the participation of economic non-elites in politics. As previously noted, essentially all union members belong to a local. This is the segment of the union structure connected to the workplace. It is through a worker's connection to the local union and involvement in its activities that an economic non-elite augments his or her leadership and skill development with a network of supporters.

³⁷ CHRISTOPHER HAYES, TWILIGHT OF THE ELITES: AMERICA AFTER MERITOCRACY 150 (2012).

This network develops from the role that unions play for members that goes beyond enforcing the collective bargaining agreement and protecting the interests of members in the workplace. Through various activities, they can also serve as community bases for workers. Local union functions provide a setting for workers to socialize outside of work and, depending on the size of the employer, meet coworkers on different shifts or in different parts of the workplace. It is not unusual for local unions to host barbeques, picnics, and outings to events like professional sports games for members and their families. In attending these events, members can build friendships and closer relationships than what may be possible just in the workplace. Economic non-elites interested in pursuing elected office can look to these deeper relationships made with fellow union members and their families for campaign support and votes.

Local unions also connect workers to the surrounding community. Many locals provide workers opportunities to participate in member initiatives such as community events, volunteer service projects, and political activities. Usually driven by member-led committees (another avenue for leadership development), these programs provide an avenue for members to meet and build relationships with members of other unions, non-labor community groups, and the local political party apparatus. Taking part in these activities allows economic non-elites to couple the leadership and skill development formed inside the industrial relations process with visible leadership roles in the greater community, another asset for seeking elected office. At the same time, economic non-elites are building a base of community support that goes beyond their own union and workplace.

Given that economic non-elites lack the funding for media advertisements and other expensive campaign strategies, they must rely heavily on the relationships cultivated through the local union's community element, both at a personal and institutional level. At the personal level, economic non-elites need fellow union members, their families, members of the labor movement in the area, and other community members to help mobilize voters by phone banking, walking door-to-door to talk to voters, and participating in other campaign activities. The institutional support is also critical because economic non-elites who develop relationships with other unions, civic groups, and the local political party through volunteering and participating in their activities can look for reciprocal support.

Ultimately, our model proposes that the community connections developed through union membership complement the shop-floor leadership experience of economic non-elites by lowering the cost of entry to successfully campaign for elected office. The local labor movement can provide strategic advice and offer in-kind services to the campaign. Area union members, families, and supporters are able to work as campaign volunteers, knocking on doors and calling potential voters. Economic non-elite candidates can also gain access to community organizations that work closely with the unions, increasing their visibility to potential voters beyond union member households. All told, the access and resources provided by unions allow economic non-elites to match a better-funded rival candidate's campaign operation. And, when that rival is an economic elite, the economic non-elite's own background provides a compelling narrative of authentic representation to middle class voters.

CASE STUDY: FROM STEWARD TO SENATOR

In an effort to provide a primary test of our model explaining how unions facilitate and support workers wanting to hold elected office, we turn to examples of union members who have successfully won elections in recent years. We identify in this paper two such examples in Las Vegas, Nevada, where workers who were leaders in their union, Culinary Workers Local 226, ran for public office with the union's support. Maggie Carlton, a member of Local 226 and waitress at a coffee shop in the Treasure Island casino, won a Nevada state senate seat with the support of her union. Steven Horsford, another Local 226 member and CEO of the union's joint labor-management training organization, also won a state senate seat with assistance from Culinary Workers Local 226. In the following section, we test our model through a case study analysis methodology that relies on semi-structured interviews with these economic non-elite candidates and key union staff members familiar with their campaigns.

The Culinary Workers—a branch of Unite Here—represent the city's thousands of hospitality workers, including in many of the famous casino resorts.³⁸ Its sixty thousand members include bellhops, laundry room attendants, housekeepers, cocktail waitresses, and many other hospitality employees.³⁹ Because public policy affects its members' lives, the Culinary Workers devote a significant amount of time to politics, including maintaining a political director on staff. While its lobbying efforts are primarily focused on local and state issues, the union engages in electoral work for candidates across the entire ticket.⁴⁰ Observers note the union's political program's success with member voter registration and mobilization methods for ensuring workers are heard at the polling place.⁴¹ Less is known about its success in helping worker candidates successfully run for office and directly participate in the deliberative process that ultimately shapes policy.

One such member candidate is Maggie Carlton, a fourteen-year Culinary Workers member who, as previously mentioned, worked as a waitress at the Treasure Island casino while successfully running for and then serving in public office.⁴² Her shop floor experiences as a union member influenced her path

³⁸ *Our Union/History*, CULINARY WORKERS UNION LOC. 226, <http://www.culinaryunion226.org/union/history> (last visited Jan. 23, 2014). Culinary Workers Local 226 members also work in the casinos of Reno, Nevada. *Our Union/Contact Us*, CULINARY WORKERS UNION LOC. 226, <http://www.culinaryunion226.org/union/contact> (last visited Jan. 23, 2014).

³⁹ *Our Union*, CULINARY WORKERS UNION LOC. 226, <http://www.culinaryunion226.org/union> (last visited Jan. 23, 2014).

⁴⁰ Interview with Union Official 1, in Las Vegas, Nev. (June 6–7, 2012); Interview with Union Official 2, in Las Vegas, Nev. (June 6–7, 2012). The union's health and pension fund also lobbies independently on related policies.

⁴¹ See Ronald Brownstein & Kathleen Hennessey, *Latino Vote Still Lags Its Potential*, L.A. TIMES (Sept. 25, 2004), <http://articles.latimes.com/2004/sep/25/nation/na-latinovote25>; Melanie Trotman & Brody Mullins, *Election 2012: Unions Rejigger Political Spending*, WALL ST. J., Feb. 27, 2012, at A4, available at <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052970204778604577243590542178300?mg=reno64-wsj>.

⁴² Having developed an interest in healthcare from her time as shop steward and a member of the legislature, Maggie left Treasure Island to work for a healthcare-focused nonprofit in 2000. Interview with Maggie Carlton, Steward, Culinary Workers Union Local 226, in Las Vegas, Nev. (June 6–7, 2012).

to political candidacy. In addition to her job as a waitress in the casino's coffee shop, Carlton served as a bargaining team member, shop steward, and volunteer on the union's organizing and political campaigns. She participated in negotiations for three collective bargaining agreements, represented colleagues through daily contract administration, and helped non-union hospitality workers in Las Vegas join the Culinary Workers and gain a voice in their own workplaces.⁴³

Through these leadership roles within the union, Carlton gained experience directly crafting workplace policy and advocating for workers' interests, which is consistent with our model. Reflecting on the experience, Carlton notes she learned about "working with people, the drive for consensus, learning to put groups of folks together."⁴⁴ In a manner mirroring our own political system's fundamental tenets, Carlton operated in a process where "the goal was always to put all of the different parties together and come up with a consensus."⁴⁵

As a union steward, Carlton also took part in continuous trainings covering a variety of topics. Some of the trainings focused on organizational-development-type skills, attributes that in the context of labor-management relations built better worker power, and in the politics arena created cohesion around important policy initiatives. Others were on important policies, such as the specific elements of healthcare coverage. Through the frequent trainings made available by the Culinary Workers, Carlton gained a substantial knowledge base and skill set that she could later deploy as an elected official.

Her path to political office began when Culinary Workers staff told a group of stewards, including Carlton, that they thought it would be valuable to have a worker candidate run for office in a Las Vegas-area state senate district. The union "thought that everyday people who wait on tables, clean rooms, and make food should have a voice as compared to lawyer-dominated legislatures, business-dominated legislatures. That the common sense of the average person was just getting drowned out, that's why [the union] wanted to elect some of [its] own to be in the state legislature."⁴⁶

After looking at the legislative map on the office wall and realizing she lived in the district, Carlton brought her eligibility up with the union's political director. Her motivation for doing so came in part from curiosity and in part from an interest in growing up in a politically active, union family. She also knew she could tell the working families in the district that she understood what they faced, because she too punched in and out at work each day.⁴⁷ Here, it is clear that her identity as a union member guided her view of public policy.

While Carlton independently decided to run for office, she looked to the Culinary Workers' leadership and staff for counsel to determine whether it was a worthwhile endeavor. As the strategic political experts, they walked through Carlton's community involvement with her and considered any potential weaknesses that could derail her campaign. One senior union leader explains, "We

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ *Id.*

⁴⁶ Interview with Union Official 2, *supra* note 40.

⁴⁷ Interview with Maggie Carlton, *supra* note 42.

very much want our members to run, but we don't want them to go on suicide missions."⁴⁸ And as a working mom unconnected to Nevada's political establishment, Carlton understood that she would need the support of her Culinary Workers brothers and sisters to win election.⁴⁹

Carlton won her election that year, unseating an establishment-backed incumbent in the Democratic primary before emerging victorious in the general election. Throughout both the primary and general campaigns, she walked the streets of her district after work each night, introducing herself to voters and sharing how she would represent the interests of ordinary workers in the State Senate. The Culinary Workers supported her by mobilizing voters in door-to-door communications and phone banking.⁵⁰ A union leader remembers, "[Carlton] didn't have much money, but we had boots on the ground. . . . It was a primary. It was hotter than hell, and we had people on the street."⁵¹

Arriving at the statehouse in Carson City, Carlton jumped into learning how to legislate. Thinking back to those first days in office, she says, "You have to learn protocol, all of the rules, there's just so much to learn. And then you have to figure out how to dress and act. I was a waitress. I wore uniforms every day, I didn't have suits!"⁵² Undeterred by the pomp and circumstance of the statehouse, Carlton started work on a variety of pro-worker policy initiatives, providing the perspective of a working mother in committee hearings and caucus conferences. These were her interests as a working elected leader, not a checklist from anyone.⁵³ A union official noted that, "[The union] didn't have a set agenda. We just wanted the average person to have their voice be heard."⁵⁴ When the legislature wasn't in session, Carlton kept working as a waitress at Treasure Island. She did this throughout her twelve years in the state senate before term limits forced her to move to the state assembly, where she continues to serve.⁵⁵

Another Culinary Union member who ran for office as an economic non-elite is outgoing Nevada State Senate Majority Leader Steven Horsford. While he does not work in Las Vegas's casinos or resorts, Horsford plays a pivotal role in ensuring that those who do have the skills needed to succeed and prosper in the gaming and resort tourism industry. Before running for office, he led the Culinary Academy of Las Vegas, a Taft-Hartley training program jointly operated by the Culinary Workers and Las Vegas casinos where members work,⁵⁶ a job Horsford held outside of his state senate assignment.

⁴⁸ Interview with Union Official 2, *supra* note 40.

⁴⁹ Interview with Union Official 2, *supra* note 40; interview with Maggie Carlton, *supra* note 42.

⁵⁰ Interview with Union Official 2, *supra* note 40; interview with Maggie Carlton, *supra* note 42.

⁵¹ Interview with Union Official 2, *supra* note 40.

⁵² Interview with Maggie Carlton, *supra* note 42.

⁵³ *Id.*

⁵⁴ Interview with Union Official 2, *supra* note 40.

⁵⁵ Interview with Maggie Carlton, *supra* note 42.

⁵⁶ 2013 Media Kit: *How Hospitality Works*, CULINARY ACAD. OF LAS VEGAS 3–4 (2013), <http://www.theculinaryacademy.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/CulinaryAcademyMediaKitUpdate2013-r2.pdf>.

Horsford's position at the confluence of labor-management collaboration provides a unique wrinkle for testing our model. Most obviously, he holds a managerial position and therefore may not approach work, the union, and his view of the workplace in the same way as a traditional worker like Carlton might. He also comes into contact with the traditional industrial relations process in a different manner than Carlton. As the leader of a joint program, Horsford is charged with implementing the policies negotiated by labor and management, rather than crafting the policy itself. Nevertheless, his job directly connects to industrial relations and, therefore, provides another way to test our model of how unions facilitate and support economic non-elites who want to run for elected office.

Unlike Carlton, Horsford did not become associated with the Culinary Workers as a bargaining unit member. His relationship with the union grew out of its rapid response efforts after the September 11th terrorist attacks, which immediately damaged Las Vegas's economy. The halt to air traffic and fears of more attacks on popular U.S. destinations led to a significant drop in casino revenue, and nearly 25,000 Las Vegas workers lost their jobs within a week of the attacks.⁵⁷ The Culinary Workers' hall served as a crisis center, where the union led efforts to coordinate assistance help for displaced workers with numerous agencies and organizations.⁵⁸ Horsford's employer at the time, a public affairs firm, loaned him to the coordination effort.⁵⁹

Participating in the union's community assistance program proved to be a seminal moment in Horsford's life. He remembers, "It was an opportunity for me to see that I could actually make an impact in my community. I could come back to the community that I had been born and raised in and work with our partners . . . to help people get what they needed."⁶⁰ It also connected with his previous union affiliation as a student member of the National Education Association while attending the University of Nevada, Reno. Soon after this experience, Horsford jumped at the opportunity to lead the Culinary Academy and its sister non-profit, Nevada Partners, eventually focusing only on the Culinary Academy.⁶¹

Just as Carlton gained shop floor experience advocating for worker interests and crafting workplace policy, Horsford gained similar experience leading seemingly partisan opponents—represented by the Culinary Workers and the union Las Vegas casinos—in developing programs benefiting both sides. Through the Culinary Academy, workers gain training opportunities that are critical to career development in Las Vegas's hospitality industry. In turn, the casinos and resorts benefit from high performing, high skilled employees.⁶²

⁵⁷ Interview with Steven Horsford, Senate Majority Leader, Nev. State Senate, in Las Vegas, Nev. (June 6–7, 2012).

⁵⁸ J. Patrick Coolican, *Culinary Head D. Taylor Poised for New Challenge as National Leader*, LAS VEGAS SUN (Nov. 25, 2012, 2:00 AM), <http://www.lasvegassun.com/news/2012/nov/25/local-labor-leader-d-taylor-standing-workers/>.

⁵⁹ Interview with Steven Horsford, *supra* note 57.

⁶⁰ *Id.*

⁶¹ *Id.*

⁶² *Id.*

Horsford notes that his Culinary Academy work provides valuable experience for serving in elected office, particularly in his most recent role as Nevada Senate Majority Leader. Just as the political arena contains varied factions and interests clamoring for attention, Horsford must work to find ways to satisfy multiple interests in the labor-management partnership. He notes, “[The Culinary Academy leadership] have a very delicate balance to make sure that we’re achieving the objectives [of all stakeholders] . . . and forging consensus sometimes when it does not look like it is there initially.” To give just one example, when stakeholders raised concerns about the predominance of training programs such as English language classes geared toward the Latino community, Horsford and the Culinary Academy developed a program that helped rank-and-file employees gain the skill sets necessary to move into frontline supervisory positions.⁶³

With a lifelong interest in public policy, Horsford decided to run for state senate in 2004. Like Carlton, he looked to the Culinary Workers for strategic advice, speaking with the union’s seasoned staff about the details of running for public office. Horsford won a crowded Democratic primary and, later, the general election with assistance from the union. Like in Carlton’s campaign, Culinary Workers’ members helped register voters, knocked on doors, and participated in phone banking operations to garner support for Horsford in his district.⁶⁴

In office, Horsford ascended through the Democratic caucus, eventually becoming the first African-American senate majority leader in Nevada’s history. He dedicated himself to passing policies that help all workers, including raising the minimum wage and improving the delivery of health care throughout the state.⁶⁵ Horsford sees his legislative work as an extension of his full time work with the Culinary Academy, just as Carlton brings the life experiences of a working mom to her political role. He notes, “What I have tried to do in my experience at the [Culinary Academy] has been to try to inform [the legislative work], not just for union members, but for all people that are trying to get access to employment or trying to move their career or advance their career.”⁶⁶

Horsford recently won election to the U.S. House of Representatives in Nevada’s 4th District. While campaigning for the seat, he spoke of hoping to take his labor-management partnership experience to Washington and impact national public policy. In fact, Horsford notes the lack of non-elites in Congress, stating “[I]t’s a big part of what we need in DC—people who actually understand the plight of the ninety-nine percent of us who are in the working class.”⁶⁷

While a sample size of two is by no means quantitatively conclusive, the case study analysis of Maggie Carlton and Steven Horsford’s journeys from union members to elected officials supports our model’s explanation of how unions facilitate and support economic non-elites who want to run for elected

⁶³ *Id.*

⁶⁴ *Id.*; interview with Union Official 2, *supra* note 40.

⁶⁵ Interview with Steven Horsford, *supra* note 57.

⁶⁶ *Id.*

⁶⁷ *Id.*

office. For both individuals, there was no obvious route to independently running for elected office. Even Horsford, who had more exposure to the management of Las Vegas's largest employers and arguably had access to a broader base of financial support, relied on his relationship with Culinary Workers Local 226 for strategic political direction and voter mobilization support. And, both identified as union members interested in pursuing public policy that benefits the working class.

We see the union and presence of the industrial relations process influencing both Carlton and Horsford's campaigns. Both candidates identified their experiences operating within the industrial relations process as a qualification for holding elected office. Carlton pointed to her time advocating for her co-workers and being a part of contract negotiations. Horsford referred to the consensus building required in a labor-management partnership as a tool that he could bring to the statehouse. The two candidates also relied on the community element of union membership to achieve electoral success. As economic non-elites, Carlton and Horsford did not have the financial resources to independently staff campaign teams and use an expensive media strategy. They looked to Culinary Workers Local 226's political program for assistance, which provided canvassers, phone banks, and other campaign support.

One interesting observation gleaned from the case study analysis is the role of the union as strategic advisor. While we expected candidates to use the relationships gained through union membership in their campaigns, our model did not originally incorporate the pre-campaign advisory facet of a union's role in facilitating and supporting economic non-elites who want to run for elected office. Before declaring their candidacies, both Carlton and Horsford talked with union staff about the feasibility of running for office. Here it seems the union plays equal parts pollster, pundit, and strategist. The obvious high stakes of running for elected office require such a systematic review. For an economic non-elite, though, it is an element of running for elected office that can be cost prohibitive. Having access to a union's strategic political resources helps lower the cost of entry for candidates like Carlton and Horsford to run for office, and further plays a role in facilitating and supporting economic non-elite candidates.

CONCLUSION

Coming out of a presidential election year where candidates vied to represent the interests of middle class workers while spending record amounts of money, it is appropriate to consider the role of unions in a political system that is seemingly becoming less accessible to economic non-elite candidates.⁶⁸ And, while a significant literature exists explaining labor's electoral processes (i.e. voter mobilization and education), less is known about how unions assist economic non-elites who want to run for elected office and, thereby, promote pluralism by injecting non-elite voices into the policy making arena. Recent research has made important contributions to understanding the issue by identi-

⁶⁸ Fredreka Schouten & Christopher Schnaars, *Records: Presidential Race History's Most Expensive*, USA TODAY (Dec. 7, 2012, 1:26 PM), <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2012/12/07/presidential-campaign-spending/1753971/>.

fyng that occupational background influences policy makers' voting records and establishing a relationship between the union density of certain occupations and their presence in state legislatures.⁶⁹ This paper aims to build off of these efforts by explaining at a micro-level how unions facilitate and support economic non-elite candidates for elected office.

We propose an initial model demonstrating how unions do this. Our model asserts that unions provide economic non-elites with the ability to develop the tools necessary to successfully run for elected office through participation in the industrial relations process and the union's membership initiatives. In the industrial relations process, workers develop expertise in crafting shop floor policy and representing constituent interests through collective bargaining and contract administration. These skills transfer over to the political arena and provide economic non-elites with a demonstrable leadership and technical record to rely on in a campaign. The union's membership initiatives provide an avenue for economic non-elites to build a broad base of community support and attain greater visibility. Together, these two elements of union membership allow economic non-elites to run for office at a time when campaigning is an extremely expensive endeavor and a widening disparity exists between the economic standing of policy makers and citizens.

We tested our model in a case study analysis of two union members who ran for state senate seats in Las Vegas, Nevada, area districts. Maggie Carlton and Steven Horsford, both members of Culinary Workers Local 226, entered politics with the assistance of the union. While both candidates have different backgrounds—Carlton was a waitress, while Horsford managed a joint labor-management training center—neither had an obvious opportunity to self-fund their campaigns. Our analysis of each candidate supports the model: Carlton and Horsford's experience in the industrial relations process and access to opportunities that come with union membership provided political skill sets that they relied on to win their respective campaigns. In addition, we discovered in both cases that the union served a pre-campaign advisory role that our model did not originally consider.

While these case studies provide preliminary support for our model, more analysis is needed to confirm our thesis. Future research must provide more diversity in occupations, geography, and actors, variables that could confound the findings of our study. As an example, is the support found for Carlton and Horsford unique to the Culinary Workers or Unite Here locals? Or would an economic non-elite candidate running for elected office in a district with less union density than Las Vegas find the same success, even with union support? Considering these questions through both qualitative and quantitative methods will prove valuable.

Understanding how unions facilitate and support economic non-elite candidates for elected office does more than answer an interesting research question. As elections become more expensive and more policy makers come from the ranks of economic elites, it is crucial to explore paths for expanding plural-

⁶⁹ See generally Carnes, *supra* note 23; Sojourner, *supra* note 25, at 474–84.

ism in the U.S. political system.⁷⁰ Unions that facilitate and support economic non-elite candidates for office are helping to cultivate this path, widening access to democracy for everyday citizens.

⁷⁰ As elections become more expensive, unions also face a question of how best to use limited resources to broaden support for worker-friendly public policy. Cultivating and supporting economic non-elite candidates may come at the expense of other strategies geared toward pressuring non-union politicians.