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ORIGINAL PAPER

Labor Unions and White Democratic Partisanship

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Abstract

The Democratic Party's declining support among white voters is a defining feature of contemporary American politics. Extant research has emphasized factors such as elite polarization and demographic change but has overlooked another important trend, the decades-long decline of labor union membership. This oversight is surprising, given organized labor's long ties to the Democratic Party. I argue that the concurrent decline of union membership and white support for the Democratic Party is not coincidental, but that labor union affiliation is an important determinant of whites' partisan allegiances. I test this using several decades of cross-sectional and panel data. I show that union-affiliated whites are more likely to identify as Democrats, a substantively significant relationship that does not appear to be driven by self-selection. Overall, these findings underscore the political consequences of union decline and help us to better understand the drivers of declining white support for the Democratic Party.

Keywords Labor Unions · Partisanship · Whites · Democratic Party

A defining characteristic of American politics over the past half-century has been the Democratic Party's loss of support among white voters. This has been driven primarily by the realignment of the once "Solid South" from Democratic to Republican (Kuziemko and Washington 2018; Lupton and McKee 2020; Valentino and Sears 2005), but has occurred outside of the South as well (Abramowitz and Saunders 2006; Zingher 2018). Seminal work by Carmines and Stimson (1989), and a more recent paper by Kuziemko and Washington (2018) argue that civil rights and race were central in driving whites, particularly Southerners, away from the Democratic Party. Moving beyond the Black-White divide, Hajnal and Rivera (2014) and Ostfeld (2019) emphasize the role of immigration and Latino outreach in shifting whites

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away from an increasingly diverse and pro-immigrant Democratic Party. Additional work emphasizes the role of abortion, the "culture wars," and debates over the welfare state, arguing that elite polarization on these issues has helped people better align their ideology and issue positions with their partisanship (Abramowitz 1994; Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Adams 1997; Layman and Carsey 2002; Zingher and Flynn 2018). As a result, many whites have shifted away from the Democratic Party.[1]

These past approaches broadly emphasize two trends in contemporary American politics, increased elite polarization and growing racial/ethnic diversity, as drivers of this white partisan change, but overlook another important trend, the decline of organized labor.[2] This oversight is surprising, given the long-standing political alliance between labor unions and the Democratic Party (Anzia and Moe 2016; Asher et al. 2001; Dark 1999; Francia 2006) and the fact that labor union membership and white Democratic partisanship have moved in tandem over the past several decades.[3]

Labor unions are politically consequential. Most notably, they have been shown to boost voter turnout and civic engagement among their members (Feigenbaum et al. 2019; Flavin and Radcliff 2011; Leighley and Nagler 2007; Kerrissey and Schofer 2013; Radcliff and Davis 2000). Labor unions also provide an important voice to the lower and middle classes (Rosenfeld 2014; Schlozman et al. 2012); this can serve to decrease political and economic inequality (Becher et al. 2018; Brady et al. 2013; Bucci 2018; Flavin 2018; Kerrissey 2015; Western and Rosenfeld 2011).[4] Here, I argue that labor unions also have important consequences for mass partisanship, specifically that the decline of organized labor has played an important, but under-examined role in the decline of white support for the Democratic Party.

I test this by using a variety of survey data across six decades, demonstrating a robust relationship between labor union affiliation and Democratic partisanship. I

[1] The Supplementary Appendix and all data and Stata code to replicate the main findings are available at the Political Behavior Dataverse (https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/polbehavior).

[2] Union membership has declined dramatically in the private sector while it has remained largely stable in the public sector (http://unionstats.com/). Even though public sector workers make up a large share of union members (nearly half as of 2018, according to CPS data), far more Americans work in the private sector (130 million) than the public sector (22 million), according to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) (https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t17.htm). As such, private sector union decline is especially consequential and has certainly had a large impact on declining overall union membership.

[3] Not all labor unions are staunch supporters of the Democratic Party, nor is their support constant across elections and candidates (https://news.bloomberglaw.com/daily-labor-report/gop-candidates-labor-unions-make-strange-bedfellows). For instance, the Teamsters endorsed Richard Nixon in 1972 (https://www.nytimes.com/1972/07/18/archives/meany-stand-on-mcgovern-spreads-labor-dissension.html), while Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump both received a sizable proportion of the union vote (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/11/10/donald-trump-got-reagan-like-support-from-union-households/). Although certain labor unions may occasionally endorse Republicans, organized labor is, in general, among the strongest organizational supporters of the Democratic Party (https://www.opensecrets.org/industries/indus.php?Ind=P).

[4] See Ahlquist (2017) and Rosenfeld (2019) for fuller reviews.

also use panel data to show that this relationship does not appear to be driven by self-selection. Overall, these findings underscore the political consequences of labor unions and help us to better understand the drivers of declining white Democratic partisanship.

Labor Unions and White Partisanship Over Time

The peak of the Democratic Party's post-war success among whites was in 1964, when Lyndon Johnson won 60% of the white vote in his historic landslide victory over Barry Goldwater. Two decades later Walter Mondale suffered a landslide defeat at the hands of Ronald Reagan, winning just 34% of the white vote. Nearly three decades after Mondale's defeat, Barack Obama comfortably won reelection over Mitt Romney with only 39% of the white vote. This was nearly the same percentage (40%) that Michael Dukakis won in his 1988 defeat at the hands of George H.W. Bush. Donald Trump won the Electoral College in 2016, but lost the popular vote to Hillary Clinton, despite winning 57% of the white vote. This was a similar amount as Ronald Reagan garnered in 1980, when he won 56% of the white vote en route to an electoral drubbing of Jimmy Carter. Although the U.S. electorate is diversifying, whites are still the largest racial group and their partisan allegiances have important electoral implications.[5]

Figure 1 shows that declining white Democratic partisanship has occurred alongside a decline in union membership. In 1964, nearly 60% of whites identified as Democrats, while nearly one in three American workers belonged to a labor union. By the mid 1980s, both white Democratic partisanship and union membership had declined by nearly 10 percentage points. These trends have continued into the 2010s. I argue that their concurrent decline is not coincidental, but rather that organized labor is a driver of this partisan change.[6]

Why Labor Unions Promote Democratic Partisanship

The primary reason we should expect a relationship between labor union affiliation and Democratic partisanship centers around unions' ability to educate, inform, and socialize their members (Ahlquist and Levi 2013; Kim and Margalit 2017; Macdonald 2019).

[5] See Aldrich et al. (2018, Chap. 5) and Roper exit poll data (https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/data-highlights/elections-and-presidents/how-groups-voted) for greater detail.

[6] Union membership peaked in 1953 at nearly 35% (Goldfield and Bromsen 2013). This was driven primarily by the private sector (with membership at nearly 43%) as public sector unionization was very limited at the time (Anzia and Moe 2016; Flavin and Hartney 2015). Today, according to Current Population Survey (CPS) data, the public sector makes up a near majority of union members, while just 6.4% of private sector workers belonged to a labor union (http://unionstats.com/). Private sector union membership has also declined among both whites and Blacks (Rosenfeld and Kleykamp 2012).

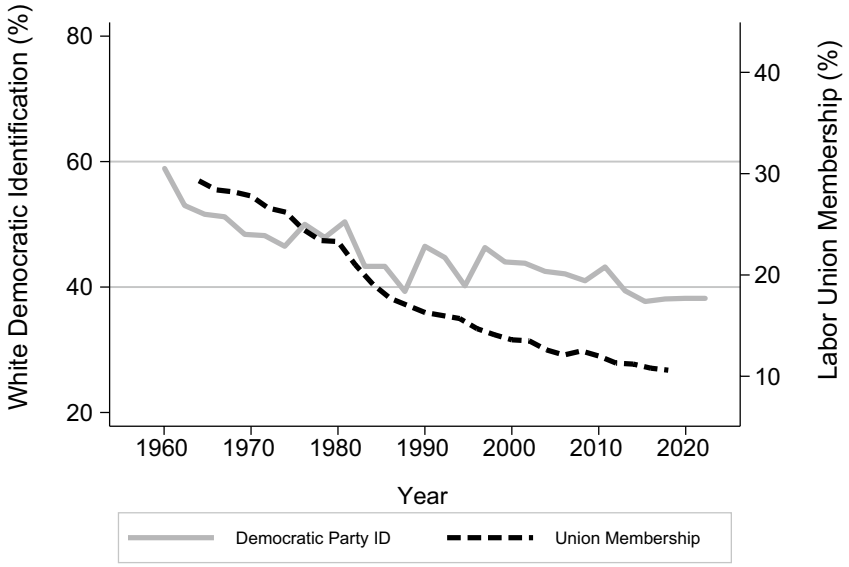

Fig. 1 Union Membership and White Democratic Partisanship, 1964–2018. White Democratic partisanship (includes strong, weak, and independent-leaning Democrats) is based on weighted ANES and CCES survey data. Union membership is for all races and is based on CPS data. Years range from 1964 to 2018 (only even years are examined). Cumulative ANES is used to measure white partisanship for 1964–2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016. Cumulative CCES is used for 2006, 2010, 2014, and 2018

Labor unions frequently communicate with their members. These communications can occur via meetings, informal discussions, newsletters, and/or emails, etc., and take place during both election-year mobilization efforts (Asher et al. 2001; Francia 2006) and on a day-to-day basis (Kim and Margalit 2017; Macdonald 2019). Labor unions keep their members abreast of what they (the specific union and organized labor more broadly) are doing to improve their livelihoods and economic well-being. For example, union organizations such as the AFL–CIO (American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations) prominently highlight the myriad ways in which organized labor seeks to benefit the working/middle classes, i.e., by securing higher pay and benefits, increasing workplace safety, and giving employees more of a "voice" in their workplace.[7]

Because union members are, in contrast to their non-unionized counterparts, exposed to a greater volume of "pro-union" information flows, they should be more likely to view organized labor in a favorable light, and by extension, more likely to support the political party that has historically sought to strengthen organized labor. Indeed, data from the Cumulative ANES shows that union members rate labor unions at a value of 68 (on a 0–97 feeling thermometer scale); this is significantly

[7] See also for example, the AFL–CIO's website highlighting the actions (broad and specific) that labor unions take to better working conditions for their members and for the broader working/middle classes (https://aflcio.org/what-unions-do).

warmer than people who are not union-affiliated at all (mean rating of 51). Data from the General Social Survey (GSS) similarly shows that 77% of union members agreed that "workers need strong trade unions to protect their interests." In contrast, just 41% of non union members agreed with this statement.

Labor unions also tend to take policy positions that are consistent with the national Democratic Party's stances. These include support for a higher minimum wage, universal health insurance, and regulations to protect workers (Freeman and Medoff 1984; Lichtenstein 2013; Rosenfeld 2014). Labor unions have also adopted progressive stances on issues of race and civil rights (Frymer 2008; Schickler 2016), and made efforts to incorporate Hispanics and immigrants into their ranks (Francia and Orr 2014; Rosenfeld and Kleykamp 2009). Both of these positions, economic and racial liberalism, are consistent with the Democratic Party's political agenda. Furthermore, organized labor's frequent endorsements of Democratic candidates signals to union members that the Democratic Party is an ally of the group (labor unions) to which they belong. This signal, i.e., that a party is an ally of one's social group, keeps with a prominent perspective on partisanship (Green et al. 2002) and has been experimentally shown to strengthen partisan ties (Kane 2019).

Labor unions' efforts to educate, inform, and socialize appears to matter, i.e., to impact their members.[8] Indeed, past work has shown that labor unions can act as a powerful socializing agent, promoting a sense of altruism and solidarity with the broader working class (Ahlquist and Levi 2013). In addition, unions have been shown to influence their members' attitudes on specific issues such as free trade (Ahlquist et al. 2014; Kim and Margalit 2017), workplace unionization (Lyon 2020), economic redistribution (Mosimann and Pontusson 2017), and affirmative action (Grumbach and Frymer 2020). Furthermore, research in both the United States (Francia and Bigelow 2010) and in Europe (Arndt and Rennwald 2016) shows that labor unions can shape voting behavior, making their members more likely to support parties of the left.

In short, labor unions frequently communicate with their members, educating them about the "good things" that unions do for them and for the working/middle classes more broadly. Many unions also endorse Democratic candidates and liberal policies, signaling that the Democratic Party is an ally of organized labor. Along with past research showing that labor unions can shape their members' political attitudes, it stands to reason that unions can also foster identification with the pro-union Democratic Party.

[8] It also seems likely that labor unions' efforts to inform provision efforts will also reach, albeit to a more limited degree, non union members who live in union households. One way that this could occur is via political discussions that occur in labor union households. For example, data from the Cumulative ANES shows that just 22% of Americans report that they *never* discuss politics with family and friends. This could also occur because these individuals (non union members in a union household) are likely *somewhat* reliant upon labor unions and the benefits they provide the household, i.e., for some portion of their economic well-being. Data from the Cumulative ANES seems to support this. Union household members (who are not in a union themselves) give labor unions a mean rating of 63 out of 97 (on the feeling thermometer scale), compared to a mean rating of 51 for people who are not at all union-affiliated.

Testing the Union-Party Relationship

I use data from a variety of surveys, primarily the Cumulative American National Election Studies (ANES), to more rigorously test the relationship between labor union affiliation and white partisanship.[9] I regress the dependent variable of interest, white Americans' partisanship, on labor union affiliation and a wide set of demographic characteristics.[10]

I specifically control for age, gender, marital status, home ownership, educational attainment, household income, frequency of church attendance, religious affiliation, and region of residence. These socio-demographics reflect salient political divisions in American politics (Mason 2018). They can also help to account for the different social groups to which people belong and the differences in peoples' life circumstances that orient them toward one political party over another (Campbell et al. 1960; Green et al. 2002; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008). I also control for year fixed effects (dummies for each election year) to account for factors such as partisan control of the presidency, the public's policy mood, and the state of the national economy (Fiorina 1981; MacKuen et al. 1989).

Consistent with past work (e.g., Green et al. 2002; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008), I expect that, on average, females, the less affluent, the less religiously observant, and those who do not identify as Protestants will be more likely to align with the Democratic Party. In contrast, I expect that males, the more affluent, the more religiously observant, and self-identified Protestants will be less likely to align with the Democratic Party.

Table 1 shows, using five decades of data from the Cumulative ANES, that union-affiliated whites score approximately 0.7 points more "Democratic" (on the 7-point scale) than their non-union affiliated counterparts, and rate the Democratic Party approximately 11 points warmer than the Republican Party.[11] The magnitude of the union-party relationship is also substantively significant.[12] It exceeds the differences

[9] Unless otherwise stated, union-affiliated (at times written as "union household") refers to respondents who are union members themselves *or* who live in a household with other union members, but do not belong to a union themselves. See Supplementary Appendix A for greater detail on variable coding.

[10] I look at two dependent variables: (1) the canonical seven-point scale, and (2) a difference in feeling thermometer ratings between the Democratic and Republican Parties. I do this because partisanship is conceptualized as consisting of both identification and affect (Campbell et al. 1960).

[11] This demographics-only model may be subject to criticism as it does not include controls for issue attitudes and retrospective evaluations. I am confident, however, that this relationship is robust to their inclusion, given the findings of past research. For example, Hajnal and Rivera (2014, Table 1) show that union membership is significantly associated with white Democratic party identification, using data from the 2008 ANES that includes controls for demographics, ideology, issue positions, retrospective economic evaluations, presidential approval, and racial and immigration attitudes. Zingher (2018, Table 2) uses ANES data over several decades, showing that white union members are significantly more likely to identify as and vote Democratic when controlling for demographics, and economic/social policy attitudes. Though labor unions are not either paper's main explanatory variable, I rely on these two papers' findings (Hajnal and Rivera 2014; Zingher 2018) to show that the relationship between union affiliation and white Democratic partisanship is robust to controls beyond the demographics included here.

[12] It is important to note that the results here display the "average" influence of union affiliation on white partisanship. It is likely that the relationship is stronger for people who feel closer to/identify more strongly with labor unions (Campbell et al. 1960, Chap. 12; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008, Chap. 11).

Table 1 Labor Unions and White Partisanship

	(1) Party ID (High = Dem)	(2) Party FT (Dem—Rep)
Union household	0.652*** (0.031)	10.691*** (0.758)
Female	0.241*** (0.025)	5.809*** (0.587)
Married	− 0.161*** (0.029)	− 4.089*** (0.676)
Homeowner	− 0.106*** (0.030)	− 2.936*** (0.720)
18–29 years old (ref.)		
30–44 years old	0.119*** (0.035)	2.946*** (0.819)
45–64 years old	0.215*** (0.037)	4.757*** (0.888)
65 years and older	0.144*** (0.045)	4.642*** (1.046)
Less than high school (ref.)		
High school diploma	− 0.352*** (0.051)	− 11.980*** (1.475)
Some college	− 0.597*** (0.056)	− 14.698*** (1.552)
College degree	− 0.465*** (0.059)	− 9.152*** (1.596)
0–16 income percentile (ref.)		
17–33 income percentile	0.024 (0.047)	− 0.010 (1.136)
34–67 income percentile	− 0.167*** (0.044)	− 5.073*** (1.067)
68–95 income percentile	− 0.367*** (0.049)	− 7.883*** (1.177)
96–100 income percentile	− 0.882*** (0.068)	− 14.559*** (1.564)
Never attend church (ref.)		
Attend church a few times a year	− 0.199*** (0.037)	− 3.254*** (0.886)
Attend church once or twice a month	− 0.257*** (0.046)	− 5.328*** (1.072)
Attend church almost every week	− 0.409*** (0.047)	− 9.436*** (1.072)
Attend church every week	− 0.582*** (0.038)	− 14.892*** (0.894)
Protestant (ref.)		
Catholic	0.731*** (0.032)	9.585*** (0.709)
Jewish	1.623*** (0.074)	26.405*** (1.781)

Table 1 (continued)

	(1) Party ID (High = Dem)	(2) Party FT (Dem—Rep)
Other/none	0.488*** (0.041)	10.849*** (0.942)
Northeast (ref.)		
Midwest	0.098*** (0.036)	2.751*** (0.838)
South	0.316*** (0.037)	− 0.453 (0.871)
West	0.130*** (0.040)	2.409*** (0.916)
Constant	4.645*** (0.089)	18.260*** (1.983)
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes
Observations	30,017	22,976
R^2	0.101	0.100

Dependent variables range from 1 to 7 (model 1) and from − 97 to + 97 (model 2). Years range from 1970 to 2016 (model 1) and from 1978 to 2016 (model 2). Source is the Cumulative ANES, survey weights applied. OLS coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses

***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1, two-tailed

between males and females, and is similar in magnitude to the differences between the most and least affluent, and the most and least religiously observant.[13] Overall, these results point to a strong relationship between labor unions and Democratic partisanship among white Americans.

Table 2 shows that the union-party relationship is present for both white union members and for whites who live in a union household. This suggests that labor union efforts to educate, inform, and socialize their members also reaches, to a lesser degree, the families of union members. If peoples' political behavior and attitudes are shaped not just by union membership, but also by residence in a union household, this suggests that the decline of organized labor may have broader consequences than previously thought. The decline of organized labor may not only depress whites' support for the Democratic Party by decreasing the number of people who belong to labor unions, but also by decreasing the number of white Americans who are socialized in a labor union household. The findings in Table 2 also suggest that the main results in Table 1 (which combined union members and those

[13] These are pooled data (across five decades) and thus may mask the changing relationship between several demographics, such as gender, education, and religiosity, and whites' partisanship. See Abramowitz and Saunders (2006), Mason (2018, Chap. 3), and Zingher (2014, 2019) for greater detail on the over-time partisan allegiances of different demographic groups. See Margolis (2018) for a broader treatment on the complex relationship between religion and partisanship in the United States.

Table 2 Unions and White Partisanship by Household Status

	(1) Party ID (High = Dem)	(2) Party FT (Dem—Rep)
Non union (ref.)		
Union member	0.772*** (0.038)	11.564*** (0.897)
Union household only	0.494*** (0.046)	9.583*** (1.178)
Controls	Yes	Yes
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes
Observations	30,004	22,967
R^2	0.102	0.100

Dependent variables range from 1 to 7 (model 1) and from − 97 to + 97 (model 2). Years range from 1970 to 2016 (model 1) and from 1978 to 2016 (model 2). Source is the Cumulative ANES, survey weights applied. OLS coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses

***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1, two-tailed

who only belong to a union household) are a conservative estimate of the union-party relationship.[14]

Figure 2 examines the union-party relationship over time to see if, for example it was systematically stronger in the 1960s/1970s than in the 2000s/2010s, given that organized labor was a more consequential political actor in this earlier time period (Rosenfeld 2014). In order to test this, I use data from the Cumulative ANES and run six bivariate probit regression models, one for each decade from the 1960s to the 2010s.[15] In order to maximize over-time comparability, I restrict the sample to white respondents who were interviewed in-person during presidential years. Each decade thus consists of a few thousand white respondents across two or three election years.[16]

I regress the dependent variable of Democratic party identification among whites (0 = Republican/Pure Independent; 1 = Democrat) on labor union affiliation (0 = non union household; 1 = union household). The results show that union-party relationship is relatively consistent over time. Union-affiliated whites have consistently been between 10 and 15 percentage points more likely to identify as Democrats than their non union-affiliated counterparts. Despite a modest increase (in the strength of the relationship) from the 1980s to the 1990s, which may have resulted in efforts

[14] Furthermore, the ANES data only asks about current union affiliation. Thus, it is possible that the "non union affiliated" group includes former union members; this could further underestimate the magnitude of the union-party relationship among white Americans.

[15] Several of the relevant demographic controls were not available in the 1960s. As such, I opted to run simple bivariate models instead. Furthermore, the pooled analyses in Table 1 demonstrate that the union-party relationship is robust to a battery of additional demographic controls.

[16] The sample size for each decade ranges between 1688 and 4252. The election years for each decade are as follows: 1960s = (1964/1968); 1970s = (1972/1976); 1980s = (1980/1984/1988); 1990s = (1992/1996); 2000s = (2000/2004/2008); 2010s = (2012/2016).

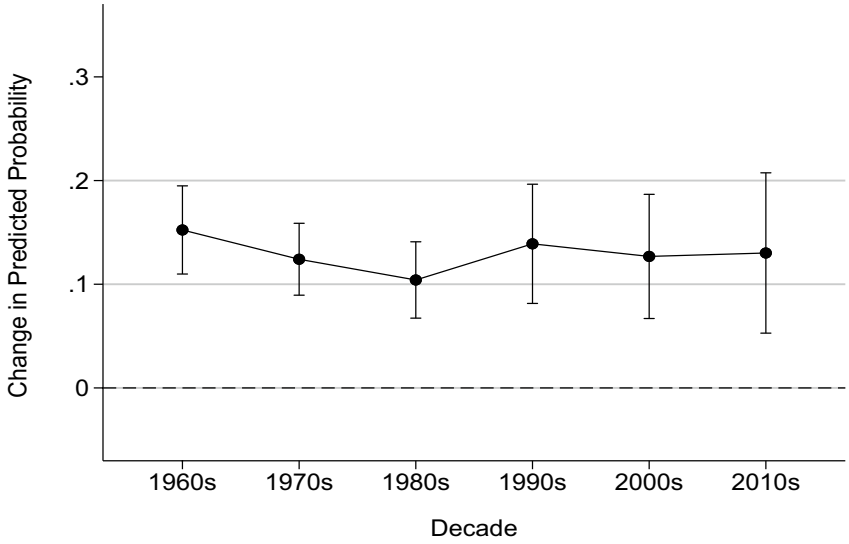

Fig. 2 The Union-Party Relationship Over Time. Shows the marginal effect of union affiliation on Democratic party identification (0 vs. 1). Based on six bivariate probit regression models (one for each decade). To maximize over-time comparability, only presidential election years (from 1964 to 2016) and white in-person survey respondents are examined. Source is the Cumulative ANES, survey weights applied. Number of observations ranges from 1688 to 4252

by then AFL–CIO president John Sweeney to increase unions' political activism (Asher et al. 2001; Chap. 5), there has not been a monotonic increase/decrease in the magnitude of the union-party relationship. Overall, these results demonstrate that union-affiliated whites have generally remained loyal to the Democratic Party over time (see also Aldrich et al. 2018, Chap. 5; Asher et al. 2001), but as unions have declined, their share of the electorate has decreased.

I supplement the cross-sectional ANES analyses using panel data from the 1965–1997 Youth Socialization Panel study (ICPSR 4037). This study tracks a class of American high school graduates (the class of 1965) at four different points: from age 18 in 1965, age 26 in 1973, age 35 in 1982, and age 50 in 1997. This study measures respondents' party identification at all four points (1965–1997), and respondents' union affiliation at three different points (post-high school) from 1973 to 1997. This unique panel study can illustrate the political consequences of union affiliation, i.e., whether it matters if people are joining and remaining in labor unions during their adult working lives.

Using these panel data, I compare the 1997 partisanship of whites who were union-affiliated (in a union or a union household) during the entire 1973–1997 period with the 1997 partisanship of whites who were not union-affiliated (did not belong to a union or live in a union household) at all over this same time period. Unlike the cross-sectional analyses of the ANES in Table 1, I can also control for respondents' partisanship in 1965, *before* they were old enough to make the decision

to join a labor union. This crucial "pre-treatment" variable can help account for respondents' childhood socialization and other factors that may predict the decision to join a labor union/union household.

The results in column 1 of Table 3 show that whites who spent much of their adult working lives (from 1973 to 1997) in a labor union household (as either a union member or as a non member living with a union member) score significantly more "Democratic" (mean of 4.8 on the 7-point scale in 1997) than whites who were not union-affiliated at all during this time period (mean of 3.8). Importantly, these results hold when controlling for respondents' "pre-treatment" partisanship. This variable is measured in 1965, *before* people have the opportunity to join a labor union/union household, and can thus account for childhood socialization and other factors that may predict both union affiliation and partisanship in adulthood. Column 2 of Table 3 shows that, controlling for pre-adult partisanship (measured in 1965), non union-affiliated whites (from 1973 to 1997) had a mean placement of 3.8 (on the 7-point scale in 1997) and had a 43% probability of identifying as a Democrat in 1997. This compares to a mean placement of 4.7 and a 68% probability for whites who were union-affiliated during this 34-year time period.

Robustness of Findings

In Supplementary Appendix B, I conduct a series of additional analyses to demonstrate the robustness of the union-party relationship. I briefly describe them below.

First, I use a dichotomous coding of Democratic partisanship (0 = Republican/Pure Independent; 1 = Democrat) rather than the 7-point scale. This shows that the main ANES results are robust to additional model specifications (OLS vs. probit). Second, I run models (using ANES data) that control for parental partisanship (Jennings et al. 2009). This is a powerful control that can help to

Table 3 Unions and White Partisanship Through Adulthood

	(1) Party ID—1997 (High = Dem)	(2) Party ID—1997 (High = Dem)
Union household (1973–1997)	1.010*** (0.232)	0.890*** (0.228)
Partisanship (1965)		0.246*** (0.045)
Constant	3.755*** (0.096)	2.701*** (0.202)
Observations	488	480
R^2	0.032	0.091

Dependent variables range from 1 to 7 and are measured in 1997. "Pre-treatment" partisanship (1–7) is measured in 1965. Source is the 1965–1997 Youth Socialization Panel (ICPSR 4037). OLS coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses

***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1, two-tailed

assuage concerns about spuriousness, i.e., that people affiliate with labor unions *and* identify with the Democratic Party solely because one or more of their parents were Democrats. Third, I run models (using ANES data) that control for respondents' geographic residence, i.e., whether they live in an urban, suburban, or rural area (Gimpel et al. 2020). This can help assuage concerns that union affiliation is actually capturing urban residence. Fourth, I run models (using CCES data) that control for whether a respondent works in the public sector to address concerns that union affiliation is simply capturing public sector employment. In each model specification, the union-party relationship holds, i.e., it remains positive and statistically significant.

Finally, I run models (using ANES data) that examine the union-party relationship across educational attainment. I use education (high school or less, some college, college) as a proxy for the type of union (e.g., low vs. high skilled) to which someone may belong. This rests on the premise that educational attainment correlates with the type of industry in which someone is employed, i.e., that less educated people are more likely to work in low-wage and low-skilled jobs, while those with some college education and/or a college degree are more likely to have a salaried job and/or perform high-skilled labor. The results show minimal differences across educational attainment, suggesting that the "type of union" does not appear to condition the union-party relationship.

Ruling out Self-selection and Reverse Causality

Although labor unions are primarily associated with the workplace, and even though people tend to join them for economic benefits rather than to express a political preference (Ahlquist and Levi 2013; Asher et al. 2001), unions are still political in nature. Thus one concern about the results is that they may be an artifact of self-selection, i.e., that people who support the Democratic Party select into labor unions. Short of random assignment of individuals into unions, I cannot completely rule out this possibility. However, I can bring evidence to bear in an attempt to rule out self-selection. I do this in three separate analyses in Figs. 3 and 4 and in Table 4.

In Fig. 3, I use aggregate time-series data from 1964 to 2018, running two regression models to examine the over-time relationship between labor union membership and white Democratic partisanship. The first model regresses white Democratic partisanship (the % of whites who identify as Democrats) on a lagged measure of labor union membership (2 years prior) and lagged white partisanship (2 years prior). The second model regresses labor union membership (the % of non-agricultural workers who belong to a labor union) on a lagged measure white Democratic partisanship (2 years prior) and lagged union membership (2 years prior). This approach is akin to a Granger analysis (e.g., Stimson et al. 1995), which seeks to establish temporal ordering between two variables, here these are white Democratic partisanship and labor union membership.

The results in Fig. 3 show that lagged union membership significantly predicts white Democratic partisanship, but that lagged white partisanship does not significantly predict union membership. This suggests that the decades-long decline of organized labor has not been driven by declining white Democratic partisanship, but

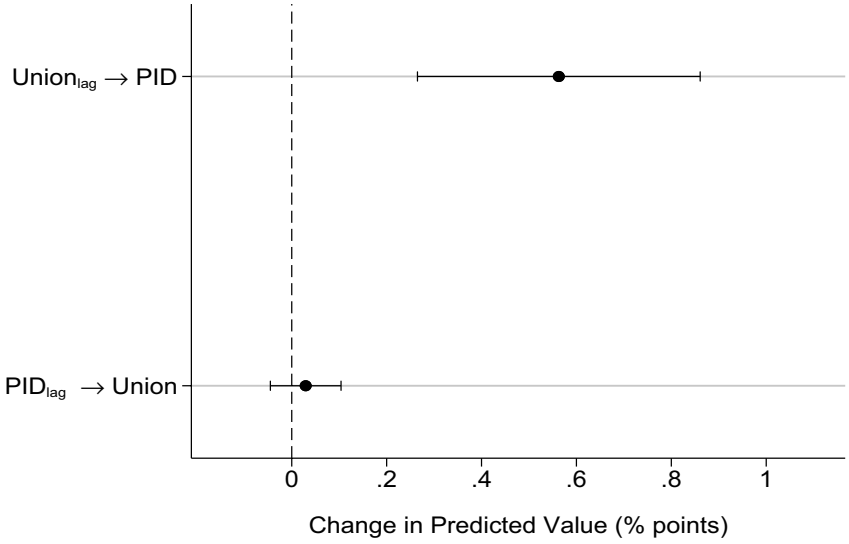

Fig. 3 Aggregate Union Membership and White Macropartisanship, 1964–2018. Shows the impact of lagged union membership on white Democratic partisanship (top) and the impact of lagged white Democratic partisanship on union membership (bottom). Both models control for a lagged dependent variable. All of the lagged variables are measured 2 years prior. Union membership is measured for all races; partisanship is only measured for whites. Data ranges from 1964 to 2018, even years only. Source are the ANES and CCES (for partisanship) and the CPS (for union membership). Bars around the point estimates represent 95% confidence intervals

that declining union membership has played a role in decreased white support for the Democratic Party.[17]

In Fig. 4 and Table 4, I examine whether whites are more likely to "select into" labor unions, potentially as a result of their partisan orientations, in right to work states. A right to work (RTW) state is one that bans private sector labor unions from mandating that people join a union and/or pay dues as a condition of employment (Goldfield and Bromsen 2013). This was permitted under the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act; the Supreme Court extended this to the public sector in *Janus v. AFSCME*. In contrast, people in non right to work (NRTW) states may be required to join a union and/or pay dues as a condition of employment.

In right to work states, people are more easily able to "free ride," i.e., to receive many of the benefits won for workers by labor unions without joining the union and/or paying the fees of union membership. As such, self-selection could be driving the union-party relationship, i.e., people may be more likely to join a union for economic reasons in NRTW states, but more likely to join for political reasons in RTW states. If this was the case, then we would observe a substantively significant

[17] This doesn't mean that partisan control of government is inconsequential, but rather that changes in white macropartisanship do not appear to have directly driven changes in labor union membership.

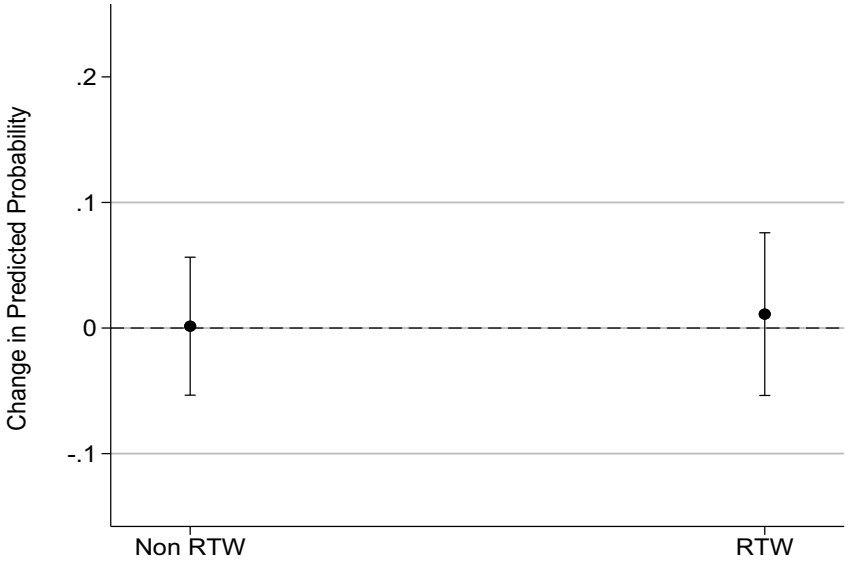

Fig. 4 Partisanship Does Not Predict Whites' Decision to Join a Union, 1973–1982. Shows the marginal effect of Democratic party identification (0 vs. 1) on the probability of a white respondent having joined a labor union at some point between 1973 and 1982. Based on a probit regression of the dependent variable (joined a union vs. remained a non union member) on an interaction between Democratic party identification (measured in 1973) and state right to work status (0 vs. 1). Sample is restricted to whites who did not move from a Non RTW to a RTW state (or vice versa) between 1973 and 1982. Observations from Louisiana are omitted. Source is the 1965–1997 Youth Socialization Panel (ICPSR 4037). Number of observations = 570. Bars around the point estimates are 95% confidence intervals

relationship between peoples' partisanship and their decision to join a union in RTW states, and a substantively weak relationship in NRTW states.

I test this by using data from two panel studies. The first is from the 1965–1997 Youth Socialization Panel Study (ICPSR 4037). This dataset has a measure of adult respondents' labor union affiliation and partisanship at three different time periods between ages 26–50 (1973, 1982, and 1997). I use data between 1973 and 1982

Table 4 Partisanship and Whites' Decision to Join a Union, 2010–2012

	Joined a union (2010 → 2012)		
	All states	Non RTW	RTW
Democrats (N)	42	32	10
Non Democrats (N)	41	31	10

Shows the number of whites who reported having never been a union member in 2010 and then reported being a current union member in 2012. RTW refers to states that have enacted right to work legislation. Party identification is measured in 2010. Sample is restricted to whites who did not move from a Non RTW to a RTW state (or vice versa) between 2010 and 2012. Observations from Indiana are omitted. Source is the 2010–2012 CCES panel study

(ages 26 to 35) when many people are likely to be settling into their careers. The second is the 2010–2012 CCES Panel study. This has a measure of respondents' union affiliation and partisanship in both 2010 and 2012. These two datasets, one tracking white Americans from their mid 20s to their mid 30s during the 1970s and 1980s, and another examining a national sample over a shorter 2-year time period in the early 2010s, allows for me to examine whether partisanship has a stronger relationship with the decision to join a labor union in right to work (RTW) states than in non right to work (NRTW) states.[18]

Figure 4 shows that partisanship does not predict whites' decision to join a labor union between ages 1973 and 1982. Indeed, white Democrats are not significantly more likely to join a union than their non-Democratic counterparts; this is true in both right to work (RTW) and non right to work (NRTW) states. Far fewer people joined a union between 2010 and 2012 (CCES panel data) than from 1973 to 1982 (Youth Socialization panel data); thus there is minimal variation in the dependent variable (joined a union vs remained a non member). As such, I do not run a regression, but instead present cross-tabs. The results in Table 4 show that there is not a consistent pattern of white Democrats joining a labor union (in both RTW and NRTW states) at higher rates than their non-Democratic counterparts.[19] This is not to say that political considerations are always irrelevant in the decision to join a union, but these data simply do not support the claim that people join unions solely for partisan considerations, especially in right to work states.[20]

[18] These two datasets allow me to examine whether a respondent's union affiliation changed between 1973/1982 and 2010/2012, respectively. However, it does not the exact year in which a respondent joined a union nor if they moved from a RTW state to a NRTW state during the two panel waves, or vice versa. To ensure that peoples' incentives to join a union remained the same, i.e., that they did not move from a NRTW state to a RTW state and then decide to join a union because of their partisanship, I restrict both samples to respondents whose RTW status did not change in between 1973/1982 and 2010/2012. This means that they could have moved from North Carolina to South Carolina (both RTW) or from New York to New Jersey (both NRTW) but not from California to Florida (NRTW to RTW) or from Iowa to Pennsylvania (RTW to NRTW), for example. I also drop observations from Louisiana (1973/1982) and Indiana (2010/2012) as their right to work status was in flux, i.e., these two states enacted such legislation in the middle of the two panel waves (https://www.ncsl.org/research/labor-and-employment/right-to-work-laws-and-bills.aspx). This results in approximately 10% of the sample (in both analyses) being dropped. The results are substantively similar if the full sample is examined.

[19] Cumulative ANES data from 1964 to 2016 shows a similar pattern. A simple bivariate probit model shows that white union members are 14 percentage points more likely to identify as Democrats than are non union members in non right to work (NRTW); they are 15 percentage points more likely to identify as Democrats in right to work (RTW) states. This substantively small difference (in the union-party relationship across RTW and non RTW states) is not statistically significant ($p = 0.418$).

[20] Further analysis of the 1965–1997 Youth Socialization Panel (ICPSR 4037) from 1973 to 1997 shows that there is relatively little movement in/out of a labor union over peoples' working lives. For instance 87% of peoples' union membership status was the same in 1973 (age 26) and 1982 (age 35); this number was 88% from 1982 (age 35) to 1997 (age 50). In short, most people who join a union early on in life tend to remain in one throughout their working lives. Those who do choose to join/leave a union do not appear to be systematically doing so for partisan reasons.

Table 5 Unions and White Partisanship Across Demographic Subgroups, 2006–2012

	Democratic party identification (%)	
	Never a union member	Current union member
Private sector	41.0	54.5
Public sector	41.7	55.0
Midwest (IA, MI, MN, OH, PA, WI)	42.7	53.8
South (FL, NC, VA)	38.6	53.0
West (AZ, CO, NV, NM)	38.9	49.8
Male; Non college	33.8	47.2
Male; College	36.8	54.7
Female; Non college	40.7	54.7
Female; College	51.6	68.9

Shows the percent of each group that identifies as a Democrat, split by union affiliation. All differences (between union and non union members) are statistically significant. Source is the pooled 2006-2012 CCES, survey weights applied. The number of observations ranges from 378 to 37,564

Can Unions Influence Everyone's Partisanship?

Having established a robust relationship between labor union affiliation and Democratic partisanship, I next examine differences across a variety of demographic subgroups.[21] To do this, I leverage the large sample size of the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), using pooled data from 2006 to 2012. This yields tens of thousands of observations, and allows me to examine mean differences across a variety of different demographic subgroups of interest: employment sector, region, gender, and education.[22]

Table 5 first compares Democratic partisanship among private and public sector workers. The results shows that white union members in both sectors are significantly more likely to identify as Democrats than are their non union-affiliated counterparts. This suggests that the union-party relationship is not being driven solely by the public sector, which has many powerful, well-organized pro-Democratic labor unions (Anzia and Moe 2016; Finger and Hartney 2019; Flavin and Hartney 2015).

Table 5 also shows that unions also have implications for white partisanship in a series of electorally competitive states across the country. White union members

[21] I examine mean differences in Table 5. In Supplementary Appendix B, I run a series of models that include, for each demographic subgroup, a battery of additional demographic controls similar to those in the ANES analyses. The results show that the union-party relationship is robust for each of these subgroups.

[22] The CCES data include categories for: (1) currently a union member, (2) formerly a union member, and (3) never a union member. These data also include analogous categories for union household residence. Here, I simply compare the first and third categories (current member vs. never a union member).

are more likely to identify as Democrats than their non union-affiliated counterparts in both the industrial Midwest, a former bastion of organized labor, and in the West and South, regions that have historically been less friendly and hostile toward labor unions, respectively.[23]

Labor unions also appear capable of shaping white partisanship across gender and educational divides. Table 5 shows that just over half (51.6%) of non union-affiliated college educated white women identify as Democrats, compared to nearly two-thirds (68.9%) of their counterparts who belong to a labor union. For non college educated white men, these numbers are approximately one-third (33.8%) and nearly one-half (47.2%) for non union and union members, respectively. This latter group (non college educated white men) often characterizes, in the mass media and political discourse, the so-called "white working class" (Frank 2004; Gest 2016). This group has become an increasingly important part of the Republican Party's electoral coalition, and is one that the Democratic Party has struggled greatly to win over in recent years.

Conclusion and Political Implications

Labor unions are still relatively strong in the public sector and comprise an important part of the Democratic Party's electoral coalition (Anzia and Moe 2016), the Supreme Court's 2018 ruling in *Janus v. AFSCME* notwithstanding (DiSalvo 2019; Finger and Hartney 2019). However, there are far more Americans who work in the private sector, and this is where organized labor has collapsed (Goldfield and Bromsen 2013).[24]

This decline has been due to a variety of factors including the consequences of economic globalization, but also from policy choices made by governments (Goldfield and Bromsen 2013; Hertel-Fernandez 2018; Holger 2015; Lichtenstein 2013; Rosenfeld 2014). Indeed, the scope of right to work legislation has increased over the past decade (Kogan 2017; VanHuevelen 2020), with former union strongholds such as Indiana, Michigan, West Virginia, and Wisconsin enacting laws to curb the power of organized labor.[25] Furthermore, state governments are limited in their ability to curtail the decline of organized labor (Darmofal et al. 2019). Recent work by Feigenbaum et al. (2019) shows that right to work laws have important political consequences. These authors examined border counties in U.S. states that enacted and did not enact right to work (RTW) legislation from 1980 to 2016. They showed that

[23] Union decline is likely to be especially consequential in the industrial Midwest. States in this region, including Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, have seen 25–30 point declines in union membership, are politically competitive, and have large white populations, relative to the national average. However, even in the former Confederacy, the average decline in union membership (across the 11 states) from 1964 to 2018 was nearly 10 percentage points (http://unionstats.gsu.edu/MonthlyLaborReviewArticle.htm). This is not drastically different from the national average, which was approximately of 16 percentage points.

[24] The number of Americans working in the private sector (https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/USPRIV) has consistently dwarfed the number who work in the public sector (https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/USGOVT), even as labor unions grew increasingly strong in the public sector.

[25] At the time of this writing, West Virginia's right to work law was undergoing court challenges.

right to work policies weakened labor unions' ability to mobilize voters, depressing voter turnout and reducing Democratic candidates' vote share; this effect grew in strength during subsequent election years.

Weakened unions can depress voter turnout and civic engagement (Asher et al. 2001; Kerrissey and Schofer 2013), particularly among the less affluent (Leighley and Nagler 2007), the less educated (Rosenfeld 2014), and among racial/ethnic minorities (Francia and Orr 2014; Kim 2016; Terriquez 2011); groups for whom political engagement is often more costly. Weakened unions can also deprive the working and middle classes of an important "voice" and a means of influencing public policy (Rosenfeld 2014; Schlozman et al. 2012). Despite strong public support for labor unions (Saad 2018), recent victories for organized labor such as the overturning of Missouri's right to work legislation in a ballot initiative and successful teachers' strikes in Oklahoma, West Virginia, Kentucky, Arizona, and California (Santus 2019; Vara 2018), the proliferation of right to work legislation, elite rhetoric that paints unions as corrupt and greedy (Kane and Newman 2019), and the Supreme Court's ruling in *Janus v. AFSMCE* will likely weaken unions politically in the future (Finger and Hartney 2019; but see DiSalvo 2019).

Future work would do well to examine how union affiliation shapes partisanship among Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians. It would also be useful to examine if immigrants who join labor unions become more politically active and if they eventually become more likely to support the Democratic Party than their non-unionized counterparts. More detailed data could also examine if certain unions facilitate stronger connections with the Democratic Party than do other types of unions, e.g., teachers vs. manufacturing vs. law enforcement. It would also be useful to examine the union-party link among current and former members, i.e., whether peoples' political attitudes change after leaving the organization. Finally, it would worthwhile to examine the political allegiances of groups (e.g., less educated males), many of whom were union members in past decades, but not today. It would be valuable to examine whether they have been shifting toward the Republican Party or abstaining from politics.

As the United States continues to diversify, we will likely see further racial sorting, in which whites, particularly religious, rural, and less educated whites, continue moving toward the Republican Party (Cramer 2016; Hetherington and Weiler 2009; Mason 2018). The Democratic Party's ability to stem this tide will depend, in part, on the strength of organized labor. Overall, labor unions have important implications for American electoral politics, not only influencing political participation, but also shaping mass partisanship.

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