



The Alliance of U.S. Labor Unions and the Democratic Party

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Ever since industrial unions worked to reelect President Franklin Roosevelt in 1936, organized labor and the Democratic Party have worked together in U.S. politics. Unions provide votes, money, and volunteer time, and Democrats offer policy benefits when they take office. This partnership is often taken for granted. Yet it differs from partnerships in other Western democracies, and the distinctive U.S. alliance of unions and a major party has also shifted over time as Democrats have shed their conservative southern wing and the unionized share of the U.S. labor force has fallen threefold over the last six decades. Just eleven percent of all American workers are currently unionized, and a mere six percent in the private sector.

Unique U.S. Political Conditions

Across the world, parties of the center-left ally with trade unions, yet institutional arrangements in the United States have circumscribed labor's influence. Winning seats only in cities where industrial workers were concentrated gave the early British Labour Party a toehold in the House of Commons, from which it ultimately overtook the Liberal Party. In Canada, the New Democratic Party, a small party with backing from unions and radical wheat farmers, pressured the Liberals to adopt its health insurance program for all Canadians. But in the United States, the Electoral College requires political parties to cobble together national majorities by winning elections outright across 50 heterogeneous states and 435 districts. Unions have mattered in many but never in all of these jurisdictions.

Distinctive historical sequences also matter. In many European countries, unions formed labor parties to push for universal male suffrage long after industrialization was under way. Present-day U.S. trade unions, however, banded together in the American Federation of Labor in 1886, decades after male suffrage expanded and mass political parties emerged in agrarian America. Federal court injunctions also limited early U.S. unions, which responded by focusing on winning benefits on the job for skilled workers and sticking to local-level political alliances.

The New Deal and Its Aftermath

The New Deal transformed both unions and Democrats. The 1935 National Labor Relations Act was spearheaded by Robert F. Wagner, an urban liberal and a loyal Democrat from New York. It gave federal sanction to union contracts, and set up the National Labor Relations Board to enforce collective bargaining rights in the private sector. After the newly formed Congress of Industrial Organizations organized mass-production workers, it departed from organized labor's longstanding reluctance to take national positions, backing Democrats and New Deal legislation.

- In the summer of 1936, the Congress of Industrial Organizations led by John L. Lewis of the United Mine Workers formed labor's Non-Partisan League to re-elect Roosevelt and contribute about a tenth of Democrats' total campaign dollars. Although the League did not get involved in Congressional elections or reach out to state or local unions, a more ramified and permanent political infrastructure emerged by 1943.
- Hopes for outright political dominance were soon tempered. After a wave of strikes, a coalition of Republicans and southern Democrats, worried about biracial labor organizing that would threaten Jim Crow, passed the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act over President Harry Truman's veto. This law created barriers to new union organizing, expanded management rights, and allowed states to enact "right-to-work" provisions to ban the union shop. Many states in the Sun Belt did exactly that.
- After postwar bills for full-employment and national health insurance fell short in Congress, unions relied on collective bargaining to secure health and pension benefits for their own members, supporting public programs as supplements. Even so, anger about Taft-Hartley pushed the American Federation of Labor into continuing alliance with northern Democrats.

Alliance Persists amid Adversity

The New Deal era labor-Democratic partnership profoundly reshaped the electoral landscape, and remained strong as Democrats later lost ground and union enrollments plummeted.

- Unions increase overall voter participation and also tilt voters toward the Democrats. Of course, labor's clout has declined with membership losses. But Democratic candidates still benefit, because voters in union households have consistently preferred them by margins between 9 and 16 percentage points greater than voters in non-union households.
- Ever since 1947, Republicans and Democrats have continued to clash over legal rights for unions, yet Democrats have not been able either to repeal Taft-Hartley or to deliver major new supports. In 1965, 1978, and 2009, pro-union bills failed due to the Senate filibuster.
- After the 1940s, unions committed scant resources to workplace organizing – and they faced long odds when they tried to change course in the 1990s. Only miniscule slivers of U.S. workers have recently formed unions, and changing this reality would cost thousands of dollars per union member each year. Ironically, a 2005 survey found that 53 percent of America's non-union employees would favor a union. If such sentiments could be translated into organizational reality, unions would represent almost three-fifths of the U.S. workforce.
- Backed by a rightward-trending Republican Party, corporations have steadily accelerated efforts to weaken unions. During the 1970s, the share of organizing campaigns in which federal regulators found illegal firings rose from less than a tenth to approximately a quarter, a level of infractions that has since persisted. After Democrats failed to expand union rights, Republican President Ronald Reagan fired striking air controllers in 1981 and banned them from federal employment for life. Further counter-attacks include recent moves by conservative GOP governors and legislatures to extend anti-union laws into previous labor strongholds such as Michigan and Wisconsin.

Just before the 2012 election, the head of the Amalgamated Transit Union worried aloud that if Republicans “take over the federal government, there will be no such thing as a labor movement.” His statement pinpoints why longstanding partnerships between unions and Democrats continue in today’s transformed environment of weak unions, polarized parties, and a fiercely resurgent anti-union Right.