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Strategic Diversity in Union Political Action: Implications for the 1992 House Elections

Abstract

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Keywords

labor unions, political action, strategic diversity, Congress, 1992 elections

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Strategic Diversity in Union Political Action: Implications for the 1992 House Elections

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It was a difficult year for the labor movement in the political arena in 1991. Labor was unable to attract enough supporters in either house of Congress for the simple majority required to deny President Bush "fast track" authorization to negotiate a free trade pact with Mexico. Although the House passed a bill banning the hiring of permanent replacement workers during strikes, the margin of victory was insufficient to override an inevitable presidential veto. Support for the legislation also appears to be lukewarm in the Senate, with concern that there may not be the 60 votes required to stop a filibuster when the bill comes to the floor early in 1992. These are the two highest visibility issues of interest to organized labor, but similar obstacles have confronted other priorities, including family leave legislation and health care reform.

The legislative logjam has caused many labor leaders to reevaluate their political strategy. Several options have been promulgated. Some have suggested making fast track and/or permanent replacements litmus test issues and withdrawing labor support from all opponents. Others have made a more general call for ending "blind support" for Democrats. To most this means being more selective in deciding which Democrats to support, although for a few unions increased support for Republicans who have been cooperative on selected narrow issues appears likely. Some labor leaders have gone so far as to suggest that unions find their own candidates, or even consider forming a Labor Party.

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The purpose of this paper is to explore labor's strategic options in the 1992 elections. We will focus on House races because the diversity in political strategies among unions is most apparent there. However, our conclusions will have broader implications for union activity in elections at all levels of government. In evaluating the situation we will consider the impact of redistricting on labor's alternatives. We should note that recent developments have made many union political operatives more optimistic. The upset victory by populist Democrat Harris Wofford in the special Senate election in Pennsylvania, the eventual compromises on civil rights legislation and extended unemployment benefits, and President Bush's decline in popularity all increase the stakes as the labor movement searches for the appropriate tactical approach to the pending campaigns.

Diverse Political Strategies of Labor PACs

As a framework for analysis we will rely on a taxonomy of labor Political Action Committees (PACs) that we have developed in research on the 1984 and 1986 House elections (Hurd and Sohl, 1992). In that research, we use principal component analysis to uncover underlying diversity in union political contribution patterns, and then employ cluster analysis to group PACs of individual unions with others that display similar patterns.

Table 1 summarizes the results. To facilitate interpretation, we report the patterns for only the 40 unions with the largest PAC donation totals. Unions toward the left side of the table follow an "electoral" approach, supporting candidates generally sympathetic to labor's agenda who are involved in closely contested elections. Unions toward the right side of the table pursue "access," concentrating their efforts on incumbents who either have proven themselves by their voting records to be friends of labor, or hold key positions in the House. Accordingly, the proportion of PAC donations going to incumbents increases from as low as 30 percent for unions on the left hand of the table to above 90 percent for some unions on the right hand of the table.

The marginal list referred to on the table is a list of races selected by the AFL-CIO's House Marginal Committee. The marginal committee meets regularly during each election year and chooses a limited number of races (45 in 1990) that deserve special attention from the labor movement. To be considered for inclusion, a candidate must be endorsed by the Committee on Political Education (COPE) (usually at a special convention held in each state), and be involved in

TABLE 1
Union PAC Contribution Strategies

Marginal List Allegiance	Electoral		Balanced Approach	Access				
	Marginal List Advocacy			Support for Friends		Transportation Access		
	AFL-CIO URW	ANA CWA IAM IBEW PAT SMW UFCW USA	BSOIW IUE	AFGE AFSCME AFT APWU ATU NALC NEA PPF SEIU UAW	ACTWU BBF CJA ILGWU LIUNA UMW	BRAC HERE IUOE NTE RLCA	IBT UTU	ALPA BLE ILA MEBA SIU

Notes: Strategic categories based on Hurd and Sohl (1992) and additional unpublished research.
Standard abbreviations as indexed in Gifford (1990).

a close race from which he/she has a reasonable chance of emerging victorious. Most unions listed on Table 1 are represented on the House Marginal Committee.

As used on the table, "Support for Friends" refers to unions that donate a large proportion of their funds to incumbents with high COPE scores, whether or not they are involved in close elections. "Balanced Approach" refers to those unions who attempt to lend support both to marginal list candidates and to friendly incumbents.

The unions in the two right hand columns all have a primary membership base in transportation. For these unions narrow regulatory issues are key legislative concerns. Their PAC contributions reflect this, with almost all of their support going to incumbents, and special attention given to members of selected House committees (especially Public Works and Transportation, and Merchant Marines) regardless of political party or ideology.

Strategic Alternatives for 1992

In an apparent break from past practices, a number of labor leaders have become quite vocal about specific litmus test issues. Some have chosen to focus on fast track authorization, including William Bywater, President of the IUE, and William Holayter, political director of the IAM. Others have suggested that permanent replacements should be a litmus test issue, including Morton Bahr, President of the CWA.

Implications of applying these litmus test issues can be drawn from Table 2. Fast track authorization won by a large margin in the House, with labor succeeding in attracting only 34.1 percent of the vote (on a related vote for fast track extension labor improved its support to 45.3 percent). The results were not much better among House members whose campaigns received donations from labor PACs in 1990. Even among those with 1990 COPE endorsements only a bare majority voted with their union friends. Unions that choose to use fast track as a litmus test will be denying funds to many candidates who have been allies on most issues.

Labor fared much better in the House on the vote to ban permanent replacements for strikers. Although a substantial minority of those who received some labor financial support in 1990 voted "wrong," every House member who was on the 1990 marginal list and almost all of those who benefited from COPE endorsements supported the union position. Using permanent replacements as a litmus test would be less limiting and therefore acceptable to more unions.

TABLE 2
1991 House Votes on Key Labor Issues

	Fast Track	Permanent Replacement of Strikers	Family Leave
Total House	148-274	247-182	253-177
Percent Right	34.1	57.6	58.8
1990 Labor PAC \$	144-238	238-140	242-135
Percent Right	37.7	63.0	64.2
1990 COPE			
Endorsement	122-114	218-20	203-36
Percent Right	51.7	91.6	84.9
1990 Marginal List	21-13	34-0	30-4
Percent Right	61.8	100.0	88.2
Percent of Wrong Voters with COPE > 70%	34.4	1.5	4.1

Notes: Votes as reported in AFL-CIO b and c (1991) and Kraus (1991).

Information on 1990 marginal list provided by David (1991).

Information on 1990 COPE endorsements provided by Ingrayo (1991).

Data on labor PAC contributions reported in Federal Election Commission (1991).

Key political operatives in the labor movement are skeptical about using *any* litmus test issue. Rick Diegel of the IBEW, who chairs the Senate Marginal Committee, calls the idea "ridiculous," adding that "narrow criteria would be the kiss of death . . . [because] we survive on coalitions" (Diegel, 1991). Marta David of COPE, who chairs the House Marginal Committee, concurs, although she admits that "specific votes will be more important this cycle than in the past," and notes that some candidates are likely to be denied spots on the marginal list as a result (David, 1991). Joe Standa of the NEA states simply, "We are not a single issue union" (Standa, 1991) and most labor political officials would probably echo this position.

The impact of redistricting raises further questions about the advisability of applying a litmus test in 1992. As Table 3 reveals, states that are gaining House seats are less friendly to unions than those that are losing seats. The differences are greater on fast track and permanent replacements than on the broader agenda. A focus on either of these issues would severely limit the influence of unions in the states whose House delegations are growing.

TABLE 3
Impact of House Redistricting on Support for Labor Issues

	States Gaining Seats Percent Right	States Losing Seats Percent Right	Net Change in Right Votes
COPE Scores			
Democrat	76.2	86.9	
Republican	12.2	26.9	
Total	48.7	63.4	-2.8
Adjusted	40.1	71.4	-5.9
Fast Track			
Democrat	33.9	62.1	
Republican	9.7	14.2	
Total	23.4	42.3	-3.6
Adjusted	17.7	50.0	-6.1
Permanent Replacements			
Democrat	91.9	97.4	
Republican	0.0	18.6	
Total	45.2	64.7	-3.7
Adjusted	33.4	76.6	-8.2

Notes: Right votes and COPE scores as reported by the AFL-CIO (1991 a,b,c).

All data are weighted by the number of seats gained or lost by each state.

Adjusted data are based on gains or losses by party in each state as forecast by Gersh (1991) and Cohen (1991).

Although the idea of a specific litmus test issue is unlikely to prove fruitful, the heightened awareness of unions to their legislative difficulties may prompt them to be more selective in their campaign contributions in 1992. By denying support to those incumbents who have not voted with labor on some narrow range of key issues, it may be possible to utilize limited funds more effectively. The third key vote included in Table 2 (family leave) was selected to represent broader social issues which receive legislative priority from labor. When taken together, the three issues should offer a concise and reasonable measure of a House member's 1991 labor voting record.

In 1990 labor PACs donated \$854,965 to winning candidates who subsequently voted wrong all three issues. An additional \$385,640 was donated to candidates who voted right on family leave, but wrong on both fast track and permanent replacements (Federal Election Commission, 1991). Included in this group were 14 House members who were endorsed by COPE in 1990. Segundo Mercado-Lorens, Director of Government Affairs for the UFCW, although resistant to the idea of a specific litmus test issue, concedes that it would be difficult to defend contributions to incumbents who voted wrong on both fast track and replacements, and inconceivable for those voting

wrong on all three issues (Mercado-Lorenz, 1991). In this spirit, withholding COPE endorsements and PAC donations from unreliable incumbents would be a modest signal that standards are tightening.

Not all unions will be responsive of course. As noted above, unions in the transportation sector pursue a rather narrow access strategy designed to secure legitimate regulatory objectives to benefit their members. As reflected in Table 4, this approach often results in significant contributions to conservatives. As Jerry Baker of ALPA explained it, "We have narrow issues, and we have to demonstrate to our members that PAC contributions are useful in getting our job done . . . We need Republicans to pass legislation" (Baker, 1991). Of the 19 conservative House members for whom detailed donations were calculated in the middle column of Table 3 (based on receipt of at least \$10,000 from labor PACs in 1990), 12 serve on a key transportation committee and six others held key positions on other powerful committees (Ways and Means, Appropriations, or Rules).

TABLE 4
Labor PAC Support for Conservatives

(1)		(2)		(3)	
Percent of PAC Funds Donated to Conservatives		Donations to House Members With Wrong Votes on Key Issues		Donations to Candidates Supported by National Right To Work Committee	
MEBA	39.5	MEBA	\$78,200	MEBA	\$66,500
ILA	30.0	IBT	54,500	ALPA	19,750
SIU	24.9	ALPA	52,300	IBT	13,250
RLCA	22.0	SIU	34,500	SIU	12,850
ALPA	20.1	NALC	31,400	ILA	9,050
BLE	19.5	UTU	15,900	NALC	8,500
UTU	16.7	ILA	14,050	LIUNA	4,350
IBT	13.7	CJA	12,817	UTU	4,050
IUOE	12.1	IUOE	9,500	NEA	3,977
UMW	11.1	NEA	9,150	AFSCME	3,500

Notes: Data from 1986 Federal Election Commission Tapes for 1986 (column 1) and 1988 (columns 2 and 3).

Column (2) refers to House members voting wrong on all three votes designated in Table 2.

Standard union abbreviations as indexed in Gifford (1990).

Although transportation unions may have a reasonable rationale for supporting conservatives, there should be room to persuade them to increase their contributions to open races and challengers without

abandoning their own bipartisan allies in Congress. Furthermore, they are not the only unions that donate to conservatives as Table 3 reveals. In fact in 1988 (the last year for which detailed data by PAC are available), 29 different unions donated money to campaigns that were also financially supported by the National Right to Work Committee. Increased diligence could redirect financial support from these opponents of labor's broad agenda to more deserving candidates.

A strategic option which has been promoted by some friends of labor is to break from the past and pursue a more progressive agenda. Rich Trumka, President of the UMW, and Edward Carlough, President of the SMW, endorse this view. Tony Mazzocchi of OCAW has gone one step further, calling for a labor party and creating Labor Party Advocates to promote the idea. The wishes of labor progressives notwithstanding, a dramatic shift in the union movement's political agenda is unlikely. In our research using 1986 FEC data, we were unable to detect any unions that pursue a political strategy that can be distinguished from other unions as notably more left wing. It is unlikely that 1992 will prove to be any different on this score.

Perhaps the most positive way to channel discontent with incumbents among unions would be to promote increased adherence to the marginal list. As reflected in Table 2, members of Congress who benefited from being included on the 1990 marginal list have excellent labor voting records. A review of total 1990 labor PAC contributions to specific candidates helps explain why. Of the 29 current House members who received \$150,000 or more in labor PAC donations in 1990, 22 were on the marginal list, including the eight with the highest totals and 15 of the top 16. Furthermore, marginal list candidates were successful in 34 of 45 races. This included a win record of 11-5 in open seats, with an impressive 5-5 record where the former incumbent was a Republican. Additionally, in the eight races where a Democratic challenger of a Republican incumbent was included on the marginal list, the challenger won four.

Because of redistricting, Marta David of COPE expects a substantial increase in the number of races which legitimately could be included on the marginal list. If unions that in the past have placed their financial support indiscriminately with incumbents could be persuaded to redirect funds to marginal list candidates, the list could be expanded without diluting financial benefits and election success. In fact, in the 1992 House elections, the most promising strategic alternative for unions is an expanded marginal list accompanied by increased commitment to marginal list candidates.

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