



# Election 2016: Labor, Politics, and the Imperative of Organization

Labor Studies Journal  
2017, Vol. 42(3) 226–232  
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DOI: 10.1177/0160449X17726185  
journals.sagepub.com/home/ljsj

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Amid all the conventional wisdom that seemed to be challenged in the aftermath of Donald Trump’s shocking victory in the 2016 presidential election, one of the most seemingly challenged assumptions was the idea that you need political organization to win.

Both in my past career as a union organizer and my present career as a scholar of labor and politics, everything I learned taught me that organization wins. People might show up for rallies, might take your leaflets, and say they are on your side. But in the end, it is the boring, unglamorous, molecular-level work of political organizations that wins elections. That is what physically gets people to the polls and turns political attitudes into actual votes.

For all her flaws as a candidate, one thing that Clinton did not seem to lack was organization. In the run-up to the election, many viewed her campaign as a well-oiled machine (Vogel and Arnsdorf 2016). In addition, as has been the case for the past several decades, her own Democratic Party campaign infrastructure was buttressed by massive levels of financial and organizational support from organized labor (Shen 2016). Meanwhile, Trump’s campaign was famously skeletal and chaotic (Jilani 2016). For all the frightening fanaticism of Trump’s base, surely his campaign would not stand a chance against Clinton’s vaunted “ground game” (Shepard 2016).

And yet, Clinton’s ground game got Trumped. Does that mean that we should throw out what we know about politics and organization? Was Trump’s election not only a harbinger of “post-truth” politics but of “post-organization” politics (Glasser 2016)?

The short answer is no. In fact, a closer examination of the election campaign shows that political organization is as important as ever. The key to understanding the election is to understand *what kind* of organization makes a difference.

First, the election highlighted the limits of *formal* political campaign infrastructure, divorced from a broader organizational ecosystem. Theda Skocpol makes this point in

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her analysis of the election (Marshall 2016). She argues that even though Trump's own campaign organization may have been skeletal, he was backed by a larger network of organizations, including the National Rifle Association (NRA), Americans for Prosperity, and evangelical churches. These allied organizations provided a ground game where Trump's was lacking, reliably turning out Republican voters on November 8.

Meanwhile, the Clinton campaign not only lacked a broader organizational ecosystem but was actively hostile to much of the broader organizational infrastructure that existed outside the official campaign. Skocpol and others focus on the weakened Democratic ecosystem, particularly the decline of organized labor. Traditionally, unions have been one of the few organizations capable of mobilizing working-class people politically on a mass scale. But with union density currently below 11 percent, and below 7 percent in the private sector, unions no longer have the reach they once did. Union decline has left the field open to other players to shape the political narrative that workers use to translate their social and economic grievances into political actions.

Beyond unions, as Skocpol points out, the Democrats' broader organizational infrastructure is "fragmented into hundreds of little issue and identity organizations run by professionals," with little in the way of actual membership beyond email lists.

In addition, postelection reporting about how the Clinton campaign operated shows that it was dismissive and even hostile to allied organizations working for them on the ground. For example, when Service Employees International Union (SEIU) campaigners got information that Michigan was not looking good for Clinton, and dispatched staff from Iowa to shore up the vote there, Clinton headquarters staff were incensed. They ordered the SEIU bus to turn around and go back to Iowa, where they hoped to lure Trump into draining campaign resources (Dovere 2016). They ignored repeated requests for Clinton or her surrogates to visit the state. Clinton lost Michigan by just over 10,000 votes. Similar stories could be told for other crucial Rust Belt states like Wisconsin, which Clinton did not visit once after the summer nominating convention, and nonurban areas of Pennsylvania (S. Stein 2016).

However, pointing to the lack of a broader organizational ecosystem leaves important questions unanswered. Most important for labor is the question of why unions failed to turn out their own members. According to exit polls, Clinton only won union households by 51-43 percent, the narrowest margin since Reagan's 1984 landslide (Bump 2016). If we restrict the analysis to union members, the split was a more solid 56-37, although that represented a four-point decline compared with 2012 (Hesson and Levine 2016). So even if there were fewer union voters overall due to union decline, why did those union voters who remained not turn out more strongly for Clinton?

To explain this, we need to consider a second key point: the role of ideas. Election 2016 drove home the fact that organization is not enough. Absent a compelling vision, it will fall short. Nowhere was this more evident than with the Clinton campaign itself. Instead of articulating a vision that people might want to vote for, they put their faith in two things: data and demographics. These melded together to create "The Model," an algorithm designed by Clinton's data analytics team that revealed where the candidate should visit, where to place ad buys, where to mobilize volunteers, and other key questions of campaign strategy (Goldmacher 2016). It was "The Model" that led Clinton

campaign headquarters to order the Michigan-bound SEIU bus to turn around, as they trusted its estimates more than reports from volunteers on the ground. It was “The Model” that kept Clinton out of Wisconsin. It was “The Model” that missed the warning signs.

At the heart of “The Model” was the idea that demographics are destiny. This is the idea that there is a natural link between individual voter identities, political issues, and policies. With “The Model” there was no need to articulate a broader vision or to have actual conversations with voters. All that was needed was to target the right demographic slices of the electorate with the right messages, and have the logistical machinery in place to get those demographic slices to the polls. It was a model of politics devoid of politics.

What passed for a vision on the Democratic side was a negative one, one that frightened voters with apocalyptic warnings of the consequences of a Trump presidency. For its part, labor doubled down on this form of lesser evil politics that takes the existing range of political options for granted, and tries to maneuver as best it can within that narrow framework. So hamstrung was the labor leadership by its lesser evil strategy that most unions could not bring themselves to get behind Bernie Sanders, the most pro-labor presidential contender since at least Jesse Jackson, out of fears of “electability.”

But if there is anything that Trump’s victory has shown, it is the bankruptcy of such a strategy (J. Stein 2016). There is only so much that you can frighten and browbeat people into voting against someone, especially when the alternative is someone whose support for labor issues is so transparently shallow and instrumental. This became clear when Clinton campaign chair John Podesta’s emails leaked. The transcripts included exchanges such as when, in response to a request that Clinton take a stand against right-to-work laws, her political director Amanda Renteria demurred, saying, “I like staying more at platitudes about what unions have done for workers.” Campaign speechwriter Dan Schwerin replied with a helpful solution: “would a Tweet not do the trick here?” (Renteria and Schwerin 2015).

Compare the Clinton campaign’s platitudes about workers’ issues with the candidate’s concrete support for pro-business free trade policies and coziness with financial elites, and the Clinton “enthusiasm gap” among union voters begins to make sense, particularly in the critical counties in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin that cost her the Electoral College. This includes not only the much-discussed white segments of the working class who took a chance on Trump’s faux populism but also the tens of thousands of workers of color in cities like Detroit and Milwaukee who refused to fulfill their demographic destiny as taken-for-granted members of Clinton’s base, and did not vote at all (Ben-Shahar 2016; Rosenfeld 2016; Tavernise 2016).

Solving the problem of labor’s flagging political influence brings us to a third and final point: the vital importance of workplace organization. As any organizer knows, one of the keys to victory in any kind of campaign is to identify and mobilize the organic leadership and communication structures that exist in the workplace. If “talking union” becomes a normal part of day-to-day workplace conversation, the chance of winning is much higher. As Julie Weir, an Oberlin College librarian and longtime activist in her Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU) union local in the swing state of Ohio, told me in a discussion about the election:

I think of it in the context of being a union organizer—if I go to a work site and work really hard and smart as a union organizer, I say the right things, offer buttons, posters and rides to the vote I will likely lose or narrowly win the election. But if I go to a work site and support and aid workers who are full of enough passion to take a stand, talk to their co-workers on break, at lunch and after work, who design fliers and pass them out, . . . I will win the election because knowing the person you trust/know is behind the effort speaks volumes over the best union organizer. Clinton had a machine, she didn't have any passion. Trump had lots of passion, and used any means of emotion to ignite it, including all of the "isms." (Weir 2016)

Beyond its role in mobilizing voters, this kind of workplace organization is essential because it creates political identities. That is, it highlights which parts of individuals' complex and multiple identities matter politically, and where the battle lines are drawn (DeLeon, Desai, and Tužal 2015). Different identities make different coalitions possible, which in turn can shape how different political issues and policies are viewed. Unions with strong workplace organization can forge strong identities as workers and union members. Not only can this counter competing efforts to divide workers based on race, gender, religion, and more, but it can create space for progressive policies based on a vision of social solidarity.

This kind of deep workplace organization is not something that can be astroturfed or built up in weeks, even months, no matter how many resources are available. Building this kind of day-to-day union identity requires a much longer term strategy.

Unfortunately, with some notable exceptions, we can add identity building to the list of things that unions no longer do (Rosenfeld 2014). This was not always the case. In the nineteenth century, organizations like the Knights of Labor articulated a vision of "labor republicanism" that highlighted the impossibility for workers to be full citizens of the republic when they faced wage slavery at work (Gourevitch 2014). In the 1930s and 1940s, the new industrial unions of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) took a much more active role in day-to-day shopfloor life and articulated a broader social role for unions than we see today (Lichtenstein 1988; Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 2003).

That changed in the postwar period, as unions shifted to bargaining over wages and benefits, and largely ceded the workplace to management (Davis 1980; Lichtenstein 1989; Moody 1988). With that turn away from the workplace, most unions retreated from workers' everyday lives. As a result, most union members today experience their union as a kind of outside force, to the extent they have any experience of "the union" at all.

Meanwhile, many current union revitalization plans involve steps that make unions' workplace presence even more remote. Creating mega-locals and outsourcing shop-floor representation to smaller groups of centralized servicing reps or even call centers reduce opportunities for creating the kind of workplace culture where union messages are an organic part of the conversation. Instead, these unions are looking more and more like the formal organizations running political campaigns that came up short on Election Day.

There are some important counterexamples we can point to, starting with two rare bright spots for labor in the recent election. In Nevada, voters bucked the national

trend, not only rejecting Trump but flipping control of both of their state legislatures to the Democrats, along with electing the first ever Latina to the Senate, Catherine Cortez Masto. And in Massachusetts, voters overwhelmingly rejected Question 2, a ballot initiative which would have dramatically increased the number of charter schools in the state, despite the initiative getting support from leaders of both major parties and millions of dollars from pro-charter school PACs.

Labor played key roles in both victories. In Nevada, the Culinary Union, UNITE HERE Local 226, set the pace (Berzon 2016). In Massachusetts, it was the Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA) (Winslow 2016). In both cases, unions built their political action off of strong workplace-based organization. Importantly, that workplace organization came out of reform projects in both unions that implemented new organizing models. These built up union members' identification as workers and union members, which in turn helped to make them more mobilized and more effective advocates for union political positions (Gray and DeFilippis 2015; Wasser and Lamare 2014).

More broadly, we can look at other recent labor victories for promising examples. One would be the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), which led a successful strike against Mayor Rahm Emanuel in 2012, and then used that power again in 2016 to get the mayor to back down without a strike (Ashby and Bruno 2016; Cherone 2016; Uetrict 2014). Another would be the Communications Workers of America (CWA) members who took on Verizon in 2016 in a forty-five-day strike, which not only defeated the company's concessionary demands but increased pension contributions and outsourcing protections, created new union jobs, and created a foothold for the union in Verizon's wireless business (DiMaggio 2016). In both cases, building workplace union culture and organization was key. Broadening this model outward could provide ways of expanding labor's narrow political options.

The 2016 election results did not upend the conventional wisdom about the importance of political organization. It still matters as much as ever, but the *type* of political organization matters even more. Having a turnout operation helps, but winning requires more than that. It requires vision, and it requires an organizational ecosystem that can connect identities to issues. For unions, that organization has to start in the workplace. While they have gotten rusty at this kind of thing, unions have at times proven themselves able to articulate these broader visions and create organizational ecosystems within and beyond the workplace. Avoiding a repeat of the 2016 election will require that unions rediscover those abilities.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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