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HONORS THESIS

Behind the Ballot: Uncovering the Influence of Education, Age, and Labor Unions on Politics in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Differences in levels of education and generational values arguably lead to the largest challenge that currently faces American politics – perceived polarization. Polarization exacerbates issues within social groups and political groups, causing tension between different ideological stances and what a group identifies as their own “in group” and an opposite “out” group. When coupled with influence from major labor unions, this perceived polarization that stems from education and age work is responsible for the highly competitive and unfriendly political climate of the United States. To better understand how these variables influence American politics, I analyze how differences in age and education status, groupthink, political polarization, and labor unions have influenced American voters between 2000 and 2020. Using research and data available to the public, this project identifies patterns and shifts in voting behavior and political activism over the past 20 years. Through the analysis of the political activity of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), I conduct a small-scale case study that further analyzes how an individual’s education, involvement within social identity groups, and involvement within a labor union influences their engagement with American politics. Within my research, I found that labor unions are not an identity group to which an individual subscribes – instead, these labor unions influence how the lower-class and lower-educated individuals obtain resources to participate politically. A connection was found between older generations and higher political participation, and wealthier/higher educated individuals and political participation – the labor unions help to lower the barriers to entry in political participation for individuals who are not wealthy and are not highly educated by providing educational and financial resources to help redistribute societal power.

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INTRODUCTION

Political polarization and how members of one group perceive members in other groups in society that hold different beliefs and values is often a hot button issue. Since the 2016 Presidential election, the issues of voting turnout, mobilization of voters, and the political influence of non-political institutions have been widely researched. Polarization is identified as a reason for voter engagement and participation (Pew Research Center, 2014), however research on the cognitive effects of polarization on an average American voter is a growing field currently. News stations and media outlets are blaming past presidents, past and current members of congress, other “biased” media outlets that provide news to the public, and the ideological stances of political parties for widespread polarization and extreme partisanship (Pew Research Center, 2014). What role does a person’s affiliation with social groups play in their support of certain ideological beliefs and membership within organizations like political parties?

This paper examines political polarization and participation through the lens of cognitive psychology and social identity – specifically looking at how education, age, and labor union affiliation all add external pressure on American voters to enforce what each group and institution thinks that individuals should believe and align with. By using the social identity theory and the concept of groupthink to analyze each of the variables, patterns of external influence and subconscious biases can be analyzed and researched to paint a more accurate picture of American voters and the widespread polarization issue facing this country. This analysis will identify issues with current political systems, as well as identify problems (including financial and educational inequality) with how voters and other institutions in society interact with the American political system. If we can analyze and help rectify inequalities that lead to a lack of political participation in individuals, it allows us to better understand the motivations behind ideological stances taken by individual voters and social groups.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory is a concept derived from research in the field of cognitive and behavioral psychology. This theory encompasses the different physical, social, and mental characteristics behind an individual's perception of themselves within society – namely, how one orients their perception of themselves through membership (or lack of membership) in specific social groups (Northwestern University Searle Center, n.d.). Much of the research guided by social identity theory examines the emotional effects of “fitting in” with specific groups in society and the negative psychological toll that can take on an individual.

This specific sector of psychology that encompasses the social identity theory is more recently developed by researchers in the fields of cognitive and behavior psychology. In his research on the subject area, Islam referenced social identity theory as a depersonalized type of identity that was solely based on an individual's membership within a group (Islam, 2014). He claimed that individuals used their perceptions of society and how it should look as a way to further advance social and political motives that align with their beliefs. Michael Urick's (2012) research furthered the topic of social identity theory by adding a different dimension to current research and understanding of this phenomenon.

Urick (2012) focused on the notion that self-categorization ties in with social identity to explain common human behaviors – one of which is the inherent need to feel as though we belong somewhere in society. Urick's (2012) research is also applicable to the formation of different groups and group identities within society to impose order and allow each group to find a sector of society in which their values fit. Urick's research in conjunction with Islam's research helps to explain the motivations and implications of self-categorization and how our social identity shapes society.

Islam (2014) further elaborated on his research through the explanation of toxicity and behaviors that arise because of social self-sorting, indirectly pointing to the subconscious application of self-identity theory as the basis for the creation of a concept regularly referred to as “groupthink”.

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Groupthink

Groupthink is a term that is widely used in many fields and practices as a negative effect of cohesion within a large group of individuals. While those from a more objective perspective may view groupthink as a negative force that stunts the growth of ideas and shared viewpoints, many researchers, namely Turner and Pratkanis (1998) and Huddy's (2001) research within the field of psychology and beyond have published pieces explaining how members within factions that practice groupthink view it as a positive force used to protect their views and inner-group sovereignty.

More recently, Marlene Turner and Anthony Pratkanis (1998) have further explored groupthink as a means of social identity preservation – pointing to the idea that groupthink evolved to manage and mitigate any threat that may arise against the “in group” and protect the perceived identity of that group. However, the research conducted by these scholars also discussed the metrics in which groupthink conditions must be met in order for it to effectively take hold of a group. It was revealed that members of a group have to acknowledge that their social identity rests within the group first and foremost – without this extreme vested interest in the group as their social identity, groupthink will be unable to take hold (Turner and Pratkanis, 1998). Turner and Pratkanis (1998) explicitly stated the next steps to successfully adhering to groupthink entail creating a shared positive view of the group and collectively agreeing to perceive another group as a threat to their manufactured image and credibility. In summary, researchers found that the process in which groupthink occurs can be generalized by those three events happening in a chain reaction.

Social Identity Theory, Polarization, and Political Parties

There has been limited research conducted surrounding the relationship between the social identity theory and political parties. Leone Huddy's (2001) research demonstrates the ways in which partisanship and social identity work together to form environments where groupthink run rampant – especially in ideological views and party polarization. The formation of one's social identity in relationship to politics is pivotal to the creation of a party identity – when an individual internalizes the ideology and viewpoints of a party as their own, it makes the wins

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and losses of the party feel as if it was their personal win or loss (Huddy, 2001). Huddy's (2001) research in the intertwined relationship between these two subject areas also analyzed how self-image and perception of groups in society plays a large role in political engagement and subsequent polarization of parties and individuals through the analysis of different types of partisanship and psychology of individuals.

Dominik Duell and Justin Valasek (2017) conducted research on how the psychological dimension more clearly infiltrates the social dimension when it comes to social identity and groups. The main focus of Duell and Valasek's (2017) research is the subconscious creation of "in" groups and "out" groups. These researchers argued that emotional connections and conformity by public figures and politicians to an individual's perception of social norms can lead to the alignment of that individual within a social group, and subsequently, the belief that the group in which they aligned is the "in" group within society (Duell and Valasek, 2017). The relationship between the "in" group and other groups in society is characterized by feeling threatened - leading to the creation of "out" groups in the eyes of a collective. The creation of these different groups in society promotes negative viewpoints of views different than one's own, polarization of parties and individuals, and extremism in viewpoints (Duell and Valasek, 2017).

The research already discussed within this topic area introduced the concept of polarization as a consequence of social identities developed by individuals and the two-party system.

Polarization that stemmed from social identities was further explored by Jacob Westfall, Leaf Van Boven, John Chambers, and Charles Judd (2015). These researchers found that the basis of polarization and party splits is inherently based upon an individual (or group's) assessment of morality and rationality. Westfall, Van Boven, Chambers and Judd (2015) discovered that individuals within society perceive their own group as rational and reliant upon facts, leading to the assumption that the social group in which an individual belongs to is perceived as morally superior to any "enemy" group – in this case, the opposition group is depicted as biased and shaped by ideological motivations as opposed to fact. These findings further led to

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research on the relation between polarization and development of extreme attitudes to the “in” group/”out” group mentality of individuals in society.

Maria Inclan and Kimberly Nolan-Garcia’s (2017) work added to the story with their research on the contribution of group social influences. Now, not only are individuals sorting themselves into groups, developing “in” group/”out” group perceptions, and polarizing themselves, they are also falling prey to external influences based upon their chosen social identities when considering political identities and allegiances. Inclan and Nolan Garcia’s (2017) research linked the strength of a person’s identity within a political party directly to the polarization observed between two parties – the stronger individuals identify with the party; the more polarization runs rampant within that group. This research was imperative to flipping the narrative from an individual’s psychological motivations to the direct actions that they take socially and politically. Inclan and Nolan-Garcia’s (2017) research connects very clearly to that of Duell and Valasek (2017) – however, Duell and Valasek (2017) took this notion of political polarization one step further when analyzing groupthink and external factors in relation to polarization and politics.

The creation of the “in” group/”out” group mentality creates a more vested interest in an individual’s social identity within the political realm due to the emotional layer of feeling as though the individual belongs within society – this feeling of belonging and loyalty can lead an individual to fall prey to the wishes and views of others within the group to remain a member (Duell and Valasek, 2017). These pressures and inherent need to conform are the same pressures many people who experience groupthink also feel. Duell and Valasek (2017) furthered the work done by Inclan and Nolan-Garcia when they conducted research on the connections between strength of partisanship and polarization – they found the same conclusion as Inclan and Nolan-Garcia (2017).

The Pew Research Center also conducted a study focused on how ideological uniformity and extremism translates to voter participation and activism. The researchers at Pew found via surveys and data collection that ideological uniformity in groups gave rise to more political activism in terms of voting and donating to campaigns (Pew Research Center, 2014).

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Interestingly, the Pew Research Center researchers (2014) also found that social identity and conformity was important in other relationships outside of their political groups – many individuals surveyed stated that concurring political beliefs was an important factor in making and maintaining friendships.

In conjunction with the research completed by many other scholars, Huddy researched another sector of social identity – the “American” identity. Huddy (2001) found that an individual’s social identity within the political realm (political identity) stems from their level of internalized patriotism, understanding of multiculturalism, and national identity within society. Since patriotism and national identity vary from individual to individual based on a person’s perception of the country in which they reside, Huddy (2001) focused his research in on different variables and characteristics of groups that could lead them to identify with one group over another. Specifically, Huddy (2001) researched how groups can take on different meanings to each individual based on personal perception. While conducting research in this area, Huddy (2001) studied variables in that can lead someone to ascribe/choose to join different identity groups and fixed variables that place people in certain social groups within society based on traits or characteristics out of their control.

Age and Generation

Age and generational influence on social identity tied in closely with previous topics touched upon by researchers and scholars. Most prominently, Urick’s (2012) research regarding the social identity theory also had a section related to individual’s generational identities and the differences behind the sorting of those specific social groups. Urick’s (2012) research on generational and age identity as social groups explains the three main types of age/generational based identity groupings within society and how they differ from one another. More specifically, Urick (2012) touches on the flexibility of age and generation as a social grouping, stating that many people may belong to more than one group in this area based on age, time they started work, and even any skills/experiences they may have within the work or educational worlds. Urick (2012) also pointed out that the flexibility in this social

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grouping expands to identities outside of age – many people may have overlapping political or partisan identities with those in the same or different age/generational groups.

Aparna Joshi, John Dencker, Gentz Franz and Joseph Martocchio (2010) furthered the point made by Urick with their research regarding age and generations as social identities. These researchers agreed that age and generational social groups do not have to be based upon solely age or generation that individuals belong to, but rather these groups can form from shared experiences or bonds. Joshi, Dencker, Franz, and Martocchio's (2010) research also came to the same conclusions as Urick's (2012) research in that multiple generational identities can exist within other identity groups and institutions – these identities adopted by individuals are not rigid social groupings.

Sam Trachtman, Sarah Anzia, and Charlotte Hill's (2021) research took the information from the other two researchers a step forward and analyzed political activism between the different age groups and generational groups in which people may identify. These researchers found trends in voting and activism that linked directly to the older and younger groups in society, as well as trends in specific age and generational groups that may be more likely to run for office. The biggest takeaway from a research standpoint from this source was that both older and younger population groups draw on age and generation as a form of social identity within society, and the strength of this identity within age was found to be connected to the strength of an individual's partisan identity (Trachtman et. al, 2021). Thom File's (2014) work had many similarities to Trachtman, Anzia, and Hill's (2021) work and provided data to back up the findings from the previous work – File's (2014) work demonstrated the difference in voting trends between the older and younger generations within America.

Education and Socio-Economic Status

Socioeconomic status is a variable that goes hand in hand with education. Patrick Flavin and Benjamin Radcliff's (2011) research that links the two with political participation explored how access to specific resources and capital allows for more involvement in the American political/civic processes. Nate Cohn's (2021) research countered much of Flavin and Radcliff's (2011) points about socioeconomic status being the major divider among voters

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with the data that he collected. Cohn's (2021) research found that educational status/level of education within voters is starting to become a larger divider than that of economic resources. The data referenced and reported in his work shows a shift towards higher education in many voters, and an outright connection between leaning towards more democratic party values and obtaining a college and/or graduate school degree (Cohn, 2021). Cohn's analysis of the shifting of traditional voter bases uses data gathered via surveys of voters from different educational levels and data gathered from the 2020 election on voting demographics and representation.

Amaud Chevalier and Orla Doyle's (2012) research regarding education and politics focuses more on the cognitive skill and knowledge base needed to understand the civic procedures as opposed to underlying socioeconomic links. The research conducted by these individuals addresses the idea that more highly educated individuals are more likely to have a vested interest in politics. However, the relationship between high education and high levels of civic participation is not causal – instead Chevalier and Doyle (2012) argue that other intrinsic motivations or identity aspects of individuals may influence political participation. This research conducted by Chevalier and Doyle (2012) coincides nicely with research conducted by the Economic and Social Research Council (2014) regarding education. The ESRC (2014) found data that alluded to education being used as a social and economic class sorting system, drawing off principles associated with social identity theory to explain how education can become an identity and motivator for voters.

Aina Gallego's (2010) research followed a similar comparison strategy to that of Flavin and Radcliff (2011), and Chevalier and Doyle (2012) when analyzing the intricacies of higher education and economic status of voters. Gallego's (2010) research focused on the role of affluence on voting processes and found that the more highly educated individuals in society tend to be more affluent – this affluence is directly correlated with the ability to mobilize and more regularly participate in civic processes like voting and donating to political campaigns. While it is not a fully causal relationship, Gallego's (2010) research focuses on the relationship between affluence, ability to mobilize, and participation – of which is all

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intermittently very high for highly educated individuals and usually very low for lower educated individuals. Gallego's (2010) research is unique compared to the aforementioned research because it also touches on the ability of individuals to mobilize in unions to increase their political participation, regardless of educational status.

Labor Unions

To gain a more preliminary understanding of my research regarding labor unions, I used Union Plus (n.d.) to define what a labor union is, the power structure of most labor unions, and how they are chartered into local chapters around the nation. With that background knowledge, the research completed by Nolan-Garcia and Inclan (2017) helped to refine how the structure of unions allow for social identification within the union itself, and how specific perspectives on issues are built into the structure of the unions themselves. Nolan-Garcia and Inclan's (2017) research came to the general conclusions that unions are not a sole identity for people, but rather that membership within these organizations reinforce an individual's already existing social identity.

Ray Gibney, Marick Masters, Ozge Aybat, and Thomas Amile's (2018) research furthered that of Nolan-Garcia and Inclan (2017) on general psychology behind an individual choosing to join a union – research from those publications reveals that many people are attracted to join groups in which many members share surface level and ideological beliefs. Gibney, Master, Aybat, and Amile (2018) also made the distinction of labor unions being perceived to have an “in” group/”out” group mentality that may alienate other individuals who would want to join – a great example of this was the research regarding union member's perception of superiority over another individual in the same position who is not union member. This research continues to dig deeper into demographics of union members and common perceptions and stereotypes many union members may embody or seem to embody from individuals looking in from the outside. Gibney, Master, Aybat, and Amile's (2018) research is a culmination of data points and social psychology studies that ties in very well with Kayla Blado, Dan Essrow, and Lawrence Mishel's (2017) analysis of stereotypes that were proven untrue through survey and membership analysis.

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One of the points Gibney, Master, Aybat, and Amile (2018) made in their research was the impact of declining membership over the past few years and the 2020 surge of membership during COVID19 – researchers addressed the possible causes and benefits of unionized labor during the pandemic.

Political Activism and Labor Unions

When analyzing political activism within labor unions, I broke my research into two specific areas – facilitation of political acts of members by unions, and the functions of labor unions that expose members to politics. Jasmine Kerrissey and Evan Schofer (2013) focused their findings on the background demographics of many unions – specifically, they focused on the differing levels of education on political topics that union members may have. Kerrissey and Schofer (2013) found that unions typically expose members to pro-union views and campaigns, work to develop the organization and civic skills of members, and invest in political campaigns that align with union leaders' agendas.

Flavin and Radcliff (2011) took their research in a slightly different direction and focused more on how labor unions promote activism in political organizations due to the fact the labor unions are political organizations. Their research focuses on the inner workings and processes of labor unions and how it exposes members to systems that work inherently like political systems – labor unions have elections and campaigns for leaders, similar to how the government has elections and campaigns.

When researching political activism in unions in a more broad sense, I found an New York Times article in which the leader of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) spoke about efforts in mobilization and civic education many labor unions undertook during the 2012 presidential election on behalf of Barack Obama. The article discussed campaign donations, canvassing and telephone calls made to potential voters from union members, and other acts that directly involved and exposed union members to political and civic processes (New York Times: The Caucus, 2012).

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Union Members and Voting

Research conducted on the political participation of union members finds that there is a strong correlation between membership and consistently voting. Kerrissey and Schofer published two pieces of research on this topic and both tie together different aspects of voting with union membership. In their 2013 publication, Kerrissey and Schofer deduced that union members were more likely to vote for democratic candidates than non-union members and were overall more likely to vote in elections in general. They delved further into these areas of research within this publication when they analyzed the effects of membership of a group (i.e. an identity) on voting patterns (Kerrissey and Schofer, 2013).

Flavin and Radcliff (2011) built off of the research done by Kerrissey and Schofer in 2013 with their research on union perception by the public and how it factors into overall voting participation. In their research, Flavin and Radcliff (2011) observe a direct connection between membership in labor unions and turning out to vote in elections – the reasons observed for the connection revolve around identity and perception of the group by other groups in society.

The publication released in 2018 by Kerrissey and Schofer focuses on the connections between political participation and someone's position within a societal hierarchy. This research specifically addresses linkages between union membership in more industrialized societies and an overall increased willingness to participate in political processes of that country (Kerrissey and Schofer, 2018). While not focused specifically on the United States, this research helps to answer broader questions about union influence on an individual's voting patterns.

METHODOLOGY

Each section of my thesis required a different approach for collecting data and information – requiring I use both quantitative and qualitative research methods throughout my thesis research process. For my research on the more cognitive psychology-heavy sections regarding social identity theory and the different types of identities that can affect an individual (age,

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education, political ideology/party, labor union), I focused on gathering qualitative information from social sciences and psychology journals. To stay consistent with the quality of the research, I mostly used JSTOR as my hub for scholarly publications but did reference scholarly articles and information from other sources when needed.

When focusing on the research regarding the individual labor unions (AFSCME and AFT), I used the direct websites of the labor unions, affiliate websites of labor unions, and recent articles from the New York Times or NPR to gain information. To gain data that helped to statistically represent the qualitative data found on these websites and within the journals, I used surveys and data from the Pew Research Center, the Economic and Social Research Center, or data that is accessible via public databases to help supplement the data points found in the scholarly articles and journals. The different types of sources used in my research, allowed me to paint a more intricate picture of the interconnections between the major areas that I researched.

Before conducting my research on each of the outlined topics, I narrowed down what specific variables I wanted to evaluate in conjunction with my topic and set the time constraints for the sources and data I would be collecting. I decided to focus on data gathered from 2000 to 2020 because I felt that it would be a reasonable enough timeline to gain data on any shifts in data, while still being manageable in terms of research and relevancy to the topic areas I am covering. The topics and variables I decided to cover within my research were the psychology of social identities, perceived party polarization, union membership, education as a social divider, age/generation as a social divider, and political activism in unions – research questions were generated based on these variables and their interconnectedness.

After setting a timeline and outlining the variables I wanted to cover within my research I generated a list of research questions to better focus my inquiries into the subjects of my topic. The research questions I generated focused on finding patterns and connections between social identity and the other variables listed – my goal was to prove how a person's perception of themselves and the world around them effects political actions. I furthered divided each question and variable section into different categories depending on whether I

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would need quantitative or qualitative research (or both) on the topic before starting my research. This allowed me to better organize where I would look for my research and what quality of sources I would need to use.

The overall criteria I looked for in my sources when starting my research was credibility of the authors, universities, or think tanks conducting the research, and objective language in the sources. My thesis topic could easily be manipulated into a subjective and politically charged research topic, so finding sources that maintained an objective voice and accurately presented data were very important to me throughout this process. Using scholarly articles in tandem with university research and data accessible via public databases allowed me to gain a more holistic view of the different facets of my topic.

CASE STUDIES

In this section, I analyze data on and compare two different labor unions to give an example of how labor unions and labor union activity influences members. The two labor unions analyzed are the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, and the American Federation of Teachers – both AFSCME and the AFT are larger labor unions that have upwards of a million members. I chose these two unions as I felt that their influence is felt more widely across the United States because of the number of active and retired members that are affiliated with the AFT and AFSCME.

Case 1- AFSCME: American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees

For my research on AFSCME, I obtained information and data from AFSCME's website and OpenSecrets which are both domains open to the public – I did not use any academic journals. Currently, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees is one of the largest labor unions and currently covers many different sectors of work - AFSCME as a whole has approximately 1.6 million retired and active union members (AFSCME, n.d.). AFSCME represents individuals of all genders and ages who work in public works, transportation, public administration, probation and parole, nurses, museum and cultural institutions, library workers, law enforcement agents, K-12 school workers, higher education,

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healthcare, and many more (AFSCME, n.d.). Through an analysis of data available via AFSCME's website and affiliates, it was found that there are no known educational requirements to join the union because it spans a wide array of job sectors. Instead, it is assumed that the average educational background of an individual would vary from member to member based on needed qualifications for their job and field of work.

In terms of member demographics, AFSCME is a labor union whose members are 58% women and also represents workers of a broad range of ages (AFSCME, n.d.). To garner support from members, AFSCME offers student debt assistance, opportunities for education and job training, and scholarship benefits for all current members (AFSCME, n.d.). There was no indication of average age of union members in data collected and analyzed on AFSCME.

Through research of the hierarchy of the labor union, it was found that AFSCME functions like any other labor union – they have a national headquarters and many sub-unions for different states and occupations (AFSCME, n.d.). AFSCME's hierarchy of power is determined through elections in which leaders and workers vote in electoral processes to determine union officers and union goals for the year regarding growth and programs implemented to benefit all current and retired members (AFSCME, n.d.).

In terms of offering political support to candidates and mobilizing members, AFSCME has a voluntary independent political organization called PEOPLE that is owned by AFSCME members – under federal law union dues cannot be used to fund political candidates, which is why AFSCME has a voluntary PAC under their name (AFSCME, n.d.). PEOPLE funds are used to contribute to local, state, and federal elections, as well as fund and coordinate political engagement/education programs for members of AFSCME – members of the union have the option to take money out of their paychecks every pay period to donate to PEOPLE (AFSCME, n.d.). AFSCME also offers incentives like conventions held with the union leaders to talk about issues facing union workers and political stances of the union and union members, and exclusive benefit programs partnered with larger national brands that create incentive for workers to join unions and remain a part of unions (AFSCME, n.d.). Thus, although not all members may want to donate or become politically informed and active

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following union membership, AFSCME gives members the resources and ability to do so if wanted and allows members to feel seen and heard by their peers (AFSCME, n.d.).

Through an analysis of the donation contribution data of AFSCME, PEOPLE, and affiliates of AFSCME, it is clear that AFSCME regularly donates millions of dollars to solely Democratic party candidates and/or initiatives. In 2012, AFSCME and PEOPLE contributed over \$13 million to campaigns and ranked as the 9th highest contributor to elections and campaigns in the nation – all of the donations went towards the Democratic party (OpenSecrets, n.d.). In 2016, AFSCME and PEOPLE contributed over \$15 million and again in 2020 AFSCME and PEOPLE donated over \$17 million to elections and campaigns – in both years they were ranked as top contributors and solely contributed to the Democratic party (OpenSecrets, n.d.). This pattern of high donation amounts and trending towards the Democratic party reveals a willingness on behalf of current and past union members affiliated with AFSCME to donate to and support Democratic party and union-backed initiatives.

In addition to financially contributing to the Democratic party, the data reveals that AFSCME has a history of endorsing Democratic candidates in elections. For example, in 2020, AFSCME openly endorsed President Biden's campaign for President (AFSCME, n.d.). The President of AFSCME sat down with NPR's Michael Martin to discuss labor union issues and how Joe Biden's platform was heavily aligned with union goals for the future. This interview and other promotional media released by AFSCME outlined these goals as ones that include more affordable healthcare, retirement security, aiding post offices and schools, and protecting social security (Martin, 2020). Union leadership referenced member frustration with the overall lack of resources allotted to public works and high unemployment rates within public works as the main grievance that needed to be addressed in the upcoming year – leaders and members believed that Biden's campaign in 2020 addressed those grievances in a way that agreed with the union ideology (Martin, 2020). The data provided on AFSCME indicates that at least some of its members are politically active and may endorse Democratic party initiatives and/or campaigns.

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Case 2 – AFT: American Federation of Teachers

I obtained research and data on the American Federation of Teachers through the AFT website and a third-party website called Ballotpedia. The American Federation of Teachers is slightly more focused than AFSCME in terms of representing a specific job sector. The AFT represents school-related personnel including pre-K through 12th grade teachers, paraprofessionals, higher education faculty, and other related personal – the AFT is also one of the largest labor unions with approximately 1.5 million members in total (Ballotpedia, n.d.). Like AFSCME, the AFT has no strict educational requirements for members who wish to join. They cover a smaller job sector, but still have a wide variety of different types of jobs and individuals that they represent - each job and field represented by the AFT may have different educational requirements for individuals but the union does not impose any requirements/restrictions on members (Ballotpedia, n.d.). The AFT, like every other union in America, is set up with a national headquarters and local and state unions that fall under the national union – the AFT, like other unions, also undergoes democratic elections processes for leaders within the local and national unions (Ballotpedia, n.d.)

The AFT offers members different benefits and opportunities to help draw in new members. They advertise exclusive deals and money off of products and equipment that are only available to members of the AFT – a great example of this includes student debt relief programs, rebates on specific types of cars, and exclusive discounts on Dell computer products (AFT, 2021). Like any other labor union, the AFT also acts as a liaison with employers to ensure that union members have access to better working conditions and pay rates – this is something that non-union members often do not have access to through their employers (AFT, 2021). The AFT acts as a liaison between members and political systems to fight for policies that benefit members - a great example of this tactic was used during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the AFT mobilized more union members than ever before for voting campaigns and encouraged political activism in members to support fellow members who were/are front line workers during the pandemic (AFT, 2020).

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In terms of political activism and support, the AFT is very similar to AFSCME. After looking at the data regarding campaign donation and support that is available via OpenSecrets, it was revealed that the AFT tends to donate to exclusively to the Democratic party, candidates, and initiatives. Like AFSCME, the AFT also has a system of using an outside subsidiary PAC to collect donations for the union-backed candidate for elections – as mentioned earlier, due to federal laws and regulations, labor unions cannot use member dues to contribute to elections nor can they donate straight to candidates themselves (AFT, 2020). During the 2012 election cycle that AFT contributed over \$9 million to Democratic party candidate Barack Obama – they were ranked the 12th highest contributor and donated all money to the Democratic party and Democratic party initiatives (OpenSecrets, n.d.). The same trend followed in the 2016 and 2020 elections – the AFT donated over \$16 million in 2016 and over \$19 million in 2020 to the Democratic party candidates and initiatives (OpenSecrets, n.d.).

Besides purely monetary contributions, the AFT also publicly endorsed presidential candidate Joe Biden in the 2020 election and donated copious amounts of media to how the election outcome would affect labor unions (AFT, 2020). The AFT and its national leaders started a podcast that is aimed at informing union members about issues facing the AFT and other unions and educating and engaging union members about the future of labor unions – it was noted that the President of the AFT will often have guest speakers join and give input on hot button issues (AFT, 2021). In their 2021 state of the union announcement the AFT outlined an internal campaign effort to engage more union members in voting processes and town hall meetings directed towards educating individuals about voting rights. With these efforts the AFT is seemingly trying to increase political participation and activism within their members and providing them a platform in which they can gain knowledge on politics which is something that is not necessarily unique to the AFT, but is not openly discussed on AFSCME's website or any general resources provided to the public by AFSCME. The research found within this section points to the conclusion that the AFT may influence voter behavior based on the assumption that at least some union members are politically active and may donate to the Democratic party and/or party initiatives – this is the same conclusion that the data from AFSCME implied. The other conclusion drawn from the AFT data that is unique to that labor union is that the AFT provides resources and educational opportunities to

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members seeking to become more politically involved, thus possibly influencing members to become politically active by providing them resources to do so.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Social Identity in Two Party Systems

Research on this topic area in general has alluded to an overall connection between groupthink tendencies, an individual's social identity, and strength of partisanship within an individual. At face value, an individual identifying as a member of a political party is a type of social identity in itself – leading many researchers in the field, most notably Huddy (2001), Duell and Valasek (2017), Islam (2014), and Turner and Pratkanis (1998), to conclude that there is a connection between overall social identity in society and an individual's political identity (no matter the strength of that political identity). A person's social identity is how an individual views themselves based on membership within a certain social group (Islam, 2014). These social groups and the idea of self-sorting into different social groups are both ways that researchers believe individuals enforce social hierarchies and allow for people to develop a sense of self relative to their communities and experiences. Huddy's (2001) research found that partisanship and the sorting of individuals within political parties is one of the largest variables to account for when looking at social identity and American political behavior. Political parties are social groups in which an individual can become a member of – thus a person's social identity can be heavily influenced by how they perceive themselves and their allegiance to a political party.

It has been further shown that this identity an individual believes themselves to have within society automatically groups them in with what they believe is the “in” group in society – which is essentially a group of people who they believe to have the majority opinion. Social identities, in a broad sense, are most influential when one believes the involvement with a specific group is central to who they believe themselves to be as a person (Islam, 2014). To apply this further with politics, the more embedded a feeling of belonging to a specific political party is to an individual, the more influential the characteristics and goals of that group will be on the individual and their thought processes. Huddy's (2001) research indicates

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that the formation of a vested identity within a political party stems from a feeling of belonging and similarity to others who identify with that party – alluding to the belief that social identity within a political party is nothing more than comparing one’s self-image to their image of others in an “in” group or “out” group. This heavy influence of self-perception and group opinions/goals on an individual, paired with the vested interest in the group as a part of the individual’s identity leads to groupthink within the collective.

Groupthink is often facilitated through the creation of an “in” group/”out” group mentality within social settings. Researchers have studied the effect that politics and political activity has on political parties and individuals who identify as a part of a specific party through the lens of groupthink. Huddy’s (2001) research found that internalization of party as a part of an individual’s identity leads to the internalized belief of a party’s wins/losses as the individual’s own wins/losses, which further exacerbates groupthink’s presence within politics. The vested interest of an individual within the political realm of America leads to a higher chance that an individual will vote – the more sharply an individual identifies with one specific party and internalizes the involvement as a part of their identity, the more likely they are to be involved in civic duties and political campaigns (Huddy, 2001). This internalization of political activity and development of a political identity (or a social identity that is vested within a political party) ultimately leads to more widespread and aggressive perception of party polarization.

Perceived polarization between political parties is the belief held by an individual, based on their own experiences, that the two main political parties in America (Democratic party and Republican party) are vastly different. Perception of polarization is shaped by the creation of “in” groups/”out” groups, extremity of the thoughts and beliefs of an individual, and the strength of identity within the social group by an individual (Westfall et al., 2015).

Polarization and the perception of strict social divides results from the belief that an individual has regarding the rationality of their group’s views as opposed to another group – most people assume that their own group’s beliefs are rational and superior as compared to an opposing group who they view as biased or morally corrupt (Westfall et al., 2015). These

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beliefs and stereotypes attributed to opposing social groups in society stems from the influence of other individuals in the group on one individual's beliefs and viewpoint.

The psychology behind perceived polarization is best exemplified by American politics. Research has pointed to a connection between an individual identifying as a part of a partisan group and an individual developing a negative view of their group's opposition. In relation, perception of other group's ideological standpoints drives individuals to believe that political parties are becoming more radicalized – of which researchers have proven is not necessarily true. Instead, researchers have discovered that individuals and their perceptions of polarity within politics is heavily influenced by their peers to act and behave in certain ways. Research conducted in 2014 by the Pew Research Center noted that the groups who see a sharper rise in ideological uniformity, tend to also be more politically active. Thus, the people actively engaging in voting behaviors, donation behaviors, protests, and other forms of activism are more likely to be a part of a group that heavily influences their belief systems and may be a more radicalized or extreme voter. This prevalence of active extremist individuals leads to further public perception of polarity between political parties and more animosity between parties, even though it is not statistically proven that political parties are becoming more extremist and polarized (Pew Research Center, 2014). The “in” group/”out” group mentality associated with an individual's social identity and its prevalence within the American political system has allowed for partisan political ideology to facilitate widespread groupthink and conformity in individuals within political and social settings.

The influence of partisanship on perception of polarization is furthered manifested into individuals by their peers through the shared belief of other political groups as threats. Through an analysis of research, it has been deduced that an individual who feels as though they belong within the political party views that party as a stable fixation of their identity and this feeling of belonging and superiority that an individual feels is inherently threatened by another group if they take a powerful position. The subconscious belief for many individuals is that they do not share any values or beliefs with an opposing group, and should the opposing group take power, it would destabilize the individual's group and sense of identity.

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This further leads to the individual's perception that no political party shares values and that other groups also view their group as a threat to societal wellbeing.

The last major influential piece that social identity theory and my research in this topic area highlights is that of political identity stemming from an individual's preconceived notions of patriotism and what it means to be an American. Huddy (2001) emphasizes one major factor in his research on social identity that directly coordinates with the development of political identity – and it entails the idea that being “American” does not mean the same thing to everyone. The political effects of patriotism on a person's identity and view of the political realm solely rests on an individual's perception of what the ideal American should think like, act like, and even look like. The research acquired on patriotism, politics, and social identities interconnections with people's ideological approaches and identities highlights the notion that everyone in society is different and that factors such as personal experiences and hardships, age, educational background, and socioeconomic status influence values and belief systems.

Age and Generation

Social identity groups and allegiances dealing with age and generation factors have different facets and groups depending how an individual decides to internalize their experiences and their numerical age. The three most common identities found people align themselves with were cohort-based identities, age-based identities, and incumbency-based identities (Urlick, 2012). To preface the discussion of each of the three main identity categories within age and generation, it is important to point out that many individuals define themselves in more than one way and may ascribe their social identity to many different groups causing overlap. Urlick (2012) found that age and generation might overlap more frequently with is partisan/political identity.

Cohort-based identity tends to form between individuals who enter an experience at the same time – an example of this would be starting a new job or starting education in roughly the same time (Urlick, 2012). This type of identification is focused on the actual feelings and experiences of individuals and how they bond over similar struggles or periods of adjustment – these similarities and feelings become internalized and eventually become a part of the

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identity of those individuals. Cohort-based identity is less focused on the age or even generational aspect of an individual's identity, but instead focuses on shared experiences – these experiences, memories, or major events that occur in the lives of people is what is used as their social identifiers under this model (Urlick, 2012)

Age-based identity is formed through experiences of individuals who are born around the same time as one another – despite the name, this is the more generational approach to identity (Urlick, 2012). Age-based identity is formed throughout the lifetime of individuals and usually manifests itself in the form of shared values and hardships based on age. Often, we hear people talk about certain values and stereotypes in regard to Boomers, Generation Z, and Millennials – sorting individuals into these groups is a direct application of an age-based identity.

Incumbency-based identity forms through a bond between individuals who share similar skills, experiences, and attitudes that result from a position or role they held for a prolonged period of time (Urlick, 2012). This type of bond is one that relies on both age-based identity characteristics and cohort-based identity characteristics – one's age and experience is considered under this model. This seems to be the least common identity in today's society and no real examples were provided by Urlick (2012) to further explain this specific identity group.

The most important piece of research highlighted throughout this section on social identity is multiple generational identities can coexist within other identity groups. Membership is not always solely based on numerical age or generational sorting, instead these groups that fall under age/generational sorting tend to blur the division lines between the generations because of daily intergenerational interactions within their identity groups or even in the workplace (Joshi Aparna et al., 2010). However, more recent research conducted has shown that the older generations and youngest generations both rely more heavily on their age and collective generational values as a social identity, despite having many intersections or shared experiences.

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Recent arguments considering voting and political participation rates in the United States center more on generational differences and motivations behind engagement and ultimately, how it effects political engagement. Through data collection, it was made apparent that the older adult population and youngest population both trend toward a heavier reliance on age as a form of identity. In correlation with that analysis, researchers found that there are direct connections found between strength of identity within an age or generation group and strength of identity within a partisan group for an individual – the stronger you identify in one, the more likely you are to strongly identify in the other (Trachtman et al., 2021). In correlation to those findings, recently researchers have discovered that those who identify as a part of the older generations are more likely to be more politically engaged than those of the younger generation (Trachtman et al., 2021). An analysis of the previous findings leads to the conclusion that the older generation in America strongly identifies as a member of their age group and a member of a political party, whereas younger Americans may be less inclined to strongly identify as either. This strong identification and tendency to politically participate in older individuals is manifested into society through larger voter turnout and more representation within governmental roles for those who identify as a member of the older generational group in America. Recent data reports exemplify these findings as reports show that voters aged 65 or older have more recently had the highest voting rates of all age sectors in the United States – the overall participation in voting processes showed a 3.4% increase from 1964 to 2012 in voting participation by older Americans (File, 2014). The data and research further support that the younger age group in America has historically undervoted in many major elections.

This section notating to prevalence of experiences in the workplace as a way to create social identity groups is arguably the most applicable to the case study outlining the AFT and AFSCME. Both labor unions vary in age, encompassing the youngest and some of the oldest age groups able to vote within the United States. It is important to notate that labor unions are inherently a method in which individuals are grouped via cohort-based identity or even sometimes incumbency-based identity – meaning that they may share similar workplace experiences or have hold similar jobs to one another that creates that identity bond. The major

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point raised about strength of identity within age group correlating to strength of identity vested into a political party is interesting because it opens the door for further research to be completed on the correlation between generational/age group identity group strength in comparison to political identity strength in any field or numeric age group.

Education, Socio-Economic Status, and Activism

Education and socio-economic status are two intertwined external factors that researchers found can affect how individuals shape their social identity, political activism levels, and voting attitudes. Researchers at the ESRC (2014) found that education is a tool that is internalized by individuals as a facet of their identity and a way to sway other people's view of them – it was also found that people satisfied with their education level tend to incorporate it into their social identities. In contemporary American society, education (specifically high levels of education) is emphasized as a positive trait held by people in “in groups”. This view of education as a way to elevate status alienates individuals with lower levels of education – leading the social divider of the American public to become educational status as opposed to socio-economic status (Cohn, 2021). The importance of a heavy emphasis on education in America is two-fold. On one hand, the emphasis on higher educational levels has led more college-educated individuals to become politically active in terms of voting and identifying with a political party. A great example of this push for activism in younger individuals with high education levels is the 2016 and 2020 Presidential elections – in the state of Massachusetts, college graduates outvoted any other social group during these election years (Cohn, 2021). On the other hand, this emphasis has led to a realignment of political parties and a perceived increase in polarization within political parties. College graduates are statistically more strongly affiliated with the Democratic party and the overwhelming view of many of these individuals is that political issues are structural and systemic – these views have pushed the Democratic party more to the left extremity (Cohn, 2021). With the influx of college-educated voters changing the existing ideological focus of the Democratic party, there has been an overall shift in allegiance for working class and lower-educated individuals to the Republican party in the last few years.

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To better illustrate how the parties have changed since the late 1990s/early 2000s to 2020, I gathered statistics regarding voting demographics of the Democratic party under both President Bill Clinton and President Joe Biden. Under the Clinton administration, approximately 60% of the Democratic party's voters and activists were white voters with no college degree (Cohn, 2021). Today, approximately 20% of the Democratic party's voters and activists are white with no college education under the Biden administration (Cohn, 2021). This data objectively proposes the idea that the influx of higher educated voters and restructuring of ideological priorities within the party has led to some alienation of non-college educated voters within the Democratic party over the last 20 years.

In terms of socio-economic factors, individuals with a college degree are likely to have a higher average salary than individuals who do not have a degree (Flavin and Radcliff, 2011). With this higher level of income and education, the more educated American citizens have access to resources that allow them to be more politically active and engaged. Research has found that individuals with lower levels of education and a lower income level are often deterred from participating in political processes due to the overall cost of gaining election knowledge and lack of resources (Flavin and Radcliff, 2011). Education improves an individual's general background knowledge base, which seemingly facilitates an ability for higher educated individuals to understand political processes better than those of a high school education or less. Researchers gathered data that supports the general connection between education and political participation, claiming that one extra year of school for an individual in the United States leads to an approximate 2% increase in probability that the individual will vote in an election (Chevalier and Doyle, 2012). However, the link between higher education and higher outright political activism is not causal. An individual's want to participate in political processes like campaign donations and voting may have intrinsic motivations and/or be influenced by a person's other social identity groups – a higher education level and income does not cause someone to be more politically active, rather it gives them the resources to be more active if they choose to (Chevalier and Doyle, 2012 and Gallego, 2009).

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Mobilization of individuals for political purposes is inherently easier if they have access to adequate financial resources. This concept in itself demonstrates the social inequity of the society we live in – the people who may need the help of politicians or legislation are groups that may not be politically engaged or knowledgeable enough to feel comfortable voting in major elections. This paradigm is what labor unions are trying to (and have been trying to) change for years through membership in unions for individuals of often mixed professions, education levels, and economic backgrounds (Gallego, 2009). While individuals may not have resources to donate to campaigns or have the time to educate themselves on political processes, the labor unions do – the goal of labor unions is to form a collective to fight for higher wages, more equitable working conditions, and overtly mobilize the working class (Gallego, 2009). Hence, the influence of education is not just contained to an individual's social identity, but instead has morphed into an indicator of political and economic power too.

The AFT is an example of a labor union that uses their resources to help increase member participation within political processes. As mentioned in the case study section, the AFT offers different types of programs, including podcasts that can be listened to anywhere at any time, for members to become more educated on politics and upcoming elections. This offering by the labor union helps reduce the resource and time cost barrier for their members and allows them the resources to participate in elections and the pathways to safely donate to campaigns – these are all resources that not many non-union workers have at their disposal.

AFSCME also offers a variety of different educational programs and mobilization efforts for their members. Like the AFT, these programs available to their members help to provide AFSCME represented workers with the educational resources regarding politics and elections should they be interested in taking advantage of those offerings. AFSCME also provides safe ways and programs to facilitate worker donation to political campaigns if an individual is interested in donating to the union-backed candidate or party. These educational programs and safe ways to donate money run by AFSCME help to lower socioeconomic and educational barriers to voting and other forms of political participation for the union members – both the AFT and AFSCME run similar programs to help shrink barriers to political participation.

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Labor Unions and Activism

Labor unions are multi-faceted organizations whose sole purpose is to unite and represent a group of workers to ensure fair working conditions. Unions work as a democratic body that mirrors many other democratic processes – the procedures for electing higher officials in the union are similar to that of many other elections. The system in which labor unions function is hierarchical in structure, similar to that of levels of government in a federalism system– there are smaller local and state chapters of labor unions that fall under the national unions (Union Plus, n.d.). Currently there are over 60 national unions that represent more than 14 million workers throughout the United States – two of the larger unions that represent overlapping worker populations are the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, and the American Federation of Teachers (Union Plus, n.d.).

Elections of leaders is not the only similarity that exists between labor unions and the American political system - unions by design encourage similar experiences to that of political parties. Like political parties, people are attracted to join unions where they share similar beliefs as current members (Gibney, Rey et al., 2018). Individuals in this position compare their self-identity to the organization’s identity and often hold a viewpoint of superiority of their group – similar to the “in” group superiority felt when someone internalizes a group as a part of their social identity (Gibney, Rey et al., 2018). Similar to political parties, unions also have predisposed class interests that allow for some individuals to join or favor them as opposed to other groups (Nolan-Garcia and Inclan, 2017). It appears through an analysis of relevant research that labor unions do not function as a separate social identity group, but that they reinforce the social identity of their members. It was briefly covered in another section, but the intersection of multiple group identities is apparent within labor unions – approximately 46% of members are women, 36% of members are people of color, and 64% of members hold an associate’s degree or higher (Blado et.al, 2017). This data proves that labor unions may not be an identity, but still harbors and allows individuals of different identities to find a common ground and a shared understanding of self.

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In terms of demographics of union members, many of individuals come from working-class families and despite some union members obtaining degrees of higher education, many union members may lack basic knowledge of the American political system. Common preconceived notions that non-union members hold of many union members expresses the opposite belief – many non-union members believe union members to be poorly educated, middle-ages, and a white male (Gibney, Rey et al., 2018). However, this perception is seemingly driven by the same metrics that the “in” group/”out” group competition is – non-union members see union members as a threat to them in some way. In terms of political exposure within unions, research conducted showed that union membership helps to expose individuals to pro-union views and further encourages participation in politics through informational sessions hosted by the unions or through voter mobilization tactics by the unions (Kerrissey and Schofer, 2018). It was also found that unions help to develop the organizational and civic skills needed to achieve political goals for the union in their members – unions are often found donating to political campaigns or mobilizing to help with voting in elections on behalf of the union (Kerrissey and Schofer, 2018). The trend towards higher participation rates in political processes by union members does not go unnoticed, research shows that many union members are aware that unions take political stances and that countries (like the United States) in which union membership is higher, political participation rates in terms of voting is also higher (Flavin and Radcliff, 2011).

Union membership appears to have a strong connection with voting and other forms of political participation. Research has shown that union members are two times as likely to be politically active (attend strikes, boycott, petition, vote, etc.) than non-union workers (Kerrissey and Schofer, 2018). In the United States, unions are also more likely to engage with political parties more directly – many unions have programs set in place that make it easier for members to donate to political campaigns or the unions have a subsidiary PAC in which they donate to political campaigns (Flavin and Radcliff, 2011). Data gathered showed that labor unions across the nation donated an estimated \$76 million during the 2008 election cycle, and approximately \$141 million during the 2012 election cycle – 90% of these donations made by the labor unions went to Democratic candidates and causes (Brady, 2014).

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During the 2012 election cycle, the President of the AFL-CIO (the nation's labor union's governing body) acknowledged the labor unions' role in reelecting President Barack Obama – claiming that the union members who mobilized to increase voter participation flipped the vote in Obama's favor in Ohio, Wisconsin, and Nevada (New York Times: The Caucus, 2012). Data gathered by the New York Times (2012) showed that approximately 60% of individuals from union households in Ohio voted for Obama – this was higher than the statistics gathered for the 2008 election.

It is statistically proven that union members are more likely to vote for Democratic candidates and more likely to vote in elections in general than non-union members. Research has shown that the effects of union membership and access to the plethora of resources they have is most influential over those with lower levels of education – joining these unions are essentially one of few ways in which working class citizens can obtain power in society (Kerrissey and Schofer, 2018). However, the preconceived notions of widespread corruption and societal depiction of union members as unable to think for themselves that many non-union members have about unions halts the influence and growth of the organizations (Gibney, Ray et al., 2018). The goal of these stereotypes propagated by union opponents is to deter individuals from joining the collective as it removes power from unions and returns power to the more affluent individuals, bigger corporations, and employers (Gibney, Ray et al., 2018).

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, membership in labor unions across the nation was in decline due to the widespread misconception that individuals who want to join unions have to hold the same political and ideological beliefs as the union they would consider joining (Gibney, Rey et al., 2018). However, since COVID-19 struck, unions have become very useful tools in terms of negotiating wages and worker conditions for people working through the pandemic (Shanker et al., 2021). Many individuals who recently joined the workforce sought out opportunities to join a union due to the support in negotiation and need for representation and a voice in their workplaces (Shanker et al., 2021).

The AFT and AFSCME are both great examples of politically active unions with a plethora of different types of members. Both the AFT and AFSCME are highly diverse in terms of

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gender, age, and occupation – the odds that every single one of their 1+ million members holds the exact same political beliefs and stances is very slim. As stated before, both unions have educational programs and ways for members to donate to campaigns and become politically active if the desire is there, which helps normalize and facilitate the flow of power to individual union members as opposed to larger corporations or employers. In correspondence with research on labor unions, it does appear that both the AFT and AFSCME tend to trend more towards donating and endorsing members of the Democratic party. However, this correlation between the AFT and AFSCME with the Democratic party does not mean that every member of the labor union agrees with the Democratic party or endorses the Democratic party. This endorsement on behalf of the AFT and AFSCME means that the union leaders feel as though the platforms of those candidates best aligns with goals and objectives voted on by the union members. Because all unions, including the AFT and AFSCME help to provide more educational and financial support resources to members, I predict an upwards trend in union membership over the next few years due to the pandemic furloughs and restrictions. These unions fight for better pay for members and protect members against ill working conditions, which will be in high demand because of the widespread need for employment the nation currently faces due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

CONCLUSIONS

Education levels, age and generation, and membership within labor unions all seemingly influence an individual's social identity in different ways. As seen when evaluating both the AFT and AFSCME, education and labor unions are heavily connected to shaping and refining an individual's ideological beliefs and levels of activism, whereas age and generational aspects of a person are considered traits in which individuals use to join or ascribe to social identity groups. More specifically, labor unions are collective groups that advocate for the interests of people inside of the group (or "members" of the group) and inherently endorse ideological standpoints, endorse political candidates, and simulate democratic election processes through everyday operations – this both exposes individuals to political processes and voting on a smaller scale than national elections while holding similar procedures as a national or local election. The influence unions have on individuals stems from efforts on

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behalf of the union to educate members and provide resources about elections to members that focuses specifically on union endorsed ideologies and candidates – the union attempts to influence members through explanations of why a candidate or set of policies may be beneficial to the union and its members. As demonstrated by the efforts of AFSCME and the AFT, education and resources are interconnected with the influence of labor unions because unions act as a means for people to gain access to resources and educational tools that may be needed to boost motivation to participate in political processes that non-union members may lack access to – thus, increasing the likelihood of an individual that belongs to a labor union to vote or become politically active.

While labor unions themselves are not considered a social identity group, these types of organizations do create a sense of loyalty to a group and its other members due to the benefits an individual receives from being a part of it – essentially it does create an “in” group mentality but is not considered a social identity. There is a connection and influential structure prevalent between union membership and political/social identities of an individual – research shows that individuals are more inclined to join labor unions because they see themselves in line with union goals or perceive themselves as individuals who are similar to current members. Thus, the stronger the connection to an identity that an individual feels, the more active an individual will be in support of that group – in the sense of a labor union, the more membership within a labor union benefits an individual and confirms the ideological beliefs, the more likely they are to remain loyal and active within the union.

No research has been conducted that addresses the connection between a decline in organized labor and a decline in civic participation. However, it is reasonable to conclude, based on data and research collected, that a decline in labor union affiliation does not significantly impact political participation by people who are non-union members, but may impact people who previously were/still are union members. The main effect of the decline in labor union participation in the early 2000s was the perception of a shrinking voice for minority groups and less educated individuals as many lacked the resources and knowledge they felt was needed to participate in political processes (Brady, 2014). This massive decline that

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previously occurred led to further wage inequality in already poorer groups of individuals. The most recent surge in membership by younger and older populations of individuals has correlated to an increase in political activism and participation – seemingly creating the perception that withstanding membership within labor unions positively correlates with likeliness to participate in civic procedures. If this trend of influence by labor unions continues, it would be reasonable to expect the influence of labor unions on political processes and voter participation to grow in correlation with a growth in union membership among voting populations.

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