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Public Sector Unions and Presidential Voting

Historically, unions have played a key role in U.S. elections. But with private sector union membership declining and membership in public sector unions increasing, it is important to examine the possible impact public sector unions have in states that have high percentages of government employees in unions.

Clearly, members of public sector unions have a vested interest in maintaining and expanding the size and scope of government at all levels. Their livelihood and power depend on maintaining or expanding programs that in turn requires more and more expenditures. Thus, they have a strong incentive to support candidates who promote big government. Moreover, family members and/or friends of public sector union workers are likely to be sympathetic to the position of the union worker and vote the same way. And after watching the behavior of teachers' unions in Pennsylvania, it is clear that many public sector unions place the interests of their members far ahead of the public they are employed to serve.

One obvious place to explore the impact of unions is to look at their influence on presidential election voting. We would have liked to examine the impact on local elections, but it is very difficult to obtain consistent union membership data except for large metro areas and states. However, it is extremely likely that voting patterns in presidential elections will hold for local elections as well.

We obtained data on the percentage of public sector union membership (PSM) as measured by the percentage of all public workers covered by collective bargaining agreements. This data is available back to 1986. Likewise, we obtained voting results by state and party for the last four presidential elections. We compared the average vote margin in each state with the percentage of public sector union membership in each state.

Because of the traditional allegiance of union workers to the Democratic Party, our focus will be on how public sector union membership has influenced the vote margin for Democratic candidates since 1988. Rightly or wrongly, Democrat candidates are generally perceived as being more supportive of big government than Republican candidates.

The hypothesis: States with very high levels of public sector membership will produce winning margins for Democratic candidates. This is because the extent of public sector unionization is likely a close proxy for the broad philosophical leaning of the state. We concentrated on states with public sector union membership of 50 percent or higher and states with 25 percent or less. The membership ranged from a high of 72.8 percent in New York to a low of 13.5 percent in South Carolina. For all states for the four election cycles, the average public sector union membership was 39.4 percent.

There were 19 states with a public sector membership of 50 percent or more in the 1988 to 2000 period. On the whole, Democrats had winning voter margins in 16 of these states. In Rhode Island (68% PSM) and Massachusetts (61% PSM), the Democratic candidate enjoyed a combined victory margin of 20 percentage points or greater. New York, Hawaii, Illinois, and Vermont delivered combined margins of 10 percentage points or more. Only Ohio, New Hampshire, and Nevada had public sector membership of 50 percent or more yet failed to produce overall winning margins for Democratic presidential candidates.

There were 15 states with public sector membership of 25 percent or less. Thirteen of these states recorded losing margins for Democrat candidates. Over the four election cycles, Democratic candidates had positive margins in only two of these states--New Mexico and Arkansas. The latter is almost certainly due to the fact that Arkansas was the home state of President Clinton. However, the winning margin in both states was quite small (2.7 and 3.7 percentage points, respectively). Meanwhile, Democratic candidates had very large losing margins of 20 percentage points or more in Idaho (23.6% PSM) and Wyoming (23.4% PSM).

There were 16 states in the middle range with a percent public unionization of 25 to 49 percent. Democratic candidates had positive margins in 5 of these states and the District of Columbia. As a result we conclude that having a public sector union membership over 50 percent seems to be a threshold that more or less guarantees a strong Democrat edge in presidential elections.

One could argue that these voting patterns are nothing more than a reflection of party registration in the states. But that is not the case; there were high percentage public sector unionization states where Democratic affiliation comprised less than half of the registered voters where Democratic candidates did very well; states such as New York, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania. Conversely, there were states with low public sector union coverage where Democratic registration numbers were over 50 percent of registered voters, and the Democratic candidate still posted losing margins. These include Louisiana, North Carolina, and Kentucky. In short, the level of public sector union membership is a better predictor of winning vote margins for Democrat presidential candidates than party registration numbers.

So what can we conclude from these findings? Democratic presidential candidates, for the most part, do extremely well in states with high levels of public sector unionization. For one thing, they can rely on a large, built-in constituency that has a vested interest in maintaining or enlarging government, which tends to coincide with the position of most Democratic candidates. In short, there is a mutually reinforcing relationship between big government candidates and public sector unions.

Jake Haulk, Ph.D. President **Eric Montarti, Policy Analyst**

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Allegheny Institute for Public Policy
305 Mt. Lebanon Blvd.* Suite 305* Pittsburgh PA 15234
Phone (412) 440-0079 * Fax (412) 440-0085
E-mail: aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org