

Organized Labor and the Congressional Democrats: Reconsidering the 1980s

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What happened to the power of labor unions in Congress in the 1980s? For many authors, the answer is straightforward: a decline in political capacity and an ensuing exclusion from the policy-making process. Declining union representation in the workforce, economic restructuring, the decreasing credibility of liberal policies, increased business spending on campaign finance and political mobilization, greater suburbanization, the growth of Reagan Democrats among union voters, public animosity toward special interests, and, of course, Republican presidential victories: all contributed to a decisive decline in union power. Yet, important as all these factors may be, there is good reason to believe that the situation of unions in Congress during the past decade was considerably more complicated than this roster of adversity would suggest. This article argues that energetic and well-coordinated political activity by unions, combined with important changes in the institutional and political setting in Congress, actually allowed unions to offset many of these difficulties. One result was a level of influence well beyond what we would expect on the basis of the usual accounts of unalleviated union decline.

The conventional view argues that the Democratic congressional leadership turned its back on the labor movement during the 1980s. "There is no chance that Democratic elected officials in the foreseeable future will permit a declining labor movement with little public support to regain the influence and stature it had in Congress in the mid-1960s," *Washington Post* reporter Thomas Byrne Edsall insisted in 1984.¹ Similarly, University of California at Berkeley Business School Professor David Vogel argued in 1989 that "not only has union membership been declining steadily but, even more important, ties between trade unions and

¹ Thomas Byrne Edsall, *The New Politics of Inequality* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984), 174.

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the Democratic party have measurably weakened.”² Writing from the left, Mike Davis surmised in 1986 that congressional Democrats had become “increasingly reliant upon business PACs (Political Action Committees) and middle-class interest groups,” with the unsurprising consequence being a growth in influence of “young neo-liberals with scant loyalty to labor or minorities.”³ And in 1994, historian William Berman concluded that the Democrats’ improved ties with business in the mid-1980s came at the direct expense of organized labor: “As that relationship took hold, organized labor’s own bargaining position with key House Democrats changed for the worse. Benefiting politically from their contact with business lobbyists, those Democrats increasingly turned a deaf ear toward labor lobbyists.”⁴

There is much that is valuable in the above claims. It is true that unions were largely on the defensive in the 1980s, and that they found it very difficult to achieve legislative gains on their most crucial issues, although this is not exactly a new condition in American politics.⁵ Business increased its spending on politics and became more aggressive in opposing union demands.⁶ And unions seemed less and less able to effectively adjust to economic change or to articulate viable public policies in a world of heightened international competition. That which unions most wanted, such as a major reform of labor law to facilitate union organizing, they had no chance of achieving, and what they could achieve, such as a watered-down plant closing law, they barely wanted. If things were not as bad as in the 1920s, when union membership declined in absolute numbers and some unions simply faded away entirely, they were still far worse than unionists could have conceived in the 1950s or 1960s, when organized labor seemed solidly implanted in the American political and economic scene.

Still, despite all this, there is another side to the story of union political involvement in the 1980s that has received much less attention. This other side is hinted at in the words of *Washington Post* journalist, David Broder, writing two years after the Democrats recaptured the Senate in 1986: “In a time of declining membership and presumably reduced political clout, organized labor has defended and perhaps improved its place as the premier lobbying-political force in Congress, with a score of notable legislative victories in the last two years.”⁷ Similarly, *National Journal* noted in 1988: “A funny thing has happened

² David Vogel, *Fluctuating Fortunes: The Political Power of Business in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 293.

³ Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream* (London: Verso, 1986), 289, 292.

⁴ William C. Berman, *America’s Right Turn: From Nixon to Bush* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 117.

⁵ For the historical limits on union political power, see Christopher L. Tomlins, *The State and the Unions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and Robert H. Zieger, *American Workers, American Unions 1920–1985* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1986).

⁶ See David Plotke, “The Political Mobilization of Business” in Mark Petracca, ed., *The Politics of Interests: Interest Groups Transformed* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), 175–198.

⁷ Quoted in David Broder, “Renaissance of Labor’s Power,” *Washington Post*, 19 August 1988.

on the way to the close of the 100th Congress. The agenda of organized labor, consigned to the backseat since the start of the Reagan administration, has suddenly emerged in the driver's seat."⁸ Three scholars of industrial relations also concluded in 1989: "... the labor-Democratic party alliance has remained strong."⁹ This other story seemed to be distinguished by union involvement in setting the agenda of Congress, by close ties between the Democratic congressional leadership and union lobbyists, by the passage of several union-supported initiatives, and by union success in fending off Republican attacks on pro-labor policies.

How can we reconcile these divergent views of the role of unions in Congress in the 1980s? Part of the answer can be found in the periods chosen for analysis. Those who emphasize the first half of the decade, especially prior to the Democratic regaining of a Senate majority in 1986, see mainly labor weakness. Those who examine the period after 1986 see a real if nevertheless limited labor revival. But another part of the answer must be found in a greater awareness of the role of institutional structure and change in American politics and policy. A distinctive institutional configuration came into place after 1986 that benefited the labor movement considerably. At this time, the AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations) achieved a heightened degree of internal unity, leading to an improved capacity to bargain on the part of its top leadership. At the same time, newly selected Speaker Jim Wright concentrated power into his own hands in the House of Representatives, taking advantage of the previously unrealized potential of the congressional reforms of the previous decade. These two centralizations provided the basis for a level of cooperation between labor and the Democratic leadership that few would have expected given our received ideas about the role of unions during the 1980s. A different configuration, such as a highly divided labor movement and a more fragmented congressional environment, might have produced a very different outcome even if the labor movement possessed the same aggregate resources, and the Democrats held the same number of seats. In this sense, it is in politics—in the distinctively political interplay between institutions and resources—that an important part of the explanation for the limits and possibilities of labor union power can be found.

LABOR AND THE DEMOCRATIC LEADERSHIP

The conventional wisdom cited above argued for the diminished force of organized labor among congressional Democrats in the first half of the 1980s and used that analysis to generalize about the entire decade. But given the extraordinary conditions after the 1980 elections—the thorough political repudiation of the previous Democratic administration, a major Republican victory in the presiden-

⁸ Richard E. Cohen, "Labor Comes Alive," *National Journal*, 16 July 1988.

⁹ Marick F. Masters, Robert S. Aktin, John Thomas Delaney, "Unions, Political Action, and Public Policies: A Review of the Past Decade," *Policy Studies Journal* 18 (Winter 1989-90): 479.

tial election, Republican control over the Senate for the first time since 1954, the defeat of prominent liberal Democratic senators, and a gain of thirty-five Republican seats in the House—it does not seem reasonable to use events at this time as the sole basis for identifying the enduring features of labor’s role within Congress and the Democratic party. The defection of conservative southern Democrats (the so-called Boll Weevils) on key votes in the House of Representatives, as well as the fact of a GOP-controlled Senate (also with its share of Democratic voting defections), meant that liberal, pro-labor Democrats had little basis for effective resistance. Enactment of the central elements of the Reagan budget and tax cuts in 1981 would be very difficult to prevent. Thus, in the years immediately after 1980 there plainly would be little opportunity for movement on the issues dear to the hearts of labor unionists and their liberal congressional allies. Moreover, with the labor movement battered by defeats in collective bargaining, the movement of plants overseas, rising international competition, and the Reagan administration’s successful attack on the air traffic controllers union, unions were clearly in no position to mobilize effectively their own members as a disruptive force capable of pushing an alternative agenda.

In contrast, the latter half of the 1980s provides a different angle on the relationship between labor and the congressional Democrats, because it was only at this time that the Democrats were really able to go on the offensive against the Reagan administration, and to articulate their own distinct agenda. If unions were to advance parts of their own program, it could only be in the context of a resurgent Democratic party. The 100th Congress provided this context, when the Democrats regained control of the Senate, enlarged their majority in the House of Representatives, and sought to put the Republicans on the defensive in anticipation of the 1988 presidential elections. Thus, if the early 1980s present a picture of unions operating at the nadir of their congressional influence, the later 1980s show unions at work in a considerably more auspicious environment.

Labor’s capacity to take advantage of this opportunity would depend to a large degree on the kind of relationship that union leaders and lobbyists maintained with the Democratic leadership in the House and Senate. For this reason, the consolidation of a close alliance with the House leadership during the brief tenure of Speaker Jim Wright merits close attention. Despite the tendencies toward decentralization inherent in the congressional reforms of the mid-1970s, latent within the rules was the possibility for an ambitious Speaker, under the appropriate conditions, to consolidate power and play a leadership role not seen within Congress for decades.¹⁰ It fell to Jim Wright (D-TX) to see these opportunities, and to take them. Elected as the new Speaker in January 1987, Wright sought, with the assistance of Majority Leader Thomas Foley (D-WA) and Whip Tony Coelho (D-CA) to formulate a more coherent Democratic party agenda. The growing unity of House Democrats, primarily due to the increased liberalization of

¹⁰ For further discussion, see David W. Rohde, *Parties and Leaders in the Postreform House* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 105–119.

Southern Democrats and the subsequent relaxation of internal party antagonism, suggested that the Democratic caucus would be ready for a stronger brand of party leadership. Wright was ready and willing to provide it.

Wright described his legislative ambitions bluntly: "Reagan was the counter-revolution. I wanted to get the revolution going again."¹¹ The Speaker considered himself "a populist and an egalitarian," who retained a New Deal commitment to an active governmental role in shaping economic development and providing a wide array of social services. While Wright's much publicized ties to oil interests and the savings and loan industry would appear to contradict such beliefs, such contradictions were certainly not unheard of in the Texas brand of New Deal politics. Much like the other Texan who inhabited the White House during the 1960s, Wright saw no necessary conflict between his efforts to maintain business support, while at the same time cultivating labor in an effort to pass liberal legislation. Wright was trying to utilize the enhanced powers of the Speaker's office in order to rebuild the broad, inclusive alliance that had characterized the New Deal Democratic party. He thus came into the Speaker's office with a larger conception of his role and a more aggressive commitment to a legislative agenda than had any of his immediate predecessors. "The House should develop a program of action . . . rather than leaving the making of policy to a fragmented group of 21 standing committees without any cohesion," Wright proclaimed. "There has to be a sense of coordinated policy, a cohesive pattern to what the institution does."¹²

Precisely because of this intent to advance a cohesive Democratic legislative agenda, Wright sought to coordinate and deepen the existing ties between the House leadership apparatus and the labor movement. *Congressional Quarterly* noted: "Wright decided, when he took over the top leadership post, that operational changes were needed in how Democrats and labor dealt with issues of mutual interest."¹³ Speaker Tip O'Neill had previously designated deputy whip, Representative Pat Williams (D-MT), as the labor whip, in order to have an ongoing point of contact between the House whip operation and the labor lobbyists. Wright sought to further improve the quality of this relationship, encouraging closer coordination between union lobbyists and the highest levels of the House leadership. Representative Williams commented: "The Speaker wondered if we could develop a system for more order in the way in which we brought legislation to the floor. He also wanted to make sure that the legislation would pass when it reached the floor."¹⁴ The goal was to reach a consensus between the leadership

¹¹ Quoted in John M. Barry, *The Ambition and the Power* (New York: Viking, 1989), 656.

¹² Quoted in Janet Hook, "Speaker Jim Wright Takes Charge in the House," *Congressional Quarterly*, 11 July 1987.

¹³ Richard E. Cohen, "Labor Comes Alive," *National Journal*, 16 July 1988. For earlier ties, see Barbara Sinclair, *Majority Leadership in the U.S. House* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 122-126.

¹⁴ Cohen, "Labor Comes Alive."

and the labor movement on a set of bills and to closely coordinate their lobbying activities in order to ensure passage.¹⁵

The possibilities for leadership/labor coordination were also enhanced by changes in the AFL-CIO's own lobbying operation. Shortly before Wright's selection as House Speaker, the AFL-CIO selected a new director of legislation, Robert M. McGlotten, an African-American who had been a lobbyist with the federation since 1974. McGlotten had a reputation as a flexible and highly skilled lobbyist. He replaced Ray Denison, who had served as director of legislation since former director Andrew Biemiller's retirement in 1980, and whom many on the Hill felt had not lived up to the performance of his predecessor. The federation also selected as its new associate lobbying director, Peggy Taylor, a former congressional staffer with seven years experience as a union lobbyist. Thus, the AFL-CIO now had an African-American and a woman in its two top lobbying positions—a marked departure from earlier patterns of white male dominance, and a change that would help the federation in its alliances with other members of the liberal coalition.

In keeping with the deeper alliance constructed with the House Democratic leadership, McGlotten sought to enhance the capacity of the labor movement to coordinate and prioritize its legislative activities on Capitol Hill.¹⁶ This task was especially necessary because of the greater involvement of a wide range of national unions in Washington lobbying, in comparison to the 1960s, and the subsequent need to avoid a chaotic fragmentation of union political demands. The primary means for reaching consensus on a delimited set of legislative goals was a meeting every Monday afternoon of the most important union lobbyists. This meeting was the principal site for the forging of compromises on the set of issues which would be given priority in the federation's negotiations with the House and Senate leadership. The goal in such meetings was to maintain agreement by making sure that the principal factions of the labor movement each had at least one key issue on the list of the top five or six federation-endorsed issues. This afternoon meeting was supplemented by a larger gathering every Monday morning of the entire community of lobbyists from AFL-CIO affiliated unions. The Monday morning meeting was largely devoted to tactical issues, the dispersal of information, and the distribution of lobbying assignments. A key result of these ongoing meetings was that McGlotten could maintain the support and confidence of the community of labor lobbyists and was, therefore, in a good position to bargain on behalf of the labor movement as a whole in his interaction with party leaders.

The effectiveness of the federation was also enhanced by the subsidence of the ideological and strategic conflicts among national unions, and between some

¹⁵ Interview by author with Tom Nides, House Speaker's leadership staff, 17 May 1990.

¹⁶ The information that follows is based on interviews by the author with Peggy Taylor, associate director of the AFL-CIO Department of Legislation, 30 November 1989; Robert McGlotten, director of the AFL-CIO Department of Legislation, 19 January 1990; and Geri Palast, director of Politics and Legislation, Service Employees International Union, 21 March 1990.

national unions and the federation itself, which had disrupted labor unity in the past.¹⁷ Many of the same kinds of conflicts—over foreign policy, the direction of social change, and internal decision-making procedures—that had torn apart the Democratic party in the late 1960s also produced major ruptures within the labor movement. Dissatisfied with the AFL-CIO's more conservative political direction, the United Auto Workers (UAW) chose to leave the federation in 1968 in order to pursue a more independent political and legislative strategy.¹⁸ Likewise, other important unions, such as the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, the International Association of Machinists, and the Communication Workers of America, also grew dissatisfied with the direction of the federation under the leadership of AFL-CIO President George Meany. By 1976, these unions and six others had gone so far as to formally organize their own coalition to participate separately from the AFL-CIO in national politics. But with the accession of Lane Kirkland to the AFL-CIO presidency following Meany's death in 1979, and with other personnel changes in the AFL-CIO's top staff, opportunities arose again for greater labor unity. Kirkland's more conciliatory and tolerant brand of leadership soon prompted the return of the UAW to the federation in 1981, and his commitment to a more active role within the Democratic party similarly satisfied those unions that had grown unhappy with the federation's political strategy. Finally, in 1987 the Teamsters union, expelled from the AFL-CIO twenty years earlier for corruption, was allowed to rejoin, and in 1989 even the long-independent United Mine Workers returned to the fold. Thus the labor movement by the late 1980s was more organizationally unified than it had been in decades.

With bargaining capacity increasingly concentrated both within the labor movement and within the House, a relationship of close cooperation could be forged between the AFL-CIO and the party leadership. As reporter John M. Barry noted in his rich account of Wright's tenure as Speaker (based on day-to-day access to the leadership and to key meetings in the House), an informal "deal" was struck between the leadership and labor: "cooperation for cooperation."¹⁹ Labor would agree to coordinate its own agenda and strategy with that of the leadership, thereby creating a consensus around a common set of legislative priorities. Labor would deploy its lobbying apparatus in support of not only "labor bills," but also in support of the broader range of issues that the leadership sought to advance. In return, the leadership would agree to bring labor's favored bills to the floor expeditiously and with the full support of the Democratic leadership and whip operation.

While the latter form of assistance might seem to be little more than a case of the leadership carrying out its formal duties, it usually involved running up

¹⁷ See Andrew Battista, "Political Divisions in Organized Labor, 1968–1988," *Polity* 14 (Winter 1991).

¹⁸ John Barnard, *Walter Reuther and the Rise of the Auto Workers* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1983), 195–198.

¹⁹ Barry, *The Ambition and the Power*.

against the opposition of conservative and moderate Democrats who considered floor votes on controversial, labor-supported legislation an electoral liability. For example, Representative Timothy Penny (D-MN) complained in 1988:

I think the leadership is pushing the labor agenda mostly because of the long-term relationship between the party and labor leaders. . . . We ought to be less confrontational and invite bipartisanship. I don't know why we are so unwilling to look for alternatives to achieve the same objectives with less controversy.²⁰

Another Democratic member commented:

Why do we have to keep voting on these things that have no chance of becoming law? Reagan is certain to veto it, even if the Senate ever gets off its ass and voted on it. Members are grumbling. Very few have the guts to confront the leadership, but there's resentment out there on the floor.²¹

Wright had effectively centralized power and was now using it to push a liberal agenda, including labor bills, over the wishes of many rank-and-file members who sought to avoid these controversial votes.

The closeness of the labor/leadership interaction is further illustrated in the informal, daily contacts between Wright's key staff members and McGlotten and other labor lobbyists.²² These contacts were so extensive that the community of labor lobbyists became, in effect, an arm of the Democratic leadership. Most interesting was the willingness of the leadership to share what was considered secret information with union lobbyists. The whip apparatus regularly prepared confidential, internal counts of where Democratic members stood on impending floor votes. Although this information was given to the whips by members with the expectation that it would not be distributed even to other members, much less to outside interest groups, the leadership was willing to share this information with the AFL-CIO. As Barry observed: "Internal whip counts were very sensitive; what a member told another member was confidential, and no one in the whip organization would share a member's name with a lobbyist. But they would tell McGlotten."²³ It became a regular practice early on in the 100th Congress for the whip operation to share these counts with the top AFL-CIO lobbyists, who could then coordinate a lobbying campaign to pressure members who were not voting "correctly." The leadership also regularly sought to enlist the support of labor for a broad range of issues on the Democratic agenda, from taxes to highway projects to trade legislation.

In the Senate, the situation was different in ways that reflected the basic differences between the two chambers. The party leadership in the Senate had fewer tools for exercising power, and neither Majority Leader Robert Byrd (VA)

²⁰ Quoted in Cohen, "Labor Comes Alive."

²¹ Quoted in Barry, *The Ambition and the Power*, 409.

²² This section is based on interviews with Tom Nides, House Speaker's leadership staff, 17 May 1990, and Jon Weintraub, administrative assistant to Representative Pat Williams, 30 January 1990.

²³ Barry, *The Ambition and the Power*, 273.

nor, after 1989, Majority Leader George Mitchell (ME), could achieve a concentration of bargaining capacity comparable to that achieved in the House. The changes of the 1970s had decentralized power in the Senate, just as they had in the House, but there were few new provisions for a more centralized party leadership. Majority Leader Bird's role during the 100th Congress was especially weak, with Byrd making little effort to exert policy leadership. Majority Leader Mitchell did, however, take on a more aggressive role during the 101st Congress, endorsing a domestic policy agenda almost identical to that advocated by union leaders.

Union lobbyists were not as crucial in the Senate as in the House, partly because of the greater representation of rural states in the upper body and partly because there was not as strong a leadership organization to serve as an ally. Thus, although McGlotten and other union leaders had systematic access to Mitchell, there was no equivalent whip operation for the labor unions to work with. The key facts in the Senate were that the leadership was weaker, party unity was diminished, and the filibuster increased the powers of a (usually Southern) minority to obstruct legislation. Union lobbyists could work closely with the leadership, but there would not be the kind of integral cooperation that had developed in the House.

THE RESOURCES OF ORGANIZED LABOR

What did labor have to exchange with the House leadership, and what made such a close alliance attractive to Speaker Wright and his allies? Contrary to popular perceptions, unions still controlled valuable resources. First, labor unions maintained an elaborate lobbying network in Washington, one which expanded in the 1980s as individual national unions developed their own political capacities.²⁴ This community of labor lobbyists included a number of individuals (including the AFL-CIO's McGlotten) with many years of experience in Washington and impressive reputations as knowledgeable and skillful players in the legislative process. Many of these lobbyists had developed long and trusting relationships with the leaders of the Senate and House labor committees, with other key committee leaders, and with the principal figures in the Senate and House party leadership. The activity of these lobbyists was, moreover, backed up by well funded research departments at the AFL-CIO headquarters and in many national unions—departments which provided the union lobbyists with coherent and well researched arguments in support of the unions' policy demands.

In addition, during the 1980s the AFL-CIO and the national unions expanded their capacity to engage in so-called grassroots lobbying. It has often and correctly been stated that the labor lobbyists of the 1960s and the 1970s were more proficient at insider, elite-oriented bargaining than they were at mobilizing their own mem-

²⁴ Marick F. Masters and Asghar Zardkoohi, "Labor Unions and the U.S. Congress: PAC Allocations and Legislative Voting," *Advances in Industrial and Labor Relations* 4 (1987): 80–83.

bership to pressure Congress.²⁵ Grassroots lobbying was not as common nor as necessary in the more hierarchical Congress of the past, and labor lobbyists therefore did not put much effort into establishing the institutional capacity to flood members' offices with letters or postcards, although they were not without some capabilities in this area. Labor "got used to a Washington-based, backdoor operation," noted the chief lobbyist of the National Education Association (NEA).²⁶ Union leaders were also unaccustomed to using mass communications to contact and mobilize their members, a strategy which potentially posed risks as well to the maintenance of the leadership's own internal power position. One political consultant observed: "Most union leaders are elected at a convention made up of a few thousand local union officers. In their experience rising to power, they do not need to use mass communications."²⁷

Despite these problems, unions spent considerable time and money during the 1980s setting up new forms of linkage to congressional districts and new capacities to generate pressure at the district level on individual members.²⁸ The AFL-CIO alone spent over \$400,000 a year in the late 1980s on grassroots lobbying. Federation President Lane Kirkland wrote:

In 1987 the AFL-CIO used an arsenal of grassroots weapons to build constituent pressure—Legislative Action Committees [LACs] in targeted districts, state federation teleconference strategy sessions with key members of Congress, mailgram campaigns, postcard and letter-writing efforts, face-to-face meetings with "swing vote" lawmakers, direct mail and phone bank outreach, call-in campaigns aimed at the local offices of federal legislators, plant gate handbilling, video technology and media support tactics.²⁹

As one recent study based on interviews with union lobbyists concludes, ". . . labor lobbyists feel that LACs have been enormously helpful in getting legislation passed, more helpful than any device that the AFL-CIO has used in recent years."³⁰

These resources took on an added importance because of the approach that unions took to lobbying. Unlike most interest groups in Washington, unions are active on an extraordinarily wide range of issues, including not only most domestic policy issues, but also many foreign policy issues. Partially because of this breadth of concern, labor lobbyists are not as committed to a single issue and, therefore, a single vote as are many other interest groups. Union leaders and lobbyists are

²⁵ See Paul Starobin, "Unions Turn to Grass Roots To Rebuild Hill Clout," *Congressional Quarterly*, 2 September 1989.

²⁶ Quoted in Bill Keller, "Once a Washington Power, Labor Now Plays Catch-Up in Lobbying and Politics," *Congressional Quarterly*, 4 September 1982.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Interview by author with Mike Gildea, AFL-CIO Department of Legislation, 28 September 1989.

²⁹ Lane Kirkland, *Report on Congress 1987* (Washington, DC: AFL-CIO Department of Legislation, 1988).

³⁰ William Form, *Segmented Labor, Fractured Politics: Labor Politics in American Life* (New York: Plenum Press, 1995), 303.

also practiced at aggregating a wide range of interests internal to their organizations. This leads them to be both more accepting of compromise in the legislative process and more willing to work on issues that are not their first priority.

Most unions also maintained a commitment to the long-term health of the Democratic party. As J. David Greenstone noted in his analysis of AFL-CIO political involvement in the 1960s, unions identify with the party as an institution.³¹ Most labor leaders believe that unions will not be able to have much influence within American politics unless the Democratic party does well. They are, therefore, willing both to subordinate their immediate interests to enlarge their definition of labor's issues in order to enhance the prospects for the party. These factors made labor a more useful force for the Democratic congressional leadership than the fragmented and specialized groups that otherwise populate the interest-group universe in Washington. Also, another distinct advantage for organized labor was its long-term commitment to lobbying. As Andrew Biemiller, the AFL-CIO legislative director in the 1960s and 1970s, once said: "You know, the real secret of labor lobbying is that we never give up. If we are defeated in one Congress, we just come back in the next Congress."³²

Finally, unions remained major financial investors in congressional elections, despite a deterioration in labor's overall position in campaign finance since the 1970s. Much has been made, and rightly so, of the large increases in the number of corporate PACs and the subsequent rise in corporate campaign contributions in the 1970s and 1980s. Federal Election Commission (FEC) reports indicate that in congressional campaigns over this period, union PACs were easily outspent by corporate and trade association PACs.³³ In 1987–1988, labor PACs spent \$34.9 million in congressional elections, while corporate PACs spent \$54.4 million, and trade association PACs spent \$40.9 million. Moreover, from 1977–1978 to 1987–1988, corporate PAC donations in congressional races rose more than 465 percent, and trade association PAC contributions rose nearly 259 percent, while total labor PAC contributions grew only 242 percent. As David Sousa has demonstrated in recent research, labor's percentage of the PAC donations to all Democratic congressional candidates shrunk from 52.8 percent in 1975–1976 to 34.7 percent in 1987–1988.³⁴ Furthermore, Sousa shows that labor's percentage of the PAC contributions to Democratic House incumbents declined from 43.2 percent in 1977–1978 to 31.3 percent in 1987–1988, and the same figure for

³¹ J. David Greenstone, *Labor in American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 357.

³² Andrew J. Biemiller, "Reflections on the People's Lobby," *AFL-CIO American Federationist*, January 1979, 17.

³³ The following figures are drawn from Marick F. Masters, Robert S. Atkin, and John Thomas Delaney, "Unions, Political Action, and Public Policies: A Review of the Past Decade," *Policy Studies Journal* 18 (Winter 1989–90).

³⁴ David J. Sousa, "Union Politics in an Era of Decline" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1991), 107.

TABLE 1

Aggregate Union PAC Activity, 1977–1978–1987–1988 Election Cycles
(Revenues are in \$1,000s)

<i>Election Cycle</i>	<i>No. of Unions with PACs</i>	<i>Number of Union PACs</i>	<i>Union PAC Revenues</i>	<i>Union PAC Contributions</i>	<i>PAC Revenue per Member</i>
1977–78	72	280	\$19,563	\$10,321	\$.86
1979–80	80	331	\$25,677	\$14,213	\$1.15
1981–82	78	415	\$37,474	\$20,916	\$1.90
1983–84	83	371	\$51,133	\$26,206	\$2.95
1985–86	82	418	\$65,311	\$31,004	\$3.85
1987–88	N/A	401	\$75,966	\$35,547	\$4.47

Note: Union PAC contributions are donations made to presidential and congressional candidates during the two-year cycle.

Source: Delaney and Masters, "Unions and Political Action." Original source was Federal Election Commission reports.

Democratic Senate incumbents took an even more precipitous decline, from 47.6 percent in 1977–1978 to a meager 18.8 percent in 1987–1988.³⁵

Important as these developments may be, however, the notion that unions completely lost their clout in campaign finance is seriously misleading.³⁶ Indeed, many political operatives and members of Congress are convinced that union political money was a more important resource for unions than their members' voting behavior.³⁷ In some ways, unions stabilized their position in campaign finance during the 1980s. Between the 1977–1978 and 1987–1988 election cycles, for example, unions increased their total PAC contributions in federal races from \$10,321,000 to \$35,547,000 and their per capita revenue per member rose from \$.86 to \$4.47 (see Table 1).³⁸ If total PAC revenues (not just congressional campaign contributions) are taken as the key unit of analysis, FEC data show that unions have maintained a fairly constant share of total PAC receipts during the 1980s.³⁹ In 1977–1978, labor PAC receipts were 24.5 percent of the total; in 1983–1984, they had sunk to 17.7 percent of the total; but, by 1987–1988, they were up to 20.6 percent. Over this same period, corporate PAC receipts rose from 21.8 percent of the total to 26.1 percent. While this was surely a negative change for labor, it hardly represents a collapse of union financial power.

³⁵ Ibid., 108.

³⁶ For a detailed quantitative analysis that shows this, see Gregory M. Saltzman, "Congressional Voting on Labor Issues: The Role of PACs," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 40 (January 1987).

³⁷ This conclusion is based on numerous interviews with union lobbyists, members of Congress, and congressional staffers in Fall 1990.

³⁸ John T. Delaney and Marick F. Masters, "Unions and Political Action" in George Strauss, Daniel G. Gallagher, and Jack Fiorito, eds., *The State of the Unions* (Madison, WI: Industrial Relations Research Association, 1991).

³⁹ Sousa, "Union Politics in an Era of Decline," 97.

Part of the reason for the resiliency of unions in campaign finance was that the use of a payroll check-off system allowed many unions, even some with declining memberships, successfully to increase the size of their PACs.⁴⁰

Moreover, the amount of union money spent on congressional campaigns is definitely not fully captured by FEC records of campaign contributions from union PACs. Much to the chagrin of Republicans, unions are clearly effective in deploying soft money – funds that are spent on nonpartisan internal communications, voter registration, and political education, and which, therefore, do not have to be reported as contributions under the Federal Election Campaign Act. Although estimates of the amount of actual spending remain hazy, there is little doubt that unions spend many millions of dollars on such activities.⁴¹

Union money is also directed to a disproportionate degree to Democratic challengers and to Democratic incumbents facing strong opposition. Because unions have a broad agenda, they clearly pursue a more partisan and ideological orientation in campaign giving, rather than the access or special-interest strategy more characteristic of corporate or trade PACs.⁴² In 1987–1988, for example, 92 percent of union PAC contributions went to Democrats, and although 64 percent of union PAC money went to incumbents, 21 percent also went to challengers and 14.8 percent to open seat races.⁴³ This can be compared to corporate PACs, which gave only 53 percent of their contributions to the Democrats in 1987–1988 and gave 90 percent of their contributions to incumbents. Likewise, trade, membership, and health PACs granted 82 percent of their contributions to incumbents.⁴⁴ These patterns of giving meant that even in 1987–1988, Democratic House challengers received 64.3 percent of their PAC contributions from unions, and Senate challengers received 46.0 percent of their PAC dollars from unions. In addition, much of the union money for Democratic challengers came very early in the campaign, helping to bolster a candidate when they needed it most and thereby establishing a good relationship between labor and the candidate early on. On the whole, these investments ensured that a large number of members of Congress felt that they owed at least something to labor – which in turn guaranteed union lobbyists access, which could be utilized not only to promote their own issues, but also those supported by the party leadership. In short, labor donated its money in a strategically effective manner that ensured that unions

⁴⁰ See Charles R. Babcock, “Pumping Up PACs With Payroll Deductions,” *Washington Post*, 7 November 1989.

⁴¹ See Chuck Alston, “Republicans Seek To Reduce Labor’s Clout at the Polls,” *Congressional Quarterly*, 31 March 1990; James T. Bennett, “Private Sector Unions: The Myth of Decline,” *Journal of Labor Research* 12 (Winter 1991); and Larry Sabato, *PAC Power: Inside the World of Political Action Committees* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985), 14–15.

⁴² Saltzman, “Congressional Voting on Labor Issues,” 175.

⁴³ Masters, Atkin, and Delaney, “Unions, Political Action, and Public Policies: A Review of the Past Decade.”

⁴⁴ M. Margaret Conway, “PACs in the Political Process” in Allan Cigler and Burdett Loomis, eds., *Interest Group Politics* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, 1991).

remained important in congressional campaign finance, despite a relative decline in total union giving compared with business PACs.

Also of considerable importance, especially from the viewpoint of the party leadership, was the fact that union money flowed in large amounts to such Democratic party institutions as the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC), Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, and the Democratic National Committee (DNC).⁴⁵ Unions also provided major funding in the late 1980s for the DNC's Project 500, an effort to boost Democratic strength at the state level in order to control the state legislatures that would be engaged in congressional redistricting following the 1990 census. These union contributions to party institutions helped the party leadership as it tried to gain greater control over the rank-and-file member of Congress. As California Representative Tony Coelho demonstrated during his tenure as chair of the DCCC, accumulated funds can be usefully deployed to individual members to create political debts to the leadership that may be long remembered. Coelho, in turn, and despite his extensive ties to business, felt obligated to organized labor and strongly supported union efforts to secure plant closing legislation, trade protection, and legislation protecting construction unions from non-union competition.⁴⁶

In addition to support in campaign finance and lobbying, unions also sought to deliver the votes of their members and their families in congressional elections. Although we cannot explore here all the complexities of measuring union electoral power, suffice it to say that there is abundant evidence that unions have not, contrary to the conventional wisdom, suffered a rupture in their influence at the polls.⁴⁷ Again, David Sousa's work on union voting behavior is especially instructive. Working with the American National Election Studies and using a probit model, Sousa shows that through the 1980s union members voted disproportionately for Democrats in House elections, that union voters were much less likely to split their tickets by voting for Democrats for Congress and Republicans for president and that unions were especially successful in keeping their white and middle-income members from defecting from the Democratic fold.⁴⁸ Sousa explicitly concludes: "The suggestion that there are droves of 'Reagan Democrats' in labor unions and labor union households is simply wrong."⁴⁹

These findings for the 1980s are further supported by evidence showing the persistence of a major union voting effect into the 1990s. According to the AFL-

⁴⁵ David B. Magleby and Candice J. Nelson, *The Money Chase: Congressional Campaign Finance Reform* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1990), 85.

⁴⁶ Brooks Jackson, *Honest Graft* (Washington, DC: Farragut, 1990), 156-159.

⁴⁷ See John Thomas Delaney, Marick F. Masters, and Susan Schwochau, "Union Membership and Voting for COPE-Endorsed Candidates," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 43 (July 1990): 621-635; Michael H. LeRoy, "The 1988 Elections: Re-emergence of the Bloc Vote?" *Labor Studies Journal* 15 (Spring 1990): 5-32.

⁴⁸ Sousa, "Union Politics in an Era of Decline," 283.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, and David J. Sousa, "Organized Labor in the Electorate, 1960-1988," *Political Research Quarterly* 46 (December 1993): 744-745.

CIO, exit polls indicate that even in the critical 1994 congressional elections, as the Democratic party collapsed around the nation, union members voted for Democratic candidates by a 61 percent to a 39 percent margin.⁵⁰ With only 49 percent of the general public voting for the Democrats, the union differential was a full 12 percentage points. Figures such as these suggest that many Democratic members of Congress remain significantly dependent on union voters and that this dependence may grow as other constituencies move toward the GOP in congressional elections.

In summary, labor unions retained sufficient financial and organizational, and, to a more limited extent, electoral resources to be able to engage in effective bargaining with the Democratic leadership and many members of Congress. Union lobbyists were available to help the leadership in lobbying recalcitrant members, especially those members who felt loyal to unions and/or beholden to them for votes and money. Barry has described the resulting mentality of members of the House toward labor (and business): "Members did not like making enemies of either organized labor or the business community. *Those people would raise money against you. Hell, they'd even run somebody against you.*"⁵¹ It is on the basis of considerations such as these that labor unions, like their business opponents, maintained access on a systematic basis to key congressional players.

Lastly, the labor movement's role was also enhanced by the slow process of the nationalization of the congressional Democratic party. By all accounts, those southern Democrats who have remained Democrats have faced increasing incentives since the 1960s to become more liberal, not more conservative. The key causal factor at work here has been the entry of African-American voters into the political arena and especially their role, along with teachers and other union members, in southern Democratic primaries. These developments have led to an increased homogenization of the Democratic party in Congress as southern conservative Democrats have been displaced by Republicans or by liberal Democrats. This realignment of the South along lines more in keeping with the national Democratic party at least partially diminished the role of anti-union southerners within the congressional party, especially in the House.⁵² The party leadership could now act more forcefully on liberal issues and thus serve as a more reliable ally for organized labor.

WHAT DID LABOR GAIN?

To what degree did unions actually advance any of their policy goals as a result of the alliance with the Democratic leadership, and what did those goals consist

⁵⁰ *Executive Council Report to the AFL-CIO Convention 1995* (Washington, DC: AFL-CIO, 1995), 47.

⁵¹ Barry, *The Ambition and the Power*, 280. (Emphasis in original.)

⁵² Macon Morehouse, "Conservative Coalition: Still Alive, but Barely," *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, 19 November 1988; and William J. Keefe, *Parties, Politics, and Public Policy in America* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, 1991), 258-263.

of? Of course, labor's capacity to actually achieve enactment of its agenda was sharply limited by Republican control of the presidency. Still, we can identify several areas where the labor/leadership alliance succeeded in setting the terms of debate and even enacted legislation over presidential opposition.

During the 100th Congress, the most notable example of the labor movement securing valuable leadership support could be found in the evolution of the advance notification or plant closing, legislation passed into law in June 1988. This legislation required sixty-days advance notification to employees before a layoff or plant closing involving fifty or more workers. The bill was strongly opposed by business lobbyists, who viewed it as the first step toward a series of new labor standards mandating severance pay, health benefits, and family and medical leave. A spokesperson for the National Association of Manufacturers declared: "This is the biggest labor-management battle of the year, absolutely. This is the very beginning. If they get notice now, they'll come back with consultation and information disclosure. Instead of creating jobs, it's going to reduce the ability of companies to create jobs. What we're going to here is the Europeanization of our economy."⁵³ Although the final bill was not as far-reaching as the early proposals endorsed by union lobbyists (which had mandated that employers engage in "good-faith" consultation with union representatives), its passage was still a victory for the labor movement over business opposition. As one labor lawyer observed, the new law constituted "an initial encroachment into the manner and timing of management actions to make important business changes."⁵⁴

Originally attached to the 1988 omnibus trade bill, the advance notice proposal was strongly opposed by President Reagan, who vetoed the entire trade bill on 24 May 1988 rather than allow the measure's enactment. The Democratic leadership then chose to promote a freestanding plant closing bill, which passed in both chambers by veto-proof margins and became law without the signature of President Reagan. Although many members of Congress originally viewed the bill as another example of an inside deal between the leadership and labor that had little resonance with the general public, opinion polls showed the provision for advance notice of plant closings to be quite popular, securing nearly 80 percent approval ratings. Union lobbyists also launched a major grassroots campaign in support of the bill, and they viewed its eventual passage as proof that unions could mobilize at the district level in order to influence the course of congressional action. But despite the bill's evident popularity and potential as a 1988 election issue, it is certainly questionable whether labor could have encouraged timid members to vote on the measure at all without the strong support of the House and Senate party leaderships.

⁵³ Quoted in Jonathan Rauch, "Plant Closing Law's Political Dynamics," *National Journal*, 15 August 1987.

⁵⁴ Peter A. Susser, "Election-Year Politics and the Enactment of Federal 'Plant-Closing' Legislation," *Employee Relations Law Journal* 14 (Winter 1988): 356.

Union lobbyists also worked closely with the House and Senate leaderships on several other important issues during the 100th Congress. Early in 1987, when the House leadership sought to override President Reagan's veto of a highway construction reauthorization bill, union lobbyists were mobilized to help secure the necessary two-thirds majority. Speaker Wright hoped to secure an early veto override in order to establish the strength of the Democratic Congress vis-à-vis President Reagan. Wright met with the AFL-CIO's Robert McGlotten; Owen Bieber, president of the United Auto Workers; and Thomas Donahue, secretary-treasurer of the AFL-CIO. In return for his promise of support for their views on trade issues, Wright obtained the unionists' support for the highway bill override effort.⁵⁵ Based on his day-to-day access to Wright, Barry describes the Speaker's dialogue with the union leaders:

Wright told them he did support their position [on trade], then added, "Now let me ask you something. This highway veto, it's a high-stakes roll of the dice. And auto people ought to be interested. The Building Trades. It's very important. The Republicans figure this will create a Reagan resurgence."

The highway bill was not an AFL-CIO priority—at least it had not been—but McGlotten replied, "I'll get right on it."⁵⁶

A better example of the symbiotic nature of the labor/leadership exchange, wherein each side traded support for their key issues, would be hard to find.

In return for such assistance, Wright not only promoted the plant-closing bill, but also supported labor's views on the 1988 Trade Act, including support for the so-called Gephardt amendment. The amendment was Missouri Representative Richard Gephardt's effort to impose tougher penalties for unfair trade practices by requiring countries with consistent trade surpluses with the United States to reduce those surpluses by 10 percent a year. The amendment was a key issue for the AFL-CIO and especially for the manufacturing unions suffering membership losses as their industries contracted in the face of foreign competition. Although the Gephardt amendment narrowly passed the House with the support of organized labor, the leadership apparatus, and some sectors of the business community, it did not win approval in the Senate. Despite this, union leaders were pleased to see the final trade bill contain a number of provisions that the AFL-CIO had specifically endorsed, including: a provision defining the abuse of workers' rights abroad as an unfair trade practice; the allocation of funds for a dislocated worker retraining program; and an extension of the existing trade adjustment program. Lane Kirkland said that the bill had "at long last targeted habitual unfair trade practices by our foreign competitors and set sanctions against them."⁵⁷

Other bills where labor and the leadership worked together to achieve successful enactment during the 100th Congress included restrictions on the use of

⁵⁵ Barry, *The Ambition and the Power*, 190.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁵⁷ Lane Kirkland, *Report on Congress, 1988* (Washington, DC: AFL-CIO, 1988).

polygraphs by employers, overturning the Supreme Court's *Grove City* decision undermining civil rights laws, fair housing legislation, catastrophic health insurance, welfare reform, and reparations to Japanese Americans interred during World War II. Unions were also major forces in the battle against the confirmation of Judge Robert Bork as a Supreme Court justice, providing considerable financial resources and technical assistance to groups leading the anti-Bork campaign.⁵⁸ Evaluating this diverse record through an analysis of the AFL-CIO's designated "key congressional votes," Masters, Atkin, and Delaney have identified rising percentages of union success in the late 1980s, in keeping with the argument advanced here.⁵⁹ In 1988, the AFL-CIO won on 92.8 percent of its key votes in the House, compared to a low 46.7 percent victory rate in 1981. In the Senate, the AFL-CIO's rate of success rose from 21 percent in 1981 to 57.1 percent in 1988. Although an analysis based on AFL-CIO key votes is of limited value because the issues chosen from year-to-year reflect the vagaries of the congressional agenda more than organized labor's priorities, it is still suggestive of the more congenial environment that labor faced in the late 1980s.

The breadth of the labor agenda was reflected in the active support by the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees and the Service Employees International Union of an array of proposals sometimes grouped under the label "family issues." The two main pieces of legislation in this category were a bill providing increased federal support for child care, and the Family and Medical Leave Act, which would require that employers allows employees to take time off to care for family medical problems. Union lobbyists viewed these issues as well suited for use against the Republicans in forthcoming elections and as effective tools in improving the image of labor unions. "These bills will help bring us back into the mainstream," a top AFL-CIO official said.⁶⁰ Both bills were ultimately passed by Congress, but vetoed by President George Bush in 1990. The Family and Medical Leave Act was later enacted early in the Clinton administration.

Proposals such as the Family and Medical Leave Act, plant closing legislation, and mandated employer health benefits were all indicative of a trend toward increased union support for legislation requiring that employers provide certain kinds of benefits for their employees. This development suggests that unions are seeking to achieve through legislation benefits that might otherwise have been pursued through collective bargaining. Legislative initiatives of this type have the attraction of providing more in the way of welfare state benefits without

⁵⁸ Ethan A. Bronner, *Battle for Justice: How the Bork Nomination Shook America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989), 145–147, and 158.

⁵⁹ See Masters, Atkin, and Delaney, "Unions, Political Action, and Public Policies: A Review of the Past Decade," 478. The following figures were originally drawn from this source, but were reconfirmed by my own calculations based on AFL-CIO annual Reports on Congress (available from the AFL-CIO Department of Legislation).

⁶⁰ Quoted in Frank Swoboda, "Expecting Change of Fortune, Labor Recasts Agenda," *Washington Post*, 10 November 1987.

requiring increased federal spending—a notable virtue in the context of huge federal budget deficits. At the same time, however, this approach poses the obvious danger that new mandated benefits and universal labor standards will only further reduce the demand among employees for union representation.

All this evidence shows that claims that the AFL-CIO has become unusually narrow and particularistic in its issue agenda are overstated.⁶¹ One reason a wide agenda was maintained was the growth in the number of women and minorities among union members, which has increased pressures on union leaders to maintain traditional commitments on liberal issues. Also, labor's commitment to the Democratic party means that its agenda is set in a symbiotic interchange with the party leadership. This inevitably contributes to a broadening of labor's agenda, even as it commits the party leadership to many of labor's more specialized issues. Furthermore, the costs of lobbying on a wide range of issues are not high. Unions do, after all, already have a large lobbying apparatus in place, and it does not use up vast resources to add a few more issues to labor's already lengthy agenda. Although it is true that the breadth of labor's agenda means that some of labor's political capital is used up on issues that are not central to unions as institutions (such as family and medical leave), labor's visibility at the same time helps create political debts among members of Congress and other interest groups, which can in the long run contribute to the enhancement of the labor movement's goals.

One consequence of labor's maintenance of a broad agenda could be found in the revitalization of close ties with other liberal interest groups and social movements. The AFL-CIO and many national unions experienced protracted conflict with the liberal wing of the party starting in the late 1960s, over issues of war, race, gender, ideology, and political reform. By the mid-1980s most of these conflicts had been overcome, as unions cooperated regularly with women's groups (see labor support for child care and comparable worth legislation), environmentalists (see the alliance built against the free trade agreement with Mexico), African-American groups (see labor support for the Civil Rights Act in the 101st and 102nd Congresses), and even homosexuals (see union lobbying against amendments to the Americans with Disability Act that would have allowed employers to discriminate against food servers with AIDS). The animus and hostility that were so evident in the late 1960s and most of the 1970s diminished with changes in the leadership of the AFL-CIO and the rise of a new generation of national union leaders, especially in the growing public employee unions. In short, by the end of the decade, the liberal/labor coalition was probably as healthy as it had ever been in its rather checkered history.

These alliances in turn helped the labor movement as it sought to move forward once again on legislation intended to enhance the organizational status of unions in industrial relations. The AFL-CIO sought to achieve passage of

⁶¹ For such claims, see David Brody, *Workers in Industrial America: Essays on the Twentieth Century Struggles* (New York: Oxford, 1980), 240; Edsall, *New Politics of Inequality*, 171; and Kim Moody, *An Injury to All: The Decline of American Unionism* (London: Verso, 1988), 161.

legislation outlawing the permanent replacement of economic strikers. The latter was a tactic increasingly used during the 1980s by employers seeking to undermine the capacity of unions to strike effectively. With the strong support of Speaker Foley (now in power after Wright's 1989 resignation) and a major grassroots campaign led by the AFL-CIO, this legislation reached the floor of the House during the 102nd Congress, and was passed by a comfortable margin, 247-182, on 17 July 1991. However, as one might predict, given the fate of labor law reform efforts in the 1960s and 1970s, the bill fell victim to a filibuster in the Senate, losing by a vote of 57 to 42—three votes short of the supermajority needed to end debate.⁶² The five Democrats who joined the Republicans in voting against cloture were all from the South: Terry Sanford (NC), Ernest Hollings (SC), Dale Bumpers and David Pryor (NC), and David Boren (OK). Conversely, the five Republicans who voted for cloture were all from the North: Robert Packwood and Mark Hatfield (Oregon), Ted Stevens (AK), Arlen Specter (PA), and Alfonse D'Amato (NY). Failure to bring about cloture indicated that despite the trends toward liberalization among Southern Democrats, the regional disparities in the strength of the labor movement still remained a potent obstacle for the realization of labor's legislative goals. This same problem would reappear during the Clinton administration, when a similar proposal would also fail because of a filibuster in the Senate.

CONCLUSION

Although the main purpose of this article has been to show how unions took advantage of political and institutional changes in Congress to develop improved ties with the Democrats in the late 1980s, it is also interesting to briefly compare the pattern of labor involvement at this time with that of the 1960s. There are three principal points that can be made. First, in many ways unions faced fewer obstacles in the House of the 1980s than they did in the 1960s, largely because committee chairs had become much more liberal. In the 1960s, an entrenched committee leadership disproportionately dominated by conservative Southern Democrats presented a potent obstacle to union demands. This blockage is now gone.⁶³ Second, the House leadership was stronger and could work more closely with labor because of the reforms of the 1970s and the greater homogenization of the Democratic membership. It is indisputable that this more centralized leadership redounded to labor's benefit. Third, despite all the discussions about the many changes in American politics over the last fifty years, the biggest problem for labor remained a distribution of power and set of rules (most notably, the filibuster) in the Senate, which favored the conservative coalition. This pattern

⁶² For a discussion of the earlier battles over labor law reform, see Gilbert Gall, *The Politics of Right-to-Work* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988).

⁶³ For further evidence, see Kenneth Shepsle, "The Changing Textbook Congress" in John Chubb and Paul Peterson, eds., *Can the Government Govern?* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1989).

of defeat on specifically pro-labor legislation almost exactly recapitulated that found in every effort to liberalize labor law since the 1940s.⁶⁴

In summary, although unions remained largely on the defensive in the 1980s, they did forge a sufficiently good relationship with the Democratic congressional leadership to succeed in helping to set the congressional agenda in the latter half of the decade. Unions were, however, much more successful in helping to pass legislation of benefit to a widespread constituency of employees than in passing legislation that would enhance union organizing or otherwise redistribute power specifically to unions.⁶⁵ The latter kind of legislation was inevitably blocked in the Senate. The pattern was only reconfirmed during the Clinton administration, when such initiatives as family and medical leave and "motor voter" registration sailed to success with labor support, while the labor law reform proposal outlawing the permanent replacement of strikers was again killed in the Senate. In this double sense, institutional rules and procedures mattered. Labor benefited from the new possibilities for strong leadership and greater party discipline in the House, but was stymied by the persistence of the filibuster in the Senate.

With the massive defeat of the Democratic party in the 1994 congressional elections, union attitudes about institutional rules and procedures in Congress may undergo some interesting changes. Since the time of the New Deal, Democrats have usually held majorities in Congress, and it was either Democratic party indiscipline or minoritarian procedures which usually undermined the labor agenda. Now, the tables have been turned. If conservative Republicans appear to be settling in for a long reign of power in the House and Senate, union leaders may find the filibuster and other obstructive instruments that they once despised to have a whole new set of hidden virtues. Unionists who were once overjoyed with Speaker Wright's assertive concentration of power are now found denouncing the "dictatorial" and "undemocratic" maneuvers of Speaker Newt Gingrich in support of his party's program. And in the Senate, it would be ironic indeed if the filibuster were to become a useful defensive resource for the labor movement and its Democratic allies.

But in other respects, it is probable that the basic elements of the relationship between organized labor and the congressional Democrats will persist. The AFL-CIO has recommitted itself to defeating the Republican majority and reinstalling the Democratic party in Congress. The recent transfer of leadership within the AFL-CIO itself was in part a response to a widespread perception that President Lane Kirkland had failed to effectively lead the charge against the Republican juggernaut in the period leading up to the 1994 elections. Kirkland was forced to resign in August 1994, and his hand-chosen successor, former AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Thomas Donahue, was defeated the following

⁶⁴ See Gall, *The Politics of Right-to-Work*; and Zieger, *American Workers, American Unions*, 108–136.

⁶⁵ Greenstone, of course, made the same point for the 1960s. See Greenstone, *Labor in American Politics*, chap. 10; and also Richard B. Freeman and James L. Medoff, *What Do Unions Do?* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), chap. 12.

October by a liberal coalition headed up by Service Employees International Union President John J. Sweeney and Mineworkers President Richard Trumka. Although Sweeney and his allies have promised to bring a new air of militancy into the AFL-CIO, it seems inevitable that their main political goal will be a traditional one: that of supporting the Democrats in their quest to control Congress. For their part, the Democrats may yet grow more dependent on organized labor, as the business support (read dollars) once guaranteed by incumbency status now flows towards the new majority party. Thus, as the congressional Democrats and labor now both share the experience of minority status and a common enemy, their alliance will not only continue, but seems likely to deepen.*

* The author would like to thank the Brookings Institution and the Everett Dirksen Congressional Research Center for financial support for this study.