Labor Unions and White Racial Politics

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Abstract: *Scholars and political observers point to declining labor unions, on the one hand, and rising white identity politics, on the other, as profound changes in American politics. However, there has been little attention given to the potential feedback between these forces. In this article, we investigate the role of union membership in shaping white racial attitudes. We draw upon research in history and American political development to generate a theory of interracial labor politics, in which union membership reduces racial resentment. Cross-sectional analyses consistently show that white union members have lower racial resentment and greater support for policies that benefit African Americans. More importantly, our panel analysis suggests that gaining union membership between 2010 and 2016 reduced racial resentment among white workers. The findings highlight the important role of labor unions in mass politics and, more broadly, the importance of organizational membership for political attitudes and behavior.*

Verification Materials: The data and materials required to verify the computational reproducibility of the results, procedures, and analyses in this article are available on the *American Journal of Political Science* Dataverse within the Harvard Dataverse Network, at: https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId = https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/VJUOOV.

Since the election of Barack Obama, political scientists have begun to reinvestigate the politics of white racial identity (see, e.g., Abrajano and Hajnal 2017; Jardina 2019; Parker and Barreto 2013; Tesler 2012, 2016). This work, sometimes intersected with the politics of gender and class, attempts to explain why a significant number of white working-class men and women voted against President Obama in 2008 and 2012, and for President Donald Trump in 2016. Largely ignored in this debate is the role of an additional contextual variable, labor union membership, and how it potentially shapes the attitudes and behavior of the white working class. It is worth further examination. In the last three presidential elections, for instance, white union members provided a majority of their votes to the Democratic Party candidate, whereas the majorities of whites who did not belong to unions voted for the Republican candidate. Moreover, although in decline over the past several decades, labor unions remain a chief mobilizing institution of white workers with considerable influence over their voting behavior and attitudes toward public policy (Leighley and Nagler 2007; Rosenfeld 2014; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

In this article, we investigate the relationship between union membership and the racial politics of white Americans. We develop a theory of labor unions and racial attitudes that predicts union membership reduces racial resentment toward African Americans.[1] Union leaders, because of the need to recruit workers of color in order to achieve majority memberships in racially diversifying labor sectors, have ideological and strategic incentives to mitigate racial resentment among the rank and file in pursuit of organizational maintenance and growth (Rosenfeld and Kleykamp 2009). Because of historic institutional ties to the Democratic Party, union leaders also have incentives to encourage support for the party, an organization of its own right that ought to have strategic and ideological incentives to promote interracial coalition building (Ahlquist 2017; Dark 1999; Hajnal and Lee 2011;

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[1] Although we do not test it empirically, this theory may extend to racial resentment toward nonwhite immigrant groups.

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Minchin 2016). Finally, unions' organizational structure facilitates political socialization through the dissemination and sharing of political information among workers as well as the mobilization of those workers in union election drives and contract negotiations (Ahlquist and Levi 2013; Rosenfeld 2014).

Our theory is contextually and temporally bounded. We would not expect, for instance, that segregationist unions allied with a pre-civil-rights-era Democratic Party would have the same incentives, behavior, and impact as more racially diverse unions allied with the modern-day Democratic Party. Nor would we expect in the modern era that all unions would act and impact equally: Our theory is predicated on the perceived coalitional needs of the union, driven both internally and externally through its alliances with political parties. As such, in developing and testing this theory, we bridge behavioral and historical institutionalist approaches to understanding the dynamics between unions and the attitude formation of their members (Frymer 2010; March and Olsen 1984; Skocpol and Pierson 2002).

Our empirical analysis draws on national survey data to estimate the relationship between union membership and racial resentment among whites. Cross-sectional analysis consistently shows that union membership is associated with lower levels of racial resentment. More importantly, our panel analysis of two distinct data sets shows that gaining union membership reduces racial resentment among white workers. In addition, compared to nonunion respondents, white union members are more supportive of affirmative action and other policies designed to benefit African Americans.

Taken together, the results point to the importance of unions for influencing the racial attitudes of its members, and more broadly for the development of civil rights policies. This influence also points to a major consequence of union decline in the modern era. As a critical organization associated with promoting racial toleration weakens in organizational reach, its relative influence over political outcomes and the formation of sociocultural identities, particularly within the white working class, will likely continue to weaken with it.

Racial Attitudes, the White Working Class, and the Development of a Labor–Civil Rights Alliance

White racial attitudes have been the focus of a robust literature for many decades (Bobo and Hutchings 1996; Kinder and Sears 1981; Schuman et al. 1997; Stephens-Dougan 2016; Tesler 2012).

Despite initial declarations that President Barack Obama's election in 2008 signified the "end of race" in America, his presidency only seems to have reinvigorated the expression of white racial resentment (Hajnal and Rivera 2014; Parker and Barreto 2013; Tesler 2012). The election of Donald Trump has further served to magnify the role of whites in supporting candidates and policies that seemingly invoke aspects of racial resentment, whether with regard to African Americans or immigrants (Lajevardi and Abrajano 2019; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018).

Union membership has not been a specific component of this literature, even though it has been referenced within more popular and journalistic theories related to the success of President Trump, particularly with his victories in historically pro-union midwestern states (e.g., Lombardo 2018).[2] But as a leading mobilizer of the white working class, attention to labor's role is warranted. Historically, labor's relationship with white working-class racial attitudes has varied. In the early twentieth century, W.E.B. Du Bois (1935) famously argued that white workers resisted forming coalitions with African American workers because they would rather benefit from the "psychological wage" of hierarchical status and privileges based simply on their race (see too Roediger 1991). In the early decades of the labor movement, unions frequently engaged in racist and discriminatory practices and supported exclusionary immigration policies, most notably mobilizing in favor of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the racially restrictionist Immigration Act of 1924 (Mink 1986; Ngai 2004). Even in the post-civil-rights era, many unions, particularly in certain craft and public sector jobs, have been subject to lawsuits claiming systematic and pervasive discrimination for denying employment opportunities to racial minorities and women (Frymer 2008; Gould 1977).

Beginning with the New Deal, union leadership increasingly made alliances with civil rights organizations and progressive policy leaders, notably the early CIO efforts to actively mobilize black workers, culminating in the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations' (AFL-CIO) active endorsement of the 1964 Civil Rights Act (Goldfield 1997; Lichtenstein 2001; Schickler 2016). Labor and civil rights activism frequently fused in the speeches of union leaders like A. Philip

[2] Although Trump received greater support from white union members than did earlier Republican presidential candidates, the increase was not unique to union members. Conditional on demographic covariates, union membership is negatively associated with Trump support in the CCES data. Furthermore, Ogorzalek, Piston, and Puig (2019) find that having a relatively *high* income in one's local area predicts Trump support.

Randolph, Walter Reuther, and Cesar Chavez and civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and Bayard Rustin, as well as in organizing drives around the country that linked the union ideal with racial and class progress (see, e.g., Korstad and Lichtenstein 1988; MacLean 2006; Meier and Rudwick 2007; Vargas 2005).[3] By the 1980s, the AFL-CIO had made a significant turnaround and was actively embracing immigration rights, and more broadly racial, ethnic, and gender diversity (Fine and Tichenor 2009; Warren 2005). Today, the union movement is undoubtedly more diverse than ever, as unions have become the largest mass membership organization of people of color (Bronfenbrenner and Warren 2007). African Americans currently have the highest rate of union membership at 12.5% while Latinos are the fastest-growing demographic of new union members, mobilized through massive organizing campaigns by the likes of SEIU and UNITE-HERE (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020; Francia and Orr 2014; Milkman 2006; Rosenfeld and Kleykamp 2012; Sherman and Voss 2000).

How Unions Shape Racial Attitudes

Theoretically, we expect a number of mechanisms to link union membership with the racial attitudes of their white workers. First, broadly, there is an extensive and suggestive literature that context and community, particularly from organizations, affect the formation and development of political attitudes (see, e.g., Campbell 2003; Cigler and Joslyn 2002; Mettler and Soss 2004). As Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995, 369) describe, organizations are "the backbone of civil society—lying between the personal world of the family and the public world of politics." Organizations coordinate, provide social and expressive benefits, facilitate the "acquisition of new perspectives for viewing . . . society" (Carson 1981, 1); they mobilize members from the top down and the bottom up (Leighley 1996). Organizations serve to politically socialize its members and shape their belief formations, including the potential for promoting tolerance toward minority groups (Cote and Erickson 2009). The workplace is viewed within this literature as a particularly influential space where both interactions and experience shape policy preference formation and political views (see, e.g., Banaszak and Leighley 1991; Hertel-Fernandez 2018). As Mutz and Mondak (2006,141) note, "most people work out of necessity rather than choice," and they do so in environments with a degree of demographic diversity that is often quite unlike the places where they live, learn, play, and worship.

Labor unions are an especially important class of organizations in both the workplace and more broadly in American politics. They have had significantly larger membership bases than other civic and political organizations, at one point reaching a third of the American workforce and still representing more than 10% today, accounting for more than 14 million workers. Unions are centered around work, where individuals spend most of their time outside of home life; they are also, in an important sense, micro-democracies, places where workers participate in the establishment of representatives who help govern their workplace, negotiating everything from hours and wages and retirement benefits to political rights while on the job to standards of care and community (Dahl 1986). Prior research has found that unions have a large impact on the political attitudes of their workers, particularly in areas such as support for the welfare state and job protections (Francia and Bigelow 2010; Hasenfeld and Rafferty 1989) and trade (Ahlquist, Clayton, and Levi 2014; Kim and Margalit 2017), as well as muting the impact of far right organizations on worker preferences (Arndt and Rennwald 2016).

Organizational environments can shape attitudes; but why would unions push workers' attitudes to specifically be more favorable toward racial diversity and equality? As mentioned earlier, this is dependent on institutional context, one that has varied over time. In the modern era, marked by increased demographic diversity within the workplace and within unions, union leaders wishing to maintain the health of their organization ought to be incentivized to promote interracial solidarity among their members. As democratic organizations, regulated by the federal government, unions not only benefit from mobilizing their base to elect their preferred candidates in state and local elections, but they also need to mobilize their base to win majority votes in collective bargaining agreements and union certification elections. In the modern context, labor union leaders also have incentives to partner with the Democratic Party, reflected in their long-standing alliances with the party. In turn, modern Democratic Party candidates and elites have similar coalitional incentives to promote at least a certain degree and form of interracial solidarity, such that the Democratic Party may serve to mediate the relationship between union membership and attitudes. Finally, union organizations facilitate the sharing of these political messages among union members inside and outside the workplace. We address each of these potential mechanisms in turn.

[3] As Martin Luther King Jr. argued, "the coalition that can have the greatest impact in the struggle for human dignity here in America is that of the Negro and the forces of labor, because their fortunes are so closely intertwined."

Union Leaders and Organizational Incentives

In recent decades, union leaders have had both ideological commitments and strategic reasons for building an interracial coalition. Union leaders are often ideologically committed to egalitarianism, and such a commitment can influence the rank and file. As Ahlquist and Levi (2013, 6) argue, unions politically mobilize their members more effectively when they have "an ideologically motivated founding leadership cohort who devises organizational rules that facilitate both industrial success and coordinated expectations about the leaders' political objectives." This is how some unions, such as the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), "produce membership willing to self-sacrifice on behalf of a wide range of political and social justice issues" (1).

Dependent on context, union leaders' goal of maintaining and expanding their organizations also gives them strategic incentives to reduce racial animus among their rank and file. In the pre-civil-rights era, union leaders representing all-white workforces often felt the need to avoid the subject of racial diversity in order to maintain solidarity within their membership, particularly during drives to establish a collective bargaining agreement (Frymer 2005). With frequent racial segregation in employment and larger majorities of white workers, it may have made strategic sense for union leaders to increase the salience of class identity at the expense of racial identity. But even during this time, it was dependent on the context of the specific workforce. In the 1940s, CIO unions in particular saw the activism of African American workers on factory floors in the auto and steel industries, leading union and civil rights leaders alike to embrace the other movements as a way to gain members for their own (Lichtenstein 2001).

As the labor movement has become more diverse in recent decades, the incentives for union leaders have increasingly changed with it. Changing demographics led many service industry unions such as AFSCME, UNITE HERE, and SEIU to embrace both racial minority and immigrant workforces. Starting in the 1980s, the AFL-CIO began to endorse pro-immigration legislative policies and agency rules in response to the rising numbers of undocumented Latino workers who were joining union campaigns (Fine and Tichenor 2009). To secure more union election victories and collective bargaining agreements, its leaders increasingly felt a strategic need to embrace interracial solidarity. National union conventions are increasingly multilingual, with large immigrant populations in many service industries now representing just about every part of the world. Starting in the 1990s, the AFL-CIO pushed the National Labor Relations Board to recognize the solidaristic benefits of racially based union campaigns centered around African American and Latino workforces, and influenced the board to cooperate with immigration officials to protect undocumented workers during union activity (Frymer 2008).

The Role of the Democratic Party

For over a century, the labor movement has had an alliance with the Democratic Party. This historical alliance suggests a potential mediator between union membership and racial attitudes: party identification. With few historical exceptions, such as construction unions' endorsement of Richard Nixon, the Teamsters endorsement of Ronald Reagan, and law enforcement and construction trade unions' endorsement of different Republican campaigns in recent years, American labor unions have overwhelmingly endorsed Democratic candidates. A number of studies document the association between union membership and Democratic Party identification and voting (e.g., Francia and Bigelow 2010; Freeman 2003; Sheppard and Masters 1959; Sousa 1993).[4] However, we have little understanding of how this relationship influences racial attitudes. As the previous section described, union rank and file are exposed to political signals from union leaders about race. But they are also exposed to partisan signals, such as union endorsements of candidates.

This organized promotion of the Democratic Party is likely to lead to greater exposure to Democratic Party elites and organizations among union members. Like union leaders, Democratic candidates and other party elites have incentives to build interracial coalitions of supporters, especially in the more heavily unionized North. It is common to hear explicit appeals against white racial resentment from Democratic candidates. These appeals often suggest that racial animus is a tool that powerful interests use to divide working people, harming workers of all races in the process. Moreover, unions are one of the largest mobilizers of voters in campaigns, promoting agendas that strongly overlap with the Democratic Party in national, state, and local elections, whether focused on union-specific concerns, broader concerns involving employee rights and higher wages for nonunion workers, or Democratic Party priorities such as health care

[4] We also provide descriptive analysis of the aggregate and individual relationships among union membership, Democratic voting, and Democratic Party identification in Appendix 1 in the supporting information (SI).

reform, increased education spending, and criminal justice reform.

Unions promote Democratic Party support and identification, which in turn exposes workers to strategic political signals from Democratic elites in favor of interracial unity. Party identification is a dominant predictor of vote choice and policy attitudes (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2004; Mason 2018), and candidates and other party elites strongly influence the attitudes of their bases (Broockman and Butler 2017; Lenz 2013). In this way, Democratic Party identification may mediate the relationship between union membership and racial resentment among white workers.

Organization, Information Sharing, and Socialization

The previous sections described the incentives facing union organizers and Democratic Party elites that give them an interest in reducing racial resentment among their white members. But these signals from leaders, organizers, and labor-associated Democratic candidates and elites would likely have much less influence if not for the organizational structure of unions. We argue that the dominant organizational form of labor unions facilitates information provision and political socialization in ways that amplify signals from leaders and organizers.

Unions are typically federated organizations of "locals" or chapters in which information and other resources are shared horizontally across the locals and vertically to and from state and national leadership offices. Critical in this organizational model is the development of formal and informal organizers from their rank and file. These stewards and leaders in other local positions work alongside their fellow union members, while taking on responsibilities for recruitment, information sharing, organizing gatherings, and serving as a spokesperson. Unions often pool their resources to produce guides and other materials to support the development of these local leaders, solving a key collective action problem.

Contact theory suggests that long-term cooperative intergroup relations, such as white workers working alongside workers of color, can increase intergroup solidarity (e.g., Pettigrew and Tropp 2008).[5] Although it is unclear whether unionization directly increases diversity in the workplace,[6] the point remains that conditional on workplace diversity, intergroup contact among workers in unionized settings is likely to be deeper and more cooperative. Union workers engage in collective action around issues of contract bargaining and workplace grievances. Intergroup contact via this work toward collective goals is more likely to generate intergroup solidarity than contact in other less cooperative environments.

On the other hand, even cooperative contact absent explicit anti-racism strategies from the organization may not reduce racial resentment. The military is also the site of interracial contact, where racially diverse service members work toward common goals in ways that may reduce racial resentment. However, recent evidence suggests that, at least in the post-draft era, service members and veterans have greater racial resentment than civilians (Nteta and Tarsi 2016). In SI Appendix 12, we replicate the cross-sectional results of Nteta and Tarsi (2016) and also provide novel panel analysis of the within-subject effect of joining the military, which is more likely to be causal. These results provide little to no evidence that military service in the contemporary period reduces racial resentment.

Whereas the U.S. military branches heavily regulate political discourse and activity by service members, unions actively facilitate political discussion—including discussion with explicitly anti-racist messaging. Unions encourage the discussion of workplace issues and grievances among the rank and file, holding frequent workshops, conversations, and campaign information events. Almost all unions have newspapers and/or websites aimed at educating workers on topics both local and national; perhaps more importantly, labor unions hold frequent meetings and other gatherings in which workers share political information (Ahlquist and Levi 2013). Because most unions endorse political candidates and have associated political action committees, it is typical for locals to have political action chairs assigned the duty, as in the case of the Iowa State Teachers Union (see SI Appendix A10) to "organize, engage and communicate with members around election issues."

Macdonald (2019) shows that union members report more frequent political discussions at work than nonunion members, and research in comparative political economy and American politics further suggests that union membership increases political knowledge (Iversen and Soskice 2015).

Finally, there is ample evidence in recent years that unions have engaged more directly in conversations about

[5]These findings differ from settings of more "shallow" and less cooperative contact, such as research on responses to exposure to immigrants.

[6]Union workers are slightly more likely to be African American than nonunion workers (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020), but there is little clear causal evidence. The relationship between unionization and workplace racial diversity appears heterogeneous and contextual (e.g., Ferguson 2016; Michel 2017).

race and civil rights. Unions have increased mobilization efforts of African American and immigrant workers, especially in industries historically without a unionized presence, ranging from poultry workers and health workers to taxi and Uber drivers, as well as defending immigrant workers against workplace raids. In 2008, the AFL-CIO targeted white workers in midwestern states thought to be resistant to vote for an African American candidate, and its president, Richard Trumka, made frequent frank and personal speeches to workers around the country about his own white working-class upbringing and support for Obama (Minchin 2016, 310–11).[7] Trumka responded similarly to the racial conflicts produced by the 2014 police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, noting in a speech widely disseminated to union workers from the AFL-CIO and through its locals that both the police officer and Brown's mother were union members. "Our brother killed our sister's son and we do not have to wait for the judgment of prosecutors or courts to tell us how terrible this is"; noting the difficult history of union racial division and the fight for equality, Trumka declared ongoing racism "our problem. That is what solidarity means" (AFL-CIO 2014). More broadly, unions have been aggressively promoting interracial solidarity in their campaign materials and multilingual messaging to union members (see, e.g., AFL-CIO 2020).

In sum, the interaction of leaders' coalition-building incentives to mitigate white racial resentment and unions' facilitation of information sharing should make union membership an important influence over the racial attitudes of workers. We hypothesize not only that white union members should be less racially resentful than their white nonunion counterparts, but also that gaining union membership should reduce racial resentment over time. In the next section, we describe the data and analyses that we use to test these hypotheses empirically.

Methods

Data

In this study, we primarily use data from the Cooperative Congressional Election Survey (CCES) and the Voter Study Group (VSG). First, the CCES Common Content data contain biannual samples of 30,000 respondents, allowing us to estimate cross-sectional relationships between union membership and attitudes with considerable precision despite the relatively low rates of union membership among the public. Second, we use panel data to estimate *within-subject* effects of gaining union membership on racial attitudes. The VSG data set is a panel of approximately 8,000 respondents who were surveyed during the 2012 election cycle and then contacted again during the 2016 election cycle. We also use the CCES 2010–14 panel data, where respondents were surveyed in three panel waves: 2010, 2012, and 2014.[8]

Both the VSG and the CCES ask respondents to report their union membership status. An additional advantage of the cross-sectional CCES is that it contains questions for both current and past union membership, which allows us to estimate decay in the relationship between union membership and racial attitudes, albeit somewhat coarsely.

To measure racial resentment, we primarily use an index of two survey questions from the CCES and an index of four survey questions in the VSG data set. These questions are canonical indicators of racial resentment used in prior research (e.g., Bradberry and Jacobson 2015; Tesler 2016), each measured on 5-point Likert scales (*strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*):

(1) "The Irish, Italians, Jews, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors."
(2) "Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class" (reverse coded).

We take the sum of these two responses (with question 2 reverse coded) and rescale the racial resentment index to the [0, 1] interval.[9]

The VSG data set contains these same questions as the CCES. In addition, the VSG data set contains two questions commonly used in racial resentment indices, with response categories again on a 5-point Likert scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*:

(3) "It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites."

[7] As Trumka stated at the United Steelworkers Convention in 2008, "the labor movement has a special responsibility to challenge racism . . . because we know better than anyone else how racism is used to divide working people."

[8] Although other studies use CCES modules with approximately 1,000 respondents to study racial resentment (e.g., Wallsten et al. 2017; Wilson, Owens, and Davis 2015), these modules contain too few white union members for us to estimate relationships with adequate precision.

[9] This allows us to interpret coefficient estimates as proportions of the range of the outcome variable.

(4) "Over the past few years, blacks have gotten less than they deserve" (reverse coded).

We construct a traditional four-item racial resentment index using the VSG data (e.g., Kinder and Sanders 1996). The greater number of items reduces measurement error and, in turn, increases the precision of our estimates of the effect of union membership. This is especially helpful in light of the smaller sample size of our panel data compared to the cross-sectional CCES data.

We replicate our analyses of racial resentment with data from the American National Election Study (ANES), which has the same four questions as the VSG. The ANES has a much smaller sample size, with only about 4,000 cross-sectional observations for our purposes compared to over 60,000 in the cross-sectional CCES. The ANES also lacks a question about past union membership. However, the ANES offers a useful robustness check, and, more crucially, it asks additional, distinct questions about support for public policies that benefit African Americans. We use the standard four-item index of ANES indicators of racial resentment (Feldman and Huddy 2005; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Tesler 2012; Tuch and Hughes 2011).

To measure support for public policies that benefit African Americans, we use survey questions about racially targeted policies. The CCES and VSG each contain a question about support for affirmative action, which we use in additional analyses. The ANES also allows us to construct an index from three ANES items about policies that benefit African Americans. The ANES questions ask respondents about their support for (1) racial preferences in hiring, (2) government action in support of fair treatment for African Americans in employment, and (3) the notion that the government should "make every effort to improve the social and economic position of blacks" (see SI Table A3 for full question wordings; see also Tuch and Hughes 2011).

Estimation Strategy

Union membership is not randomly assigned, but we use a variety of strategies to attempt to mitigate confounding to the extent possible with these observational data. First, our cross-sectional analysis compares differences in racial attitudes among similar white individuals based on their union membership. In regression models, we adjust for standard individual-level and contextual covariates, including age, education, gender, income, and state of residence. In addition, we use a matching design to pair otherwise similar "treated" individuals (union members) with "control" individuals (nonunion members) to estimate the difference in their racial attitudes. We use genetic matching (Diamond and Sekhon 2013), which searches the data for control units to match to the treated units in order to maximize covariate balance. In particular, we exact match on survey year, state, and gender, and we match on continuous measures of age and income. We find strong balance on these observables. We report balance statistics before and after matching in SI Appendix A6.

Next, our panel design estimates whether changes in union membership are related to changes in racial attitudes within individuals. Panel data have been important for economics research estimating the effects of union membership (e.g., Jakubson 1991), but we find no use of panel data on unions in political science research. The panel design importantly avoids time-invariant confounders that are correlated with the likelihood of being a union member and racial attitudes. For example, white individuals from more racially diverse neighborhoods may have both more liberal racial attitudes and greater likelihood of entering more densely unionized industries. The panel design, however, strictly compares *change* in an individual's union membership to change in his or her racial attitudes. In these models, *Gained Union Membership* is equal to 1 if an individual gains union membership, and 0 otherwise; *Lost Union Membership* is equal to 1 if he or she loses union membership, and 0 otherwise. For the VSG data, the outcome variable is either Δ *Racial Resentment* or, alternatively, *2016 Racial Resentment* in models that adjust for *2012 Racial Resentment*.[10] Our specifications with the three-wave CCES panel data are similar; we adjust for racial resentment at time $t-1$ to estimate the effect of gaining union membership on racial resentment at time *t*. Our full panel models adjust for demographic factors, as well as pretreatment party identification.

The panel design mitigates much of the concern about endogeneity and reverse causality. There are three primary ways in which individuals become "treated" by union membership. First, they select into occupations and geographies with varying union density. Because our cross-sectional regression and matching designs adjust for covariates such as education that are predictive of occupation, we expect little incidence of bias. Our panel models adjust not only for these predictors of occupation, but also for time-invariant personal characteristics

[10]The lagged dependent variable model ($Y2_i = \alpha + \beta_1 X_i + \beta_2 Y1_i + \varepsilon_i$) is more statistically efficient but potentially more susceptible to omitted variable bias, whereas the "change score" model ($Y2_i - Y1_i = \alpha + \beta X_i + \varepsilon_i$) is more susceptible to spurious relationships stemming from correlations between the treatment variable and Y1 (Allison 1990). Our estimates are virtually identical across these models.

TABLE 1 Union Membership and Racial Resentment among Whites

	Outcome: Racial Resentment		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Union Member	–0.063**	–0.047**	–0.048**
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Past Union Member	–0.020**	–0.024**	–0.025**
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Female		–0.046**	–0.046**
		(0.002)	(0.002)
Income		0.003**	0.002**
		(0.000)	(0.000)
Age		0.001**	0.001**
		(0.000)	(0.000)
Education		–0.049**	–0.050**
		(0.001)	(0.001)
Constant	0.688**	0.946**	0.959**
	(0.001)	(0.012)	(0.012)
State Fixed Effects	No	Yes	Yes
Year Fixed Effects	No	No	Yes
N	71,431	61,463	61,463
R-squared	0.003	0.080	0.081
Adj. R-squared	0.003	0.079	0.080
Residual Std. Error	0.300	0.288	0.288

Note: Union membership is associated with reduced racial resentment among white respondents. Racial resentment is scaled from 0 to 1. Data are from the 2010 and 2012 CCES.
*p < .05, **p < .01.

that could affect both union membership and racial attitudes. In adolescence, ideology and partisanship may sort individuals into careers in particular industries in ways that are correlated with union density (e.g., liberal attitudes may lead young people into careers in the more unionized teaching industry and away from less unionized white-collar business occupations). In the 4 years between the panel waves, by contrast, it is unrealistic to expect individual changes in party identification or racial attitudes to lead to changes in occupational industry or other determinants of union membership.

The two additional major determinants of union membership are also plausibly exogenous. Policy changes, such as right-to-work laws and bans on agency fees, affect the ability of unions to organize, but it is unlikely that such changes would have heterogeneous effects based on individuals' racial attitudes—or even more unlikely, based on the *future trends* of their racial attitudes in our panel data. Moreover, an important cause of union membership is the potential of being recruited by a union steward or organizer. Typically, this recruitment is made of all workers, as is required by existing labor law. Workers who join unions enter into a variety of employment situations. Most people who begin union jobs enter into a preexisting union around the time of their employment and are contacted by a steward around this date. Unions also organize recruitment drives around contract negotiations, certification elections, and workplace grievances against management, with a primary goal of majority support from workers. In turn, unions have incentives to "organize" any and all workers, and while it is possible that there might be some variation at the level of individual stewards (and certainly, some unions are known to emphasize organizing to a greater degree than others), it would typically be unlikely that stewards could select on racial attitudes, and even less so on future trends in racial attitudes. Overall, the reality of union organizing suggests it is plausible that, conditional on our covariates, gaining union membership is exogenous to racial attitudes.

We provide a robustness check from Kim and Margalit (2017) and Macdonald (2019) in SI Figure 5, which compares the effects in right-to-work and non-right-to-work states, where workers' incentives to join unions differ. If the effect is greater in right-to-work states where workers can free-ride, this could reflect self-selection into unions by racial attitudes. We find a nearly identical effect in both settings.[11]

TABLE 2 Matching Results of Union Membership and Racial Resentment among Whites

	Treatment	
	Current Union Member	Past Union Member
Estimate	–0.041**	–0.020**
(Std. Error)	(0.007)	(0.004)
N	61,463	61,463

Note: Union membership is associated with reduced racial resentment among white respondents. Results are from a paired t-test of a matched sample. Racial resentment is scaled from 0 to 1. Data are from the 2010 and 2012 CCES. Balance statistics on observables are presented in SI Appendix 6.
*p < .05, **p < .01.

[11] We are also interested in testing our theory of Democratic Party identification as a mediator between union membership and racial attitudes. We provide descriptive analysis of a mediation model in the supporting information (SI Appendix 11; also see Baron and Kenny 1986). This requires the assumption that party ID is post-treatment to party ID, an assumption that cannot be directly tested with our cross-sectional data and is underpowered in the

TABLE 3 VSG Panel Results of Union Membership and Racial Resentment among Whites

	Racial Resentment 2016 (1)	Racial Resentment Change (2)	Racial Resentment 2016 (3)	Racial Resentment (4)	Racial Resentment 2016 (5)	Racial Resentment Change (6)
Gained Union	–0.046**	–0.044**	–0.048**	–0.046**	–0.041**	–0.042**
Membership	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.015)
Lost Union	–0.010	–0.010	–0.007	–0.007	0.003	–0.003
Membership	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.016)	(0.015)	(0.015)
Racial	0.930**		0.906**		0.813**	
Resentment 2012	(0.010)		(0.011)		(0.012)	
Party ID					–0.115**	–0.055**
(Democratic)					(0.008)	(0.007)
Income			–0.000	–0.001	–0.001	–0.001
			(0.000)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Female			–0.015**	–0.013*	–0.007	–0.007
			(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Education			–0.010**	–0.006**	–0.011**	–0.005**
			(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Age			0.001**	0.001**	0.001**	0.001**
			(0.000)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Constant	0.007	–0.034**	0.026	–0.041**	0.143**	–0.019
	(0.006)	(0.002)	(0.017)	(0.015)	(0.018)	(0.015)
N	4,276	4,276	4,068	4,068	3,994	3,994
R-squared	0.671	0.002	0.674	0.012	0.693	0.029
Adj. R-squared	0.671	0.002	0.674	0.011	0.692	0.027
Residual Std. Error	0.154	0.155	0.153	0.155	0.149	0.153

Note: *p < .05, **p < .01.

Results

Union Membership Is Associated with Lower Racial Resentment among Whites

We first present regression estimates of the relationship between union membership and racial resentment among white respondents. Table 1 suggests that union membership is negatively associated with racial resentment. White union members are less racially resentful than nonunion members by between 4.7 and 6.3% of the racial resentment scale. The magnitude of this relationship is substantial—rivaling or surpassing other demographic variables that strongly structure mass politics in the United States. The coefficient for union member is as large as that for female, and quite nearly as large as that for education. Its magnitude is much greater than any realistic difference in age (equivalent to over a 90-year age difference).

Past union membership is also significantly associated with reduced racial resentment. Past union members are less racially resentful by between 2.0 and 2.5% of the range of the index. The size of the relationship is approximately half the size of that of current union membership (the difference in coefficients is significant). This difference is consistent with a theory of decaying attitudinal effects of group membership.

We also use a matching estimator to compare otherwise similar white individuals by union membership. The results, presented in Table 2, are similar and again precise: Union membership is associated with lower racial resentment by about 4.1% of the racial resentment index. Past membership again shows an estimate of about 2.0% of the index.[12]

CCES three-wave panel data. For this reason, we caution against interpreting the mediation analysis as an unbiased causal effect.

[12]Covariates in the matched data set are quite balanced across union members and nonunion members, with a minimum difference-in-

Table 4 CCES Panel Results of Union Membership and Racial Resentment among Whites

	Outcome: Racial Resentment			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Gained Union	–0.055**	–0.055**	–0.051**	–0.049**
Membership	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.019)	(0.018)
Lost Union	0.000	–0.000	–0.003	0.009
Membership	(0.032)	(0.032)	(0.033)	(0.033)
Racial Resentment ($t-1$)	0.899**	0.899**	0.884**	0.797**
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.007)
Party ID				–0.124**
(Democratic)				(0.005)
Income			0.000	–0.001
			(0.001)	(0.001)
Female			–0.007	0.002
			(0.003)	(0.003)
Age			0.000*	0.000
			(0.000)	(0.000)
Education			–0.010**	–0.010**
			(0.001)	(0.001)
Constant	0.056**	0.054**	0.084**	0.215**
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.012)	(0.014)
Year Fixed Effects	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	10,908	10,908	9,726	9,617
R-squared	0.749	0.749	0.749	0.764
Adj. R-squared	0.749	0.749	0.749	0.764
Residual Std. Error	0.165	0.165	0.165	0.161

Note: *p < .05, **p < .01.

Panel Results

Table 3 estimates the effect of change in union membership and racial resentment between 2012 and 2016 using the VSG data. Across the models, which vary in the use of controls and lagged dependent variables, the effect of becoming a union member is a reduction in racial resentment between 4.1 and 4.8% of the index. Given the greater variance in union membership and attitudes across individuals compared to within individuals over time (especially in just a 4-year time span), we are somewhat surprised by the similar point estimates of our panel analysis and our previous cross-sectional analyses.[13]

In contrast to becoming a union member, *losing* one's union membership is largely unrelated to racial resentment. This is consistent with a theory in which the effects of past union membership persist, as was also suggested by our cross-sectional analysis presented earlier.

Table 4 reports estimates from similar models using the 2010–14 CCES panel data. With three panel waves (2010, 2012, and 2014), the outcome variable is racial resentment in at time t; we adjust for racial resentment at time $t-1$. We include year fixed effects in Models 2–4.

Table 4 shows consistent results. The effect is slightly larger than those from the VSG panel results, an effect between –0.049 and –0.055. In Model 4, the size of the effect is about 40% of the coefficient of pretreatment party identification. The effect of losing union membership is again close to zero. Overall, across all of our panel

means p-value of .12 despite our large N. However, although the absolute differences are extremely small (0.033 years of age on average), differences between *past* union members and nonunion members are significant in terms of age and income, where past union members are slightly younger and slightly wealthier.

[13]The VSG data also contain a feeling thermometer toward blacks. We provide panel analysis of the union effect on the thermometer in SI Appendix 13. Consistent with our racial resentment results, we find that white respondents who gain union membership increase their positive feelings toward blacks at a magnitude between 2.7 and 3.2% of the thermometer range (p < .1).

Table 5 Union Membership and White Support for Policies That Benefit African Americans

	Outcome: Racial Policy Index		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Union Member	0.036*	0.041*	0.040*
	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.018)
Female		0.014	0.014
		(0.011)	(0.011)
Age		–0.000	–0.000
		(0.000)	(0.000)
Income		–0.048**	–0.048**
		(0.005)	(0.005)
Education		0.029**	0.029**
		(0.004)	(0.004)
Constant	0.301**	0.341**	0.331**
	(0.006)	(0.031)	(0.032)
Region Fixed Effects	No	Yes	Yes
Year Fixed Effects	No	No	Yes
N	2,650	2,431	2,431
R-squared	0.002	0.052	0.053
Adj. R-squared	0.001	0.048	0.049
Residual Std. Error	0.279	0.273	0.273

Note: Union membership is associated with increased support for policies that benefit African Americans. The racial policy index is scaled from 0 to 1. Data are from the ANES (covering presidential election years 1996–2016).
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$.

results, we observe that union membership has an effect between 4.1 and 5.5% of the range of the racial resentment index.

Union Membership Is Associated with Support for Policies That Benefit African Americans

In additional analysis, we estimate the relationship between union membership and support for policies designed to benefit African Americans. Table 5 presents the association between union membership and our racial policy index of support for four racially targeted policies designed to help African Americans. The relationship is of a similar magnitude to those presented earlier on union membership and racial resentment: Coefficient estimates are between 0.036 and 0.040 (with the outcome variable ranging from 0 to 1), a substantively meaningful amount. Despite the precipitous drop in sample size of white respondents in these ANES data, our estimates are sufficiently precise to be statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level.

We also estimate the relationship between union membership and support for affirmative action, specifically, in the supporting information. Turning back to CCES data in SI Table 1, we again find a strong relationship between union membership and support for affirmative action for African Americans. Coefficients are quite precisely estimated, ranging from 0.047 to 0.048 (again with the outcome scaled from 0 to 1). The magnitude of this union relationship with affirmative action support is greater than that of education, and nearly the size of gender.

We use the VSG data to present a similar panel analysis of the effect of gaining union membership on support for affirmative action among whites in SI Table 2. The VSG affirmative action question is less helpful for our purposes; it is a binary question of support (rather than a Likert scale), and it adds a gender dimension by asking about support for affirmative action "for women and racial minorities." Still, we find that gaining union membership increases affirmative action support by between 0.042 and 0.064 (with 0 indicating opposition and 1 indicating support), similar to our CCES estimates in SI Table A1.[14]

Alternative Mechanisms

We provide two additional analyses that increase our confidence in our hypothesized mechanism. First, a debate in comparative political economy asks whether ethnoracial diversity affects the welfare state, and a related debate in race and ethnic politics investigates whether economic insecurity is associated with racial threat and conflict. Unions may increase racial liberalism not through political socialization, but simply by increasing wages and job security for their members. However, our earlier results suggest that for white respondents, higher incomes are unrelated to, or even slightly positively associated with racial resentment. In SI Appendix 5, we provide a panel analysis showing that change in income has no effect

[14]Support for these policies is strongly predicted by racial resentment (coefficient = 0.814). It may be the case that union membership increases policy support *through* the mechanism of reducing racial resentment. We run a mediation analysis to assess this possibility. The results are consistent with this argument (direct union effect on policy attitudes = 0.024; mediated effect through racial resentment = 0.36; total effect = 0.59).

on racial resentment.[15] Although we lack non-income indicators of economic security, all of these results are consistent with a sociopolitical mechanism of union membership, rather than a primarily economic mechanism.

Second, rather than a specific effect on racial attitudes, unions may increase liberal ideology more broadly—encompassing a wide array of policy attitudes. Although unions' role in promoting *economic* attitudes is well known (e.g., Hasenfeld and Rafferty 1989; Kim and Margalit 2017), our findings about white racial attitudes may simply be part of a broader union effect on attitudes toward *social* liberalism. We provide additional placebo checks showing that union membership has no consistent relationship with abortion attitudes specifically (SI Table 9) or social liberalism more broadly (SI Table 10, using social liberalism ideal points from an item response theory model of social policy attitudes).

Conclusion

Labor union membership impacts wages (Budd and In-Gang 2000; Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020; Jakubson 1991), workplace conditions (Ravenswood and Markey 2011), corporate governance (Aguilera and Jackson 2003), and, as this study suggests, white racial attitudes. Yet despite increased scholarly attention to the role of organizational membership, as well as labor's historical role in race and partisan realignment in the New Deal and civil rights periods, there has been surprisingly little research on the relationship between union membership and attitudes in the contemporary period. This study provides the first quantitative study of the relationship between unions and racial attitudes. In both cross-sectional and panel designs, union membership is associated with moderate to substantial reductions in racial resentment among whites. Furthermore, these white union members are consistently more supportive of affirmative action and other policies designed to benefit African Americans. Taken together, the results suggest that unions play a considerable role in increasing the racial liberalism of their white members.

Our mediation analysis in SI Appendix 11 further suggests that the Democratic Party may be an important conduit in the relationship between union membership and racial resentment. Unions, by increasing Democratic Party identification, may further influence the racial liberalism of white workers. As representatives of an increasingly racially diverse major political party, Democratic Party elites, like union leaders, have strategic and ideological incentives to promote racial solidarity among their base. Although recent research highlights the racial dynamics of the labor movement's relationship with the Democratic Party as far back as the 1930s (Frymer 2008; Schickler 2013, 2016), the role of partisanship as a mediator may be especially consequential in the contemporary era of hyperpolarization.

Our study focuses on the direct connections between individual-level union membership and racial attitudes, but the labor movement plays a broader role in promoting racial progress in the United States. Some unions provide organizer training sessions and classes for aligned activists who are not union members. Union organizers frequently campaign for racially liberal candidates and get out the vote of nonunion members for them. Union political action committees (PACs) spend substantial amounts in support of Democratic candidates, and both these PACs and union organizations more broadly have been critical in fighting for changes to public policy at both the federal level and especially at the state level, where there has been a vigorous move toward new policies that raise the minimum wage, provide greater healthcare benefits, and grant stronger protections for women and minority workers against discrimination and harassment (Andrias 2017).

Future research will need to scrutinize the differences between unions. Just as historically, CIO unions were typically far more progressive than those unions of the AFL, to this day there are strong differences between union sectors—teaching versus construction, for instance—that would provide far more nuance and specificity in understanding the mechanism at work in our analysis. Union members are increasingly likely to work in the public sector and less likely to work in manufacturing. And in the current era, worker centers and alternative labor forums are increasingly on the rise, with typically more diverse and immigrant populations and leadership, and with important implications for the workers involved (Fine 2006).[16]

Threats to causal identification may remain. Individuals with more liberal racial attitudes may be more

[15] In addition, recall that while gaining union membership in our panel analysis leads to lower racial resentment, *losing* one's union membership has no effect.

[16] As a first step, we check for heterogeneity in the union effect by occupation type to the extent possible with our data. The results, shown in SI Table 11, show a slightly greater effect among professionals such as teachers than manual laborers, but the differences are insignificant. Similarly, we present effects by college education in SI Figure 4, with a similar finding that the union effect is slightly stronger among college-educated individuals. Further research is needed to shed light on variation in racial politics across unions and industries.

likely to enter certain unionized occupations, such as teaching and other public sector unions. However, many white union workers are also in relatively conservative sectors where it is highly unlikely that they sort based on racial liberalism, including public sector unions representing prison_guards, police, and private sector craft and construction trades that have lengthy histories of racial and gender discrimination (Frymer 2008; Waldinger and Bailey 1991). Furthermore, though our panel design mitigates observed and unobserved differences between individuals, time-variant confounders and endogeneity can still lead to bias. However, it seems unrealistic that preexisting racially liberal individuals selected into union jobs are biasing the results precisely because they became less racially resentful during our 4-year panel. Finally, survey respondents may misrepresent their union membership status. This can happen via social desirability, but also because workers may not always know their union membership status. Bias can occur if changes in racial resentment are associated with moving from "incorrect" to "correct" reporting of union membership between the two observation periods in the panel data.[17]

Still, our theory and consistent results point to an important role for labor unions in shaping the racial attitudes of white workers. Such an influence could have broad downstream effects on both mass and elite behavior in the media, political parties, and elections. Yet union density has declined from close to 30% to 10% of U.S. workers since 1970, limiting this impact to fewer white workers.[18] In recent years, state governments have passed a wave of right-to-work laws and other policies that further threaten the growth of labor unions (Feigenbaum, Hertel-Fernandez, and Williamson 2018). But in some ways, the dominant theme of dramatic union decline has led us to overlook the ways that unions continue to matter (Rosenfeld 2014). This becomes all the more critical in a modern era when societies around the world continue to struggle against rising nationalist and, often, racist attitudes in pursuit of interracial democracy. Labor unions can and do play an important role in engaging and politicizing racial and economic inequality to its members, and as a consequence, serve to mitigate white resentment and further toleration in pursuit of political solutions to problems facing society.

[17]Prior research suggests such measurement error in self-reported union membership may bias estimated effects *downward* (Hirsch 2004).

[18]Assuming constant treatment effects suggests that about 12% of white workers have higher racial resentment (by an average of 4.2% of the racial resentment index) than they would have absent union decline.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Appendix 1: Union Members and Democratic Party Identification over Time
Appendix 2: Union Membership and Support for Affirmative Action
Appendix 3: ANES Racial Policy Index Question Wording
Appendix 4: Replication with ANES
Appendix 5: Alternative Mechanism: Economic Security
Appendix 6: Covariate Balance for Matching Design
Appendix 7: Placebo Tests
Appendix 8: Union Membership and Racial Resentment by Occupation and Education
Appendix 9: Union Effect by Right to Work Status
Appendix 10: Primary Source Union Organizing Materials
Appendix 11: Analysis of Party ID as a Mediator
Appendix 12: Military Service and Racial Resentment among Whites
Appendix 13: Union Membership and Feeling Thermometer toward Blacks