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The relationship between unions and people's populist beliefs

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The Relationship between Unions and People's Populist Beliefs

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Abstract:

This study asks, “do unions affect people’s draw to populism and the politicians that they vote for?”. To answer this question, I interviewed custodians from Union 32BJ Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and teachers from the Boston teachers’ Union (BTU) and Brookline Educators Union (BEU). Alongside these interviews I also analyzed the websites and social media pages for Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers (HUCTW, another union at Harvard that had more information than 32 BJ SEIU), BTU, and BEU to compare what was said in my interviews versus the messaging from each of these unions. The websites and social media pages of these unions had a strong Democratic leaning and, in some cases, particularly with HUCTW and BEU, displayed populist attitudes. When analyzing these websites alongside the interviews I found that there were populist displays from the teachers and the custodians. Specifically, there were teachers and custodians who echoed the populist sentiment of politicians not being trustworthy. There were also teachers who supported populist politicians like Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. There was also one custodian who leaned slightly populist right in his discussion of Trump and seeing himself has a hard worker in comparison to his colleagues. There did seem to be a connection in the messaging of the unions and their members when analyzing the interviews alongside the websites and social media of the unions represented in the interviews. The websites and the social had populist leanings of an “us versus them” framework of these occupation versus everyone else. There were also strong Democratic leanings that generally matched the beliefs of the participants.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Research Question and Design of the Study

Unions are created to protect individual workers against large corporations that could take advantage of them. This framework seems to suggest an inherent tie to populism as populism is about protecting “the people” from “the elites”. Given that populist politicians are becoming more popular in the United States, such as support for Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders, it is important to study where this increased interest in populism is coming from. There have been studies about people being drawn to populism or extremist views on the left and right because of cultural and economic appeals but given the potential connection between unions and populism the relationship between unions and its members should be studied. This study will look at the relationship between unions and its members, and how unions might be affecting people’s political and specifically populist beliefs through interviews with participants from teacher’s unions and trades unions. These two groups were selected to diversify political beliefs to see if the effect of unions on populist beliefs changed depending on the party preference of the participant. The results from these interviews will then be compared to the union messaging of the union represented in the interviews through their websites and social media pages. This comparison will give an indication of to what degree unions affect people’s political beliefs and populist beliefs or voting, and how unions have this effect.

In the 2016 election unions had significant power in how their members voted. However, union membership has been decreasing in the United States, from 20% of all employees belonging to a union in 1983 to just over 10% in 2021 (Johnston 2022). However, this has been primarily in the private sector, leaving jobs like teaching and policing still unionized (ibid). Government jobs have also remained at similar union membership rates since the 1970s (ibid).

Given this shift in the labor movement, it is important to evaluate the differences between public and private sector union jobs and how this difference changes the partisan preferences from each of these groups. Unions can still have significant influence over their members' political beliefs. To better understand why people are being drawn to populism the degree to which their occupation and union effects their beliefs should be studied.

In terms of the effects on unionization and populist support I think that because unions are by definition created to protect people from an "other" larger more powerful group there is an inherent populist undertone to unions that could affect individual union member's draws to populism. However, in terms of whether this is a draw to the populist right or left I think it would depend on the prestige or monetary value associated with the job and therefore the union. With the study groups of teachers and custodians we might expect custodians to be drawn to right-wing populism and teachers to left-wing populism because right-wing populism uses cultural appeals of feeling not heard or seen by others that custodians might feel more than teachers.

Definitions of Populism

Populism, as defined by Cas Mudde is "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite'" (Mudde 2017 3). This definition is based on the ideology of populism, but there are also definitions, such as by Pierre Ostiguy and Kenneth Roberts, that specifically define what a populist politician looks like: "On the political low, politicians tend to be coarse in public, more uninhibited, improvisational, direct, and (intentionally or not) politically incorrect by the standards of the high" (Ostiguy and Roberts, 2016, 30). Ostiguy and Roberts also assert that right-wing populism tends to paint Democratic elites as the "outgroup" and working-class white Americans as the "in-group." (Ostiguy, 2016, 28). According to these authors, left-wing

populism relies less on cultural divides in society and instead focuses on the economic divides between favoring the rich and favoring redistributive policies (29). In either case Ostiguy and Roberts describe populism as “flaunting the low” (27). They discuss how the economic left and right is divided based on pro-market on the right side and more redistributive policies on the left; “high” and “low” then refer to how the policies are carried out and specifically “the manner in which a politician relates to people and appeals to the electorate” (29). The two components of “flaunting the low” then are the sociocultural subdimension that refers to vocabulary, demeanors, way of speaking and dressing, etc. (30) and the politicocultural subdimension, which is the “exercise of political authority and the preferred mode of decision-making” (31). Ostiguy and Roberts set up some of the characteristics and attitudes that populist politicians use to gain popular support.

For this study I will be looking at people’s draw to populism from both an ideological and politician specific perspective. I want to evaluate what draws people to populist politicians and if support for populist politicians correlates to participants also expressing populist attitudes, such as seeing themselves in an “us versus them” framework. There have been studies on what draws people to populist candidates and populist attitudes, and I will be adding to this discussion by looking at the effect of unionization on people’s political preferences and specifically their draws to populism. I chose to look at how unions effect political beliefs because their structure creates a politicized environment for its members (Frymer and Grumbach 2021 229).

Populism as an Attitude

Margaret Canovan introduces the idea that populism is like a mood (Canovan 1999 6). specifically, she discusses how populist politics is similar to a movement and that it can get people who are normally not interested in politics engaged with political happenings (ibid). She

also discusses that there is an emotional component to populism (ibid). This emotional element of populism came up on the interviews particularly with the custodians when they were not discussing individual politicians that do and do not like, but rather that overall, they feel not represented by politicians overall. Cas Mudde discusses populism as “the people” versus “the elites”, and that that “the people” have a sense of being pure and authentic, and “the elites” are corrupt because they are not authentic (Mudde, 2017 4). The idea of authenticity was brought up by the custodians and two teachers when they discussed disliking that both the Democrats and the Republicans are beholden to money from large corporations. This also related to the ideas of “the elites” being corrupt as politicians, often Democratic politicians, claim to dislike large corporations, but then rely on their funds to win elections.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

History of Populism

Right-Wing Populism

The rise of right-wing populism in the United States can be traced to Richard Nixon’s 1972 presidential campaign during which he repeatedly questioned the morals of his opponent George McGovern (Ashbee et al., 2019, 130). Nixon positioned himself as the candidate who was fighting to keep conservative values present in United States in an increasingly progressive era (ibid). Specifically, he used the populist tactic of creating an “other” out of McGovern for his potential association with “acid, amnesty, and abortion” (ibid). In 1980 Ronald Reagan continued Nixon’s trend by appealing to religious voters and making the Republican party more conservative (ibid). Similar to Nixon, Reagan painted Democratic elites as being “the other” who supported big government and cultural progressivism and himself as someone who would protect hard-working Americans from these changes (Ashbee et al., 2019, 2). Nixon and Reagan

positioned the Republican party on a populist platform with Republicans representing traditional values and painted the Democrats as losing touch with the values of “everyday Americans” (3). In 2016 and 2020 Donald Trump continued the legacy of Nixon and Reagan as he consistently painted the Democratic elites as being out-of-touch with his base of middle-class white Americans (Ostiguy, 2016, 42).

Left-Wing Populism

Left-wing populism historically can be traced back to as early as the nineteenth century with the People’s party in the United States, populist politics in the Southeastern United States in twentieth century, and Roosevelt’s New Deal Policies (Lowndes, 2017, 2). In recent years left-wing populism has differed from right-wing populism in that it has largely existed in movements and third parties rather than as a facet of the Democratic party. A more recent example of a left-wing populist movement is the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement against wealthy Americans (Schoen, 2012, 70). Unlike the Republicans, the Democrats are more divided on the populist movements emerging on the left. Politicians like Bernie Sanders are leaders of left-wing populism with anti-establishment messaging (Ostiguy, 2016, 41). Bernie Sanders is a part of the growing divide between Democratic politicians and their supporters into progressive versus moderate Democrats. Politicians like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, Ayanna S. Pressley of Massachusetts, Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, and Rashida Tlaib of Michigan represent a new faction of Democrats who want to bring the party further left than more moderate Democrats such as Joe Biden and Nancy Pelosi. This divide among leaders, and consequently their supporters could also be a reason that right-wing populism has had more success than left-wing populism which is why it is important to interview both traditional trades union workers

who might be more likely to have right-wing values and non-trades workers like public school teachers who might be more likely to have left-wing values.

Working class Political Views and Draws to Populism

Background of Working-Class Political Views:

I will start by giving some background about Latino voters to provide context to some of my participants' political beliefs. In the 2018 midterm races 69% of Latinos voted for the Democratic candidate compared to 29% who voted for the Republican candidate (Pew 2018). There is a slight gender gap between Hispanic men and woman regarding important issues. Compared with men, a greater percentage of Hispanic women rate immigration as very important to their vote for president, 69% versus 50% (Pew 2020). More Hispanic women also cite economic inequality as important to their vote for president at 59% versus 45% (ibid). Compared with U.S. voters overall, more Hispanic voters state that the United States compares poorly to other affluent countries in response to the pandemic 68% versus 59% (ibid). This statistic might suggest a slight distrust or hesitancy from Hispanic voters towards politicians and politics overall, which will be important to think about when it comes to potentially populist attitudes.

Lastly, I am connecting this demographic to my target interest of unions through education because this was important in the 2020 Presidential election where Biden had more support from Hispanic voters than Trump, but Trump won 41% of the Hispanic voters without a college-degree versus Biden's 31% (Pew 2020). Trump also held a majority of white non-college educated voters in 2020 with 66%, whereas Biden had just 31% (2020).

I will start by defining the partisanship changes the white-working class has undergone. In recent elections there has been a political trend of the movement of white working-class voters changing their partisanship from the Democratic to Republican party (Pew 2020). Pew defined

“working-class” as people who did not have a college degree and an income of \$30,000-\$74,999, which was in the middle-income bracket between incomes less than \$30,000 and higher than \$150,000 (ibid). In 2016 Clinton lost white voters without a college degree by 36 percentage points to Trump (ibid). In the 2018 midterms Democrats won voters in the highest income bracket by 20 percentage points and won the lowest income bracket by 28 percentage points (ibid). However, Democrats lost the white middle income voters to the Republicans by 10 percentage points (ibid). Even though there is a trend of white working-class voters moving towards the Republican party, this close loss between the parties in 2018 shows the changeable political preferences of this demographic (ibid).

Working Class Views and Support for Populism

One prominent example of right-wing populism was the election of Donald Trump in 2016. Trump rallied support through “us vs them” tactics of making an enemy out of wealthy elites. He also has populist personality traits of being unfiltered and taking on a machismo persona (Ostiguy 2016). Trump is an example of a right-wing populist, but there has also been increased support in left-wing candidates. Examples of left-wing populists include Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio Cortez. Their political beliefs differ from Trump, but their willingness to speak their mind and go against their party is similar. They also have created similar “in and out groups” of everyday Americans versus the top one percent of wealth holders.

A specific example of this shift towards right wing populism is the support for Trump in 2016. New York Times author Thomas Edsall describes how “diminished status has become a source of rage of both the left and right, sharpened by divisions over economic security and insecurity, geography and, ultimately, values.” (Edsall 2020). Robert Ford, a political science professor from the University of Manchester, identifies the “progressive monopolization of

politics by high-status professionals” as contributing to a decreased social status among people who responded well to Trump’s messaging (ibid).

Effect of Economics, Social Status, and Occupations on People’s Draw to Populism

The Effect of Economic Status on People’s Draw to Populism

Economic status is one potential reason for people’s draw to populism. The economic status of voters plays a role in whether people like populist attitudes from politicians.

Specifically, in the study “The Economic Origins of Authoritarian Values: Evidence from Local Trade Shocks in the United Kingdom,” the authors found that towns negatively impacted by trade with China were more likely to express authoritarian values (Ballard-Rosa et al. 2017).

This study establishes a link between economic distress and traditionally right-wing values but still leaves the question of why cultural appeals from the right are drawing more support than economic appeals from the left if people are concerned about their economic status. If people, and in particular union workers are concerned with their economic status, why then are they drawn to cultural appeals from right instead of economic appeals from the left?

Autor’s study, “In Importing Political Polarization? The Electoral Consequences of Rising Trade Exposure,” also evaluates how the economic status of people affects their interest in populist candidates. In this study, the authors examined the origin of polarization in United States politics. Specifically, they studied the media habits of districts where local labor markets had increased trade competition with China since 2000 (Autor, et al. 2016, 3140). They determined ideological shifts by tracking the media habits of people in these towns. For example, they saw increased viewership of Fox News with regions more exposed to import competition (3142). They saw a shift towards right- and left-wing populism, but they determined that predominantly white districts negatively affected by trade tended to become ideologically more

conservative and districts with a larger minority population tended to shift more to the left (3177). However, they also found from all of the districts the most legislative seats gained were by Republicans, and moderate Democrats suffered the most losses (ibid). They concluded with strong, but not definitive, evidence that ideological shifts in regions negatively affected by trade contributed to the polarization in the 2016 presidential election (3139).

The Effect of Subjective Social Status on People's Draw to Populism

One way to determine the reason for support of populism is to study how people see themselves in their community and society in general. Gidron and Hall determined people's subjective social status by having participants place themselves on an 11-point social ladder after they were told the scale represented the social hierarchy in their community (Gidron and Hall, 2019, 11). They also used various demographic information about the participants, such as age and type of job, to make a distinction between subjective social status and objective socioeconomic status (14). Gidron and Hall determined that there was a positive correlation between people feeling socially marginalized and voting for radical parties (27). They also noted that people who feel marginalized for economic reasons might be more drawn to the left than people who feel marginalized for cultural or social reasons, who tend to go to the right. This finding differs from Ballard-Rosa et al.'s study, which saw economic issues aligning with authoritarian or right-wing values (8).

Similarly, in "The New Minority," by Justin Gest, Gest evaluated the social status of study participants from Youngstown, Ohio, and East London by presenting them with four circles with the innermost circle representing the most "central" society and the outermost being the least central (Gest 159). He also asked participants which other groups were in the circles (eg, women, Muslims, etc.) (ibid) The goal of this study was not only to determine how people

understood the current social hierarchy of their society and their communities but also to gain the historical narrative from participants about how they saw social hierarchies changing and their explanations for the change (ibid). He found that people who indicated a significant change in the structure of social hierarchies “were more likely to participate in anti-system political behavior that used undemocratic tactics to express political preferences;” in other words, these participants were more likely to support a populist candidate or someone who held extreme values (Gest 169).

After Trump’s election, Kathy Cramer evaluated the social status term she coined “rural consciousness” (Cramer, 2016, 5). In her book, “Politics of Resentment,” she examines support for right-wing populism by looking at cultural and economic appeals together (ibid). She determined that the two main factors causing people to vote for conservatives over liberals were the divide between urban and rural communities and the power of resentment (ibid). She coined the term “rural consciousness’ to describe people’s feelings that the interests of rural communities are regularly overlooked by politicians (ibid). Consequently, people from rural communities than grew to resent those from urban areas who they felt were taking resources from rural areas (12). She explains how economics and cultural issues have become intertwined for people to be “who is getting what and who deserves it” (7). This could be one answer for why right-wing populism has been more successful overall and specifically more successful in gaining the support of traditional trades workers. If these workers are seeing cultural appeals and economic appeals as combined, then purely economic appeals from the left would not be as meaningful to this group of people. The resentment that Cramer described was from a geographic perspective of rural people feeling resentful towards urban people; however, this same logic could be applied to people feeling resentful towards different occupations. People are

judged by not only how much money they make but also by the perceived prestige of the job. Thinking about my two groups I anticipate that custodians might express some resentment towards other occupations as custodians are not always respected for their work, and teachers could feel more respected than the custodians because their job requires a college education and often, they also have graduate-level degrees. However, during COVID we also saw teachers not being respected for their work and so this could have created or brought up a similar resentment that the custodians might feel.

The Effect of Unionization of Occupation on Political Beliefs

Paul Frymer and Jacob Grumbach's study called "Labor Union and White Racial Politics" added the layer of the unionization of occupation as to why someone might lean politically one way or the other (Frymer and Grumbach, 2021, 225). They not only looked at the effect of unionization of people's political beliefs, but they also determined how unionization affected people's feelings towards other races (233). The background of their study explained the close alliance of unions and the Democratic party, which, in turn, leads to union members being more exposed to Democratic ideals and candidates that could have an effect on their political leanings (228). Frymer and Grumbach specifically wanted to test the effect of unionization on people's feelings towards other races (225).

Their data were from the Cooperative Congressional Election Survey (CCES) and the Voter Study Group (VSG) (230). Both data sets reported current union membership status of respondents and the CCES also reported past union membership so that time could be included when addressing whether a relationship between union membership and racial resentment exists (ibid). To measure racial resentment, they presented respondents with two statements: one about non-black ethnic groups working hard without special favors to be successful and the other about

how slavery and discrimination have created situations for Black people where it is hard to make their way out of the lower class, and respondents were asked to rank the degree to which they agreed with both of these statements on a scale from 1-5 (ibid).

They found that white union members were less racially resentful than white non-union members by between 4.7% and 6.3% (233). They also found that the majority of white union members primarily voted for the Democratic Party candidate in the past three elections, whereas the majority of white non-union members voted for the Republican candidate (ibid). Having past union membership was also associated with reduced racial resentment and losing one's union membership was largely unrelated to racial resentment (233 and 234). In terms of my study Frymer and Grumbach's article did not distinguish between what type of occupation their non-union and union members held, but in their discussion of the organization and structure of unions they did mention teachers' unions as an example of union being open to political discourse, as many of them, including the Iowa State Teachers Union, have political action chairs (229). Specifically, they discussed how the Iowa State Teachers Union has a political action chair assigned to "organize, engage, and communicate with members around election issues" (229).

In the conclusion, they did briefly allude to the difference in political leaning and feelings of racial resentment being dependent on what types of union jobs people have (237). They did acknowledge that despite most unions leaning liberal that some unions like prison guards and police from public sector unions, and private sector craft and construction trades unions can have more conservative values (ibid). Their study did not distinguish between the occupations that participants held but given this potential distinction between how different unionized people feel I wanted my study to have participants both from teachers' unions and traditional blue-collar workers' unions.

Chapter 3: The Study

Methodology

Study Groups

The two sample groups chosen for this study were traditional trade workers and K-12 public school teachers in the Boston area. The focus was trade workers because this is the group that has shifted in political affiliation with teachers as a comparison group; teachers provided a good juxtaposition to trade workers as they are unionized but do not seem to have had this same political shift.

I interviewed people from three unions: the Boston Teachers Union (BTU; teachers), the Brookline Educators Union (BEU; teachers), and 32 BJ SEIU, a local branch of the Service Employees International Union (trade workers). BTU is nationally affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), AFT Massachusetts, Massachusetts AFL-CIO, and the Greater Boston Labor Council (GBLC) (Boston Teacher's Union). The BEU is a subgroup of Massachusetts Teachers Association (Brookline Educator's Union). The number of members vary greatly, with BTU representing 10,000 teachers and other professionals within the school district (BTU) and the BEU representing 1200 members (BEU). These unions not only differ in size, but also in environment, with Boston being an urban setting and Brookline being urban, but much smaller than Boston. With these differences also comes differing issues with contract negotiations and needs of the teachers in each of these unions. The people I interviewed in the trade divisions of my project were custodians at Harvard University. Harvard custodians are unionized under 32BJ-SEIU.

For the recruitment of participants, I emailed the president of the Boston Teachers Union and she put my request in their newsletter. I also found teachers through a connection with a BU

professor. The teachers were primarily from Boston and Brookline and covered a multitude of grades and specialties. For the trade workers I emailed the different maintenance and facilities departments around campus. I also emailed trades unions in Boston covering a wide range of trades such as: plumbers, electricians, police, etc. The participants were Harvard custodians from 32BJ SEIU obtained through a personal connection.

Website/Social Media Analysis

For each website I reviewed the “about us” or “mission statement” parts of the website to determine the messaging of each of the unions. After analyzing the messaging of the unions, I looked at the articles linked about the unions to determine what issues the union saw as important. I compared these articles to general articles written about each union. I also analyzed any graphics that the websites had.

In terms of social media, I primarily looked at Instagram, but I realized that many of the posts were the same across social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. With the social media pages, I looked for patterns and trends across the various posts and specifically noted any populist type messaging and messaging around strong union loyalty and unity. The goal of analyzing the messages of these unions was to then compare these messages to what actual union members had to say about unions and politics to see how they compared to each other.

Interviews

I asked a variation of 50 questions depending on occupation and political preference of each participant. The interview ran from 1-2 hours depending on how long the participants’ answers were and if I needed to ask follow-up questions for clarification. The interviews were semi-structured with a set of questions that I then asked follow-ups depending on how the

conversation as going. The interviews took place on Zoom. Most of the interviews were recorded, but I also took notes throughout the interviews.

Each participant was asked: (1) the setting in which they lived (urban, rural, or suburban setting), (2) their highest level of education, (3) the highest level of education of each of their parents, (4) their parents' political party affiliation, (5) their political party affiliation, (6) whether their parents' jobs were unionized, and (7) whether politics were discussed regularly in their houses growing up. These questions gave a broad picture of the political and educational background of the participants that could be used to evaluate their thoughts on their jobs and the unions of which they are a part of (see Appendix).

An important factor in answering the question of what effect unionization had on participants' political views and why certain unionized industries have had a distinct shift from Democratic support to Republican support is determining if there is an emotional component to how participants feel towards their jobs or political beliefs. To determine each participant's subjective social status, I followed Gidron and Hall's method of having participants place themselves on a ten-rung ladder with one representing the bottom of society and ten representing the top (Gidron and Hall, 2019, 14). I did not tell participants how the top or the bottom of society should be defined to allow them to share whether they thought wealth, education, race, etc. was the best determinant of social hierarchy. The first question I asked was broad in terms of the definition of "society," but then I asked participants specifically where they would place themselves in their town, state, or nationally.

The remaining sections of the interview covered specific union-based questions about participants' level of involvement with their unions and questions about their occupations, and an extensive section with a series of questions about participants' current political beliefs and

opinions of well-known politicians. These sections primarily aimed to hear the language the people used when describing specific politicians or the state of politics in the United States. I tracked patterns of common populist phrases such as referring to an out-group or referencing a certain political style or persona that a politician uses.

Interviews

Participant Demographics

A total of six teachers and 2 custodians were interviewed. All of the teachers had a graduate degree. In addition, 66% reported that at least one of their parents had a graduate degree with 33% reporting that both of their parents had a graduate degree. In contrast, both custodians had high-school level degrees and neither of their parents had graduate-level degrees. In terms of the subjective social status people with lower levels of education, and who have parents with lower levels of education might see themselves at the bottom of society and therefore be more drawn to populism. Education is also important because as discussed previously Trump won a majority of white and hispanic non-college educated voters over Biden. This suggests that the custodians without college degrees might lean more towards the right than the teachers.

Participant Subjective Social Status

Subjective social status was measured on a 10-point scale. Not everyone was willing to give numeric values to their status and instead said things like “high” and “low.” To analyze these responses with the number responses I decided that 0-4 would be considered low, 5 would be middle, and 6-10 would be high. Scores from all participants are shown in Figure 1.

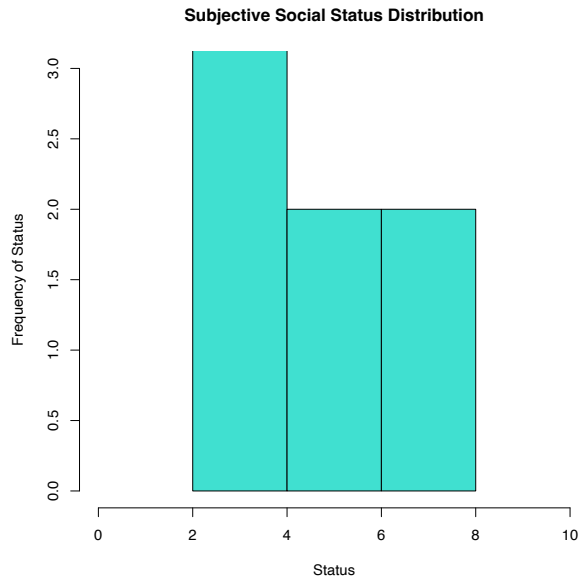


Figure 1: Subjective Social Status of All Participants

The mean score for teachers is 5.33 which suggests that there was an even spread of high and low numbers of subjective social status among the teachers interviewed. The custodians both were ranked at a 2 and so the mean of both the custodians and teachers was 4.5. The data are skewed right, but the sample size is not large enough to determine if the subjective social status of teacher and custodians is on average low.

Because parental education differed among the participants, I compared the subjective social status between participants with at least one parent with a graduate degree (Figure 2) with those who did not have a parent with a graduate degree (Figure 3).

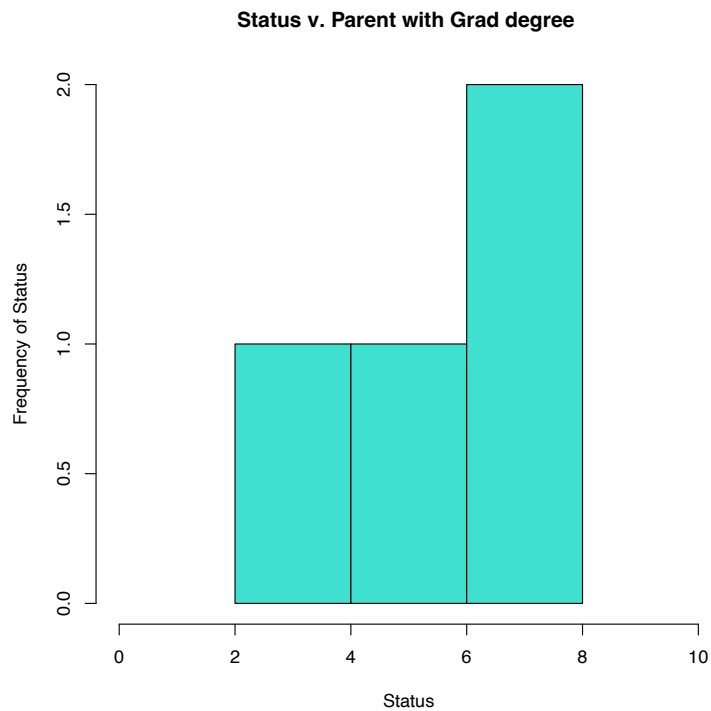


Figure 2. Subjective Social Status of Participants with at Least One Parent with a Graduate Degree

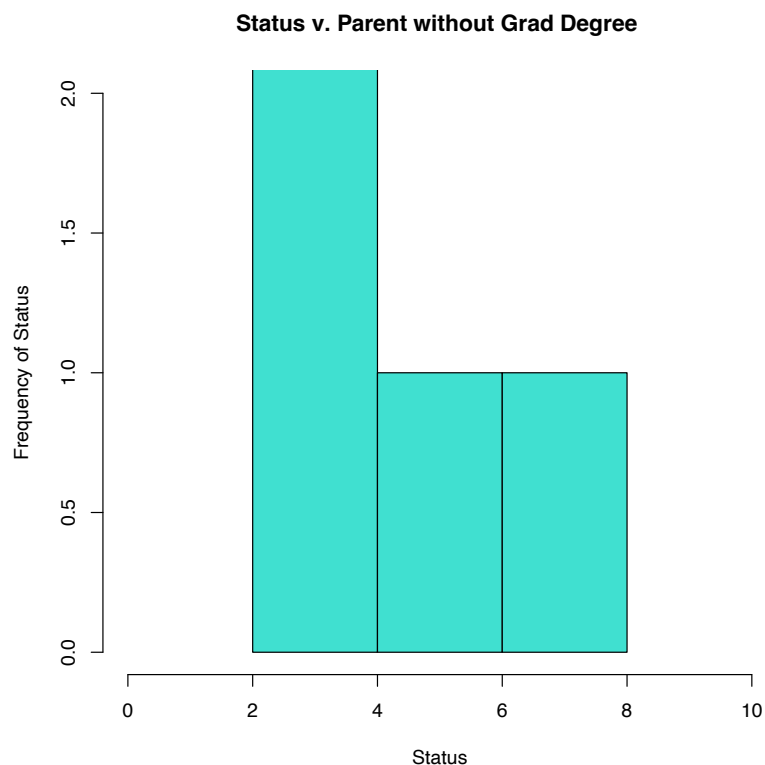


Figure 3. Subjective Social Status of Participants where neither parent had a graduate degree

Both sample sizes are again small; however, the data suggest that having a parent with a graduate degree might contribute to a higher subjective social status as Figure 2 is skewed left. The even smaller number of participants who did not have a parent with a graduate degree makes it hard to interpret whether having parents without graduate degrees affects subjective social status.

Subjective social status might also depend on the level of degree achieved by participants' parents (e.g., high school vs bachelor's vs graduate degree); however, the small sample size prevented this analysis.

Because this study was interested specifically in the role unions play in how people feel, I also analyzed subjective social status in participants who had at least one parent with a union job (Figure 4) versus those who did not have a parent with a union job (Figure 5).

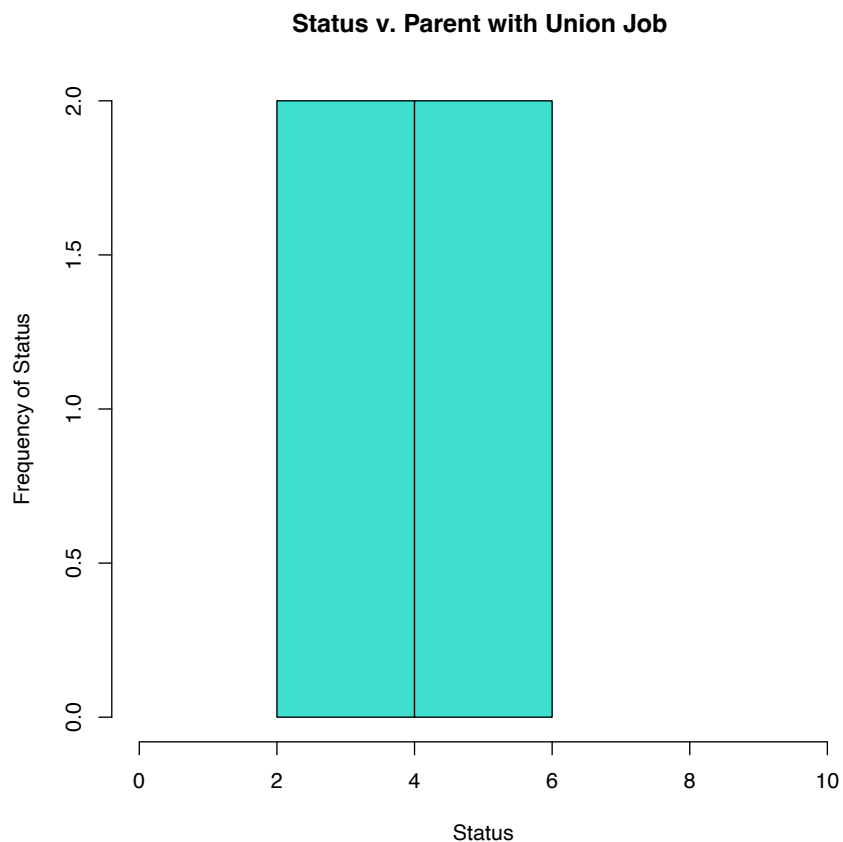


Figure 4. Subjective Social Status of Participants with at Least One Parent with a Unionized Job

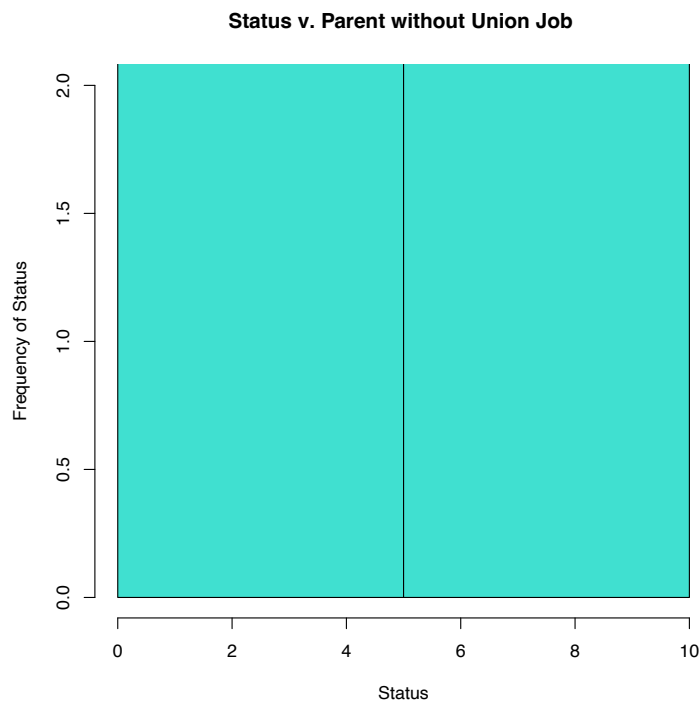


Figure 5. Subjective Social Status of Participants Whose Parents Did Not Have Unionized Jobs

Although there were only two participants who had parents with a unionized job, there were also a few participants who were not sure if their parents' job was unionized. So, despite the fact that the sample size was small, comments surrounding parental involvement in unions from participants suggests that even if their parents had unionized jobs, unions were not an integral part of their parents' identity. Figure 5 does show that the maximum subjective social status of participants without a parent with a unionized job is one point higher than those who do, but the sample is too small to determine if having a parent with a unionized job affects people's subjective social status.

Interview Analysis

General Populist Attitudes

Four participants, the two custodians (a man and a woman working at Harvard University) and two teachers (a man who is a member of BEU and a woman who is a member of BTU), who seemed the closest to expressing populist attitudes. Specifically, these four participants echoed populist sentiments of distrusting politicians in general regardless of party affiliation. One teacher identified as an independent and the other was strongly Democratic. However, in the section where I asked participants to define the ideals or mission statements of each party, they both discussed how “both parties are beholden to large corporations and monetary donations for elections.” Both custodians said that they would be independents and that they do not trust politicians because they do not follow through with their promises.

These sentiments from the teachers and custodians suggest a distrust in politics and politicians that is common in populism. Although not as strongly, comments—for example about Alexandria Ocasio Cortez’s (AOC) Met Gala dress—from other teachers suggested populist leanings. Specifically, at the 2022 Met Gala AOC, who could be considered a populist left leader given that her messaging focuses on being for everyday Americans and painting the “top one percent” as the enemy, trended on various social media sites for her dress, which was all white with red lettering on the back of the dress that said, “Tax the Rich.” That participant liking this bold statement from AOC suggests that they do not only like the populist messaging from AOC but also like her willingness to make statements like this at an event such as the Met Gala, which is attended by wealthy elites.

Feelings Towards the Democratic and Republican Parties

When asked how they would define the Democratic and Republican parties the two mentioned above as expressing populist views mentioned that both parties were still closely tied to corporations even if Democrats act like they are not. However, the Brookline teacher said that he felt that the Democratic Party was more for the working class than the Republican Party is, even though many working-class people have been voting for Republicans.

Despite the mostly critical views of the parties expressed by these teachers, the other teachers responded as I expected, broadly seeing the principles of the Democratic party as “good” and the principles of the Republican party as “bad.” One Brookline educator, who, as we will discuss later, voted for Ralph Nader, defined the Democratic party as being more policy-based than the Republican party and said that the Republicans were “completely off the rails, no longer legitimate, all about power and division.” Another Brookline educator mentioned that she felt that the Democrats “were for the people,” whereas the Republican party sees government regulation as a problem and has issues of white supremacy. In terms of government regulation, the fourth Brookline teacher discussed how she felt that Republicans were against government regulations but are hypocritical when it comes to issues like abortion where they do support regulation.

When connecting the views of these teachers back to the literature, they align with Frymer and Grumbach’s assessment that union members tend to be more Democratic because unions align with the Democratic party (Frymer Grumbach 2019). They also align with the feelings of racial tolerance found by Frymer and Grumbach from participants who were unionized and white versus not unionized and white, as the participant who mentioned the Republican party as having an issue of white supremacy is a white, unionized public-school

teacher. One of the Brookline teachers said that she is a part of a group called “Courageous Educators” that discusses how to talk about race and racial justice in their classrooms, again aligning with Frymer and Grumbach’s findings.

Effect of TPS Status on Participant Political Beliefs

Both custodians I interviewed were El Salvadorian immigrants who are here on Temporary Protected Status (TPS). The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services explains that TPS status can be designated to countries “due to conditions in the country that temporarily prevent the country's nationals from returning safely, or in certain circumstances, where the country is unable to handle the return of its nationals adequately” (USCIS). Individuals from countries with this designation are then able to apply for TPS status through U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services to live and work in the U.S. without fear of being deported (ibid). When Trump revoked TPS status during his presidency, they both got involved with organizing to get this status back. Because of their work in immigrant rights, both participants had interactions with Bernie Sanders, Ayanna Pressley, and Ed Markey, all left-wing populist politicians. One participant described how Ayanna Pressley and Ed Markey had both written letters in support of her union to Harvard.

When asked about specific politicians, however, the participants’ answers varied from each other. For example, when asked about AOC, one participant said that he liked that she was progressive and liked her tweets, indicating that he may be drawn to the populist attitude. The other participant stated that she wanted “more.” When I asked what she meant, it seemed that she wanted AOC to be more of a champion for immigrants than she already was. Even though these responses varied, they could both potentially indicated populist leanings. The participant who specifically mentioned liking her tweets seems to indicate a leaning toward populist attitudes of

speaking off the cuff and not being afraid to anger some people, aligning with populist attitudes as defined by Ostiguy and Roberts, but the participant who just stated that she wanted “more” might lean this way too. Given populist politicians often hold extreme views on the left and right, wanting “more” seems to go together with this aspect of populism. She seemed to want AOC to be more of an outspoken leader for immigrants. However, this assessment of AOC from this custodian also differs from how Ostiguy and Roberts see left-wing populism being expressed. They see cultural appeals as occupying more of the cultural right, and economic appeals occupying the populist left, in the case AOC she is on the left, but often uses both appeals (Ostiguy and Roberts, 2016, 26). It is interesting therefore that this participant is focused more on AOC’s personality and less on her economic policy ideas. This could be from a lack of knowledge surrounding AOC’s policies, or because this participant’s identity as an organizer leads her to see being vocal about the immigrant community as an integral part in their rallies for immigrant rights.

Populist Interest Expressed through Discussion of Unions

In the interviews with the teachers regarding their unions, all the participants indicated that they were loyal to their union even if they didn’t agree with every decision and that they generally felt supported by their union. In many of the conversations a slight populist sentiment emerged of “us versus them” regarding teachers and the superintendents or central office, which was unexpected; I had not expected, as mentioned above, the teachers to have populist leaning. I expected the teachers to have a higher social status than they indicated, and that this would then cause them to not express populist attitudes. However, they teachers did give some lower social status numbers, and then also indicated some populist leanings.

Specifically, the Brookline teachers discussed the issues they were having with their current contract negotiations. They reported that administration was asking more of them in terms of hours but then was not compensating with more pay. Two of the Brookline teachers also mentioned that their salary and pay raises do not match the standard of living in Brookline. These sentiments were also echoed in the social media posts for BEU. The BTU teachers discussed how even though the union members were mostly Democrats, there was still a divide between “old-school” and more progressive ways of teaching and viewing the role of teachers. This came up during a discussion of critical race theory; all teachers said that they feel like there would not be pushback for incorporating CRT into their curriculums, but that it may not be a priority for central office. One BEU teacher, who had held roles in both curriculum development and teaching, mentioned a slight divide between administrative positions like curriculum coordinator and office managers and teachers. She mentioned that the administrative group was slightly less Democratic than the teachers, and that sometimes there was a feeling among teachers that administration did not know what it is like to be a teacher. She felt that she could help bridge that gap as a teacher and administrator.

One of the custodians echoed a similar sense of “us versus them” in her role as a custodian versus Harvard. She spoke about the collective power that unions have (“management respects you more if you are in a union”) and that she has taken an active role in teaching her colleagues about the power that the union has and how the union can help them. She organized a rally of her fellow custodians to help get a new contract passed that included pay raises, more affordable health care, and more opportunities for full-time employment.

There is always going to be a natural divide between employers and employees, but the interviewee’s assertion of getting respect from management through her union could be a slightly

populist sentiment. It is not just that there is divide, but that there is an unfair power divide that she needs the union to address. Specifically, she explained how she got involved with organizing in her union (all quotes have been edited only for grammatical clarity):

“I used to work for the medical school {sic} over there was a good place to work and when I moved to Cambridge to law school I suffered bullying for being a Muslim and being Spanish and most of the workers there were Spanish from El Salvador like me, and lot of people they don’t have the education to respect each person and they make a lot of jokes about my religion and also I was sick and they joke and I asked the company to give training to the workers to respect each other and respect the different beliefs for people because people we need to respect each other what I found out is they didn’t hear me they just started giving me a hard time because I spoke out about that. Then the organizer for the union, a woman like me, helped me talk about the benefits from the union and know my rights and this helped me to work for her.”

She also referred to herself as an “invisible worker,” saying, “Because as an immigrant, as a custodian like we are invisible workers no people care about us because you know we are a people like always we clean, and we feel like people don’t care.” She followed this comment by describing how getting involved with the community has empowered her, “but when I got involved with the community and I also started working away from Harvard fighting for my own campaign because I am a TPS (Temporary protected Status) holder... When we organize for the community, we meet with political people like senate and representatives in our community and in Washington D.C. believe me this has helped me a lot to continue work in the union and my workplace.”

These sentiments relate back to the idea of subjective social status and how the “lower” down people feel in society, the more likely they are to express populist attitudes. In the case of this custodian, she states that she feels invisible and that she has to earn respect from her management. This connects to the populist attitudes she expressed, such as distrusting politicians. She explained how she felt empowered one time when she had had a conversation with a Harvard professor where the participants said she educated this professor on immigration because she “needed the people’s support.” Her use of the word “people” to refer to a Harvard professor was interesting because this person could have been seen as an elite, but to her “the people” was anyone who was not a representation of the administration at Harvard in the case of her job or a politician who was not helping her get her immigration status back. Instead of seeing the people as her TPS group versus everyone else this participant saw the “us” as more inclusive and diverse group of people.

When the other custodian discussed his union at Harvard, he shifted the conversation to discussing himself versus his colleagues. He discussed educating his colleagues on how the union should not be used for discussing disputes between co-workers. He also mentioned how he felt that some of his co-workers complained too much and were not hard workers. His focus on work ethic could indicate a slight conservative leaning, which he did seem to have when discussing his feelings towards Trump; although he has a populist attitude when it came to his distrust of politicians in general, in this case he saw himself as an individual and not an “us,” but this still could fit into a right-wing populist narrative. He could be seeing the “us versus them” as people who work hard versus people who rely on the government for money, which is a common narrative of right-wing populists.

The Trump Question

None of the teachers liked Trump, and many indicated that they thought he was a danger to democracy. One of the custodians echoed the same sentiments as the teachers, but the other one seemed like he might have liked Trump more than he disclosed in the interview. This participant seemed to care a lot about people respecting him and his image so he might have been holding back his political views when he was talking to a college student from a liberal university for fear of being judged or fear that his words would be twisted to tell a biased story in the paper. Regardless of whether he liked Trump his interview did stand out from the other interviews because he didn't necessarily like Trump but seemed to disagree with all the criticism that Trump got. His response to Trump was a little hard to follow, potentially because he didn't want to reveal himself as liking Trump, but some important highlights from it were that he felt that Trump sort had some sort of mental illness:

“I think he suffers a kind of illness in his mind. I don't think he was too bad. The person who was really bad was Stephen Miller. He had the power and talents to persuade Trump and plant the black seed in Trump's mind and so in the end Trump looks bad... He is a smart guy but as a President, he could not control himself and his emotions go beyond his professional position.”

This conversation was interesting from a populist perspective because even though this participant claimed to not believe in politics, it seems like he has some level of respect for Trump. This is even more interesting given that Trump was generally anti-immigrant, but this participant has removed Trump from blame and placed it on his advisor. This is interesting given that the participant is an immigrant and so it seemed like he needed to justify liking trump by blaming his anti-immigration policies on someone else in his administration. This reaction could

indicate a preference for populist-right attitudes from the participant given that he seemed to like Trump but maybe felt that he was not the right person to be the president.

Identity Politics

One pattern observed across the participants but more noticeably with the female participants was the mention of their own identities in relation to the politicians they supported. When one participant, for example, talked about Ayanna Presley, she talked about her fondly and said that “her story reflects my own and she always listens to us when we make a request.” Similarly, regarding AOC, this custodian said: “I feel she (AOC) is good, but she needs to speak up more for immigrants. She needs to do more. I want to see her be more of a voice for the immigrant community.” It seemed to her that AOC’s and Ayanna Presley’s identities as women of color, and AOC’s as being from an immigrant community, should directly correlate to their policies regarding issues like immigrant rights.

One teacher liked Bernie Sanders but felt that because of his identity he could not fully understand people’s concerns surrounding gender and sexuality. Another teacher mentioned that she didn’t like Bernie supporters because she felt that they were very masculine and specifically had a “bro-mentality,” referring to how many Bernie supporters were male and were accused of bullying of Elizabeth Warren online throughout the 2020 presidential campaigns (Beauchamp 2020). This participant also specifically said that she didn’t like Bernie because he was populist.

One of the custodians mentioned relating to Biden because he (Biden) had experienced suffering by losing his wife and daughter. He also said that he could relate to Biden’s train commute to D.C. he also takes public transportation to work. He mentioned that Biden had not fulfilled his promises to TPS holder yet, but he discussed how he knows that Biden has a lot of constraints and that he still has time to fulfill his promises. I think that is interesting from a

populist perspective because Biden is not recognized as a populist leader like Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump are. He generally holds more moderate views and doesn't use the rhetoric of "the people" versus "the one percent" that we hear from Sanders. However, this participant's response and his feelings of a connection with Biden suggests that there is something populist about the relationship between this participant and Biden. Biden also does have some populist characteristics since as often bringing up his middle-class background to appeal to everyday American, speaking off the cuff, and his language is not as academic or elitist as many of his colleagues.

Populist Attitudes without Political Extremism

One teacher from Brookline stood out from the other interviews because his opinions seemed to be populist, but without political extremism. He didn't give as much details as other teachers, but he described liking AOC but not really following her and liking Sanders but not always agreeing with his economic decisions. He also fundraised for Biden's campaign in 2020. However, he did mention that he felt Clinton could be elitist, and he discussed voting for a third-party candidate, Ralph Nader in 2000 instead of Al Gore. He mentioned the environment as an important issue to him prior to discussing Ralph Nader and so this could indicate that he is someone who votes based on specific issues rather than party ideology. The teacher who expressed the populist attitude of not liking that both parties were beholden to corporation also voted for Ralph Nader in this election and yet is an independent.

People are always going to have a mix of ideological views, but it is interesting that given that populism is often defined as the radical versions of either party, whether that be culturally radical or economic, that for these participants their populist views and radical/progressives views did not match. In the case of the BEU teacher who voted for Ralph Nader, for example,

this suggests a leaning towards progressiveness as Nader ran as a green party candidate in 2000, but then he did not seem as interested in the progressive messaging from AOC and Sanders.

Union Communications: Website and Instagram

BEU Instagram

The first post of the BEU Instagram page is from June 11, 2020. The fact that this Instagram page was seemingly created, or at least updated during the pandemic, to post frustration about how teachers were being treated suggests that there was already a growing resentment between teachers and the media that was exacerbated during the pandemic. This is an example of a COVID-related post:



Figure 7: BEU Instagram Post July 10, 2020

This post addresses the feeling of resentment that many teachers had during the pandemic where they were not treated well by society for the work that they do. From this post, and others on the page, suggests that a strong sense of teacher loyalty to each other and loyalty to the union versus people that don't understand what it is like to be a teacher was probably already present before the pandemic. This was also evident in a more meme-like post of a teacher carrying lots of things in his hands that were labelled "teaching content, holding kids accountable, keeping students safe, taking care of our own mental and physical health, etc." with the title, "Teaching during a pandemic."

What is interesting about this post is that it was a re-post from an account called @teachertrauma, which has posts from before the pandemic. Most of the posts are humorous and focus on the relationship between teachers and their students; however, there were a few that mentioned administration and parents. One was a meme that stated, "Me every time I check my inbox and seen an email from 'that' parent" and another one said, "Me when a colleague says that the principal came in for a walk through the afternoon before a vacation break" and then the response was "No one deserves what happened to you." These posts are still on the humorous side as opposed to the posts dealing with COVID, but they still show a sense of teacher loyalty against an "other." This account suggests that there was already a potential resentment, or at least collective understanding among teachers, that they were not always well understood by non-teachers, long before the pandemic began. The pandemic seems to have made the resentment that teachers were already feeling worse or gave teachers a way to connect and discuss the resentment they were all individually feeling.

The Brookline Educator Union's Instagram page also had many posts of rallies and canvassing events of teachers trying to get a fairer contract for themselves. One demand was for a

pay raise, stressing how a 1% pay raise is not enough especially during a pandemic. Another post was from a Brookline educators rally that showed a participant holding up a sign about how little free time teachers have and specifically how they are only paid 45 minutes to grade, attend meetings, make copies, respond to emails, call parents, post lessons, fill out forms, and plan lessons. The lack of paid time to get other work done outside of the classroom was brought up by some of the Brookline teachers during the interviews. Specifically, they mentioned that because their contract is in flux, they are protesting by only working within their contract hours until the contract is adjusted.

Another post from the BEU Instagram page was of a poster that was titled, “You do NOT have to go to college to make a good living...” and then had a series of trade jobs such as plumbers, crane operator, wind turbines, etc. and their respective hourly rates listed below the title. The bottom of the poster said, “Enroll in a TRADE School.” The fact that a teachers’ union highlights trade jobs that are often unionized is interesting because these two career paths seem like they are completely different from each other. Given that in populism there is a clear sense of “us vs them,” it was surprising to see that teachers were including other trade workers in their “us.” The education gap between members of teachers’ unions and those of trade unions is often large, but in this case BEU seems to be seeing themselves in alignment with trade workers despite the differences in their training and jobs.

Some of the posts from BEU were political and highlighted some resentment from teachers about how they are seen by politicians. There was a post about Governor Charlie Baker and how he thinks that teachers only administer MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment Systems) and annoy him by asking to be treated like people, but on the “What Teachers Do” portion of the post there were a series of roles including: teaching, counseling,

mentoring, planning, grading, inspiring, etc. Even though this post is specifically aimed at Charlie Baker given he is a spokesperson for Massachusetts if this the rhetoric he is using around teachers than it is likely that members of the public also feel similarly about the roles of teachers.

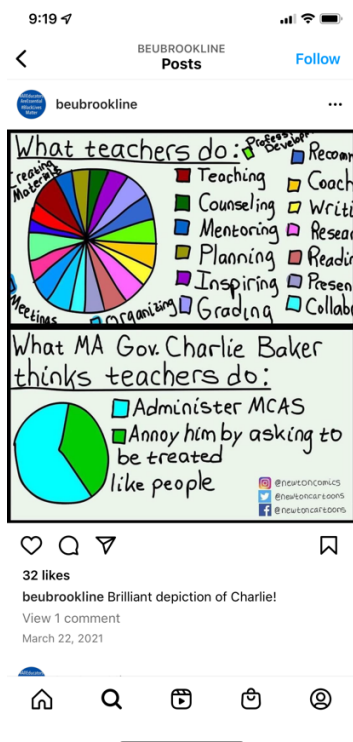


Figure 6: BEU Instagram Post from March 28, 2021

This post shows some of the resentment that teachers feel towards how the media and politicians perceive them, which could lead to a strong sense of union loyalty; however, it could also be polarizing for teachers who do not agree politically with the union. Specifically splitting up a post to have teachers one side and a politician on another is a visual depiction of the populist “us versus them” mentality. A similar, but positive post about politicians was a tribute to John Lewis and Ruth Bader Ginsburg that said, “We owe them both some good trouble.” The comment from BEU underneath the post said, “We fight on for them. #voteblue2020”. This post is important because the union is specifically telling its members how to vote, but instead of being against John Lewis and Ruth Bader Ginsburg (as the previous post was against Charlie Baker), this post

is specifically letting them in to this “us” of being a teacher and telling teachers to rally for them. It could also be a sign of teachers’ feeling resentment from society as they are aligning themselves with people who were trailblazers in their field and early on in their careers might not have been respected by their colleagues.

BEU: Website

One example of material posted on the BEU website was a March 2020 newsletter that primarily highlighted grievance and negotiation meetings (BEU 2020). Prominently on the first page of the newsletter were the words “No Contract = No Respect!” side by side with a calendar of BEU events that were mostly about negotiations (ibid). The newsletter also had a section about the healthcare and reminded people of the open enrollment period when they could switch their health benefits (ibid). The third page was an advice column called “Should I Contact the Grievance Team,” where teachers could anonymously submit their concerns (ibid). This feature’s story was a teacher asking if he/she should contact the grievance team about a mandatory meeting during the lunch period (ibid). The teacher’s concern seemed less about angering his/her boss and more that the BEU would disclose his/her name and create conflict within the school (ibid). The newsletter as it was put out by BEU generally paints a positive picture of the union and what it can do for teachers. However, it is clear that tensions between the union and the school district exist, with the various references to negotiations; the teacher’s concern about the grievance committee might even suggest that teachers fear the power of their union.

Another section on the BEU website was the negotiations blog. In each of the proposals there were two-unit sections (ibid). Unit A seemed to be the teachers’ part of the union and Unit B was admins (ibid). In each of the proposals the sections were divided into Comp and

Employment, Conditions of Professional Service (breaks, days off, etc.), Leaves of Absence, Evaluation and Supervision, Just Cause, Conditions of Development and Implementation of Educational Programs, Grievances Procedure, BEU Rights and Privileges, Reductions in Force, Sexual Harassment, Duration (ibid). Both contracts have expired as of 2019, which was referenced in many of my interviews with Brookline educators (ibid).

In my interviews I got two automatic email responses from teachers stating that they would only respond to emails within their working hours. I then got to hear from these teachers about this, and they explained how because their contract is still being negotiated, they are being encouraged by their union to take a stand: only being in the classroom during their stated classroom hours and only communicating with parents within their stated communication hours. One teacher discussed how he felt that this might be at the expense of students as the teachers now can't stay after school to be available for students or have meetings after school, but that he hopes it will help end the contracts negotiations. The themes that came up in the Brookline meetings surrounded the administration asking more from teachers in terms of hours and responsibilities without compensating with extra pay. Multiple teachers also discussed how it is very expensive to live in Brookline and their salary does not match this standard of living.

BTU: Instagram

The BTU Instagram account notably has more posts than the BEU Instagram overall and the included posts dating from before the pandemic. Many of the posts focus on contracts and what it is like to be a teacher. Several posts had to do with a contract-organizing campaign called "Show Our Students Some Love," in which teachers asked students to comment on what they thought they deserved in their teachers' contract. Some examples on the posters in the photos were "Modern School Buildings," "Safe and Reliable Transportation," and "Inclusion Done

Right.” In these posts there is a strong sense of teacher unity, which is also joined with the students. In the “us versus them” framework, teachers and students are on the same side against, what seems to be the school board.

A post from November 2021 was a photo of a rally for Lydia Edwards for Massachusetts State Senate. The posters in the photo said, “Labor for Lydia,” directly relating to union loyalty. The post just before this was for election day and had a link to the full list of candidates and initiatives that BTU was supporting. Another was a photo from a rally for abortion justice highlighting that, “Abortion Is Healthcare, and Healthcare Is a Human Right.” These posts very clearly show BTU to be a left-partisan organization and, given the strong sense of union loyalty and pride in these posts as well, suggest that many BTU members would be inclined to support the political messaging of the union. The account also had several posts regarding other social justice issues such as posts about Black Lives Matter, supporting nurses during the pandemic, and supporting labor causes like hazard pay and the Fair Share Amendment for Massachusetts.

However, there were some teacher-specific posts that had to do with the conditions of teaching during a pandemic. There was one post showing a series of photos of teachers holding up signs with what they want from the city before they begin teaching again including testing and ventilation systems, and that the re-opening plan should be a collaboration between the community, teachers, and students. There was also a post that had a series of split photos comparing the Boston Public Schools (BPS) re-opening plan to the BTU re-opening plan where we see teachers at odds with the administration of BPS. Most of the complaints surrounded a lack of understanding about what was actually necessary to teach from BPS such as no plan for how ASL students will be accommodated when learning remotely.

BTU: Website

The BTU website had an article from early January 2022 when there was a BPS protest about the re-opening of schools during the omicron variant surge (Brace and Niezgoda, 2022). BPS students and teachers staged a walk-out to protest in person learning when over 1000 BPS staffers were out due to omicron (ibid). The superintendent alongside Governor Charlie Baker refused to close schools despite health risks and low attendance of students and staff (ibid).

Another COVID-19 related news article that was highlighted on the BTU website was an article discussing the heavy burden that school nurses are facing throughout the pandemic (Emanuel 2022). The WBUR article interviewed Lauren O'Malley-Singh, a nurse at Brighton High School (ibid). She explained that most of her job has become to give rapid COVID-19 tests to students and isolate students who test positive at school (ibid). This work of contact tracing and trying to find places for students to get vaccinated continues into her weekends without extra pay (ibid).

Finally, the BTU website highlighted a COVID-19 issue that was at the state level, when masks and tests were sent to Massachusetts teachers, and they were expired (Avashia 2022). All three of these issues touch on union related topic of safe working conditions and fair-compensation. Given COVID-19, teachers might have an increased reliance on their unions to protect them from these issues which also could lead to increased loyalty when it comes to the political preference of these unions.

To compare the union messaging to what was being said about the union I also looked at recent news articles about BTU. For example, another WBUR article focused on the superintendent of BPS stepping down from her role (Jung 2022). This article discusses how this announcement came shortly after BTU voted a vote of no confidence for Brenda Cassellius

regarding negotiating the re-opening of Boston schools during the pandemic (ibid.). Another WBUR article explained that BTU sued BPS over federal disability laws violated during the pandemic (Gorel 2022). And finally, a Boston Globe article connected BTU to politics and how BTU could influence the November Boston mayoral election (García 2021). Right before the election there was a need for a new contract for BTU, but the article discusses how neither candidate mentioned this contract in their campaigns because they didn't want to lose the union's vote (ibid.). The article also highlighted the fact that many contract negotiations happen behind closed doors even though the contract affects the public (ibid). This lack of transparency from unions and contract negotiations was also brought up by a Brookline teacher during one of my interviews. These issues focus on the power of BTU and unions in general, which might be why they are not directly featured on the BTU website.

One interview I did was with a BTU teacher who was very pro-union and had been actively involved with BTU on the Housing Justice Committee, Unafraid Educators, and School Counsel. She generally spoke positively about BTU but did mention a divide between more liberal members of the union and less liberal and more old-school members. She specifically mentioned not feeling heard or well represented by central office. Her concerns about not being heard and well-represented by central office could be connected to the Education Reform Act of 1993 in Massachusetts, which was brought up by one of my other BTU interviewees (Antonucci 1995). Under G.L. c. 71, [[section]] 41), principals could no longer participate in collective bargaining (ibid). The BTU teacher who brought up this law mentioned that she thought it was detrimental to the school system as it made principals side with superintendents rather than teachers. This divide between teachers and principals was expressed in some interviews aligning

with the populist phenomenon of “othering” by creating an outgroup of principals who are out of touch with teachers’ needs.

32BJ SEIU and HUCTW: Instagram and Twitter

32BJ SEIU has an Instagram and Twitter page. However, as the largest property service workers union in the country, it has a presence well beyond Boston or even Massachusetts with 175,000 members in 12 states and Washington D.C. The posts, therefore, are much more nationally focused. Given the regional nature of the two teachers unions, I chose to analyze the communications from the Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers (HUCTW) as a representative local union.

HUCTW has a social media presence including an Instagram and Twitter page. On its Instagram were a variety of posts indicating solidarity with other groups across the country fighting for equality justice. For example, there was a post in solidarity of the U.S. women soccer’s team equal pay settlement and a post with a New York Times article about the lawsuit against Harvard for ignoring sexual harassment claims about a professor. In terms of posts directly from HUCTW, a recent post had the slogan “Stronger Together,” “United We Stand, Divided We Fall,” and “No Justice No Peace” written in various languages. The post was specifically about a rally for a strong contract being hosted by 32BJ SEIU on Harvard’s campus. The protests happened over three days at three different locations on campus. There was also a re-posting of a tweet from Robert Reich, United States Secretary of Labor, criticizing Kellogg’s for replacing union workers who had gone on strike after workers had 80-hour work weeks, 16-hour shifts, and forced overtime. The post was encouraging people to boycott Kellogg’s showing a solidarity between labor unions across occupations.

On HUCTW's Twitter page there was a video from December 3, 2021, that had been posted by 32BJ SEIU that showed Harvard custodians gathering and rallying for better contracts; it was then reposted by SEIU'S president Mary Kay Henry. The purpose and rhetoric at the rally leaned to the populist-left, as one of the supporters at the rally was holding a document from Cambridge City Council holding Harvard accountable for how they treat their workers. Specifically, the document began by reminding Harvard that over 1,000 cleaners and security officers have kept Harvard clean and safe throughout the pandemic and the contract is about to expire; it then went into the finances of Harvard: how it is the wealthiest employer in Cambridge with a \$13 billion income, "maintaining financial assets of \$63 billion during fiscal year 2021." The document argues that with Harvard's financial standing it should be able to provide family-sustaining pay and benefits. The focus on Harvard as a wealthy institution shows populist-left leaning as it fits into the framework of everyday people, in this case cleaners and security officers, versus wealthy elites such as the Harvard administration. After discussing Harvard's background, the document shifted towards the people represented by 32BJ SEIU who they described as being mostly immigrants and people of color: people who "have shouldered an outsized share of the economic burden on their communities." This again is populist rhetoric of everyday people having economic struggles while wealthy elites live comfortably side-by-side these people.

32BJ SEIU and HUCTW Websites

32BJ SEIU began in 1934 by service workers who would assist in the function of elevators (32BJ SEIU). These workers' wages were low, and they were treated poorly, which is why they decided to organize (ibid). The website describes the organization as "Workers formed our union for the same reason workers always form unions: because banding together is the only

way to make jobs better.” However, as mentioned above, the 32BJ SEIU represents workers across multiple states and so the content of its website reflects that. Therefore, the website for HUCTW was used as a representative local comparator.

The HUCTW was ratified in 1989. The website states that, “One of our earliest slogans was ‘It’s not anti-Harvard to be pro-Union’ and that idea is still crucial to us today. We are dedicated to our work, and we want improvements to our jobs to be improvements to the University. HUCTW provided various graphics for members to use that included formats for posters, desktop backgrounds, and email signature images. The fact that there was a dedicated section of the website for union-related graphics with different options could suggest that the union is trying to engage its members in advocating union messages through a variety of ways. The graphics themselves juxtapose the prestige of Harvard University with the struggles that HUCTW members experience. Some examples are included below:



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

The message of the first two images highlights the inequity at Harvard, where students and faculty are often focused on the prestige of the university and these union members are worried about how to feed themselves and their families. This idea is connected to the populist feeling that elites are hypocritical about their messages. They might claim to care about people who have less than them but then do not provide necessities like enough money for food for these people. In terms of the interviews this sentiment was echoed by the custodians who did have some positive experiences with politicians in regard to their TPS status, but generally felt that politicians would say that they support their immigration status, but then not act on it. the

female custodian in particular criticized Biden for doing this as he promised to reinstate their TPS status taken away by Trump but has yet to do so. The third image is about the importance of healthcare. This was brought up by one of the interviewees who talked about her family's struggles and her own health problems and why a good healthcare plan was so important to her. These graphics suggest an animosity between staff at Harvard and the institution itself; however, HUCTW's motto very clearly states that, "It's not anti-Harvard to be pro-union."

The Harvard Crimson, the daily student newspaper at Harvard, has had articles documenting the issues that face Harvard union members. One of them was about a Harvard custodian named Doris Reina-Landaverde, who was also an organizer within her union 32BJ SEIU (Crimson 2021). In the article she is quoted saying that she wanted a pay raise, more affordable health care, and more opportunities for full-time employment included in their contract (ibid). She discussed how at first her colleagues were not interested in joining her fight for a better contract, but that she was able to convince people to join her in this fight (ibid). She organized a rally of 200 workers at Harvard to fight for a fair contract (ibid). After threatening to strike the custodians were able to reach an agreement with Harvard (ibid). This story highlights the power that unions can have for its members, but also how a strong sense of union loyalty and potential distrust of other organizations could come about. However, union could also have positive effects on its members such as in the findings of Frymer and Grumbach's article where people who were in unions shows less racial resentment than people not in unions (Frymer and Grumbach 2020).

Chapter 4: Conclusion

Research Question

This study aimed to address the questions of: What makes people drawn to populism and what affect does the unionization of jobs have on peoples' political beliefs? Specifically, does it affect peoples' feelings towards populism on the right or left? I interviewed eight participants: six Boston-area k-12 public school teachers represented by either the Boston Teachers Union or the Brookline Educators Union and two Harvard University custodians represented nationally by 32BJ SEIU. The interviews lasted between 1-1.5 hours, and they covered questions regarding the participants' demographics, political beliefs, subjective social status, and how they feel about certain politicians. While there was a small number of participants for this study, and therefore definitive causal relationships cannot be drawn, there were patterns that emerged throughout these interviews that I anticipate you would continue to see if the participant pool was expanded.

In terms of populism research that has been done this study added to the works of evaluating the relationships between peoples' subjective social status and their feelings towards populist candidates like in Gidron and Hall's study (Gidron and Hall, 2019). It also built off of Kathy Cramer's book "the Politics of resentment" which also studied support for right-wing populist combining cultural and economic incentives and appeals (Cramer 2016, 5). The findings of this study differed from that of Gidron and Hall and Cramer, because the geographic locations of these participants groups were similar, their education and job status was different, and yet both groups expressed populist sentiments and resentment.

Paul Frymer and Jacob Grumbach's study called "Labor Union and White Racial politics" added the layer of the unionization of occupation as to why someone might lean politically one way or the other and also how peoples' feeling towards different races is related

to whether or not they are a union worker (Frymer and Grumbach, 2021, 225). This study found that unions have a strong impact on political belief, in particular by lowering levels of racial resentment among unionized workers. This study built on their findings of unions effecting political beliefs and racial resentment to determine if unions also affect people's feelings towards to populism.

Trends in Interviews and Websites

The broadest trend from these interviews was that there were populist attitudes expressed from both the teacher and custodian groups. Given findings like Gidron and Hall's that saw people's subjective social status affecting their draw to radical views I thought that the teachers would have a higher subjective social status and therefore less drawn to populism. For the most part the participants expressed populist-left attitudes, with the exception of one custodian who expressed a slight leaning towards the populist-right. Populist attitudes were expressed in feelings of "us versus them" regarding the teachers versus their administration and the custodians versus Harvard administration.

These sentiments did match the messaging of the websites and social medias of these various unions as there was a similar feeling of "the outside world" not understanding the work of teachers and custodians. The websites of all three unions showed strong Democratic leanings. They also showed strong support of other unions. They had similar messaging to the teachers and the custodians about there being a divide between their member's occupations and those not in the union, but they differed significantly from the participants in the lack of messaging surround populist sentiment in terms of party distrust and support of populist politicians.

Populist leanings were also identified in the politician section of the interview where many participants, particularly the teachers, expressed a likeness towards populist politicians like

Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. On the custodian side they both expressed generally not trusting politicians, but one custodian seemed to like both Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump. In the politician section of the interviews when asked about populist politicians, like AOC, many participants expressed liking populist messaging such as AOC's "Tax the Rich" met gala dress. There was also a discussion from one of the custodians about relating to Biden through the suffering he has endured and his use of public transportation to get to work.

However, there were sentiments from the teacher group that did diverge from union messaging. Two teachers were Democratic leaning, but they expressed a distrust of the Democrats and Republicans overall because of their monetary ties to large corporations. Both custodians also expressed a distrust in politicians for not keeping their promises that also diverged from the union's messaging. Particularly, from one of the custodians who indicated a slight leaning to the right. The union messaging created a general "us versus them" framework but did not show these explicitly populist attitudes of a general distrust of the politicians and the political system.

There might also be a non-union explanation for why these custodians in particular feel that politicians are not trustworthy. Both custodians claimed to not believe in politics, but then also gave examples of times that they did have positive interactions with politicians. When the female custodian was asked about any politicians that she liked she mentioned Ayanna Pressley because "she had a similar story" and "always tries to support their union". The other participant had spoken to representatives from Warren, Sanders, and Pressley's offices through his organizing. He specifically mentioned liking the representative from Sanders's office because he really felt that she heard their story and would try to help them with their TPS status. In "Lessons of welfare: policy design, political learning, and political action" author Joe Soss studied the

relationship between welfare participants and political involvement (Soss 1999). He describes how welfare participants are in a unique position compared to other citizens because their “immediate fates depend on the actions of public officials” (ibid). His findings suggest both that welfare participants tend to say that “government institutions are hostile places and that officials do not understand, care about, or respond to ‘people like them.’” (ibid). This conclusion could be compared to the feeling of the custodians who are not welfare participants, but who are immediately affected by the decisions of politicians due to their immigration status. This could be another explanation for why they distrust politicians, but then also have had various positive interactions with politicians. Unlike the teachers I interviewed the custodians are reliant on politicians to either pass legislation themselves or encourage those in higher power to pass legislation that would extend or in this case reinstate their TPS status. The custodians lives and their children’s lives are more dependent on the immediate action of politicians which could lead to them being on the extreme of really liking a politician that gave them a lot of support, and then distrusting politicians and the system when they are not getting this support.

Future of the Study

In the future this study would benefit from more participants and a more diverse group of participants to determine what effect unions have on people’s political beliefs. Specifically, it would be interesting to have white participants in the trade union study group to see how a race changes people’s relationship with their union. Given the potential differences in public sector unions (police, firefighters etc.) identified in Frymer and Grumbach’s study it would be important for future studies to include participants from these unions to see how their views differ from private sector union members. In this study the participants from both study groups did not express as different of beliefs and values as was expected. This could be because

they were all from the Boston-area which is very liberal. In an expansion of this study, it would be important to look at smaller and more rural communities to see if it was the union-aspect of these participant's identities that was bringing them together or if geography was playing a larger role. These changes would give a better picture of the relationship between unions and its members' political beliefs, and why in general people are gravitating towards populist attitudes and politicians.

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Appendix:

Interview Questions

The interview flowed like an informal conversation. I started with the basic questions about union work, demographics, and basic political questions that addressed which party people support. Depending on how they answered these initial questions I asked different questions that were party specific. For example, if they indicated that they used to support one party, but now support another, I would ask questions to get at how and why that change occurred.

Demographic Questions:

- How would you describe the town you live in (urban, suburban, rural)?
- What is your highest level of education?
- What do your parents do for work?
- What was your parents' highest level of education?
- Were your parents also in unions?
- What party do your parents support?
- Were politics regularly discussed in your house growing up?

Union Questions:

- Which union are you in?
- When and why did you join a union?
- What do you do for work?
- How does the union you are a part of impact your daily life?
- Do you feel supported by your union?
- Do you feel loyal to your union?
- What is the social dynamic of your union – are you close with your co-workers?
- How often does politics come up among your co-workers?
- Is there a hierarchy within unions and if so, how do you feel about this hierarchy?
 - Where do you feel you fall within this hierarchy?

- Do you feel respected in your occupation?
- Do you think there are any stereotypes associated with your work?
- How has your job changed over the years? What do you think is responsible for that change?

Questions for Teachers:

- Has COVID-19 changed how you view your job?
 - Has this changed your view of politics?
- What do you think about teaching critical race theory?
- Do you feel respected by your peers and community in your profession?
- How much interaction do you have with your Teacher's Union?

Subjective Social Status:

- Imagine a ladder with 10 rungs, if I told you that the lower rungs represented people at the bottom of society and the upper rungs were the top of society where would you put yourself?
- Where do you feel you are in the social hierarchy of your (town, state, country)?
- Where would you put politicians on the social ladder? And would you put certain politicians on differing parts of the ladder?

Personal/Political Questions

- Where do your political opinions come from (news, friends, family, etc.)?
- Which party do you support?
- Has your party support ever changed?
- Do you ever vote for a mix of parties? (Ex. voting for a Republican president, but a Democratic senator?)
- Do you support the same candidates as your family?
- How would you describe the Democratic party and the Republican Party?

- Are there any candidates from either party that you strongly like or dislike?
- Which social justice cause, if any, do you support the most?
- Which economic issue, if any, do you care about the most?
- To what extent do you feel Republicans or Democratic candidates represent your interests?
- How do you feel about immigrants in general and in relation to your occupation?

If participants indicated a Republican Party preference

- Have you ever voted for a Democrat and if so, who was it and why did you vote for them?
- What is your opinion of Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez's character?
 - What is your opinion of her policy initiatives (for example, The Green New Deal) ***only gives policy example if they ask for one**
- What is your opinion of Bernie Sanders's character?
 - What is your opinion of his policy initiatives (for example, free college and healthcare) ***only gives policy example if they ask for one**
- What is your opinion of Donald Trump's character?
 - What is your opinion of his policy initiatives (for example, building the wall) ***only gives policy example if they ask for one**
- What is your opinion of Joe Biden's character?
 - What is your opinion of his policy initiatives (for example, infrastructure bill, will give more detail if necessary) ***only gives policy example if they ask for one**
- What is your opinion of Hilary Clinton's character?
 - What is your opinion of his policy initiatives (for example, **what policy initiative should I give for Clinton?**) ***only gives policy example if they ask for one**
- What is your opinion of Marjorie Taylor Green (Georgia)?
- What is your opinion of Lauren Boebert (Colorado)?
- How do you feel about social justice issues (anti-racism, LGBTQ rights, etc.) and the role that both parties play in them (ex. legalizing gay marriage)?
- Which messaging of a Republican politician resonates with you the most and who is that politician?

If participants indicated a Republican Party preference

- Same questions as above but for first and last question switch party

If participants switched parties:

- When did you decide to start voting for Republican candidates and/or when did your co-workers begin to favor Republican politics over Democratic? (reverse if applicable)
- Is there a specific candidate or movement that made you lose faith in the Democratic party? (reverse if applicable)
- Is there a specific candidate or movement that made you lose faith in the Democratic party? (reverse if applicable)