



Union Voters and Democrats

BY ANNE KIM AND STEFAN HANKIN

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Top Democratic and union leaders play host this week to prospective 2012 Congressional candidates, highlighting labor's status as a critical cog in progressive campaigns. Some observers believe that, in the aftermath of Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker's efforts to strip the state's public unions of collective-bargaining rights, labor has found both renewed public sympathy and political momentum.

It's not clear, however, that such attitudinal shifts will be enough to reverse the steady erosion of union membership, and the voting power that goes with it. That's the fundamental reality progressives must reckon with as they ponder how to forge electoral majorities.

To offset labor's declining share of the electorate, Democrats logically must do one of two things: do better among union households or do better among non-union households. As it happens, the key to both is the same – winning more moderate voters.

Labor traditionally has been considered a key component of the Democratic "base." But as the following analysis shows, the real picture is much more nuanced and complex. Without doubt, union voters are a potent political bloc. But they are also not monolithic. Moreover, their significance bridges the Democratic "base versus moderate" divide.

Because self-identified liberals are the smallest ideological bloc in the electorate (22 percent in 2008 and 20 percent in 2010¹), Democratic candidates have won their greatest electoral successes from building a coalition of liberal "base" voters, plus a super-majority of moderates.² Our analysis shows that union moderates, not union liberals, account for Democrats' traditional edge with labor voters:

- Democratic performance with union voters is both reliable and remarkably static—in each of the past four presidential elections, 59 percent of union voters cast their ballot for Democratic presidential

candidate. In 2008, voters in union households provided 24 percent of the total votes President Obama received.

- *Moderates* in union households account for the Democratic tilt of union voters. By a margin of 14-points, moderates in union households were more likely to vote for a Democratic House candidate in 2008 than non-union moderates. Union and non-union liberals, however, were equally likely to vote for a Democrat.
- While union households are more liberal than voters in general, the majority of union households—74 percent—describe themselves as moderate or conservative.
- Union voters are becoming more diverse, especially as organizing drives bring more Latino workers into the ranks. Not only were 2008 union voters less white than voters in general, they were more diverse than union voters in 2004.
- Union voters as a share of the electorate are declining. In 2008, union voters accounted for 21 percent of voters, compared to 26 percent in 2000.

These findings below present a more complete picture of a voting bloc that conventional wisdom has assumed is more monolithic in its composition and leanings. They also have significant strategic implications for President Obama and Democrats as they try to rebuild the winning coalitions of 2006 and 2008 heading into next year’s elections.

1. Union households delivered a quarter of the votes that President Obama received in 2008.

Among the “traditional” groups that Democrats often consider the foundation of their base, union households are a significant force. In 2008, 21 percent of voters were in union households. Among these voters, 59 percent voted for Barack Obama, which means that of all the votes received by then-candidate Obama, 24 percent came from union households.

Candidate	Union households as share of electorate	Percentage of union households won
Barack Obama (2008)	21%	59%
John Kerry (2004)	24%	59%
Al Gore (2000)	26%	59%
Bill Clinton (1996)	23%	59%

Compared to past presidential elections, President Obama’s performance exactly matched that of prior Democratic candidates. In fact, Democratic

performance among union voters in presidential races has remained remarkably static—at 59 percent—in each of the last four elections.

2. Moderates account for the Democratic tilt among union households.

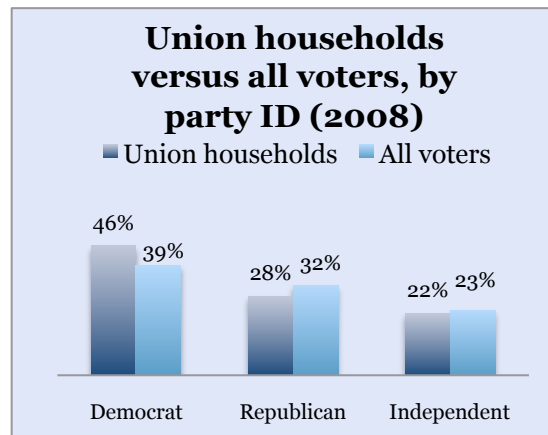
In 2008, President Obama enjoyed a 59 percent-39 percent margin among union households—or a 6-point improvement in performance compared to voters as a whole. For Democratic House candidates, the advantage was even greater. Union households voted 63 percent-33 percent for Democratic House candidates—a whopping 9-point edge in performance compared to voters as a whole.

Democratic performance among voters in union households (2008)

	Union households	All voters	Democratic advantage
Barack Obama	59%	53%	+6
John McCain	39%	45%	
Democratic House candidates	63%	52%	+9
Republican House candidates	33%	43%	

Some of this over-performance is no doubt due to the fact that union voters—by a 7-point margin—are more likely to call themselves Democrats than voters in general.

As this chart shows, 46 percent of union households identified themselves as Democrats in 2008 (versus 39 percent for all voters), 28 percent were Republicans (versus 32 percent) and 22 percent were Independents (versus 23 percent).



However, these differences in party identification don't explain everything—even as commanding majorities of union households vote Democratic, only 46 percent of union households say they are actually Democrats.

The explanation lies instead in political outlook. In particular, more than any other ideological group, **moderates in union households were**

much more likely to vote Democratic than moderate voters in non-union households.

In 2008, 71 percent of moderates in union households voted for a Democratic House candidate versus 57 percent of non-union moderates—a 14-point difference. Likewise 69 percent of moderates in union households voted for Barack Obama versus 61 percent of non-union moderates. For other ideological groups, the differences were not nearly as stark. For example, liberals in union households were equally likely to vote for President Obama as liberals in non-union households.

Performance of House Democratic candidates among union versus non-union households, by ideology (2008)

	Share of Democratic vote, union households	Share of Democratic vote, non-union households	Difference in performance
Liberal	89%	82%	+7
Moderate	71%	57%	+14
Conservative	26%	23%	+3

Performance of Barack Obama among union versus non-union households, by ideology (2008)

	Share of Democratic vote, union households	Share of Democratic vote, non-union households	Difference in performance
Liberal	87%	87%	--
Moderate	69%	61%	+8
Conservative	18%	19%	-1

3. The majority of voters in union households are moderates and conservatives.

Voters in union households are only somewhat more likely than voters in general to identify themselves as liberal. Like the electorate at large, liberals are the smallest ideological bloc among union households, while the plurality say they are moderate.

In 2008, 26 percent of voters in union households described themselves as liberal, while 44 percent described themselves as moderate and 30 percent saw themselves as conservatives.

Union households versus all voters, by ideology (2008)

	Union households	All voters
Liberal	26%	22%
Moderate	44%	44%
Conservative	30%	34%

And like the electorate as a whole, union households have also become slightly more polarized since 2004. Indeed, the share of moderates in union households has declined by 3-points from 2004 to 2008 (from 47 percent to 44 percent), while the share of liberals and conservatives has risen.

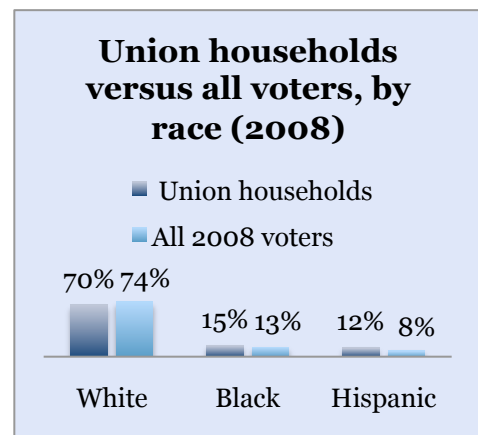
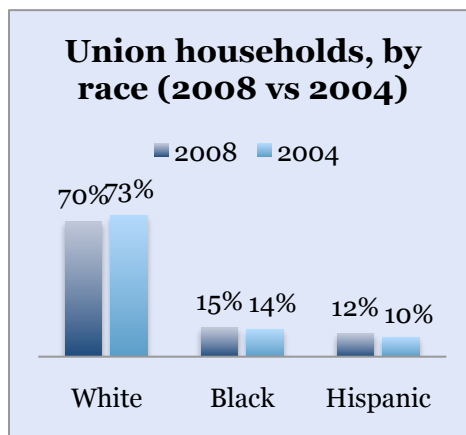
Union households by ideology, 2008 versus 2004

	2008	2004	Difference
Liberal	26%	25%	+1
Moderate	44%	47%	-3
Conservative	30%	28%	+2

4. Union households are becoming increasingly diverse.

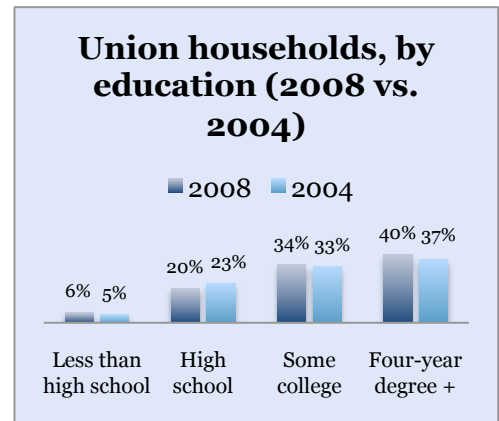
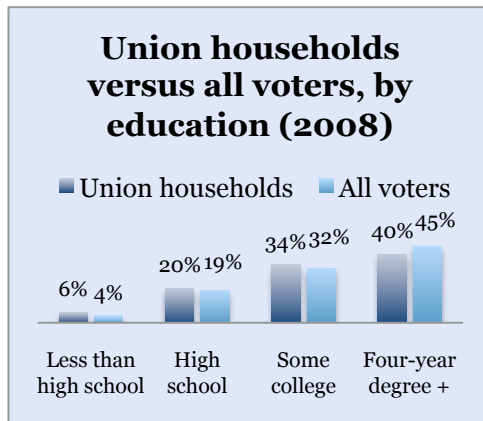
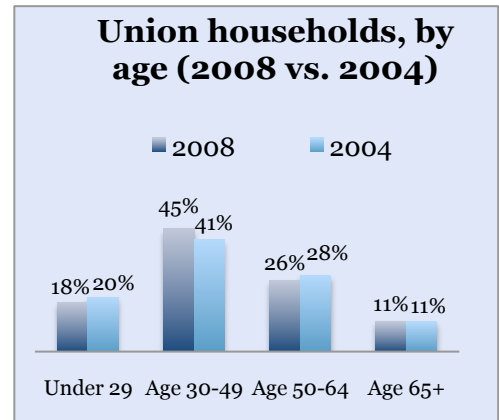
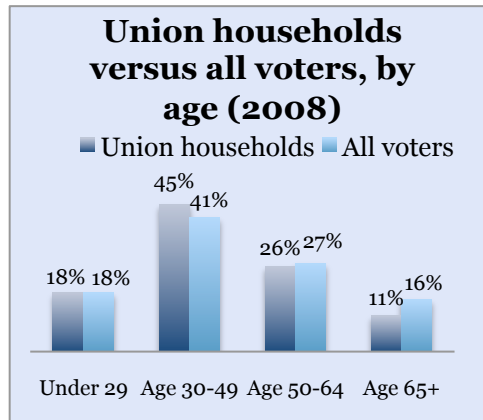
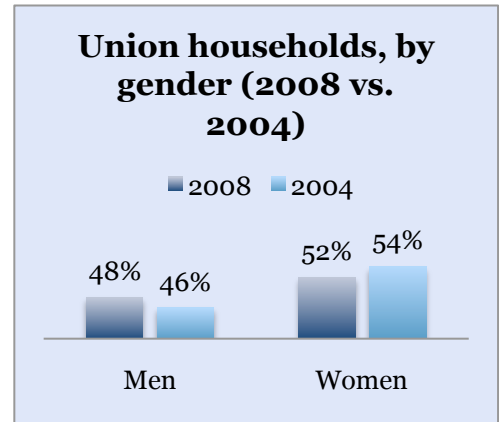
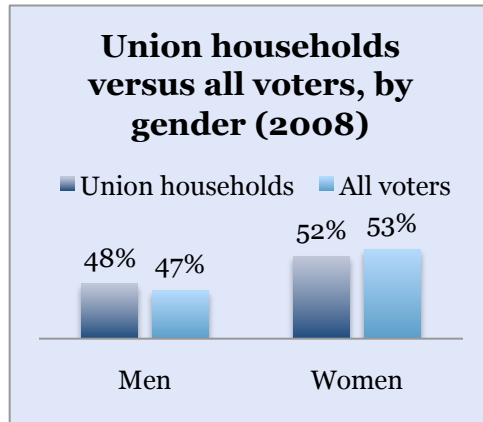
While union households were demographically more similar than not to the electorate as a whole in 2008, they were more racially and ethnically diverse than both voters in general and voters in union households in 2004.

African-Americans, for example, made up 15 percent of voters in union households in 2008, versus 13 percent of all 2008 voters and 14 percent of union voters in 2004. Hispanics made up 12 percent of union voters in 2008, versus 8 percent of all voters and 10 percent of union voters in 2004.



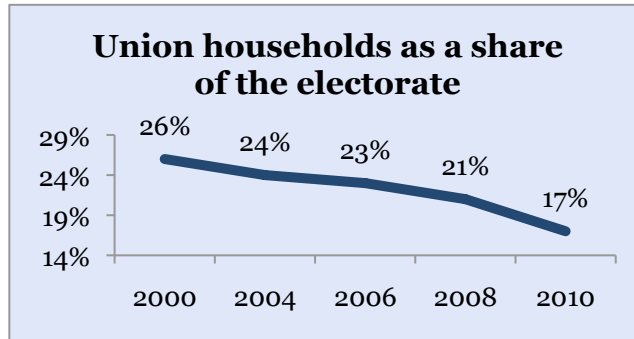
In terms of other demographics, union voters in 2008 were slightly more male and slightly less educated than voters generally. And while 45 percent of union household voters are between the ages of 30 to 49 (versus 41

percent of all voters), the share of union voters under 30 and over 65 is identical for both groups.



5. The share of union households in the electorate is declining.

Over the last decade, the percentage of voters in union households has been decreasing steadily, from 26 percent in 2000 to 21 percent in 2008.



And even though union voters delivered nearly a quarter of the votes President Obama received, the share of union votes received by President Obama is *less* than the share of votes received by each of John Kerry, Al Gore and Bill Clinton in 1996.

The reason is the combination of the static Democratic performance among union households mentioned above, along with declining electoral share. Thus, even though John Kerry performed no better than President Obama with union households—they each won 59 percent of the union vote—Kerry received 30 percent of his votes from union households (compared to 24 percent for Obama) because union households were a bigger share of the electorate.

Candidate	Union households as share of electorate	Percentage of union households won	Union household share of total votes received
Barack Obama (2008)	21%	59%	24%
John Kerry (2004)	24%	59%	30%
Al Gore (2000)	26%	59%	31%
Bill Clinton (1996)	23%	59%	28%

If the shrinkage in union households continues, performance will matter as much as turnout in 2012. In other words, one way for Democrats to make up for a shrinking labor base is to over-perform even beyond historic levels.

In practice, that means that Democrats must improve their performance among moderates even more—whether it’s moderates in union households or moderates more generally. That’s because liberals, who make up the smallest fraction of union households, already deliver close to 90 percent of their vote to Democrats.

As the following chart shows, 87 percent of liberals in union households voted for President Obama in 2008, while 89 percent voted for a Democratic House candidate. In 2004, 88 percent of liberals in union households voted for John Kerry, while 86 percent voted for a Democratic House candidate.

	Performance among liberals in union households
Barack Obama	87%
John Kerry	88%
2008 Democratic House candidates	89%
2004 Democratic House candidates	86%

Conclusion

Without doubt, labor is and will continue to be a critical force in American politics. Nevertheless, the data we've laid out above hold significant policy and political implications for Democrats in 2012, along with a variety of questions for further research:

- Why are union moderates more likely to vote Democratic than moderates more generally?
- What is the message and policy agenda that appeals to union moderates and could motivate over-performance? Is it possible that a “labor agenda” may not differ that much from an agenda that appeals to Americans more broadly in the center and that Democrats can simultaneously shore up their labor base while winning back moderates?
- Can organized labor arrest the relentless decline in union membership, especially among private-sector workers?

But one thing is clear: the union vote consists of both “base” voters and “swing” voters. A more militantly liberal message won't help Democrats compensate for the declining number of union households, because they already win the liberal union vote. They should instead frame appeals to moderate union members, where there is still upside potential. There is good news for Democrats: That course is fully consistent with their overriding strategic challenge going into 2012—winning big among moderate voters.

Endnotes

¹ CNN Exit Polls, 2008 and 2010.

² Commentators such as Bill Galston and Elaine Kamarck, as well as the authors of this report, have offered detailed analyses of why moderates are important to Democratic majorities. See, for example, William A. Galston and Elaine C. Kamarck, “The Still-Vital Center: Moderates, Democrats and the Renewal of American Politics,” *Third Way*, February, 2011; Anne Kim and Jon Cowan, “The Deciders: Moderates in 2010,” *Third Way*, October 2010.

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