

The Decline of Unionization and Republican Success in the Rust Belt Neil Pandey

Introduction

In 2016, Republican Donald Trump won an upset victory over Democrat Hillary Clinton after winning Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan states that had not gone Republican since 1988 (Wisconsin had not gone Republican since the 1984 landslide election). On the morning of election day, Five-Thirty-Eight gave Hillary Clinton a 71.4% chance of winning. Pennsylvania and Wisconsin were important tipping point states in the 2016 election. Prior to this election, these three states were considered to be part of the "Blue Wall": a collection of states that have consistently voted Democrat since the early 1990s, if not years before. Rust Belt states, including those in the "Blue Wall", have a high proportion of blue-collar workers who traditionally voted for Democratic candidates. Due to blue-collar workers shifting towards the Republican Party in 2016 Trump was able to win the election. However, this trend is not a new development. This trend can be traced back to the 1968 election and the emerging decline of unionization and union-based politics in the United States. This paper explores how Republicans have gained support in the Rust Belt due to lower unionization rates. I argue that the decline of unionization has led to the emergence of Republican support in Rust Belt states, as Republicans have effectively appealed to socially conservative, blue-collar voters as union influence wanes. To examine this phenomenon, I will examine eight Rust Belt states and why they have shifted towards Republicans using presidential election data and unionization rates. I also present a more in-depth case study of West Virginia, because it is the most extreme example of blue-collar voters shifting towards Republicans. In addition to presidential election data, this case study will also analyze Senate races since 1982, allowing me to trace Senate elections since the Reagan administration. These findings show how union-based politics have declined and how politics has become increasingly focused on "culture-war" issues. Focusing on the "culture war" leads to more division in society as the public should be more focused on economic issues such as wealth inequality and other issues that stem from it. Therefore, to win back blue-collar voters in the Rust Belt, Democrats should increase their focus on economic issues such as minimum wage, strengthening unions, increased access to quality healthcare, and universal child care. A platform similar to this helped Democrats dominate mid-century politics.

Historical Background:

The support for the Democratic Party amongst white working-class voters dates back to Franklin Delano Roosevelt's (FDR) election and the emergence of the New Deal Coalition. During the Great Depression, FDR built a diverse coalition based on support for his economic policies, which included African Americans, Catholics, Jews, Progressive intellectuals, and blue-collar workers. Roosevelt's policies — such as social security, the Works Progress Administration, and Wagner Act, among others – appealed to working-class voters from all backgrounds. However, the New Deal coalition would begin to fragment during the Presidential election of 1968 when Democratic Party voters were split between socially conservative candidate George Wallace and socially liberal candidate Hubert Humphrey.

George Wallace effectively appealed to the social anxieties of white working-class voters due to a time of civil unrest – Vietnam War protests were frequent and the Civil Rights Movement continued to advocate for legislative action to address housing discrimination and other inequities. In the subsequent election, when very socially liberal candidate George



McGovern won the Democratic nomination, many white working-class voters voted for the more conservative Richard Nixon, the Republican nominee. After this election, the Democratic Party would take on more conservative positions. The Democrats managed to narrowly win the 1976 election with evangelical Christian candidate Jimmy Carter. When conservative Republican Ronald Reagan became president, he gained significant levels of support from Democratic Party voters who felt alienated by liberalism within their party (Roper Center 1984). After Reagan's presidency, many conservative or "Blue Dog" Democrats took control of the party and shifted it away from the progressive economic policies of the New Deal. Bill Clinton, a centrist Democrat, had more success with socially conservative white working-class voters than previous Democratic candidates. During his presidency, he signed the 1994 crime bill, employed tough-on-crime rhetoric, and signed the Defense of Marriage Act. He also implemented economic policies that deregulated banks and reformed the welfare state.

At the start of the 21st century, the socially liberal Democrats would become the predominant faction of the Democratic party (Miller and Schofield 2008). This social liberalism sewed deep discontent amongst white working-class voters and caused them to turn away from the Democratic Party and toward the Republican Party. Without any economic policy to give the Democrats leverage amongst white working-class voters, the social conservatism of the Republicans was able to win over the votes from this demographic. Due to this shift, these voters have become extremely hostile toward the Democratic Party.

Theory & Hypotheses

As noted above, white working-class voters have transitioned from voting predominantly Democratic to predominantly Republican. I argue this transition occurred due to a decline in union membership which has weakened the link between the white working class and Democratic Party. Unions had previously anchored the New Deal coalition, forming close links with the Democratic Party (Scholzman 2013). Because many people in the white working class held economically progressive but socially conservative views, as union membership declined, economic issues became less salient among such voters, allowing Republicans to capitalize on their social conservatism. Furthermore, research shows that being in a union reduces racism among white workers compared to similar, non-union workers. Therefore, being in a union not only makes economic issues salient for union members but also makes them more socially liberal (Frymer and Grumbach 2021)., I, therefore, hypothesize that as unionization declines at the state level, the more Republican a state will become in presidential elections, relative to the nation as a whole.

Methods

To test the hypothesis that declining union rates facilitated the transition towards the Republican Party among the white working class, I rely on quantitative data. Specifically, I compare presidential election results with state-level unionization rates. The Partisan Voting Index describes the Republican margin of victory in presidential elections compared to the nation as a whole. For instance, in 2020, Donald Trump won the state of Kentucky by 25.94%. At the national level, Joe Biden won the popular vote by 4.45%, meaning that if you subtract Biden's victory margin (-4.45%) from Trump's victory margin (25.94%), that makes Kentucky 30.39% more Republican than the nation as a whole(positive means that a state is more Republican than the nation, while negative means that state is more Democratic than the nation). This project also uses Senate election data in the West Virginia case study.



This project examines eight Rust Belt states: Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. These states were selected because of their large, blue-collar populations, and gradual shift towards the Republican party, since at least 1996. To test my hypotheses, I will look at West Virginia and the aggregation of all eight states. West Virginia is examined in more detail than other states because it is the most extreme example of this trend. West Virginia has a primarily blue-collar workforce and before the 21st century it was considered a Democratic stronghold, but by the 21st century, it became a Republican stronghold. In terms of margin of victory over the Democratic candidate, West Virginia was Donald Trump's second strongest state in both 2016 and 2020

Results - Quantitative Analysis

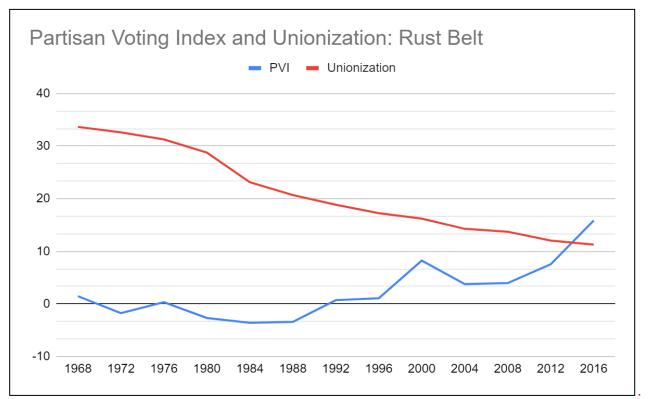
In this section, I compare how the Partisan Voting Index and union density rates fluctuate over time to determine whether unionization rates correspond to states voting more Republican. Specifically, I include graphs for each Rust Belt state in addition to a graph demonstrating the aggregate of Rust Belt states.

Figure 1: Unionization and PVI - Entire Rust Belt, 1968 - 2016

As seen in figure 1, unionization has been steadily declining in the Rust Belt and as that decline has progressed, the Rust Belt has shifted towards the Republican Party considerably. From 1976-1988, however, the Rust Belt continued to lean towards Democrats. After 1988, however, the Rust Belt became considerably more Republican than the rest of the country. By 2016, The average Partisan Voting Index has exceeded the average unionization rate. In 1968, Rust Belt states averaged a unionization rate of 33.8% and weighed in as 1.47% more Republican than the nation as a whole. This rate fell to 11.7% by 2016 and the rust belt weighed in, on average, as 15.85% more Republican than the nation as a whole.

Figure 1: Unionization and PVI in the Rust Belt, 1968-2016





Graphs Strongly Supporting Hypotheses (Kentucky, Indiana, W. VA)

Kentucky, Indiana, and West Virginia strongly suggest that lower unionization rates will lead to increased support for the Republican Party. In these states, the Partisan Voting Index has exceeded the unionization rate by a large margin.

Figure 2 shows that Indiana has been a Republican-leaning state since 1968. The Partisan Voter Index exceeded the unionization rate in both 2004 and 2016, indicating that as unionization hits its lowest points, Republican electoral strength increases. In 1968 Indiana had a unionization rate of 40.3% but decreased to 10.5% by 2016. Notably, Indiana voted for Barack Obama in 2008. However, the unionization rate did not decrease from 2004 - 2008 and increased during that time period, which may have contributed to Obama's win. Other than 2008, Indiana has remained a Republican-leaning state.

Figure 2: Unionization and Partisan Voter Index in Indiana, 1968-2016

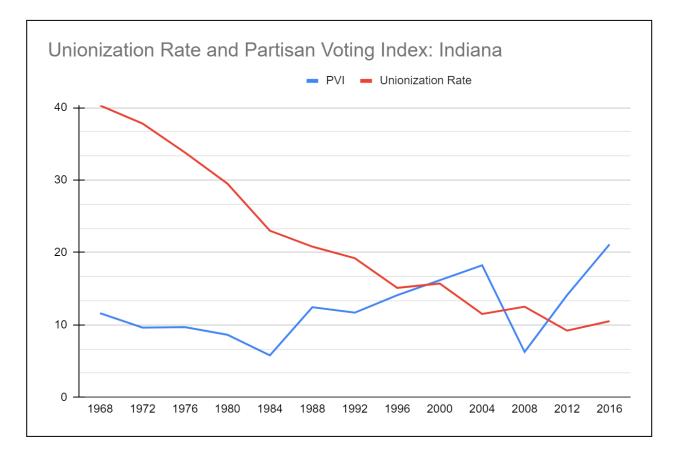


Figure 3 shows a far more stark trend for Kentucky, by 2000 the Partisan Voting Index had already exceeded the unionization rate. In 1968, Kentucky had a unionization rate of 25.1% and weighed in as 5.44% more Republican than the nation. In 2016, Kentucky had a unionization rate of 11.2% and weighed in as 31.93% more Republican than the nation. From 1976-1980 Kentucky did trend towards the Democrats due to the fact that native Southerner Democrat Jimmy Carter was the nominee for those two election cycles. By 1996 Kentucky started to trend heavily towards Republicans. Although Kentucky does not have an extremely high unionization rate, unionization has still experienced the same trend as the other rust belt states.

Figure 3: Unionization and Partisan Voting Index in Kentucky, 1968 - 2016



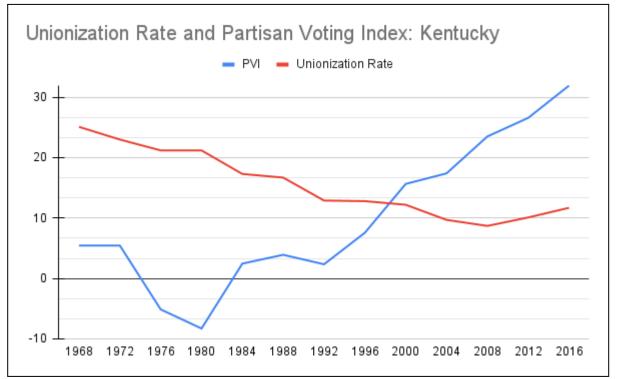
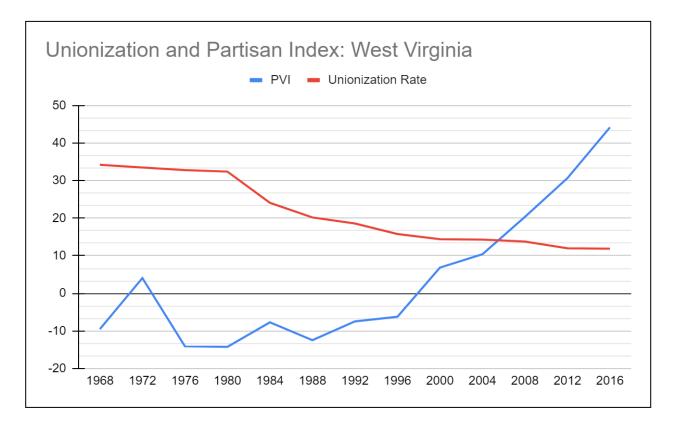


Figure 4 is the most extreme example of this trend in West Virginia. For decades West Virginia was considered to be a Democratic stronghold, however, by the 2000 election the state would rapidly trend toward Republicans. By 2008 the partisan voting index for Republicans exceeded the unionization rate. In 1968, West Virginia had a unionization rate of 34.2% and weighed in as 9.52% more Democratic than the nation. In 2016 West Virginia had a unionization rate of 11.9% and weighed in as a whopping 44.16% more Republican than the nation. **Figure 4: Unionization and Partisan Voting Index in West Virginia, 1968 - 2016**





The next figures show states that do not show as an extreme trend in voting. They include: Ohio, Iowa, Michigan and Wisconsin.

Figure 5 shows the partisan voting index compared to the unionization rate in Ohio. Ohio is considered to be a bellwether state meaning a state that tends to support the national winner in the Presidential election. Despite Ohio's bellwether status the state does seem to vote more Republican than the nation as a whole— the only two exceptions being in 1972 and 2004. The unionization rate in 1968 was 36.7% and the state weighed in as 1.58% more Republican than the nation. While by 2016, the partisan voting index for Republicans still did not exceed the unionization rate, the gap between them had closed significantly. **Graphs supporting the hypothesis**

Figure 5: Unionization and Partisan Voting Index in Ohio, 1968 - 2016

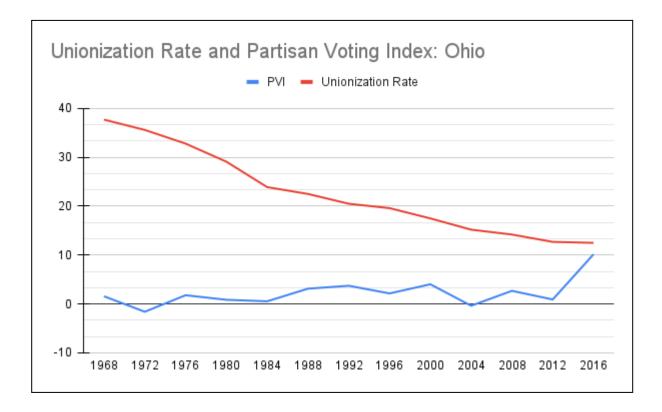


Figure 6 shows the partisan voting index and unionization rate of Pennsylvania. In every election from 1968-2012, Pennsylvania would vote more Democratic than the nation on the Presidential level despite unionization rates consistently declining. However, in 2016 the state would vote more Republican than the nation as a whole for the first since the 1948 election. In 1968, Pennsylvania had a unionization rate of 36.2% and weighed in as 4.27% more Democratic than the nation. In 2016, Pennsylvania had a unionization rate of 12.1% and weighed in as 2.81% more Republican than the nation . The partisan voting index for Republicans has not exceeded the unionization rate

Figure 6: Unionization and Partisan Voting Index in Pennsylvania, 1968 - 2016



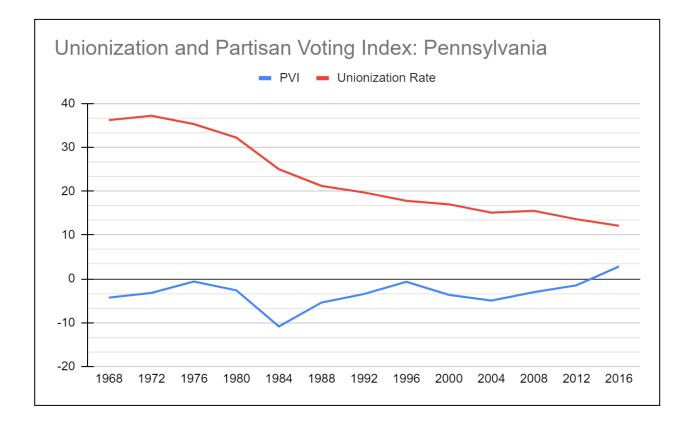


Figure 7 shows the partisan voting index and unionization rate of Michigan. Similar to lowa's, Michigan's graph is somewhat erratic. Initially, in 1968 and 1972, it seems that Michigan was a Democrat-leaning state. But in 1976, Michigan would weigh in 7.45% more Republican than the nation as a whole. That was likely because Gerald Ford, who was from Michigan, was the Republican nominee in that election. Oddly enough, after that Michigan would trend towards Democrats. Michigan voted Democrat from 1992-2012 until that streak was broken in 2016 when Donald Trump narrowly won the state. In 1968, Michigan had a unionization rate of 37.7% and weighed in as 7.42% more Democratic than the nation. In 2016, Michigan had a unionization rate of 14.6% and weighed in as 2.28% more Republican than the nation. The unionization rate has not exceeded the partisan voting index for Republicans. **Figure 7: Unionization and Partisan Voting Index in Michigan, 1968 - 2016**



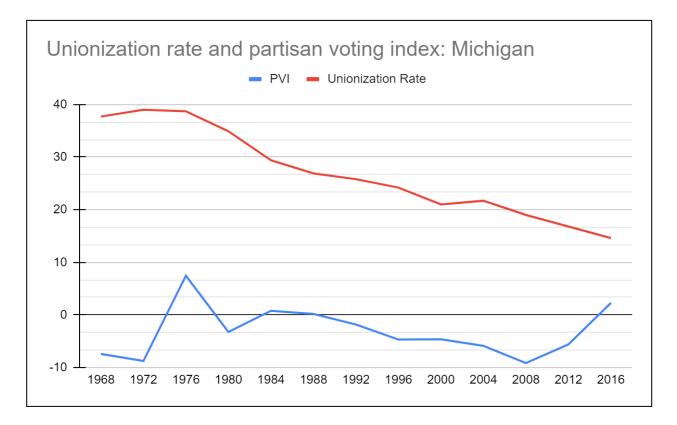


Figure 8 shows the partisan voting index and the unionization rate of Wisconsin. Wisconsin's partisan voting index rapidly fluctuates. However, for the most part the state has tended to vote more Democratic than the nation. From 1988-2012, Wisconsin consistently voted for the Democratic candidate. Donald Trump's victory ended that winning streak in 2016. In 1968 Wisconsin had a unionization rate of 32.7% and weighed in as 2.92% more Republican than the nation. In 2016 Wisconsin had a unionization rate of 8.2% and weighed in as 2.86% more Republican than the nation

Figure 8: Unionization and Partisan Voting Index in Wisconsin, 1968 - 2016



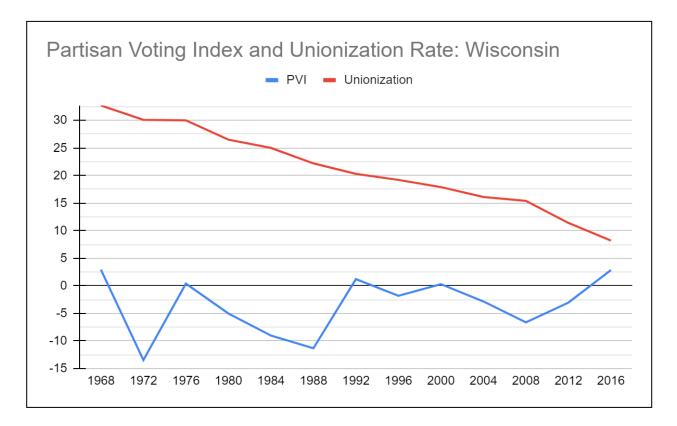
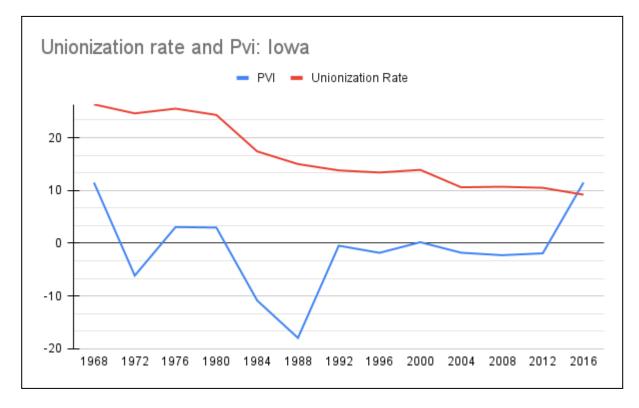


Figure 9 shows the partisan voting index for Iowa compared to the unionization rate. Iowa arguably has had the most irregular graph of the eight states. Similarly to Ohio, Iowa was also considered to be a bellwether state. However in 1984 and 1988, Iowa voted over 10% more Democratic than the nation. The surge in support for the Democratic party could be linked to a farming crisis that occurred in Iowa from 1981-1986: likely because the Iowans were satisfied with what Ronald Reagan, the Republican President, had done to alleviate this crisis (PBS Iowa). However, after the farming crisis subsided, the state shifted back towards the Republicans. In 1968, Iowa weighed in as 11.49% more Republican than the nation and had a unionization rate of 26.3%. In 2016, Iowa weighed in as 11.5% more Republican than the nation and had a unionization rate of 9.2%. By 2016 the partisan voting index for Republicans exceeded the unionization rate.

Figure 9: Unionization and Partisan Voting Index in Iowa, 1968 - 2016



Results - West Va Case Study

Of the states mentioned in the previous section, West Virginia has undergone the most extreme form of this trend. Due to West Virginia's predominantly blue-collar workforce, the state was a Democratic stronghold from 1932 to 1996. However, at the start of the 21st century, the state would rapidly trend towards the Republican party. Eventually, the state would even give Donald Trump his second strongest margin of victory in both 2016 and 2020.

One issue that damaged the Democratic Party's strength in West Virginia was environmentalism. Many West Virginians work for the coal industry. Due to the Democratic party's support for tighter regulations on coal emissions, many West Virginian voters have turned away from the Democratic Party and towards the more fossil fuel-friendly Republican Party. Like other rust belt states, the increasing strength of the Republican Party can also be due to the decline of unionization in West Virginia.

Election Year	Democratic Vote Share	Republican Vote Share
1980	Carter (49.8%)*	Reagan (45.3%)
1984	Mondale (44.6%)	Reagan (55.1%)*
1988	Dukakis (52.2%)*	George H.W Bush (47.5%)
1992	B. Clinton (48.4%)*	George H.W Bush (35.4%)

Table 1: Presidential Elections, 1980 - 20201

¹ <u>https://www.270towin.com/states/West_Virginia</u>



1996	B. Clinton (51.5%)*	Dole (36.8%)
2000	Gore (45.6%)	George W. Bush (51.9%)*
2004	Kerry (43.2%)	George W. Bush (56.1%)*
2008	Obama (42.6%)	McCain (55.7%)*
2012	Obama (35.5%)	Romney (62.3%)*
2016	H. Clinton (26.4%)	Trump (68.5%)*
2020	Biden (29.7%)	Trump (68.6%)*

Table 2: Class I Senate Elections, 1982-2018²

Year	Democratic Vote Share	Republican Vote Share
1982	Byrd(68.5%)*	Benedict(30.76%)
1988	Byrd(64.8%)*	Wolfe(31.0%)
1994	Byrd(69.0%)*	Kios(31.0%)
2000	Byrd(77.8%)*	Gallaher(20.2%)
2006	Byrd(64.7%)*	Raese(33.7%)
2010(special election)	Manchin(53.5%)*	Raese(43.4%)
2012	Manchin(60.6%)*	Raese(36.5%)
2018	Manchin(49.6%)*	Morrisey(46.3%)

Robert Byrd, a Democrat, was overwhelmingly popular during his tenure as a Senator from West Virginia. As shown in the table above Robert Byrd won all his reelection campaigns with at least 60% of the popular vote from 1982 to 2006. In the 2006 senate election, however, Republicans took notice of their increasing popularity in Presidential elections and actively campaigned in West Virginia. The Republican party attacked Byrd for his position on the Iraq war and the fact that he voted against a constitutional amendment that would ban flag-burning. However, this strategy proved to be ineffective because even though West Virginia was trending towards Republicans, Byrd had been a Senator from the state since 1959 and was popular ever since. That is not to say that the strategy did nothing to help Republicans– Byrd still faced his closest reelection victory ever. In the special election that happened after Byrd's death, Joe Manchin won the election by a much smaller margin of victory than Byrd did (Sternberg, 2005). Joe Manchin is recognized as a Conservative Democrat. His conservatism has aided his electoral chances in West Virginia among white working-class voters. Despite West Virginia

² <u>https://www.ourcampaigns.com/RaceDetail.html?RaceID=3772</u>



voting overwhelmingly for Republican Presidential candidate Mitt Romney, Joe Manchin won his 2012 senate election with over 60% of the popular vote. Eventually, however, Republicans' strength at the Presidential level would translate onto the state level as Joe Manchin would only narrowly win reelection in the 2018 senate election.

Year	Democratic Vote Share	Republican Vote Share
1984	Rockefeller(51.8%)*	Raese(47.7%)
1990	Rockefeller(68.3%)*	Yoder(31.7%)
1996	Rockefeller(76.6%)*	Burks(23.4%)
2002	Rockefeller(63.1%)*	Wolfe(36.9%)
2008	Rockefeller(63.7%)*	Wolfe(36.3%)
2014	Tennant(34.5%)	Capito(62.1%)*
2020	Swearengin(27.0%)	Capito(70.3%)*

Table 3: Class II Senate Elections, 1984 - 2020

A similar case is seen with West Virginia's Class II senate seat. For decades, Jay Rockefeller, another Democrat, managed to win all of his reelection campaigns with over 60% of the vote. By the time he retired however, the unpopularity of then-Democratic President Barack Obama gave Republicans significant ground in the 2014 senate election in West Virginia. Shelley Moore Capito, who had been touted as a viable Republican Senate candidate for years, decided to take advantage of Democrats' unpopularity in West Virginia by running as the Republican nominee for the Senate. Despite Democratic candidate Natalie Tennant trying to distance herself from the Obama administration, many West Virginians still associated her with Obama's policies towards the coal industry allowing Shelley Moore Capito to win the 2014 senate election with over 62.4% of the vote; the complete opposite of the 2008 senate election. In 2020 Capito won the election with an astonishing 70.3% of the popular vote, the best showing for a Republican Senate candidate in West Virginia's history. (Barrabi 2014; Messina 2012). **Discussion & Conclusion**

My findings show that the decline of unionization has played an important part in Rust Belt states moving towards the Republican Party. Although West Virginia provides the strongest evidence for my claim, all Rust Belt states indicate that declines in unionization correlate with increases in Republican support. Republicans are able to appeal to the socially conservative biases of blue-collar workers to gain the workers' support. The decline of unionization rates can also be why "culture war" issues have taken center stage in contemporary politics as opposed to economic issues (Bowden 2021). For example, Republicans have drummed up fear about critical race theory, transgender women in sports, and "cancel culture". These issues are very marginal and do not affect most Americans.

There are many economic issues plaguing the United States such as: as low wages, high healthcare costs, and wealth inequality. The culture war only provides a distraction from these issues. The culture war also prevents the working class from banding together to fight for their

collective interests. If the Democrats make efforts to boost unionization efforts, they will not only increase their electoral chances but also this will revive an era of politics when the working class was unified to improve their living conditions through social programs and workers' rights.

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