

Labor in American Politics: Continuities, Changes, and Challenges for the Twenty- First-Century Labor Movement*

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J. David Greenstone's classic *Labor in American Politics* has deeply influenced the field of American politics and its subfields of American political development and labor politics. Published in 1969, it placed the role of unions in the American political system center stage, defining an American politics and party politics research agenda that is still relevant forty years later. Much can be said about this empirically rigorous and theoretically rich book. I will focus on two continuities and two changes in labor politics since the book's first publication, and conclude with a couple of challenges facing the politics, and study, of the labor movement today.

Continuities

Two key arguments of the book still hold forty years later. The most obvious continuity in labor politics over the last four decades has been organized labor's continued role as the "national electoral organization of the national Democratic Party."¹ While for Greenstone this finding represented a significant shift in the *structure* of the American party system in the post-WWII period, what is notable about this relationship is its durability and endurance well into the twenty-first century. The labor movement is still the most powerful core constituency of the national Democratic Party by several measures, including campaign contributions, grassroots mobilization efforts of the Party's key voters, lobbying,

*Many thanks to Susan Orr for organizing this Roundtable on Greenstone's book at the 2009 APSA meetings and coordinating this subsequent symposium.

1. J. David Greenstone, *Labor in American Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1969), xiii.

and setting the Party's legislative agenda.^{2,3} One cannot understand the politics of the Democratic Party today without understanding the central role of organized labor. The labor movement spent more money than ever to get a Democrat elected to the White House in 2008.⁴ And it was a labor leader, Andy Stern, who visited President Barack Obama more than any other person in the first year of his Administration.⁵

The second continuity in labor politics since the book was first published is Greenstone's conceptual mapping and empirical observation of union *variation*. Not all unions participate equally in politics, and Greenstone posited an analytical framework to explain the wide variation in union political behavior across space (inter-city variation) and across union (inter-union variation). The factors he posited that shaped inter-city variation in union political behavior in his three cities (Los Angeles, Detroit, and Chicago) still operate today: the political development of each city's labor movement; the unique economic and political structures of these cities; and their distinctive political demography, particularly of patterns of ethnic politics among union members.⁶ In terms of inter-union variation, both internal and external factors continue to shape and constrain political action by organized labor. Internal factors that shape union political behavior are unions' internal structures and political incentives, while external factors include the broader economic, social, and political environments.⁷

2. Labor's importance to the Democratic Party will most likely increase dramatically in light of the 2010 Supreme Court *Citizens United v. FEC* decision lifting restrictions on independent expenditures during elections by corporations and unions.

3. Taylor Dark, *The Unions and the Democrats: An Enduring Alliance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); Marie Gottschalk, *The Shadow Welfare State: Labor, Business, and the Politics of Health Care* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000); Peter L. Francia, *The Future of Organized Labor in American Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

4. According to opensecrets.org, the "labor sector" spent more than \$150 million during the 2008 election cycle, although business spending was more than double that amount. Lindsay Renick Mayer, "Labor and Business Spend Big on Looming Unionization Issue," www.opensecrets.org, February 26, 2009.

5. Andy Stern, President of SEIU, visited the White House twenty-two times during the first six months of 2009, more than any other visitor. Jeff Zeleny, "White House Visitor Log Lists Stars and C.E.O.s," *New York Times*, October 30, 2009.

6. Ruth Milkman, *L.A. Story: Immigrant Workers and the Future of the U.S. Labor Movement* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006); Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Dorian T. Warren, *A New Labor Movement for A New Century?: The Incorporation of Marginalized Workers Into U.S. Unions* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, Ph.D. Dissertation, 2005).

7. Greenstone, *Labor in American Politics*; Paul Frymer, *Black and Blue: African Americans, the Labor Movement, and the Decline of the Democratic Party* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Warren, *A New Labor Movement for A New Century?*

Changes

Two major changes in labor politics have occurred that Greenstone could not have foreseen by 1969. The first is an important shift in the locus of union political activity from the national to local and regional levels in response to a conservative anti-union environment in national politics.⁸ Greenstone explains early in the book that “the Teamsters, the railroad unions, and the Postal Clerks, and other phases of labor political activity, notably *the entire area of lobbying in local politics*, have been largely excluded”.⁹ This would be a significant empirical oversight in the world of labor politics of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Indeed, it has been at the local level that unions have innovated and won on a range of policy issues related to workers’ rights, including living wage ordinances and minimum wage increases, labor peace and “right-to-organize” provisions, and equitable development agreements.¹⁰

A second major change in labor politics over the last forty years is the shift in power between industrial (factory) and craft and service unions (non-factory). Greenstone claimed that the economic processes of industrialization increased labor’s political activity. We might amend this premise to argue that the economic processes of *de*-industrialization and economic restructuring also increased organized labor’s political activity via both industrial and service sector unions. Writing on the cusp of *de*-industrialization and economic restructuring,¹¹ Greenstone could not foresee that over the next forty years, service sector unions would very much displace industrial unions as the power center of the

8. Richard B. Freeman, *America Works: Critical Thoughts on the Exceptional U.S. Labor Market* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2007); Benjamin I. Sachs, “Labor Law Renewal,” *Harvard Law & Policy Review* 1 (2007): 375–400.

9. Greenstone, *Labor in American Politics*, xv.

10. Ruth Milkman, *L.A. Story*; Lowell Turner and Daniel B. Cornfield, eds., *Labor in the New Urban Battlegrounds: Local Solidarity in a Global Economy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007); Miriam J. Wells, “When Urban Policy Becomes Labor Policy: State Structures, Local Initiatives, and Union Representation at the Turn of the Century,” *Theory and Society* 31 (February 2002): 115–46; Stephanie Luce, *Fighting For a Living Wage* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); Janice Fine, “Community Unions and the Revival of the American Labor Movement,” *Politics & Society* 33 (2005): 153–99; Amy B. Dean and David B. Reynolds, *A New Deal: How Regional Activism Will Reshape the American Labor Movement* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009); Manuel Pastor Jr., Chris Benner, and Martha Matsuoka, *This Could be the Start of Something Big: How Social Movements for Regional Equity are Reshaping Metropolitan America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009); Immanuel Ness and Stuart Eimer, eds., *Central Labor Councils and the Revival of American Unionism: Organizing for Justice in Our Communities* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2001); Virginia Parks and Dorian Warren, “The Politics and Practice of Economic Justice: Community Benefits Agreements As Tactic of the New Accountable Development Movement,” *Journal of Community Practice* 17 (2009): 88–106.

11. Bennett Harrison and Barry Bluestone, *The Great U-Turn: Corporate Restructuring and the Polarizing of America* (New York: Basic Books, 1988); William J. Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York: Knopf, 1996).

labor movement.¹² Industrial unions became more politically active in some cases to defend their shrinking membership as a result of de-industrialization.¹³ But service and public sector unions would overtake industrial unions in membership numbers and political influence by the end of the century.¹⁴ Indeed, some analysts mark the SEIU's John Sweeney's successful bid for the presidency of the AFL-CIO in 1995 in its first-ever contested election as a culmination of the rise and dominance of service sector unions.¹⁵ What is more interesting about this shift within the labor movement is that service sector unions have come to resemble industrial unions in their structure. The processes of nationalization and globalization of markets in which service unions operate have encouraged internal restructuring of those unions to become more centralized and hierarchical, similar to Greenstone's claim about industrial unions.

Thinking about these two major changes together—the shift in the locus of activity to the local level and the shift in power between industrial and non-industrial unions—enables us to understand the changing fortunes and politics of labor in the three cities Greenstone examined forty years ago. As he described them, Chicago and Detroit represented “polar” cases; labor politics in Chicago was constrained by the limitations “placed on labor activity and influence by strong and suspicious regular party organizations,” while labor politics in Detroit was “extensive” due to industrial unions’ political participation.¹⁶ Labor political activity in Los Angeles represented a “midpoint” between the two polar cases. Four factors explained the differences in labor political activity between these three cities. First was the variation in the political development of the cities’ labor movements. Detroit had the strongest political tradition because of the strength of the United Auto Workers, Chicago had the most conservative “voluntarist” unionists in the country, while Los Angeles was the “largest American city with a vigorous and tenacious open-shop tradition.”¹⁶ The second factor was economic structure. Detroit had a vibrant automobile industry, Chicago had a variety of

12. He also could not foresee the explosive growth in public sector unions that began when he was writing this book. These unions have distinct, and powerful, *political*, as opposed to economic incentives to engage in political activity. Paul Johnston, *Success While Others Fail: Social Movement Unionism and the Public Workplace* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

13. The political activity of the Steelworkers and United Auto Workers around NAFTA during the early Clinton Administration is one striking example. Marie Gottschalk, *The Shadow Welfare State*.

14. More broadly, in 2009 “for the first time in American history, a majority of union members are government workers rather than private-sector employees,” as a result of massive job losses in the private sector during the Great Recession and the increase in public sector union membership. Steven Greenhouse, “Most U.S. Union Members Are Working for the Government, New Data Shows,” *New York Times*, January 23, 2010.

15. Rick Fantasia and Kim Voss, *Hard Work: Remaking the American Labor Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

16. Greenstone, *Labor in American Politics*, xvi.

manufacturing industries, while L.A. had a relatively smaller concentration of heavy industries. These differences in economic structure influenced the power and activity of each city's industrial unions and thus labor politics. Political structure was the third factor, with very weak party organizations in Detroit and L.A. compared to the very strong Democratic machine in Chicago. This difference served as a constraint on labor activity in the Windy City. The fourth and final factor was political demography. Greenstone argued that "Detroit and Chicago typify the ethnic-minority group politics of relatively stable industrial centers in the East and Midwest," while Los Angeles had a "lack of ethnic consciousness typical of Southern and Western cities," which explained its position between Chicago and Detroit on the political participation continuum.¹⁷

There has been both continuity and change in all three cities over the past forty years. While some factors have stayed the same—Detroit is still defined by its now-hemorrhaged auto industry, Chicago by its Democratic machine, and L.A. by its open shop tradition—we have also seen significant changes over time. One example is the dramatic demographic change in Los Angeles due to increased immigration, especially from Latin America. In contrast to what Greenstone saw in the mid-1960s, these immigrants have made L.A. incredibly ethnic *conscious*, as nationality and ethnicity have been used as bases for collective action and union organization among new groups of workers in the "new" service sector industries.¹⁸

We might reshuffle categorization of Greenstone's three cities and place Los Angeles and Detroit as polar cases, with Chicago now occupying the midpoint. In a sense, Detroit has switched positions; the de-industrialization of Detroit directly affected the strength of its industrial unions and their declining political influence. The emergence of the new service sector economy in L.A. combined with significant demographic changes directly affected the rise and increasing strength of its service sector unions and their strong political activity. In many ways, Los Angeles can now be considered the vanguard of intense and successful progressive labor politics in the early twenty-first century.¹⁸ Chicago, with its still-stable political machine, maintained its diversified economic base that allowed service and public sector unions to emerge, albeit with political constraints because of the continued strength of the Democratic Machine, earning it the midpoint position.

Yet there has been some change in Chicago, the case I know most about, since the 1960s. Limits on labor's role within the Democratic Party are still set by the Chicago Democratic Machine, which underwent its own restructuring yet still

17. Greenstone, *Labor in American Politics*, xvii.

18. Milkman, *L.A. Story*.

remained a strong and enduring regime.¹⁹ The Machine continues to structure labor politics in the city, and, as Greenstone cogently argued, its political system is still hostile to reform and welfare state issues. There was, however, a brief rupture from 2004 to 2007. In 2004, the newly emergent public and service sector unions endorsed a state senator named Barack Obama for the U.S. Senate, while the building trades and industrial unions endorsed the white Machine candidate in the Democratic primary. As the nation and world now know, Obama won that seat, defeating the Republican candidate as well as the Democratic candidate of the Machine and “old labor.” That same year, a redistributive conflict erupted over whether or not to enact a “Big-Box living wage ordinance,” targeted at Wal-Mart stores.²⁰ In 2006, led by service and public sector unions, a labor-community coalition successfully secured passage through the usually reform- and redistribution-averse Chicago City Council, only to see Machine Mayor Richard Daley veto the measure. In response to and in retaliation for their legislative setback, the majority of organized labor in the city challenged the Machine in the 2007 municipal elections by running and supporting pro-labor, anti-Machine candidates. Of the nine reform candidates labor supported, seven won their campaigns, changing the dynamics of the Council. This and the Obama example suggest that the historic constraints Chicago Democratic Machine politics put on labor are weakening.

Challenges

I conclude with a couple of challenges facing the politics and study of labor in American politics today. The first—and political—challenge facing organized labor is that over the past four decades, employers have become much more aggressive at violating workers’ basic associational rights to join unions and engage in collective bargaining with their employers.²¹ Thus, it is no surprise that union density in 2009 (12.3 percent) is practically at its 1929 rate (10.5 percent), while income and wealth inequality are at their highest rates since the cusp of the Great Depression. It is in this context that the labor movement saw the 2008 election as critical for its survival in the twenty-first century. Still the most important constituency and mobilizing arm of the Democratic Party, as Greenstone made clear, organized labor has attempted to make labor law reform

19. Dick W. Simpson, *Rogues, Rebels and Rubber Stamps: The Politics of the Chicago City Council from 1863 to the Present* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001).

20. Dorian T. Warren, “Wal-Mart Surrounded: Community Alliances and Labor Politics in Chicago,” *New Labor Forum* 14 (2005): 8–15.

21. Kate Bronfenbrenner, “No Holds Barred: The Intensification of Employer Opposition to Organizing,” *EPI Briefing Paper #235* (<http://www.epi.org/publications/entry/bp235/>); Michael Goldfield, *The Decline of Organized Labor in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

a key priority of the party over the years, albeit unsuccessfully.²² The pending Employee Free Choice Act is organized labor's twenty-first-century version of the Wagner Act. It would alter the rules of the game for organizing workers into unions, making it easier to overcome intense employer opposition. What's important about this proposed legislative reform is that the political implications are more significant than its potential effects on economic inequality. If the labor movement does not stop the continued decline in union membership, it loses its ability to deliver votes and resources for the Democratic Party in future elections. In short, the very fate and future viability of the Democratic Party hangs in the balance. This is a short- and long-term political challenge Greenstone could not have foreseen.

The second challenge—of the study of labor politics—is the need to restore labor to the center of the research agenda on American politics while maintaining the longstanding methodological pluralism in how we study labor politics. *Labor in American Politics* exemplifies how to overcome both of these challenges. Greenstone forced analysts to confront the central role of labor in American politics while combining the best of two empirical approaches in his study: historical analysis with intensive ethnographic fieldwork. He spent almost a year in his three major cities, ultimately interviewing more than three-hundred informants, a number that would scare away the most ambitious researchers today—graduate student and senior scholar alike. Forty years later, now is the time for American politics scholars to re-engage this classic work in the field.

22. Dark, *The Unions and the Democrats*.