



**Resilience in the Rust Belt:  
Michigan Democrats and the UAW**

**Daniel Galvin**

Assistant Professor of Political Science  
Faculty Fellow, Institute for Policy Research  
Northwestern University

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## Abstract

Scholarly theories predict that strong ties between political parties and industrial labor unions will inhibit party adaptation and lead to its electoral decline in the context of globalization and deindustrialization. Testing these expectations in the case of the Michigan Democratic Party (MDP), which has long been dominated by the United Auto Workers (UAW), this study finds some peculiar results: UAW leaders regularly supported Democratic adaptation, thereby contributing to the party's relative electoral resilience. Contrary to the notion that labor leaders will always press their interests in a naïve or sincere manner within party councils, these union officials acted with political sophistication and strategic thinking. Several factors were at play, but there is reason to believe that deep and durable party-union linkages encouraged union leaders to engage in this surprising behavior, an argument that echoes and builds upon Greenstone's (1969) findings from over forty years ago. This working paper suggests that under certain conditions—specifically, at very high levels of party-union integration—the presumed negative relationship between party-union linkages and the party's adaptive capacities may actually be reversed.

## INTRODUCTION

Globalization and deindustrialization have posed major challenges for left-of-center political parties around the world. Rising unemployment and increased out-migration have eroded their core blue-collar constituencies; depleted state and municipal budgets and the growing appeal of neoliberal ideas have undermined their traditional policy agendas; conservative candidates have cut into their electoral coalitions and divided their allies. In this context, left-leaning parties have faced strong incentives to craft new policy appeals, seek out new constituencies, and reassess their traditional organizational alliances. As comparative scholarship has shown, however, not all of these parties have responded at the same time, in the same ways, or with the same degree of success. One factor that has reliably mediated their responses is the strength of their ties to industrial labor unions. In what has now become an almost unquestioned premise in the literature, scholars posit that the stronger the party-union “linkages,” the more difficult the party’s adaptation and the more likely its electoral decline. If labor-allied parties are to remain competitive in the postindustrial age, we assume they must loosen, weaken, or jettison their institutional ties to industrial labor unions (Valenzuela 1991; Koelble 1992; Piven 1992b; Taylor 1993; Kitschelt 1994; Piazza 2001; Levitsky 2001, 2003; Ludlam et al. 2002; Burgess 2004).

Precisely the same assumptions animate the ongoing debate over the place of organized labor in the Democratic Party in the United States. Centrist “third way” Democrats pin much of the party’s declining electoral fortunes since the late 1970s on the outsized influence of organized labor in the party, which they argue has turned off the suburban swing voters needed to build national majorities. If Democrats are to compete

effectively in a postindustrial age, they argue that labor must “no longer be at the center of the party’s national coalition” (Baer 2000, 67; Galston and Kamarck 1989; Hale 1995; Galston 2004). Those on the other side lament labor’s *diminished* influence within the Democratic Party and argue that its decline has contributed to the party’s rightward drift, abandonment of core values, and loss of enthusiasm at the grassroots (Meyerson 1986; Kuttner 1987; Dreyfuss 2001; Levi 2003; Francia 2006). Both sides thus agree that a negative relationship exists between the party’s ties to organized labor and its adaptive capacities: they differ only in how much of the former they are willing to trade for the latter.

This debate, unfortunately, has generated more heat than light. We still know far too little about the mechanisms through which strong party-labor linkages supposedly inhibit adaptation and harm the party’s electoral competitiveness. The implicit assumption is that union leaders use their leverage in party councils to veto adaptation efforts, and the more entrenched they are in the party, the more effective they are at thwarting change. But it remains unclear how, exactly, such pressure is exerted; the conditions under which it is more or less likely to occur; whether it applies to every kind of party-union relationship; or even how the “linkages” between parties and unions should be conceptualized and operationalized in the first place. Without answers to these questions, there is little we can say about the actual effects of the Democrats’ alliance with industrial labor unions since the mid-1970s.

Nowhere does this scholarly lacuna have more substantive, real-world significance than in the “Rust Belt” region of the United States, where globalization-related trends have thrust these questions to the center of the political stage. The story is,

by now, familiar: the oil shocks of the 1970s left the automobile industry reeling; factories began to close or move elsewhere; blue-collar unemployment rose precipitously; union density fell; depopulation accelerated; budgets tightened; austerity programs gained in credibility; conservative candidates won office with increasing frequency; and Republican partisan identification grew steadily in each state. Under these conditions, Democrats should have had strong incentives to follow the median voter rightward by developing new programmatic and electoral strategies (Downs 1957; Riker 1962; Panebianco 1988; Schlesinger 1985; Kitschelt 1994). Indeed, this was precisely what centrist outfits like the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) urged them to do (Galston and Kamarck 1989, 1998; Schaitberger 2005; From 2006). Theoretically, however, their deep and durable ties to industrial labor unions should have inhibited their adaptation process. But was organized labor a “drag” on the party in actuality? And if Democratic politicians did move rightward, how should we explain it? At present, we simply cannot say.

Clearly, there is a lot of ground to cover. This article thus moves swiftly from examining aggregate electoral trends to a detailed case study, seeking to resolve the puzzles it discovers along the way. In the first section, it compares the electoral fates of several Rust Belt Democratic parties between the 1970s and 2000s and finds some peculiar patterns. Though all states trended Republican, mirroring nationwide trends, Democrats in Michigan performed better and won more consistently than Democrats in neighboring states. This is surprising, because the Michigan Democratic Party (MDP) is one of the most labor-dominated parties in the nation. Leaders of the United Auto Workers (UAW) have occupied key offices in the MDP for many decades and have

exercised nearly determinative influence on all critical party matters, from candidate selection to policy development to campaign strategy. Compared to neighboring states, where party-union linkages were relatively weaker, Michigan Democrats should have been the *least* capable of adapting and the *most* likely to suffer electoral decline. Yet as I will discuss, many high-profile Michigan Democrats conspicuously adapted, moving rightward in their policy positions in order to expand their base of electoral support.

How was this possible? The secondary source record on internal party politics at the state level is virtually nonexistent, so explaining this peculiarity requires digging a bit deeper than usual. Drawing upon archival research and over two dozen interviews with former and current party and union leaders conducted between 2011-2012, I find that the UAW tolerated—and in many cases took the lead in promoting—the Democrats’ programmatic and electoral adaptation. Contrary to the notion that labor leaders will always press their interests in a naïve or sincere manner within party councils, these union leaders acted with political sophistication and strategic thinking. To be sure, they did not support centrist Democratic candidates and “third way” policies all of the time or in every race. But they did so enough to suggest that the presumed mechanism underlying our theoretical expectations—a sharp dichotomy between the interests of party politicians and the interests of union officials—may be in need of modification and refinement.

Further comparative analysis is needed to explain the UAW’s surprising support for party adaptation, for as I will discuss, several factors appear to have played a role in this particular case. Yet when viewed in light of J. David Greenstone’s (1969) intensive comparative study of party-union relations in the 1960s, the findings presented here appear to lend additional support to his principal argument. In brief, Greenstone found

that organized labor's decision to integrate with the Democratic Party led it to moderate its demands and adopt party-like behaviors, thereby stunting its potential to serve as a "flow channel" for working-class demands. Whereas traditional pluralist theories anticipate that interest groups articulate demands and political parties aggregate them, Greenstone found that organized labor had become so intertwined with the Democratic Party that it had internalized the party's strategic considerations and helped to perform its aggregation function. "When two political organizations cooperate intimately for a long period of time," he wrote, "their patterns of activities begin to fuse" (13). Nowhere was this more apparent than in the UAW's support of "non-labor" Democratic candidates "sympathetic to unions but independent enough to aggregate labor's interests with those of other Democrats" (285).

My findings suggest that despite major systemic changes over the last forty-plus years, Greenstone's central insights remain vital and instructive. After many years of continuous and extensive party-union integration, the distinction between party and union has become hopelessly blurred in Michigan. Party politicians and union actors have developed collective identities and a sense of shared fate, and their perspectives on electoral politics have converged. The basic patterns Greenstone identified in the 1960s, in other words, have become even more pronounced in the contemporary context of deindustrialization, brazen anti-labor offensives from the right, and heightened party competition.

There is still much work to be done, of course, to specify the variable effects of different configurations of party-union relations on party adaptation processes. This study thus takes a first step in this direction, demonstrating that under certain conditions—

specifically, at *very high* levels of party-union integration—the presumed negative relationship between party-union linkages and the party’s adaptive capacities may actually be reversed.

The paper begins by elaborating the predominant theoretical framework and identifying some of its limitations. It then lays out the animating puzzle—electoral resilience and conspicuous adaptation in Michigan despite strong party-union linkages—in some detail. By way of explanation, the following section then demonstrates that union leaders acted strategically to maximize the party’s chances of winning a majority of offices, even at the expense of their preferred policies. The final section then considers the factors contributing to the union’s surprising behavior and discusses the substantive and scholarly implications.

### **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

In the context of globalization and deindustrialization, strong party-union linkages are widely viewed as a drag on the party’s competitiveness. In perhaps the most prominent formulation, Herbert Kitschelt writes: “While in the past strong working-class organization in centralized labor unions, allied with social democratic parties, was a political asset that boosted the parties’ electoral fortunes and policy effectiveness, this asset has now turned into a liability” in the postindustrial era. “Strong linkages to labor unions privilege traditionalists in the party leadership who are unwilling to take on *either* the challenge of market efficiency *or* the challenge of left-libertarian politics” (1994, 6, 225). This echoes Frances Fox Piven’s claim that over-reliance on unions can have “perverse effects on the party, as internal oligarchies hobble adaptations to new political

conditions...[and] ultimately become political liabilities” (1992a, 16), as well as Thomas Koelble’s (1992, 52) contention that “adaptation is more difficult for parties with a strong organizational connection to blue-collar unions in declining industries and relatively smooth for parties with a greater organizational independence from unions in declining industries.” The same perspective appears in numerous comparative studies of labor-allied parties (Przeworski and Sprague 1986; Collier and Collier 1991; Regini 1992; Taylor 1993; Piazza 2001; Murillo 2001; Levitsky 2003; Burgess 2004) and is reflected in the literature on party-union relations in the United States as well (Rehmus et al. 1978; Goldfield 1987; Dark 1999; Ferguson and Rogers 1986; Vogel 1989; Levi 2003; Francia 2006).

Party-union linkages are thus seen as a crucial “internal” organizational factor that mediate party responses to “external” change (Panebianco 1988; Harmel and Janda 1994; Strom 1990; Kitschelt 1994; Levitsky 2001, 2003). Since labor-allied parties in industrialized democracies tend to have multiple veto points, routinized procedures, and high barriers to entry for leadership positions, “old guard” labor leaders within the party hierarchy are expected to use those institutional levers to block the recruitment of new candidates or the development of new policies that might betray labor’s priorities. The more entrenched union officials are in the party’s decision-making processes, the more they are expected to frustrate party adaptation. Longstanding alliances with labor unions can also manifest in normative, cognitive, or cultural constraints that make adaptation more difficult for future party actors (Kitschelt 1994; Piven 1992a; Berman 1997; Schwartz 2011). The widespread assumption, therefore, is that if parties are to adopt new strategies and remain electorally competitive, their ties to organized labor must somehow

be severed or weakened.

This conceptual framework thus presumes a clear-cut distinction between the perspectives of union officials and the perspectives of party politicians. Union leaders are presumed to be *sincere*, naïve actors who pursue their interests by pressuring party politicians to stay close to their ideal preferences.<sup>1</sup> Party politicians, in contrast, are presumed to be *strategic*, sophisticated actors who seek to maximize votes or seats in a “Downsian” fashion, adapting their ideological platforms, policy programs, and electoral strategies to appeal to the median voter, wherever she may be (Downs 1957). Their preferences often overlap, of course—which explains the alliance in the first place—but the strong assumption is that party and union actors have distinct interests and incentives. Indeed, even those scholarly accounts that emphasize the mutual benefits of the party-union relationship describe it as an “exchange” between party interests, on one hand, and union interests on the other (Pizzorno 1978; Garrett 1998; Huber and Stephens 1998; Dark 1999; Hicks 1999; Przeworski and Sprague 1986).

When their interests diverge—as we anticipate under conditions of global economic integration, deindustrialization, and heightened party competition—union leaders are said to face a “loyalty dilemma” (actually, trilemma) in which they must choose between three difficult options (Burgess 2004, 9). Either they abandon the alliance (exit), make demands on the party that violate the terms of the alliance (voice), or acquiesce to the demands of party politicians and accept a more subordinate, less influential position in the party hierarchy (loyalty) (Hirschman 1970; Burgess 2004; Taylor 1993; Murillo 2001; Piazza 2001; Levitsky 2003; Avdagic 2004). The costs of exit are usually deemed to be too high; voice and loyalty are therefore seen as the most

common responses.<sup>2</sup>

Voice—making demands that run counter to politicians electoral imperatives—can produce different outcomes depending on the strength of party-union linkages. If linkages are relatively *weak*, then party politicians will refuse the union’s demands, the alliance will loosen further, and the party will remain more competitive as politicians adapt more freely. If linkages are relatively *strong*, then party politicians must either acquiesce to the union’s demands and suffer electorally, or try to weaken those ties. The third option, loyalty—in which the union accepts party adaptation without a fight—results in weaker party-union linkages as well, since it implies diminished union influence in the party. Whichever option the union chooses, then, the result is either the party’s electoral decline or weaker party-union linkages.

Extant theoretical frameworks thus leave no room for the possibility that party-union linkages might remain strong while the party remains electorally competitive. This may stem from the strong scholarly tendency to treat parties and groups as competitors in political space, playing a zero-sum game. As E.E. Schattschneider famously observed, organized pressure groups and political parties practice “contrasting kinds of politics” and pursue conflicting and competing goals (1960, 20). A more recent review of the literature likewise notes that “the ongoing contest between political parties and interest groups is one of the epic struggles of American politics” (Heaney 2010, 568; see also Lawson and Merkl 1988; Katz and Mair 1995).

When Greenstone wrote his classic *Labor in American Politics* at the height of labor’s political power in 1969, he found that this received wisdom about party-group relations did not apply to the organized labor-Democratic Party alliance in the United

States. Once labor “came to terms” with the institutional, ideological, and organizational limitations the American political system imposed on its ability to serve as a “flow channel for lower-class demands,” he wrote, it entered the Democratic Party, assumed a leadership role, and its perspective began to change (120). It moderated its demands and prioritized the party’s electoral imperatives. Such a shift not only dashed the hope that labor might assume a more militant, radical role in American politics, but it confounded the expectations of pluralist theory. Instead of working at cross-purposes, unions entered into a synergistic relationship with the Democratic Party. Of course, Greenstone’s book was published just as “labor unions were on the precipice of a dramatic decline” (Frymer 2010). Given the profound systemic changes that have challenged the labor movement in the decades since, scholars do not typically assume that Greenstone’s insights still apply today. This paper argues that they nevertheless do.

In fact, what Greenstone thought was specific to the party-*union* relationship increasingly appears to apply to party-*group* relations in general. To be sure, the relationship between the MDP and the UAW is unusual—it represents an “extreme” case, occupying the upper range of party-union linkages.<sup>3</sup> But very high levels of integration and collaboration between party actors and “policy-demanding” interest groups are probably more common than is often realized (Bawn et al. 2012). Recent studies have shown that parties and groups need not always compete for activists’ loyalties, but may share robust, overlapping memberships and staff; trade valuable information assets; act as “brokers” for one another; and share durable institutional ties (Masket 2009; Koger et al. 2009; Heaney 2010; Skinner et al. 2012; Allern and Bale 2012; Krimmel forthcoming). Thus, while parties and interest groups may at times work at cross-purposes, they may

also converge, cooperate, and act in mutually beneficial ways. This study lends support to this notion.

### **THE PUZZLE**

The motivating puzzle consists in two parts. First, between 1970 and 2010, Michigan Democrats performed better in elections and won more consistently than neighboring-state Democrats. Part of the explanation is that many Michigan Democrats moved rightward in their policy positions. Second, the MDP and the UAW maintained unusually strong party-union linkages throughout this period. Because the historical record on state-level party politics is virtually nonexistent, simply explicating this puzzle takes a bit more work than usual. This section thus draws upon aggregate elections data, archival research, and personal interviews to do so.

#### ***1. RELATIVE ELECTORAL RESILIENCE AND PARTY ADAPTATION***

To begin, we need a set of comparable parties with which to evaluate the relative electoral competitiveness of Michigan Democrats from the 1970s to the 2000s. Confining the analysis to the Rust Belt is a good start, but the region has artificial, subjective boundaries (see **Figure 1**).<sup>4</sup>

#### **INSERT [FIGURE 1](#) ABOUT HERE**

This study thus zeroes in on the four heaviest manufacturing states within that region—Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, and Wisconsin—where deindustrialization challenges should have figured most prominently in state politics (see **Figure 2**).<sup>5</sup>

#### **INSERT [FIGURE 2](#) ABOUT HERE**

In these core Rust Belt states, self-identified Republicans in the electorate grew by about 10 percentage points between the mid-1970s and early 2000s, mirroring the

trend across all fifty states, while Democratic party identification declined by about 2 percentage points and self-identified Independents declined by about 8 percentage points. All four states trended together, and the partisan changes in Michigan were perfectly average for the region (see **Figure 3**). As such, we would expect Democrats in each of these states to have faced similar incentives to move rightward in order to remain competitive.

**INSERT [FIGURE 3](#) ABOUT HERE**

But where to look for signs of electoral success? Though some may prefer a different combination of offices, the inquiry here will be confined to the offices state parties typically value most highly and target most routinely: state legislature; state senate; state governorship; U.S. House; U.S. Senate; and U.S. presidency. Ceaser and Saldin's (2005) Majority Party Index (MPI), which aggregates, weights, and tracks election results for these six categories every two years, is thus particularly useful for our purposes.<sup>6</sup>

As **Figure 4** indicates, Republicans assumed ostensible "majority party" status (over 50 percent) in all four states during the 1990s, but each state's electoral trends were not all of a piece. Specifically, Democrats in Michigan dampened the Republican wave more effectively than Democrats in any other state. By the mid-1990s, Ohio (which was Michigan's electoral twin in the 1970s) and Wisconsin (which was even more solidly Democratic than Michigan in the 1970s) had each swung a full 9 percentage points toward the Republican Party, while the Republican gain was less than half that in Michigan.

**INSERT [FIGURE 4](#) ABOUT HERE**

Given the region-wide trend toward the Republican Party, these differences may appear small. But in a competitive two-party state, only one or two MPI points can mean the difference between majority control and out-party status. A party’s ability to *dampen* the region-wide trend and remain within striking distance of 51 percent—to exhibit *resilience* in the face of adversity—is therefore of crucial importance. Michigan Democrats not only remained more competitive than neighboring Democrats on average, but they experienced less electoral volatility (measured as standard deviation from the mean) as well. **Table 1** shows the standard deviation and range for each state (also measured as MPI).<sup>7</sup>

**Table 1**  
**Electoral Stability, 1970-2010 (MPI)**

	<u>S.D.</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Min</u>	<u>Max</u>	<u>Range</u>
<b>Michigan</b>	<b>2.6%</b>	<b>48.8%</b>	<b>43.7%</b>	<b>52.8%</b>	<b>9.1</b>
Indiana	2.8%	54.8%	48.9%	60.1%	11.2
Wisconsin	3.8%	48.1%	39.2%	55.0%	15.8
Ohio	4.5%	51.5%	44.5%	59.4%	14.9

In comparative studies of party adaptation, these measures of electoral resilience are often treated as tantamount to, or as observable implications of, party adaptation (Kitschelt 1994). That may not always be a safe assumption, however, since election outcomes are notoriously over-determined. But if not adaptation, then what explains the MDP’s relative electoral resilience?

One plausible explanation might involve Michigan’s unusually high levels of unemployment and economic insecurity during this period. Perhaps anxious voters were more willing to elect Democrats who promised more protections against the risks, dislocations, and wage uncertainties associated with globalization and deindustrialization than Republicans (Garrett 1998). In heavily Democratic districts, that is precisely what

participants reported. But at the state level and in “swing” districts, an altogether different picture emerges. An electorate clamoring for more ameliorative economic policies simply does not square with the statewide elections (and enduring popularity) of conservative Republicans Gov. John Engler (1991-2003), Sen. Spencer Abraham (1995-2001), as well as numerous Republican state legislators who championed austerity budgets, retrenchment of social welfare policies, and a variety of neoliberal reforms.<sup>8</sup>

More important for our purposes, however, is that Republicans were not the only politicians rewarded for eschewing traditional leftist policies. A surprising number of prominent Democrats in Michigan moved rightward as well, conspicuously designing “third way” policy agendas to appeal to split-ticket voters, Independents, and Republicans. Many high-profile Michigan Democrats did *not* reposition, of course (e.g., liberal stalwarts Sen. Carl Levin, Rep. David Bonior, and Rep. Howard Wolpe)—and those from “safe” districts had no reason to—but many *did*, including the two most successful Democratic politicians in Michigan during this period: Governor James Blanchard (1983-1991) and Governor Jennifer Granholm (2003-2011). Both unabashedly embraced centrist “New Democrat” positions that clashed with the traditional priorities of organized labor, and both governors sought to publicly distance themselves from the UAW. Blanchard, in fact, was a founding member of the DLC in the mid-1980s and served as chairman of Michigan’s DLC chapter. Other prominent Democrats who also publicly affiliated with the congressional New Democrat Coalition (NDC), the New Democrat Network (NDN) think tank, or the “Third Way” think tank included Sen. Debbie Stabenow (also U.S. House), U.S. Rep. Sander Levin, U.S. Rep. John Dingell (co-chair of the think tank “Third Way”), U.S. Rep. Gary Peters, U.S. Rep. James Barcia

(charter member of NDC), State Sen. Gilda Jacobs (Senate Democratic Caucus chair), State Rep. Bill McConico (founder of House DLC caucus), and Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick (also State House minority leader).<sup>9</sup>

These and other successful Michigan Democrats embraced centrist, reformist positions on myriad policy issues, including many that rolled back labor’s historic advances in protecting workers and providing for their economic security (see **Table 2**). Though the initiatives presented in **Table 2** represent only a smattering of the policies supported by these politicians at the state level, interview respondents consistently identified these policies as politically significant and highly salient departures from past practice. The point is that many Democratic politicians—especially those running in statewide elections or in swing districts—perceived it in their interest to move to the right. This does not appear to be a case of Michigan’s electorate lurching leftward while neighboring state electorates moved rightward.

**Table 2**  
**Policies Advocated by Democrats Contrary to Labor’s Traditional Priorities**

<p><b>Workers’ Compensation Reform (‘82, ‘85, ‘87)</b> Harder for workers to qualify for benefits; harder for injured workers to sue employers for damages; changes to “disability” definition</p> <p><b>Unemployment Compensation Reform (80s-90s)</b> Stop growth in unemployment benefits (in 1989); UCF restructuring 1992; reduce payments, raise monetary eligibility requirement (1995)</p> <p><b>Business-friendly Policies (80s-00s)</b> Tax cuts, tax incentives, balanced budgets, regulatory reform (1980s, 1990s, 2000s); use state pension funds as venture capital for startups; Michigan Strategic Fund (public-private partnerships); 21st Century Jobs Fund (“corporate welfare”)</p> <p><b>Education, Training Initiatives (80s-00s)</b> Buyouts with training if union membership is revoked</p>
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Adaptation by many of the state’s most successful Democratic politicians

therefore seems to be an important part of the explanation for Michigan Democrats’ relative electoral resilience during this period. Other factors were surely at work as well,

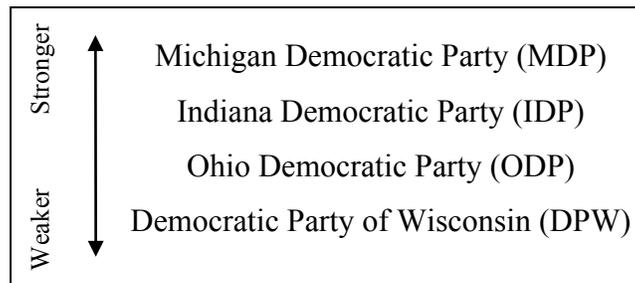
of course, as I discuss elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> But simply as an empirical matter, the five election campaigns in which Blanchard and Granholm led the Democratic ticket (1982, 1986, 1990, 2002, 2006) weigh heavily in the MPI statistic. In sum, Democrats in Michigan managed to remain more electorally resilient than their neighboring Democrats, and part of the explanation is that many high-profile Democrats moved to the right in their policy positions.

## ***2. STRONG PARTY-UNION LINKAGES***

Michigan Democrats' conspicuous adaptation only becomes puzzling in light of the unusually strong ties maintained between the MDP and UAW throughout this period. Scholars have long taken note of this extraordinary relationship (Fenton 1966; Greenstone 1969; Buffa 1984b, 1984a; Browne and Verburg 1995; Form 1995). Compared to neighboring states—also known for their high union densities and strong labor unions—the UAW's dominant role in the MDP has long stood out. In Indiana, the UAW was strong and politically active, but in urban areas of the state where party “machines” historically predominated, it tended to compete, rather than collaborate, with the party apparatus (Fenton 1966; Hadley 1993). Union density was high in Ohio as well, but with no single dominant union and most medium-to-large cities run by traditional party organizations, organized labor typically occupied a subordinate place in Ohio Democratic Party politics. Furthermore, the largest union in Ohio—the United Steelworkers (USW)—was less politically organized, engaged, and influential than the UAW in Michigan or Indiana (Form 1995; Lamis and Usher 2007). In Wisconsin, the birthplace of labor rights in the U.S., industrial labor unions were politically active in the southeastern corner of the state, and public sector unions have grown increasingly

politically active across the state. But organized labor in Wisconsin has long been fragmented by urban/rural and public/private sector union rivalries, which has served to reduce its influence within the statewide Democratic Party organization (Epstein 1958; Fenton 1966; Sulzberger and Davey 2011). In other words, in none of these manufacturing-heavy states did any union so dominate the Democratic Party as did the UAW in Michigan. A rough sketch of this variation in party-labor linkages is presented in **Table 3**.

**Table 3**  
**Variation in Party-Labor Linkages**



These secondary-source impressions provide a useful starting point, but more precise empirical referents of party-union linkages are needed. How, exactly, did the UAW dominate the MDP? Through what means should it have been able to inhibit adaptation by center-seeking Democrats?

*Conceptualizing and Operationalizing Party-Union “Linkages”*

Unfortunately, the term *linkages* is not usually well-defined or systematically measured. Sometimes it is used interchangeably with “influence,” but the term also implies something more durable, or institutional. Building on Kitschelt (1994), Ludlam et al (2002), and Upchurch et al. (2009), this study disaggregates party-union “linkages” into three overlapping but analytically distinct dimensions: structural, procedural, and operational integration (see **Table 3**). Theoretically, integration could occur along one,

two, or all three dimensions, and in different degrees along each. In Michigan, I find evidence of extensive party-union integration along each dimension throughout the period under examination. If anything, these linkages grew stronger over the years. Space constraints do not permit a full presentation of the evidence, but a few examples should suffice.

**Table 3**  
**Measuring Party-Union Linkages**

- **Structural Integration**
  - e.g., sharing of personnel, physical space, material resources
- **Procedural Integration**
  - e.g., collaborative decision making, strategic planning
- **Operational Integration**
  - e.g., coordination in political activities

### *1. Structural Integration*

The most important structural tie between the party and the union involved *personnel overlap*, meaning union members who were also party members. This party-union fusion did not always exist: prior to 1972, the UAW maintained a “general policy” of staying out of Democratic Party offices.<sup>11</sup> After a series of political crises in the early 1970s that UAW leaders felt were mishandled by MDP leaders, the union’s top political leadership resolved to change their approach. In 1972, the UAW’s political arm, the Community Action Program (UAW-CAP), mobilized local union leaders to assemble slates of delegates to run for the MDP State Central Committee (SCC) in districts across the state. Drawing upon the UAW’s power in numbers and organizational skill, union members easily took majority control of the SCC. From there, UAW members ensured that only labor-friendly party chairmen and DNC delegates were elected. This effort inaugurated a new era in party-union integration that continues to this day. Of the

approximately 3,000 party members attending biannual party conventions, over 2,000 are also UAW members (and retirees). Roughly two-thirds of SCC members, likewise, are UAW members as well. Over the years, other unions have gained in strength within the party as well—including the AFSCME, SEIU, and the Michigan Education Association (MEA)—but the UAW remains the dominant force.

Among grassroots activists, the distinction between “party members” and “union members” was just as blurred, “whether it was social groups or political groups or retiree groups, or the leadership of the party,” one participant noted.<sup>12</sup> A former union leader confirmed that local UAW activists “were all party members, and they were all political activists...there's absolutely no distinction...Everything the Democratic Party does, the UAW was totally involved with. At every level. From the grassroots right on up.”

The party and union shared not only personnel, but also physical space, material resources, and information assets. The SCC, for example, routinely met at local union headquarters around the state; the UAW and MDP regularly shared pollsters; and in the early 1990s, the two entities partnered to assemble a massive voter database.<sup>13</sup> “They’re thoroughly integrated into what we do,” one party leader reported.

## *2. Procedural Integration*

Structural integration becomes politically significant to the extent that it results in shared decision-making authority. On this score, the evidence is overwhelming that the UAW has been directly involved in virtually every important party decision since at least the early 1970s. A primary example is the Unity Caucus, a subterranean vehicle designed in the 1970s to ensure union influence in party decision-making processes. An informal device, the Unity Caucus met in advance of SCC meetings and party conventions to set

the agenda, rank nominees for statewide office, make endorsements, determine policy stands, and settle differences behind closed doors. With most contentious issues resolved, tabled, or at least discussed thoroughly in advance, party meetings appeared relatively seamless. In the 1990s, its name changed to the Labor Caucus, but it continues to meet to this day. A similar model operated at the local level as well, where local UAW-CAP council meetings were often held in conjunction with congressional district party meetings. “We’d be at the same location...we would meet with our membership, and then they would go to the Democratic Party meeting,” said one participant.

Less formal collaborative decision-making was also common. Roughly every two weeks, an unnamed “continuing operation” brought MDP party leaders together with representatives from the UAW, other statewide unions, the MEA, elected officials, and other influential actors to facilitate collaborative decision-making on candidate selection, campaign operations, and resolving other political issues. This informal mechanism enabled ostensibly independent groups to influence party actions, and vice versa. Of course, truly informal collaboration—discussions over the telephone and in person—has always been the most common form of party-union interaction. Party chairmen routinely called the political directors of UAW-CAP to discuss appointments. Said one leader: “He wasn’t getting my permission—*he was just discussing it with me*. We were consultants to each other.” Another reported: “We always picked up the phone and called the political directors, the party caucus chairs...When you’ve got that much clout, that many votes, you don’t stand at the back door of the convention and just say this is where the UAW is at...I would always make sure that I talked to all the party officers, and I’d have a discussion: How do you feel, where are you at on this.” Collaborative decision making, in

short, has long been the norm.<sup>14</sup>

### 3. *Operational Integration*

The deep structural and procedural integration of the MDP and UAW enabled myriad coordinated campaigns and political operations. For example, the party and union routinely ran joint training programs to educate and mobilize activists across the state on voter targeting, messaging, media relations, and voter contact techniques.<sup>15</sup> The primary area of operational integration, however, involved election year “Coordinated Campaigns,” whereby the broad network of Democratic Party and affiliated groups discussed fundraising, expenditures, voter registration and mobilization, candidate recruitment, issue ad placement, and other actions. Despite the UAW’s outsized influence in the state, the union was deeply committed to the party-led coordinated campaigns.

Candidates seeking the UAW’s endorsement were told:

“If you want to run for a university board and you’re going to go out asking for campaign contributions, okay, well here’s what you need to do. That money needs to go into the Michigan Democratic Party Coordinated Campaign. There’s not a thing you can do with that paltry \$30,000, \$40,000, \$80,000 you’re going to get. Keep \$5,000 for yourself to cover incidentals, but the rest of it better go to the Coordinated Campaign. This is how it works: it’s what we can do for you statewide; that’s where the money needs to go.”

To summarize, relations between the MDP and the UAW were so strong between the 1970s and 2000s that it would not be an exaggeration to describe the party and the union as *fused*. Participants often took for granted their connections, shared purposes, and dual loyalties. Extensive personnel overlap helps to explain it, but so too does the reliable reproduction of these collaborative practices over time. Drawn out over many years, little meaningful distinction could be made between the party and the union. Predominant theories predict that this extensive party-union integration would serve as a drag on the

party's electoral competitiveness. Why was it not? To this question we now turn.

### **THINKING LIKE POLITICIANS: UNION LEADERS AS STRATEGIC ACTORS**

It is a foundational premise in political science that parties under pressure will alter their strategies and adjust the nature of their appeals to keep pace with changing voter preferences. Adaptation is what we think parties and their candidates do as a matter of course (Downs 1957; Riker 1962; Lowi 1963). Given the rightward movement of the Michigan electorate noted above, it is therefore not all that surprising that many high-profile Democratic politicians moved rightward in their policy positions. What *is* surprising is that adaptation occurred despite extremely strong party-union linkages. As discussed, strong party-union linkages should have inhibited the party's flexibility and led to its gradual electoral decline. How, then, did Michigan Democrats manage to adapt and remain more competitive than neighboring parties, where party-union linkages were relatively weaker?

The explanation is actually quite simple: UAW leaders supported party adaptation and lent their assistance to the entire vote-maximizing effort. Contrary to theoretical expectations, these union leaders acted in a strategic or *sophisticated* manner rather than in a *sincere* fashion: they recognized that electing less reliable “non-labor” Democrats was far preferable to the election of more Republicans. And when they deemed it necessary for the party's electoral success, they compromised on some of their core policy commitments. In other words, they found their policy interests to be intertwined with, and indeed, inseparable from, the electoral interests of the Democratic Party.

To be sure, in solidly Democratic districts, the UAW typically backed the most

pro-labor Democrat possible. But in “swing” or “marginal” districts and statewide elections, the UAW employed an entirely different political calculus—in those districts, the UAW sought out candidates who could appeal to a broader set of voters. Interview respondents repeatedly remarked that it was almost too obvious to mention—and silly to even ask—*of course* the party needed to field candidates who could reach beyond the labor base in those races. A former UAW-CAP director explained:

“Look, if you haven’t been able to get to a point of a clear majority of Democrats, but you’re right on the edge, chances are that your membership—or people associated with the labor movement—are *less than that*. So if the candidate is a dog—and can’t go beyond the base—can’t go base-plus, and then can’t go beyond that, we are not going to get a majority. And if we cannot get a majority, they’re going to \_\_\_ us. So, what are you looking for, then? You’re looking for someone who can appeal to a broader set of people than just the union.”

Rank-and-file union members were sometimes less enthusiastic than their leaders about supporting candidates who went “base-plus.” UAW-CAP officers would hear complaints like: “You’re always going with somebody you think can *win*, and not staying true to what we believe in!” Those arguments did not hold much water for UAW political leaders, however, who reportedly responded: “Sure, this guy’s a nice guy; he says all the right things; he’s for everything we’re for. But how do you think he’s going to win this district?...You can have five of them that way, but geez, if we get below 52, we don’t have control of the House—and when we don’t have control of the House, they [hurt] us...So what is it you want to do here?”

“We always worked with our membership,” another political leader explained, “to help them understand that we had all these broad issues that went all across the spectrum, and needed candidates who would represent those issues, too.” Or another interviewee: “We always have known that we need to broaden the base. We can’t win with what

we've got. So we need to be reaching out." Still another: "To win an election, we've got to appeal to people that aren't our members—or if they are members, [didn't care]—and who believe that we're not being accommodating, or that the Democratic Party's program doesn't deal with creating new businesses, etc. That's moderate Democrats or 'business' Democrats, or Independent voters. We've got to appeal to them, too."

Prospective Democratic candidates were sometimes surprised to learn the extent of the UAW political leaders' strategic thinking. One former UAW-CAP leader recounted: "They'd sit down and start talking to me about worker's comp, and this and that, and I used to say: 'You know what? I appreciate what you're telling me, but you've got to understand something. I don't need you to take care of that. That's what *we* do.'" The UAW wanted Democratic candidates who would speak to a broader range of issues. In its lobbying activities, the UAW pressed for policy "purity," or as close to it as possible—but in competitive districts and statewide elections, it sought to recruit Democratic candidates who could reach beyond the base.

Party regulars were acutely aware of the UAW's political sophistication. One former party chairman said that UAW leaders would occasionally warn him not to be too supportive of labor in public: "They'd say...sometimes you're going to have to chew us out a little." A Democratic state representative likewise explained that the UAW's political leaders understood the imperatives of majority-building in a legislative setting: "They knew that there were Democrats that—you couldn't count on a 100% vote [record on labor's issues], but maybe 65% was pretty good for the community they were in—to help you organize as a senate or legislative body. They understood that very well."

UAW-CAP leaders sometimes even criticized party leaders for not being strategic

enough. Said one former UAW-CAP director:

“The Michigan Democratic Party has always been extremely sensitive with wanting to make sure that they balance the ticket...make sure we have minorities, a woman, and so on. And sometimes I think that was maybe not the best strategy because it didn’t necessarily mean we were going to win. We may look good, but I always thought elections were about winning!...there were some times when we basically had to step in and say this has got to be the candidate for Secretary of State, because he can win.”

*Example: Recruiting and Supporting Governor Blanchard*

The UAW’s embrace of the party’s broader strategic considerations was on prominent display in 1982, when UAW leaders helped to recruit James Blanchard to run for governor. Blanchard, then a U.S. congressman from suburban Detroit, had made a name for himself by helping to orchestrate the Chrysler bailout and championing neo-corporatism—“a positive working relationship between government, labor and management”—which, at the time, was seen as steering a middle course between the interests of labor and business.<sup>16</sup> One local magazine described Blanchard’s vision for state government as “startling in its divergence from New Deal Democratic policy.” Regarding the “unusual business-labor coalition behind his candidacy,” Blanchard was quoted as saying: “I’m interested in creating a new political force for the future,” one less dependent upon the UAW.<sup>17</sup> Yet UAW political operatives not only helped to recruit him, but offered Blanchard crucial support in the primary and general election campaign. With popular Republican governor William Milliken retiring after fourteen years and the state economy in recession, the UAW perceived a rare opportunity for Democrats to recapture the state executive’s office. Blanchard was clearly not “in their pocket,” but because he appealed to “Milliken Democrats” and other split-ticket voters, the UAW saw him as the party’s best chance to win.

As governor, Blanchard conspicuously embraced policies that departed from, and occasionally rolled back, labor's hard-won achievements. After raising taxes during his first year to balance the state budget, Blanchard felt it necessary to move to the center. He understood that his reelection prospects in 1986 depended on his ability to "pick up on a stable basis 25 to 50% of the liberal wing of the Republican Party," his adviser wrote in a confidential memo.<sup>18</sup> His close team of advisors therefore concluded that the traditional "labor-oriented economic message was untenable in what today we'd call the postindustrial economic setting."<sup>19</sup> Blanchard thus set out to develop a distinctly nontraditional Democratic policy agenda that included initiatives to attract business and invest in promising industries, reform Workers' Compensation rules, create a "Michigan Business Ombudsman," and others. Blanchard also became the state chairman of the DLC—a sometimes overtly anti-labor group seeking to move the party rightward—and throughout his 1986 campaign he took pains to distance his administration from organized labor. Yet the UAW remained solid for Blanchard and backed his policy objectives. Blanchard held weekly meetings with UAW officials, cabinet secretaries, and key administration officials to give labor leaders an opportunity to weigh in on policy decisions.<sup>20</sup>

Why did the UAW tolerate Blanchard's "third way" repositioning? According to one former party leader, the explanation was simple: "They're realists! They recognized the kinds of pressures facing the party, the need to have a broader tent." A former UAW political leader explained:

"Blanchard used to say, he couldn't have survived, couldn't have been governor, if we hadn't had a lot of tolerance for all his business initiatives. And it was true: we tolerated an awful lot of crap that he and his Department of Commerce guys did. We were pretty good on compromise on a whole bunch of issues Blanchard

and business community wanted to deal with. We let him have a lot of them. Why? Because we couldn't win without him.”

## **EXPLAINING THE UNION'S STRATEGIC BEHAVIOR**

What explains the UAW's support of Democratic adaptation? In the context of a single case study, it is impossible to resolve the matter conclusively; several plausible explanatory factors can be identified within this particular case alone. Further comparative analysis is needed to rule out competing explanations and draw conclusions with greater confidence. Though this study appears to corroborate Greenstone's findings from the 1960s—that the extremely strong ties between the MDP and the UAW had an independent, transformative effect on the outlook of union leaders—three other explanatory factors cannot entirely be ruled out.

### ***1. UAW EXCEPTIONALISM***

First is that the UAW is an *exceptional* union—meaning, unusually broad-minded, politically engaged, and strategically astute. Indeed, this is how the UAW is usually described by scholars and participants alike (Lichtenstein 1995; Boyle 1995; Barnard 2004; Meier and Rudwick 2007). Seen in this light, it would not matter how deeply integrated the UAW was with the MDP: the union would have acted in a strategic fashion either way. Rather than push its narrow interests in party councils as other economic interest groups might do, the UAW recognized that a broad-based Democratic majority was the only way to ensure that, as long-serving UAW President Walter Reuther once said, “what the union fights for and wins at the bargaining table [cannot] be taken away in the legislative halls.”<sup>21</sup> According to Dudley Buffa, the UAW had long been pragmatic about party politics: “The UAW did not want to find itself in control of a party

organization that represented only itself. Walter Reuther had understood that in the American context a labor party was an impossibility and that to obtain the strength necessary for electoral success the Democratic party had to reach far beyond the confines of the UAW or even organized labor altogether” (1984b, 35). The UAW’s political sophistication, in other words, might have been what led it to join the MDP in the first place, and the extensive party-union linkages discussed above might be an *effect*, rather than a *cause*, of the union’s strategic outlook on politics. Equally strong party-union linkages in a different setting, featuring a different union, might therefore not yield the same outcomes. At present, we cannot discount this possibility.

## ***2. UAW’S DEFENSIVE POSTURE***

The second plausible explanatory factor involves the UAW’s assumption of a defensive posture in the face of Republican electoral advances in the 1980s and 1990s. When the UAW was in institution-building mode in the 1930s and 1940s, it sought to elect “pure” or “reliable” labor Democrats who would take the lead in building new labor-friendly policies. But as its major policy achievements became increasingly vulnerable to attack and dismantlement by Republicans, the union’s most urgent concern became defensive in nature: its primary goal became preventing the opposition from eviscerating existing workers’ protections in the name of global economic competitiveness. This required the prevention of Republican majorities—or at least ensuring Democratic veto power—in state government. Supporting the election of “non-labor Democrats” was therefore rational, insofar as it was superior to the election of more Republicans. Such concessions to reality were evident in interviews. One UAW political leader explained: “It’s the whole thing about what I want, what I’d like to have, and what

I can live with. I can hardly remember having [a candidate] that I *wanted*. I spent a lot more time in the ‘live with’ category. And that’s what you have to do.”

The UAW did assume a more defensive posture during this period, and that is a central part of the broader story. But this observation only goes so far as an explanatory factor. After all, Greenstone found that the UAW made the same sorts of strategic accommodations during the “heyday” of labor’s political power in the 1960s as well.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, as early as 1949, Nelson Lichtenstein finds that Walter Reuther strategically brought the UAW into a permanent alliance with an “unreformed” Democratic Party despite knowing that such an alliance would mean sacrificing some of the union’s progressive goals (1995, 300). This was not, therefore, a new phenomenon born of the conservative ascendancy or even the sharp post-1970s decline in union density.

### ***3. ELECTORAL CAPTURE***

Nor was this a case of “electoral capture” in which the opposing party no longer sought the support of union members, thereby diminishing the union’s credible threat of defection and reducing its influence within its affiliated party. Republicans certainly gave up on the UAW’s institutional support, but they continued to make appeals to union members on a regular basis. White, blue-collar union members in Macomb County, after all, were the original “Reagan Democrats” (Greenberg 1995). But even if Republicans *had* given up on union members, the phenomenon of “electoral capture” would not apply here. In standard usage, electoral capture is said to occur when a group lacks a plausible “exit” option and is consequently left with “very little bargaining clout with party leadership or candidates” and little choice but to acquiesce to party strategy (Frymer 1999; Levi 2003). Given that the UAW remained dominant within party councils and

nearly determinative in candidate selection processes—yet vigorously committed to the strategy of adaptation for majority-building purposes—that particular phenomenon does not appear to be a very good fit.

#### ***4. DEEP AND DURABLE PARTY-UNION INTEGRATION***

The primary explanation favored here is that extensive party-union integration was, itself, an important cause of the UAW's pragmatism. That is, very high levels of structural, procedural, and operational integration, maintained over many years, led union officials to internalize the party's strategic considerations and support adaptation.

Supporting evidence can be found along each of the three dimensions of party-union integration discussed above. First, because many UAW officials served simultaneously as party officers, they were responsible for electing Democrats up and down the ticket: it was their *job* to win Democratic majorities. With a membership base that also overlapped, union leaders were also accountable to a constituency whose goals were deeply intertwined with the party's. Structural integration of party and union thus generated a sense of *shared responsibilities*. Second, extensive party-union collaboration in decision-making processes regularly engaged UAW leaders in sophisticated political strategizing about how to win or maintain Democratic majorities. Routinized processes, stable over many years, may have encouraged union officials to “think” like partisans. Procedural integration thus led to *shared purposes*. Third, frequent coordinated campaigns and other collaborative political activities created constant reminders of the party and union's *shared fate* and *synergistic organizational capacities*.

The experience of serving within the party hierarchy, participating fully in party decision-making processes, and running joint political operations over many years, in

other words, may have helped UAW leaders to reorder their priorities and adopt the perspective of “Downsian” party actors. One political operative noted, for example, that early in his career he would “idealistically” get attached to candidates who stood firm on labor’s priorities and seemed like a “good person” to have in Lansing. “Then it dawned on me after a few years,” he said, “that it’s about getting them elected. Because if it was just about the labor issues, period, it wouldn’t be the Democratic Party! There would be a Labor Movement Party, and that’s the way we’d be doing things.”

This explanation is consistent with Greenstone’s central argument in his magisterial *Labor in American Politics* (1969). Greenstone’s analysis was inherently comparative: the MDP-UAW relationship sat at one end of the continuum of party-union relationships; the opposite “polar case” was Chicago, where labor activity and influence was severely limited by a strong party organization; and at the “midpoint” lay Los Angeles (xvi). Through detailed ethnographic study and comparative analysis, Greenstone was able to conclude that where the UAW became most thoroughly integrated with the Democratic Party, it adopted the party’s perspective as its own and ceased to be a radical force for change. “Labor was free to enter the Michigan Democratic party,” he wrote. “But once it made this choice it could not merely consider the interests of its own members or even those of all wage earners...Entry into the Democratic Party...meant creating structural flow channels within the existing patterns of the political system, limiting the UAW’s capacity to convey working-class demands on behalf of welfare issues” (137-8). In short, he argued that the UAW “was restrained by its own role as leader of the Democratic party. With this leadership went the responsibility for party success, that is, to win elections by assembling broadly based electoral

coalitions that necessarily include non-UAW members” (111).

As a causal explanation, then, extensive party-union integration thus has the weight of history as well as Greenstone’s comparative analysis going for it. Further study is needed in the contemporary period, of course, but my findings in Michigan appear to lend support to the notion that very strong party-union linkages can have an independent effect on the identities, interests, and calculations of union leaders. Rather than naïvely or sincerely promote the union’s narrower interests in its dealings with the party, UAW officials adopted the perspective of the party itself. The fusion of party and union in Michigan, in other words, appeared to facilitate, rather than frustrate, Democratic Party adaptation.

### **CONCLUSION**

Since the 1970s, globalization and deindustrialization have created a new set of political challenges for labor-allied parties around the world. Nowhere has this been more pronounced than in the Rust Belt region of the United States, where state Democratic parties have had to contend with the steady erosion of their core blue-collar constituencies and mounting challenges to the legitimacy of their traditional policy appeals. Watching their state electorates move rightward and their conservative opponents win elections while promoting less interventionist, more market-oriented policies, these Democratic politicians have faced strong incentives to move to the center and develop new policy positions that, in many cases, run counter to the interests of their labor union partners. As comparative scholarship has shown, politicians in this position are often frustrated by their parties’ strong institutionalized ties to industrial labor unions—the prevailing assumption is that the stronger the party-union linkages, the more

difficult the party's adaptation. In the case of the MDP-UAW relationship, this assumption does not hold. Rather than stand in the way of party adaptation, union leaders supported it, thereby contributing to the party's relative electoral resilience. The MDP-UAW case thus challenges the range of the theory, suggesting that at *very* high levels of party-union integration, the presumed negative relationship between strong party-union linkages and the party's adaptive capacities may actually be reversed.

The primary explanation offered here is that deep party-union integration, maintained over many years, altered union leaders' interests, incentives, and calculations. Contrary to the notion that union leaders will always press the union's interests without concern for the party's broader strategic considerations, I argue that the UAW's extensive structural, procedural, and operational integration with the party led its leaders to reorder their priorities and "think" more like strategic party politicians than special interest group representatives. The notion that interest groups and political parties engage in "contrasting kinds of politics," in other words, is an outcome that needs to be explained rather than assumed. It does not hold under all circumstances, and the outstanding task is to specify the conditions under which party-group relations, and their effects, might vary.

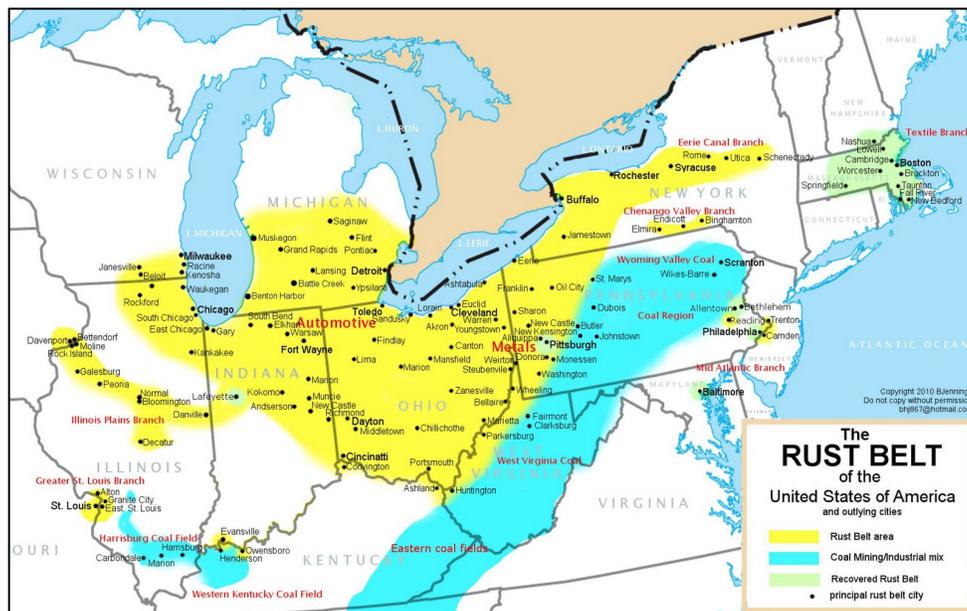
This study raises a number of questions for future research. As noted, as an "extreme" case, the MDP-UAW relationship is not meant to be representative of the broader population—it serves to maximize variance on the primary dimension of interest (party-union linkages), thereby allowing us to test the range of the theory and generate insights to help further refine the theory in subsequent work (Seawright and Gerring 2008). Specifically, this case suggests that there are at least two critical dimensions to consider: the *type* of union(s) in the alliance and the *degree* of party-union integration.

In Michigan, the UAW is not only the largest and most powerful union, but it has also had a long history of vigorous political activism. Its domination of the state Democratic Party thus magnified its influence in the state. But labor “domination” may look different in different states, depending on the particular union(s) under consideration. Steelworkers in Ohio and public sector unions in Wisconsin, for example, may have different perspectives on party politics and different levels of political engagement among their membership; they may therefore bring different assets and liabilities to their party alliances. Likewise, in states where a number of different unions compete for political power (e.g., Wisconsin), the Democratic Party may benefit from the unions’ cumulative organizational capacities, but there may be weaker incentives for union and party officials to integrate or collaborate as extensively. In such cases, we might observe more operational than structural or procedural linkages, and the transformative effects of deep party-union integration on union leaders’ perspectives might be lost. Party adaptation might be more difficult under such circumstances, even though party-union linkages are comparatively looser. Further comparative research at the state level offers a promising way to get more leverage on these questions.

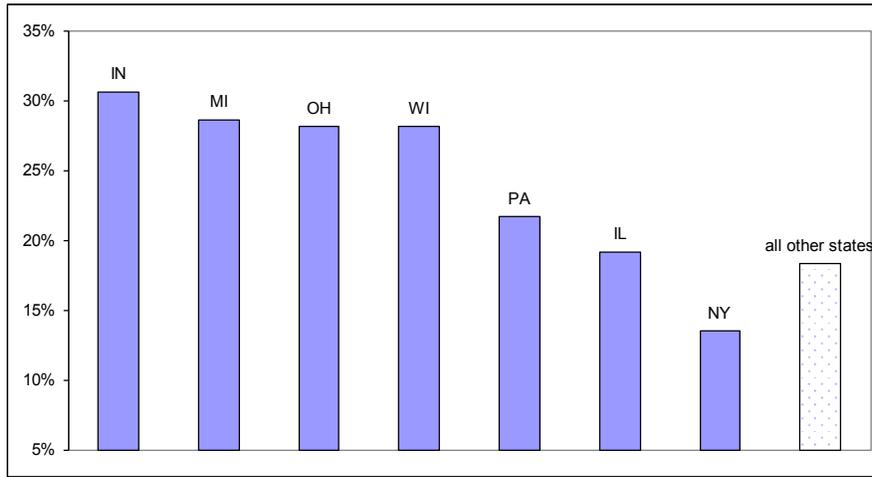
Substantively, these findings speak not only to the party’s adaptive capacities amidst changing economic and political circumstances, but also to the motivating concern of Greenstone’s study: the limited capacity of labor unions in the United States to serve as a flow channel for workers’ demands. The old chestnut is often heard: *why no labor party in the U.S.?*<sup>23</sup> Those who lament its absence either overlook the Michigan Democratic Party or are simply too disappointed with the results to admit that an American version of a labor party has, in fact, existed there for many years. Indeed, it is a

striking fact, further evidenced by this study, that one of the most politically powerful, well-organized unions in the nation has, for decades, acted more like a vote-maximizing, coalition-building party than an issue-oriented economic interest group out to protect workers from the hazards of the capitalist system. That this pattern of behavior has persisted from Greenstone’s day to the present—from the heyday of labor unions’ organizational power to its current low point—only serves to highlight the formidable structural impediments that stand in the way of expressing working class demands from the “inside” of the political system. Whatever the reason—the two-party system, the labyrinthine constitutional system, the lack of a feudal tradition or class-consciousness in America, or the continuous efforts by the right to undermine the foundations of collective bargaining—it is hard to escape the conclusion that an effective “flow channel” may *never* exist within established political structures in the United States.

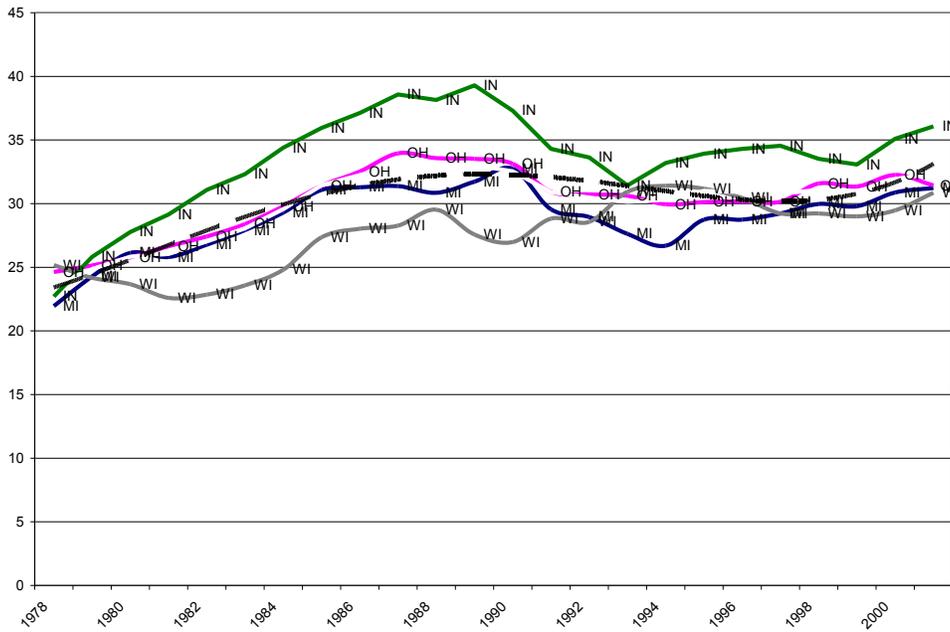
**FIGURE 1**  
**The Rust Belt**



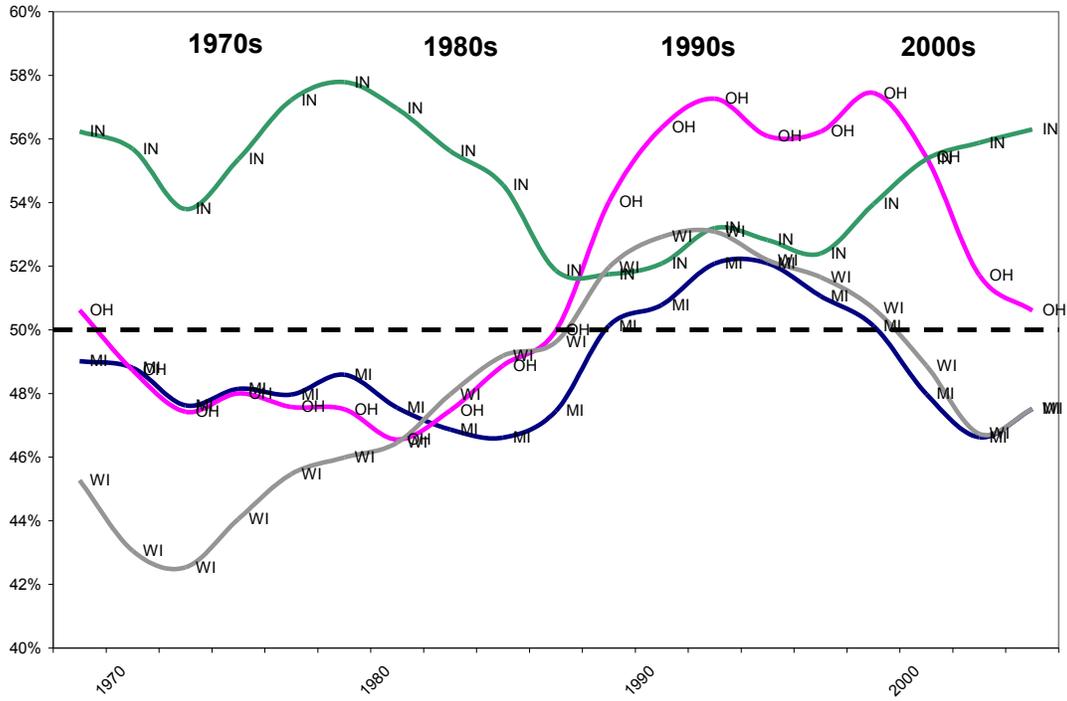
**FIGURE 2**  
**Manufacturing as Share of State GDP, Averaged, 1980-2000<sup>24</sup>**



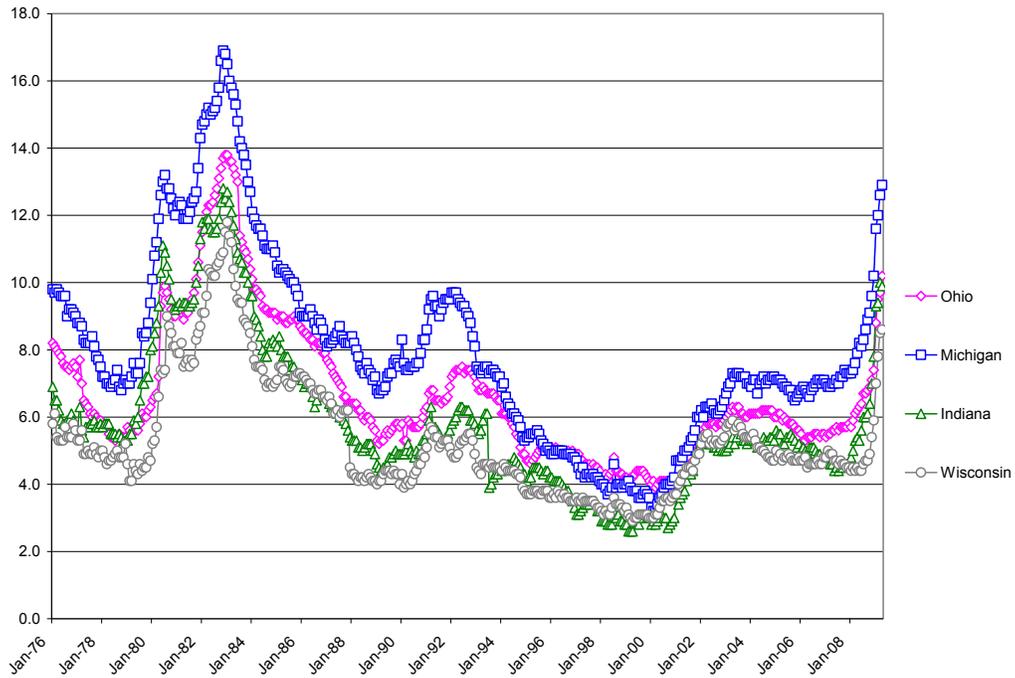
**FIGURE 3**  
**Republican Party Identification in the Rust Belt, 1976-2003 (with trend line)<sup>25</sup>**



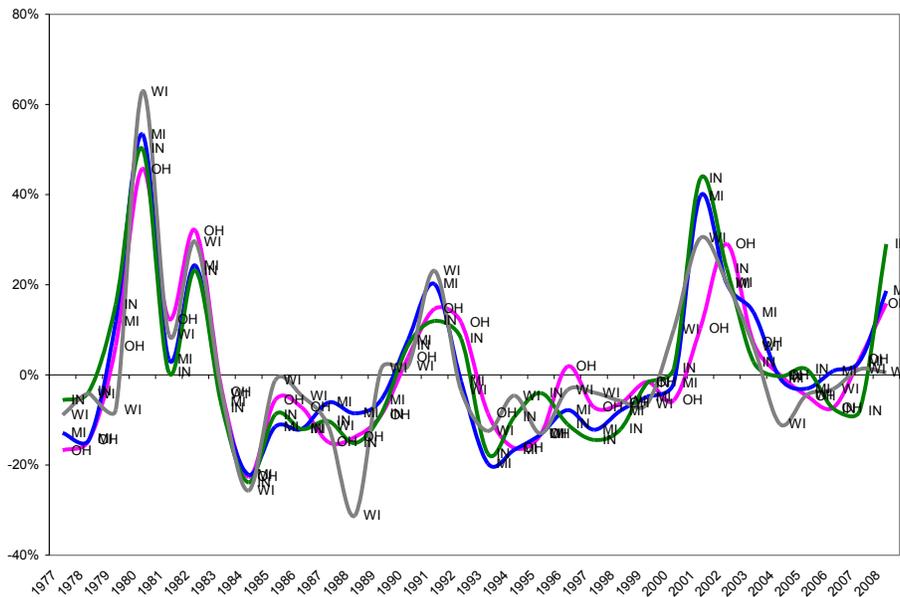
**FIGURE 4**  
**State Party Strength Over Time, 1970-2010**  
**(Higher = more Republican)<sup>26</sup>**



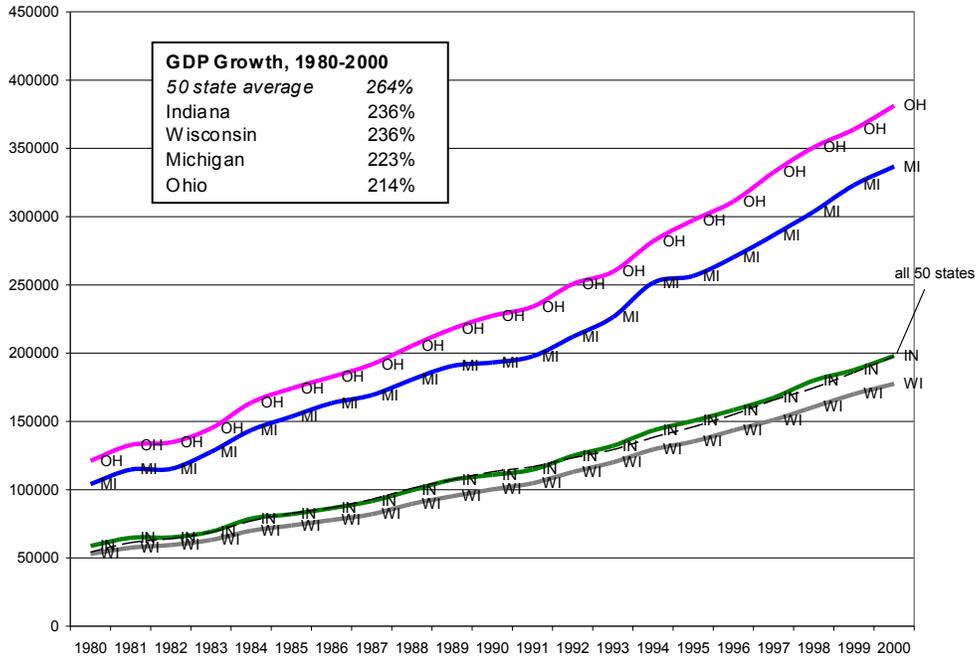
**FIGURE 5**  
**Monthly Unemployment Rate, 1976-2009<sup>27</sup>**



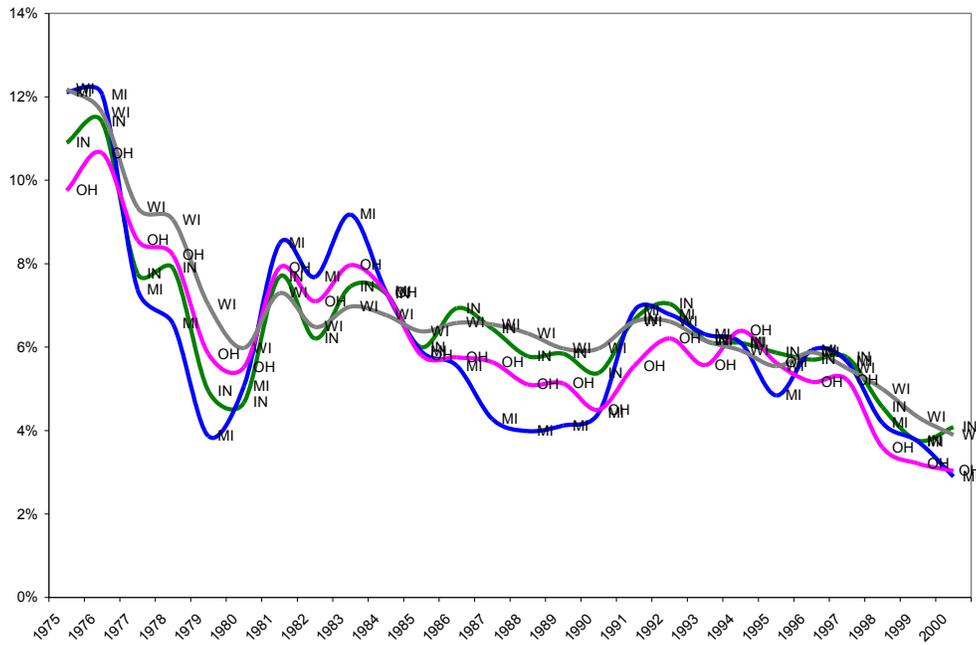
**FIGURE 6**  
**Yearly Rate of Change, Unemployment, 1976-2009<sup>28</sup>**



**FIGURE 7**  
**GDP by State, all industry total, 1980-2000<sup>29</sup>**



**FIGURE 8**  
**Yearly Rate of Change, GDP, 1980-2000<sup>30</sup>**



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<sup>1</sup> Francia (2006), for example, writes that “Interest groups have one overriding purpose: to pass or protect legislation favorable to the members they represent. Unions typically assist candidate they anticipate will most likely support workers’ concerns once elected to Congress” (119).

<sup>2</sup> Usual examples of *loyalty* include the SAP in Sweden, the SPD in Germany, and the PRI Mexico; examples of *voice* include the as the PSOE in Spain, the Labour Party in Britain, and the PJ in Argentina.

<sup>3</sup> “Extreme” cases maximize variance on the primary dimension of interest (party-union linkages) so as to test the range of the theory and generate insights that might help refine the theory in subsequent work (Seawright and Gerring 2008).

<sup>4</sup> For an illustrative debate, see: <http://www.city-data.com/forum/city-vs-city/1148701-new-rust-belt-map-please-end.html#b>.

<sup>5</sup> The economies of New York, Pennsylvania, and Illinois are more diverse and significantly less reliant on manufacturing than Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin. The population centers of the first two, as well, lie outside the usual boundaries of the Rust Belt (**Figure 1**).

<sup>6</sup> Updated data online at: <http://scholar.harvard.edu/saldin/data>.

<sup>7</sup> The next-most stable state, Indiana, was also the most Republican. Thus, if it were possible for a Democratic candidate to choose which Rust Belt state in which to seek election during this period, s/he could not do better than to run in Michigan.

<sup>8</sup> Since 1984, Republicans have held the majority continuously in the state senate, and for six of the last nine sessions of the state legislature.

<sup>9</sup> Also Bay County Executive Thomas Hickner and Mayor of Taylor, Gregory Pitoniak.

<sup>10</sup> Other factors include the UAW’s magnification of the MDP’s organizational capacities and other mechanisms of base stability exploited by Democratic incumbents seeking reelection.

<sup>11</sup> And by extension, the state AFL-CIO as well, of which the UAW was the dominant union before its disaffiliation 1968 and after its re-affiliation in 1981.

<sup>12</sup> The names of the participants have been removed to ensure the anonymity of my respondents.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, “Deitch to Corbin, Bommarito, and Whetstone, re: Michigan Democratic Party Finance Plan,” February 26, 1991, Staff Memos 1991, Box 47, Democratic Party of Michigan records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan (8331-5), (*Henceforth: MDP*).

<sup>14</sup> For detailed evidence from the 1970s, see Buffa 1984b, 236.

<sup>15</sup> See for example, “June 4<sup>th</sup> UAW Region 1D Training, Black Lake,” Chairman's Correspondence, 1992-1994, Box 47, MDP (8355)

<sup>16</sup> “Remarks Given by Congressman Jim Blanchard before Michigan Manufacturers Association Suppliers Conference,” June 9, 1981, Campaign materials, Box 265, JJB (8495-504); “The Blanchard Economic Revitalization & Jobs Program,” September 1982, 1982 Economic Revitalization Plan, Box 265, JJB (8514).

<sup>17</sup> Hillel Levin, “The *Next Deal*: Jim Blanchard,” *Monthly Detroit*, September 1982, in Governor, Political, 1980s clippings, Box 271, JJB (8601).

<sup>18</sup> “Four Years Out: Jim Blanchard Will Have...” Memoranda/subject files, Box 272, JJB

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(6848).

<sup>19</sup> Personal interview with former administration official.

<sup>20</sup> “Governor to Rick Cole, re: UAW Meeting,” February 19, 1987, Staff (and others) memoranda, 1987-1989, Box 271, JJB (8645)

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in (Francia 2006, 15).

<sup>22</sup> (Frymer 2010)

<sup>23</sup> For a good treatment of the subject, see (Archer 2007).

<sup>24</sup> Source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis.

<sup>25</sup> Source: (Wright et al. 2003). Data presented as four-year moving average.

<sup>26</sup> Source: (Ceaser and Saldin 2005). Updated data online at:

<http://scholar.harvard.edu/saldin/data>

<sup>27</sup> Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis.

<sup>30</sup> Source: Ibid.