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## Will unions get out the vote for mayor in 2021?

By Caroline Leddy

Two of the city's largest unions may help determine who becomes our next mayor, if they can hold onto the political sway they have had in the past.

During the city's mayoral election cycles, two of New York City's biggest labor unions—the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) and health care worker union 1199 SEIU, both of whom hold labor contracts with the city—have always courted candidates and issued endorsements for those who may work in their favor.

The role unions play in New York City's electoral process is often overlooked by constituents, but the endorsements issued by these organizations are highly sought after by candidates. New York is one of the [most unionized](#) states in the United States, and much of the public sector workforce is represented by a union.

While these endorsements are touted by the candidates who earn them, the weight they hold is questionable. Can labor unions really convince their rank-and-file members to support the candidate of their choice?

David Birdsell, the Dean of the Marxe School of Public and International Affairs at Baruch College, says that the power the unions have to convince their members to vote for a certain candidate is beginning to disappear.

“People have so many more sources of information about candidates and have the ability to find so many more voices that they may feel closer to,” he said, “both because of their personal preferences, and because of the way they may be manipulated by algorithms designed to whip them into a frenzy.”

Due to personal preferences and access to information, the candidate endorsed by a member's union may not reflect their personal views. Given the new realities of how voters educate themselves—via the news, candidate websites, and social media—are unions changing the way they decide on who to endorse, and are these endorsements as valuable as they used to be?

### The value of an endorsement

One thing that often comes with a political endorsement from a union is a campaign donation, which is meant to help bolster the candidate's presence on the campaign trail. Donations often come from the union's PACs, which raise money for through member donations and dues. The 2018 [Janus vs. AFSCME](#) decision, which allowed employees to be members of public-sector unions without paying union dues, has hurt the ability of labor unions to collect the revenue needed to give donations and maintain union operations, according to Birdsell.

Both the UFT and 1199 SEIU have made donations over the last five mayoral elections to several candidates—not just the ones they endorsed. In total, the UFT donated \$27,600 to candidates for mayor between 2001 and 2017, according to the New York City Campaign Finance Board. During that same time period, 1199 SEIU made \$24,300 worth of campaign donations.

However, Birdsell believes that the true value of a union endorsement comes from the organization's ability to involve members and representatives in "get out the vote" efforts. He says 1199 SEIU, which represents over 200,000 people across New York City and Long Island, has one of the strongest political presences of all of the labor unions in the city partially because of the scale of their voter outreach.

"In the case of the SEIU, particularly, you also have a tremendous get out the vote effort, and the largest and most puissant call bank," he said.

Unions typically align themselves with the Democratic party, including all of the UFT's and 1199 SEIU's mayoral endorsements over the last five elections, all of which were Democrats. However, 1199 SEIU broke with the party in 2002 when they [endorsed](#) Governor George E. Pataki for re-election following a contract deal that brought their members \$1.8 billion in raises. The rise of the Working Families Party in New York City has also given unions additional political power in the city, with several labor organizations partnering with the party.

The power unions have in convincing members to get out and vote is not as strong as it once was, says Dr. Hank Sheinkopf, president of Sheinkopf Communications, a political consulting firm in New York. He attributes the decline in power to the dwindling number of union members that can afford to live within the five boroughs.

"That's also helped along by the fact that there's no requirement for municipal workers to live in New York City. And it's too expensive to live in, so a lot of the teachers and a lot of the other workers don't live here," he said.

Sheinkopf also said that the city's changing demographics has led to a disconnect between unions and the people who can afford to live there.

"The city is younger and whiter, which means they have less of a relationship to organized labor than they ever had," he said. "Most of them are not going to be members of unions. They're not benefiting from union membership."

The UFT and 1199 SEIU are not the only unions in the city with what Sheinkopf calls "political juice," or the ability to turn out member votes. District Council 37, the Hotel Trades Council, and 32BJ SEIU are some of the other unions whose real power comes from their ability to put people on the street to campaign for candidates, Sheinkopf said.

Fernando Ferrer ran for New York City Mayor in 2001 and 2005 and was endorsed by 1199 SEIU both times. He says that 1199 SEIU's commitment to their endorsed candidates is unlike many of the other unions in the city, including the UFT.

Ferrer recalled heading down to a polling place in Lower Manhattan on September 11, 2001 for the primaries. After coming over the Triborough Bridge and seeing smoke billowing on the horizon, he had the driver pull over so they could figure out what had happened.

"We get off the first exit and find out what the heck is going on, and we saw a polling place with scores of 1199-ers. They're still working the polls, they're still working the neighborhood," he said. "UFT doesn't put its people out on the street and in that kind of way."

**Being pro-union is part of a candidate's brand**

Having union support is part of your brand as a candidate, according to Ferrer, who believes broadly having union support is a good thing. He says that candidates need to carefully craft their platforms in order to earn the trust and support of these unions, because there are several factors that play into who gets the endorsement.

“Some labor unions who have contracts coming up think twice before they go out on a limb. At the end, it’s kind of a transaction,” he said.

Ferrer was the second in a string of endorsements by the UFT for the 2001 mayoral election, coming after Alan Hevesi lost in the primary. Mark Green was endorsed by the union in a last-ditch effort after he beat Ferrer in a runoff election, and he ultimately lost to Michael Bloomberg.

The UFT’s endorsements of three losing candidates in 2001 may have been what kept them from issuing any endorsements in the two elections that followed in 2005 and 2009. In 2013, they endorsed former New York City Comptroller Bill Thompson in the primaries. After he lost, they endorsed then-former Public Advocate Bill de Blasio, who ended up winning in the general election. They endorsed him again in 2017.

Ferrer was critical of the teacher union’s ability to mobilize their members for voter outreach efforts.

“I was never convinced that their operation was all it could be. They certainly had the resources to do it, so I don’t really understand it,” he said.

That sentiment is shared by members of the UFT’s Movement of Rank-and-File Educators (MORE) caucus, who say the union doesn’t do enough to take into consideration how their endorsements will directly affect their members.

Aixa Rodriguez, a member of MORE’s media committee, says that the UFT has repeatedly failed to engage the rank-and-file membership before issuing some of their recent endorsements, including endorsing Hillary Clinton in 2015. She says many members were and remain upset about the endorsement.

“Everybody was encouraged to vote for Hillary as if that was going to be a normal thing, right? Like everybody was going to follow,” she said. “There was no real discussion. Nobody felt engaged in the situation.”

Rodriguez says that there is a lot of division within the UFT membership, and that their views aren’t represented by how the union presents itself to the public. She believes that the union is hesitant to engage with the membership because of this.

“The reality is that the UFT does not engage people because it will tell a different narrative,” she said. “The UFT membership is not a monolith, and they don’t want that to be exposed.”

Annie Tan, who is also a member of the MORE caucus, echoed the same sentiments during an interview. She says that she knows a lot of members who aren’t likely to take into account who their union says they should vote for.

“Even with the Joe Biden stuff right now, you know, there are members on the UFT page saying ‘you can’t tell us what to do.’ Even though I think Joe Biden would clearly be a much better candidate for teachers,” she said during an interview before the Presidential election.

When contacted for a comment on this issue and the union's apparent lack of member outreach, UFT spokeswoman Alison Gendar declined to comment, saying "We are updating our virtual outreach to make sure our members' voices are heard throughout the [candidate endorsement] process."

Helene Fitzpatrick is one of nearly 160,000 members of the UFT. She is a special education teacher at the Lorge School in the Bronx. Fitzpatrick says the union will often tell members about who is running for mayor and whom they endorsed at union meetings but will not explicitly tell members who they should vote for. She says she takes into account who the UFT endorses when she votes but will vote against her union's candidate if she doesn't agree with their policies.

"If I personally don't believe in the candidate and believe that they're not going to do a good job or if there's something about them that I don't like, then I will vote against," she said. "It is a personal decision."

Fitzpatrick says the most important thing to her when looking at mayoral candidates is who is going to make the school system more equitable for her students.

"It's been very hard, with students not getting the iPads that they need, with students falling behind, with students not having internet," she said. "Whoever [is the next mayor] needs to actually address these issues. It's really, really important."

Sal Albanese, who ran for Mayor in 1997, 2013 and 2017 and is also a former member of the New York City Council, says that unions take into account the viability of a candidate when endorsing, and not having any union endorsements as a candidate in New York can hurt a campaign's chances at winning.

"I lost to De Blasio in 2017 and I didn't have one union endorsement, which really, really hurt me," he said.

Albanese, who is a former teacher and is still a dues-paying member of the UFT, didn't earn the endorsement of his union in either mayoral race. While not gaining the support hurt him, he said, Albanese recognizes the delicate consideration that goes into issuing endorsements because making a mistake and endorsing the wrong candidates can hurt a union in the long run.

"They don't want to be on the wrong side, on the losing side, of an equation like that, because they want to be able to obviously influence who becomes the mayor," he said. "So they do look at your viability, even if your politics are great."

Endorsements are particularly tricky for public-sector unions because they have to work directly with politicians. Supporting one candidate over another can lead to complications in their working relationship down the road, especially if the endorsed candidate loses.

Albanese says that it's also incredibly important to make sure that the person the union chooses to support and encourage their members to vote for has a pro-labor record and support for unions, because if they take a chance and endorse someone who doesn't have a good record with labor unions it could harm them in the future.

“If they do endorse and the person turns out to be not very loyal to labor when they are elected, the membership will revolt against the leadership. So, the leadership’s very careful about these endorsements,” he said.

Still, he said, unions are an essential part of New York City’s election process.

“They play a key role, especially in a place like New York City, because it still is a strong labor town.”