

The Representation of LGBTQ+ People in the US Labor Movement

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ABSTRACT


How are LGBTQ+ issues represented within labor organizing and how are they linked to broader debates about inequality? We answered these questions by examining press releases, internal resolutions, and online resources from the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) and the Pride at Work (PAW) constituency group. We find that they significantly differ in their approaches to symbolic and substantive representation and agenda setting. Across all three outcomes, PAW and the AFL-CIO vary in LGBTQ+ issue representation. The AFL-CIO engages in more symbolic representation but also devotes resources to collective action that can improve the lives of LGBTQ+ people. PAW places greater emphasis on the interconnectedness of LGBTQ+ and labor issues to mobilize LGBTQ+ people. Our findings highlight the marginal position of LGBTQ+ labor activism in the labor and LGBTQ+ movements, and they demonstrate the challenges associated with linking LGBTQ+ issues to broader debates about inequality in American politics.

In March 2023, the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO) at the University of Michigan went on strike over working conditions. The GEO's platform included access to healthcare for transgender people as a key issue. Also in 2023, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters and the United Parcel Service bargained for an enforcement mechanism for LGBTQ+ discrimination in their new contract (Rowe 2023). The centrality of these issues in recent bargaining is notable because LGBTQ+ issues often are unrecognized as "labor" issues. Significantly, these dynamics are not unique to recent organizing.

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Some unions began to recognize gay rights in the 1980s and LGBTQ+–focused caucuses have called for LGBTQ+–inclusive unions since the late 1990s. For example, Pride at Work (PAW) was recognized as the official LGBTQ+ constituency group of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organization (AFL-CIO) in 1997 (PAW Admin 1999). These examples from past and recent organizing raise questions about the representation of LGBTQ+ issues in labor activism and how LGBTQ+ issues are linked to broader debates about inequality.

Although union participation has declined since the 1980s, there are signs of a potential resurgence. Recently, workers have successfully unionized within large corporations, particularly in service, retail, healthcare, and transportation industries. Bloomberg Law documented that unions won 641 elections in the first half of 2022, the most in almost 20 years (Molla 2022). The Bureau of Labor Statistics does not collect data on LGBTQ+ status; however, the Cooperative Election Study (CES)—a large national survey that includes demographic measures of LGBTQ+ status and union membership—provides suggestive evidence that LGBTQ+ people

Table 1

Union Membership by LGBTQ+ Status

YEAR	LGBTQ+	NON-LGBTQ+	PERCENTAGE-POINT DIFFERENCE
2016	11.16%	6.72%	4.44
2017	9.07%	5.85%	3.22
2018	7.74%	6.08%	1.66
2019	10.63%	6.31%	4.32
2020	8.99%	5.93%	3.05
2021	6.35%	6.11%	0.24
2022	8.32%	6.52%	1.79

Source: Cooperative Election Study 2016–2022.

are more likely to be union members (table 1). Thus, there is a need for scholars to examine how union actors represent LGBTQ+ issues.

This article analyzes how issues of class intersect with LGBTQ+ politics and are represented by the AFL-CIO and PAW. We examined official press releases, internal resolutions, and online resources from both organizations. Using an inductive approach, we identified patterns in symbolic and substantive representation and agenda setting around LGBTQ+ issues and found significant variation between PAW and the AFL-CIO. Whereas the AFL-CIO engages in more symbolic representation, they also devote resources to collective action that can improve the lives of LGBTQ+ people. PAW, conversely, places greater emphasis on the interconnectedness of LGBTQ+ and labor issues, attempting to influence LGBTQ+ people who are not union members. Our findings highlight the marginal position of LGBTQ+ labor activism in the labor and LGBTQ+ movements, and they demonstrate the challenges associated with linking LGBTQ+ issues to broader debates about inequality in American politics.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND BACKGROUND

The linkage between LGBTQ+ and labor issues speaks to long-standing debates among political scientists and activists about how workers' identities inform union mobilization (Frymer 2008; Olson 1965; Schickler 2016; Strolovitch 2007; Warren 2010; Warren and Cohen 2000). Agenda-setting research has long argued that political divisions are a risk for organizing (Olson 1965). Studies also find that organizers often represent the interests of advantaged members at the expense of marginalized groups (Strolovitch 2007; Warren and Cohen 2000). Scholars reveal that public-sector unions and unions with larger constituencies of women are more responsive to marginalized groups (Bielski Boris 2010) and that unions vary in political participation (Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 2002; Warren 2010). A small literature examines the relationship between LGBTQ+ and labor politics (Frank 2014), focusing primarily on alliance formation (Brantley 2020; Heersink and Lacombe 2023; Mayo-Adams 2020) but not the broader representation of LGBTQ+ issues.

Scholarship demonstrates that interactions between labor and LGBTQ+ activists date back to the 1970s. Ng and Rumens (2017, 109–20) described how LGBTQ+ labor mobilization took place in two phases: (1) activists opposed the classification of homosexuality as a disease; and (2) they shifted focus to LGBTQ+ workplace issues. The 1974 San Francisco Coors strike exemplifies the first success of that second phase. Unions and gay activists boycotted

Coors' anti-gay and anti-union hiring practices, decreasing their share of the California beer market from 43% to 14% (Bain 1999). Following the strike, gay and lesbian activists attempted to use bargaining to secure partner benefits and workplace protections and to promote visibility. For example, in 1982, New York *Village Voice* workers in District 56 of the United Auto Workers secured health insurance for "spouse equivalents" almost 10 years before the first large corporation (Holcomb 1999). During the same period, workers formed caucuses to pressure national unions on gay rights and anti-discrimination (Frank 1999), which culminated in the AFL-CIO recognizing PAW in 1997.

However, since the 1990s and as union influence has waned, labor historians and political scientists have given less attention to LGBTQ+ union activism and have questioned alliance effectiveness. Balay's (2014) study of steelworkers in Indiana, for example, found that LGBTQ+ steelworkers were closeted, harassed, and unsupported in local chapters. Other related studies about workplace anti-discrimination and transgender-inclusive healthcare focused on federal and corporate solutions while ignoring unions as remedies (Bender-Baird 2011; McNamara 2020). Within the LGBTQ+ movement, class-based politics remain at the margins (Wuest 2023). Currently, there are few systematic analyses of LGBTQ+ issue representation in the labor movement. A notable exception is Kelly and Lubitow's (2015) study of PAW's campaigns since 1994. They conducted interviews with labor organizers, studying the politics of PAW in isolation. As a result, there is relatively little known about how the representation of LGBTQ+ issues varies based on the positionality of labor-union actors. Our study addresses this gap by examining the symbolic and substantive representation of LGBTQ+ issues within PAW and the AFL-CIO. We also broaden the methodological approach beyond interviews through a qualitative analysis of union materials. Thus, our analyses can help political science to understand how LGBTQ+ workers' concerns are linked to broader issues of inequality.

LGBTQ+ REPRESENTATION AND AGENDA SETTING

We posited that labor union actors represent LGBTQ+ people and issues by engaging in symbolic and substantive representation. We expected that their positionality produces variation in the representation of LGBTQ+ issues. Within the context of labor politics, these union actors can engage in symbolic representation through low-cost statements that provide recognition to LGBTQ+ issues but do not commit organizational resources or take follow-up actions (e.g., statements that condemn or support policy, celebrate LGBTQ+ history, and propose symbolic advocacy). They can engage in substantive representation through calls for collective action and resource mobilization, such as urging members to take part in a boycott or march, planning education campaigns, and writing model contract language for LGBTQ+ issues. Because the AFL-CIO communicates with a majority non-LGBTQ+ audience, it should be more likely to engage in symbolic rather than substantive representation. We expected that PAW is more likely to engage in substantive representation because it organizes LGBTQ+ workers and attempts to influence the AFL-CIO. Moreover, because LGBTQ+ workers are marginalized intersectionally, we expected that they are more likely to advocate for issues that affect other marginalized groups.

We also hypothesized that positionality shapes the contents of symbolic and substantive representation. That is, the AFL-CIO

and PAW may vary in how they symbolically and substantively represent LGBTQ+ issues. On the one hand, if constituency groups successfully pressure dominant union actors, then we would expect alignment in representation between the AFL-CIO and PAW. On the other hand, dominant labor organizations and marginalized constituencies within them may promote different issues and strategies—even when representing the same group. Thus, by examining the relationship between union-actor positionality and representation, we can uncover whether labor-movement actors are unified on LGBTQ+ issues, which would provide insight into agenda setting and issue mobilization. Because there is limited research about the LGBTQ+ issue agenda in labor unions, we used an inductive approach to identify the contents of symbolic and substantive representation and agenda setting.

DATA AND METHODS

Our data were from two sources: (1) PAW resolutions and press releases issued between 1996 and 2022; and (2) LGBTQ+–related resolutions and press releases issued by the AFL-CIO between 2009 and 2021. Documents were coded using the software Taguette (Rampin and Rampin 2021). We coded materials to capture the frequency and contents of symbolic and substantive representation and the LGBTQ+ issue agenda among union actors. Our inductive content analysis was guided by the following approach. First, members of the research team read and coded each document to identify key themes and subthemes. From this manual coding process, the team identified symbolic and substantive calls for action, which included the subthemes of solidarity, position taking, calling for boycotts, and building community spaces. In addition, we identified issues and policies that constitute the LGBTQ+ union agenda. This included specific LGBTQ+–focused policies, issues affecting other marginalized groups, and other

concerns such as producing educational materials and campaigns.¹ Second, all statements were coded to identify the union actors, which allowed for cross-group comparison. Third, after the data were coded, we summarized the frequency and contents of symbolic representation, substantive representation, and agenda setting using R.

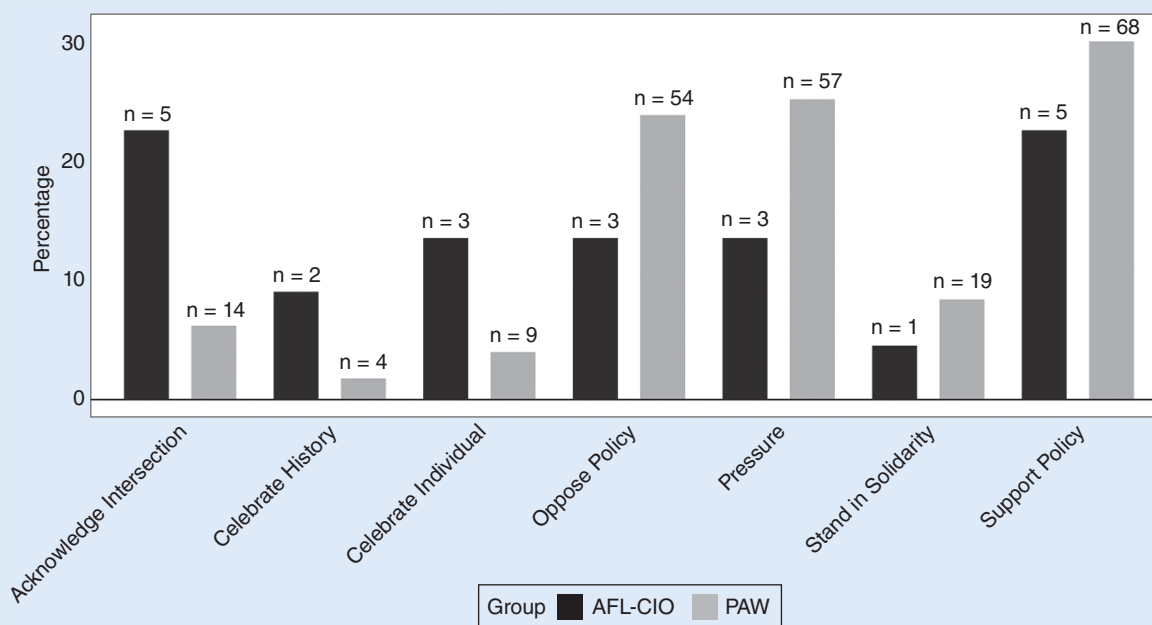
SYMBOLIC AND SUBSTANTIVE REPRESENTATION

We first examined the frequency of symbolic and substantive representation to foreground our analysis of representation content. Representation content—85% (N = 22) of AFL-CIO and 72% (n = 225) of PAW—was classified for symbolic representation.² PAW was almost twice as likely to engage in substantive representation with 28% (N = 87) of press releases, including calls for collective action, compared to 15% (N = 4) of AFL-CIO materials. The AFL-CIO was more likely to represent LGBTQ+ people by focusing on visibility within the labor movement, whereas PAW was more likely to comment on national LGBTQ+ policy debates (figure 1). The AFL-CIO often issued statements acknowledging the intersection between LGBTQ+ and workers' rights (23%) as well as celebrating LGBTQ+ individuals (14%) and history (9%). PAW was more likely to issue statements that called for union actors and representatives to take political action (25% versus 14%). Likewise, 24% of PAW press releases took positions that opposed policies compared to 14% of AFL-CIO press releases. Thus, the AFL-CIO and PAW are not aligned in how they symbolically represent LGBTQ+ people.

PAW and the AFL-CIO also differed when they advocate for collective action. The AFL-CIO was most likely to engage in policy writing, such as providing model contract language related to LGBTQ+ issues. It also called for action that would build LGBTQ+ community in and out of the workplace, and it attempted to educate non-LGBTQ+ people about LGBTQ+ issues. Thus, the AFL-CIO

Figure 1

Symbolic Representation Between AFL-CIO and PAW



dedicated resources to educating labor union members who were not LGBTQ+ and provided tools for local unions to improve working conditions for LGBTQ+ people. The AFL-CIO's collective-action repertoire was limited compared to PAW. PAW took a broader approach to collective action, calling for boycotts, call-in campaigns, and marches among other forms of collective action (figure 2). Thus, the AFL-CIO and PAW also were not aligned regarding collective action concerning LGBTQ+ issues.

organize LGBTQ+ workers, and symbolic diversity resolutions. Conversely, PAW never specifically addressed visibility in the workplace (figure 3).³ The varying emphasis on visibility is notable because visibility has been a cornerstone of LGBTQ+ activists' demands for inclusion in institutions such as political parties (Proctor 2022). Furthermore, union actors who represent dominant groups typically avoid the promotion of LGBTQ+ visibility. Thus, we observed different patterns of representation

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These differences have implications for LGBTQ+ labor organizing. First, they suggest that the AFL-CIO is not taking cues from PAW. If that were the case, we would expect greater degrees of alignment in symbolic and substantive representation between the AFL-CIO and PAW. We found instead that they are discordant in their approaches. Second, and by extension, these differences imply that PAW's influence on the AFL-CIO is limited, even when organizing around LGBTQ+ labor issues. Thus, LGBTQ+ workers face significant barriers to representation within the labor movement.

LGBTQ+ AGENDA SETTING

Next, we examined agenda setting by identifying which LGBTQ+ concerns receive attention from union actors. Of the AFL-CIO releases we reviewed, 24% discussed LGBTQ+ visibility through posts such as Pride Month Profiles, conventions about how to

in labor union materials examined in this study, which demonstrates variation in LGBTQ+ representation across institutions and actors.

We also found that the AFL-CIO promoted structural policy; that is, it advocated for addressing issues through legislation and union-wide campaigns at similar rates to PAW (19% versus 25%). We considered this alignment to be important because despite representing a majority non-LGBTQ+ constituency, the AFL-CIO has advocated for meaningful policy change. Moreover, we did not find evidence of the AFL-CIO (or PAW) encouraging individualistic approaches (e.g., creating a welcoming environment for LGBTQ+ workers), which should be less likely to galvanize opposition from non-LGBTQ+ union workers. In conjunction with the AFL-CIO's emphasis on visibility, these findings provide evidence that may explain why LGBTQ+ issues have been visible in recent labor organizing.

Figure 2

Substantive Representation Between AFL-CIO and PAW

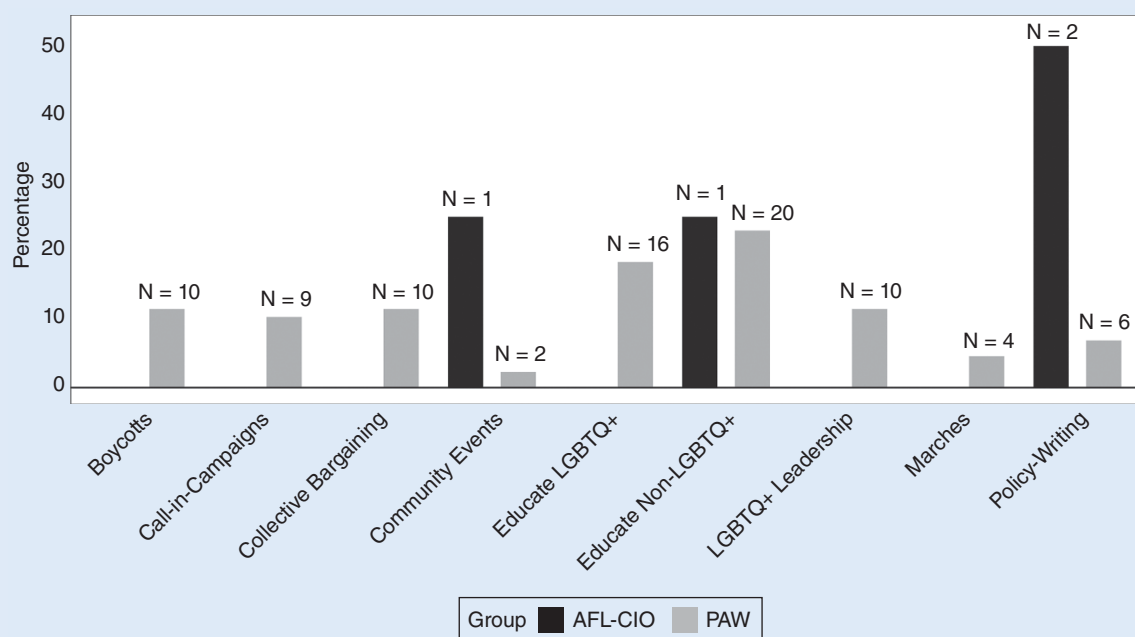
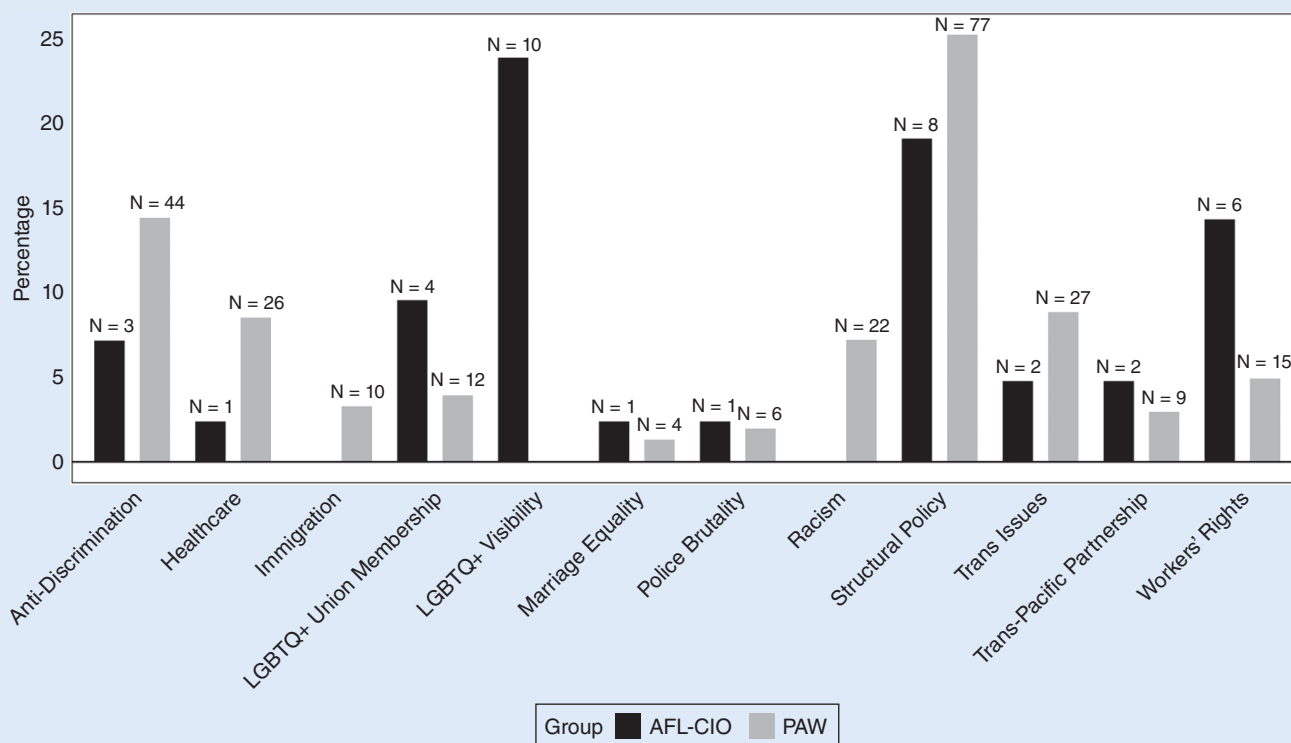


Figure 3
Agenda Setting Between AFL-CIO and PAW



Although the AFL-CIO materials promote visibility and policy, we found that PAW was more likely to represent issues at the intersections of sexuality, gender, race, and class. PAW discussed issues affecting transgender people almost twice as often as the AFL-CIO (9% versus 5%) and it was twice as likely to discuss anti-discrimination (14% versus 7%). PAW also mentioned healthcare in 9% of its materials compared to 2% for the AFL-CIO. PAW discussed racism and immigration in 7% and 3% of its materials, respectively. Thus, PAW made explicit connections between LGBTQ+ issues and issues affecting other marginalized groups, whereas the AFL-CIO instead narrowly focused on LGBTQ+ union membership and workers' rights. We speculated that these differences are due to the AFL-CIO representing the issues of marginalized constituencies in isolation rather than as interconnected.

The differences in agenda setting between the AFL-CIO and PAW have implications for LGBTQ+ labor activism. On the one hand, the AFL-CIO has promoted LGBTQ+ visibility and structural approaches to policy change. This evidence suggests that dominant labor-union actors have the capacity to improve the status and well-being of LGBTQ+ people, despite representing a majority non-LGBTQ+ constituency. On the other hand, we did not observe the AFL-CIO connecting LGBTQ+ issues to the issues of other groups. An implication of these differences is that dominant union actors may not be the best representatives for building broad coalitions unless they further link issues of sexuality, gender, race, and class. Our results also suggest, however, that union actors representing marginalized groups can facilitate the development of cross-group ties that could overcome their absence among dominant union actors.

LINKING LGBTQ+ AND CLASS ISSUES

One organizational goal of PAW is to expand the influence of labor in the LGBTQ+ movement. As a result, we examined how PAW framed class issues within the LGBTQ+ movement. PAW framed the LGBTQ+ and labor movements as deeply intertwined and mutually dependent. Many PAW statements cite the International Workers of the World's slogan, "An Injury to One Is an Injury to All," to encourage opposition to anti-union policies—even if they were not about sexuality and gender. Relatedly, PAW criticized companies that were anti-union while claiming to be pro-LGBTQ+, which PAW considered to be incompatible. For example, it used this approach when endorsing boycotts against Hyatt Hotels and condemning T-Mobile's anti-union tactics in 2012. PAW accused both companies of "pinkwashing" (i.e., claiming to be allies of the LGBTQ+ community but not supporting their rights or the community) their anti-union policies. PAW also criticized the scoring metric of the Human Rights Campaign's Corporate Equality Index for ignoring workers' rights (PAW Admin 2017). Many companies with high index scores are anti-union. Thus, PAW's advocacy reveals a tension between the upper-class bias of dominant LGBTQ+ organizations and the labor movement as well as the marginal position of labor within the LGBTQ+ movement.

We also found that PAW constructed opposition to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)—a trade deal between 12 Pacific Rim nations that the United States signed in 2016 and withdrew from in 2017—through an LGBTQ+ lens. Of the PAW press releases we reviewed about the TPP, 81% highlighted the anti-LGBTQ+ records of countries such as Malaysia and Brunei and 44%

discussed the effect of the TPP on the cost of HIV/AIDS medications. By framing the TPP as anti-LGBTQ+, PAW likely is attempting to influence the broader LGBTQ+ community to

PAW and AFL-CIO materials that we collected. For example, we may find that there is greater alignment between PAW and the AFL-CIO today than there was in the 2000s and 2010s. We

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oppose it. Moreover, it reveals the ways in which PAW constructed LGBTQ+ issues as interconnected with labor issues. Conversely, AFL-CIO publications opposing the TPP obliquely

speculate that this is possible considering the centrality of LGBTQ+ issues in recent labor activism and the centrality of the Democratic Party in organizing LGBTQ+ and labor politics. Unfor-

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mentioned PAW's concerns, focusing instead on single-axis class issues. For example, the Labor Advisory Committee on Trade Negotiations and Trade Policy report (2015) framed the TPP as "not in the economic interest of the United States" or for working families. Only one paragraph in the 122-page document mentions anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination in partner nations. Relatedly, the "Drug Pricing Transparency" section of the report did not mention HIV/AIDS medications. Thus, the AFL-CIO merely buttressed class-based arguments with LGBTQ+-specific concerns, whereas PAW centered LGBTQ+ people in its opposition to an anti-labor trade deal.

CONCLUSION

The representation dynamics identified in this article have implications for LGBTQ+ labor organizing. Most notably, our findings reflect the significant hurdles that LGBTQ+ labor groups face within the labor and LGBTQ+ movements. On the one hand, dominant labor organizations provide limited recognition to LGBTQ+-specific considerations, are more likely to focus on symbolic forms of representation, and rarely are aligned with LGBTQ+ labor groups on collective action and agenda setting. These differences raise questions about who influences the AFL-CIO's approach to representing LGBTQ+ issues. One possibility is that the Democratic Party has a key role in organizing labor and LGBTQ+ issues. Although we suspected that PAW does have some influence, we expected greater alignment on agenda setting between the AFL-CIO and its LGBTQ+ constituency group—especially because we found that the AFL-CIO does devote some resources to LGBTQ+ issues. On the other hand, LGBTQ+ labor activism also is marginal in the LGBTQ+ movement, which is dominated by interest groups that have garnered the support of corporations that often are anti-union. As a result, PAW's activism is misaligned with the approach of dominant LGBTQ+ organizations. Thus, our findings highlight the upper-class biases of LGBTQ+ movement activism and, more broadly, American politics.

We also note, however, that our findings are limited in scope by the small body of materials analyzed and the varying periods of the

fortunately, we were unable to explore these avenues further due to space constraints and without the collection of additional data.

The results presented in this article suggest several promising avenues for future research. First, scholars should seek additional union materials to examine over a longer time horizon. For example, it would be useful to compare the organizational activities of PAW as a national LGBTQ+ labor actor and local LGBTQ+ union caucuses that are engaging in grassroots activism. Second, a longitudinal analysis of LGBTQ+ labor activism could further uncover patterns of alignment and misalignment between LGBTQ+ labor activists and the broader labor and LGBTQ+ movements. Third, scholars could expand our analyses to examine how groups such as PAW interact with and represent the issues of other marginalized constituencies. Thus, there is a broad research agenda that remains underexplored at the intersection of LGBTQ+ and labor politics.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096524001367>.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the *PS: Political Science & Politics* Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/U6PRKJ>.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

NOTES

1. See the [online appendix](#) for the codebook.
2. The denominator for these calculations is the total frequency for substantive and symbolic representation. Replication codes for frequencies and figures are available at <https://atproctor.com>.
3. We excluded issues that were mentioned less than 2% of the time by both the AFL-CIO and PAW.

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