

PPW Colleagues:

I hope that this writing contains the seeds of my dissertation project. Everything is still very much in formation, so any and all feedback—even of the most fundamental sort—is welcome. I have included two related pieces of writing. The first is a short (three page) general formulation of the research project, which I wrote for an NSF Graduate Research Fellowship application. The second piece—this is the real substance—is my first attempt to provide evidence for two causal mechanisms I have identified, which begin to explain the WFP's relative success.

It would be helpful to know a) whether the broad formulation of the project through the lens of American exceptionalism is a sensible way to proceed—especially imagining that this expands into a book-length project—and b) whether the theoretical and empirical case in the substantive writing works and if so, where it is weakest.

Thank you so much.

Best,

Luke Elliott-Negri

1. Project overview

The Working Families Party (WFP) is a small but expanding "third" party, funded largely by labor unions. The career of New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio and the recent liberal turn in the City more generally reflect the efforts of the WFP over the past 16 years, a fact that many local and even national media are quick to note. For the election this November, the WFP has turned its energies to Albany, aiming to unseat key Republican State Senators, attempting to make the Republican Party a non-majority for what would be only the third time since the late 1930s. Beyond New York, the WFP is credited with pushing the passage of the country's first-ever statewide mandatory paid sick leave legislation—in Connecticut—and it now has operations in Maryland, Washington D.C., New Jersey, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin as well.

The WFP's scope is significant, especially when compared with the last noteworthy effort to form a U.S. labor party, which unfolded in 1930s New York. While the American Labor Party (ALP) had influence in the state and sent a Representative to Washington D.C. for more than a decade, it never built operations in Connecticut, let alone Oregon, and it did not last twenty years. Indeed, the WFP's expanding success sits against a backdrop of short-lived labor party efforts like the ALP, but to this point the WFP has received little scholarly attention. Since the very origins of their respective disciplines, sociologists, historians and political scientists have attempted to make sense out of the politically "exceptional" United States. Scholars have often asked: Why have socialist, labor and other third party efforts been less successful than those of other industrialized countries? For my dissertation project, I seek to address this question by inverting it,¹ viewing the Working Families Party as "an exception to exceptionalism." I ask: *What factors—both agentic and structural, micro and macro—account for the improbable rise of a labor-funded third party in 21st century American politics?*

The vast literature on American exceptionalism will frame this project, but I seek to bring two methodological innovations to the century-old discussion. Unsurprisingly, nearly all the research on the question of American exceptionalism is historical. But by

¹ As suggested in: S.M. Lipset & G. Marks. 2000. *It Didn't Happen Here*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

focusing on the Working Families Party as an "exception to exceptionalism" I will be able to bring new methods to bear on this long-standing scholarly conversation. For instance, many researchers have evaluated the hypothesis that tactical and ideological limitations of labor unions and nascent third parties at key historical moments prevented the formation of a working class political party in the U.S. However, comparative-historical methods are not particularly well positioned to evaluate the micro factors relevant to this hypothesis. By using qualitative methods—namely participant observation and interviews—to study the case of the Working Families Party, which by all accounts is a party on the rise (the recent endorsement of Cuomo notwithstanding), I will be able to map behavior and decision-making at the micro level, as the organization faces very practical dilemmas. Looking at this exceptional case in real, micro, qualitative time will give me analytic leverage to understand whether certain structural or agentic factors are particularly salient in the WFP's success (or, potentially, failure). I enter this part of the project with two hypotheses: first, that key leaders in the WFP are uniquely attuned to micro-level motivational forces, an understanding of which has been imprinted into organizational culture and practice, and second, that the WFP's recent expansion can be explained in part by mimetic isomorphism²—though I seek to identify the sub-mechanisms by which that isomorphism functions.

The second methodological element of the project is the use of field experiments to explore the mechanisms by which the Working Families Party activates its supporters, as well as voters more generally. Field experimental methods are uniquely positioned in the array of social science tools to provide sound causal interpretations. The use of random assignment to treatment and control groups overcomes the biases inherent in quantitative research that is based on cross-sectional and longitudinal data. Fortunately, I have approval from the WFP's leadership to design the first experiment. This fieldwork will enable me to address questions such as the following: *do the race and gender of Working Families Party canvassers have a causal impact on the views and behaviors of community members and voters?*

² See: P. J. Dimaggio & W.W. Powell. 1983. "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields. *American Sociological Review*, 48(2), 147–160.

Experiments promise clean causal interpretation. Without confounding variables to get in the way, the answer to the above question—as well as to others that I hope to construct—will be relatively clear. I hope that this series of experiments, in aggregate, will provide insight into the constellation of mechanisms that makes the Working Families Party successful. The results will help to answer the broader question of *how* the WFP has found success against the bleak backdrop of labor and other third party failures.

Both of the methodological tools I plan to employ in this project are inclined toward discovering causal mechanisms that are distinctly small, which is to say micro. In this sense, experiments constitute an ideal if unlikely partner for ethnographic participant observation. Using both of these methods, I seek to identify numerous micro-level causal mechanisms, and use them as building blocks to explain a macro-level outcome: the relative success and scale of a U.S. labor party, against nearly a century of failed efforts. In this sense, I am planning a project that has the potential to advance knowledge and understanding within the field of sociology by contributing to the enduring question of how micro-social interactions are related to macro-structural forces and outcomes.

2.

An Exception to Exceptionalism: Why the Working Families Party Works

Working Draft—Please do not circulate

Luke Elliott-Negri

Abstract

In the 1930s, as a means of drawing the socialist and communist vote of New York State into the New Deal effort, several New York City labor unions formed the American Labor Party. The state's unique fusion balloting laws allowed the ALP to endorse FDR while running their own politicians locally. By 1954, the ALP was no more, and until 1998, the Party remained the most successful labor party effort of the century. The Working Families Party draws on the legacy of the American Labor Party, but in many ways appears to have eclipsed it. Through 2008, for the first 10 years of its existence, the WFP operated only in states that allowed fusion balloting, primarily in New York and Connecticut. But in recent years, the Party has set up shop in several non-fusion states—New Jersey, Maryland and others—and is already having notable influence. This paper asks: What mechanisms explain a) the organization's strategic pivot to non-fusion states, and b) the party's relative success, both before and after the pivot? Two provisional answers are put forth: 1) *Contingent mimetic isomorphism*, which has caused the WFP to imitate the Tea Party and 2) *affective sensitivity*, an individual-level variable that not only explains why the WFP has had success, but also why fusion balloting has been so important to the party's strategy.

In 2010, New York State gubernatorial candidate Andrew Cuomo accepted the Working Families Party (WFP) nomination, almost as a condescending favor to the party. New York State's fusion balloting laws allow multiple parties to endorse the same candidate, but in order to maintain a ballot line in elections throughout the state, minor parties must obtain at least 50,000 votes in the Governor's race. Typically for minor parties in New York, this means endorsing a mainstream candidate. Accepting the nomination was a favor, in the sense that Cuomo was confident he would win, with or without the WFP's support.

Four years later, the tables had turned significantly. A poll released in advance of the Democratic Primary and the Working Families Party annual convention, indicated that an unnamed Working Families Party candidate would pull 24% of the vote. (Blain 2014) This was far too many percentage points for Cuomo to ignore, and the poll sent the governor and the WFP leadership into a negotiation process that lasted several weeks—and indeed late into the night on the day before the WFP State Committee made its final endorsement decision.

Ultimately, the WFP leadership decided to endorse the incumbent, extracting a number of policy commitments, which were sent to the convention via a video of a

visibly deflated Cuomo listing the goals verbally. Indeed, he looked so miserable in the first video that the WFP made him rerecord it with a more jovial tone. It was politically impossible for Cuomo to be present at the convention, which was filled with some 700 attendees, many of whom visibly, audibly *hated* the governor. Moreover state and national media were present. The convention hissed and booed while his video played, and media looked on. Given this distain for Cuomo among the Working Families Party rank and file, his nomination was not a forgone conclusion, even once the leadership had made its call. But ultimately a majority of the some 200 State Committee delegates voted to endorse the governor for the second time. It was, however, the most significant and contested endorsement in the Party's 14-year history. Many left the convention angry that the Party had not endorsed an alternative to Cuomo, Zepher Teachout. Indeed, a key WFP staff operative left to run Teachout's campaign in the Democratic Primary. Many other WFP activists stepped away from the party in the wake of the endorsement, frustrated with four years of Cuomo's leadership and with the WFP's support for another four.

But at the same time that the WFP angered a significant portion of its base by endorsing Cuomo, it also displayed an unprecedented level of power at the state level. In the four years between 2010 and 2014, the begging was inverted—from the WFP needing Cuomo, to Cuomo needing the WFP.

This is but one story of many displaying the relative power of the Working Families Party. Largely—though not exclusively—funded and populated by labor unions and their members, the party certainly has more independent political clout than any other since the American Labor Party (ALP). Labor leaders founded the ALP nearly eight decades ago, concerned that the significant Communist and Socialist vote in New York would not sign on to the New Deal. The ALP's fusion balloting status allowed leftists of the 1930s to endorse FDR without voting for the Democratic Party. The ALP lasted two decades, wielding influence at the city level, and sending a Representative to Washington D.C. for a decade (though the Representative, Vito Marcantonio, had already been to Washington as a Republican, before jumping on the ALP ballot line).

Yet the WFP differs from the ALP in significant ways. Whatever the ALP's influence, it never left the political boundaries of New York State. The WFP meanwhile

has successfully moved significant legislation in Connecticut, a state that allows fusion balloting, but importantly in New Jersey, a state that does not. As of this writing, the WFP operates in seven states and Washington D.C., but that number seems likely to grow, as the leadership attempts to export its model to other non-fusion cities and states.

This relative success sits against a backdrop of failed labor and other third parties in U.S. history. (Archer 2014) Yet in spite of its significance, the WFP has received little scholarly attention, and none at all attempting to understand its relative success as a labor party. Given the bleak landscape of labor parties in US history, this paper asks: *What factors account for the improbable rise of a labor-funded third party in 21st century American politics?* I identify two mechanisms, one of which does work to explain their success and the other, their decision to expand. I label these mechanisms *affective sensitivity* and *contingent mimetic isomorphism*.

Methods

The following analysis relies on several months of participant observation, interviews with organizational and rank-and-file leaders, as well with a former employee. In addition, I look at a document drafted in 1990 by the organization's founder, as well as secondary analyses of the Working Families Party, the vast majority of which are journalistic—relatively little has been written about the Party in the academic literature, even beyond sociological boundaries. I was present at the WFP's annual convention in Albany in the summer of 2014, where delegates made the decision to endorse Governor Andrew Cuomo for the second time. In Brooklyn, I worked as a volunteer on a Democratic Primary campaign: the candidate was a long-time WFP activist, and his campaign was run out of the WFP headquarters. Finally, I have interviewed the WFP founder and national director, the communications director and digital communications director, a rank-and-file Party Chapter Chair, as well as a former staff organizer. The evidence below is drawn from the observations, conversations and interactions entailed therein.

As suggested by Lipset and Marks (2000), I use this data to "back in" to a much larger sociological debate. The question of American exceptionalism begins with Marx

and Engels (for a review of their analyses see: Lipset 1977), and has continued full steam through the 20th century and into the 21st. (Sombart 1906, Foner 1984, Voss 1993, Archer 2007). Exceptionalism includes the attempt to understand why socialism has failed to develop in the U.S., as it did in other industrialized countries, but also why the U.S. has never had an enduring labor party, socialist or otherwise. I am concerned more with the labor party question—something quite concrete—than with the question of socialism—which inevitably has many and varied definitions. By framing the Working Families Party as an "exception to exceptionalism" I am able to bring new methods to bear on this long-standing scholarly conversation. For instance, many researchers have evaluated the hypothesis that tactical and ideological limitations of labor unions and nascent third parties at key historical moments prevented the formation of a working class political party in the U.S. (see Lipset and Marks 2000) However, comparative-historical methods are not particularly well positioned to evaluate the micro factors relevant to this hypothesis. By using participant observation and interviews, I am able to map behavior and decision-making as the organization faces very practical dilemmas. These methods enable me to contribute new theory to this century-old conversation, grounded in a type of data that has typically been excluded.

Theory & Evidence

It is impossible to understand the Working Families Party without first understanding the New Party (NP). Dan Cantor—the WFP's national director—was present for the founding of both, and both fit his vision of how best to build a labor party in the United States. Cantor founded the NP with law professor Joel Rogers, and though the party existed in New York State, its key strategic work was in non-fusion states—for very different reasons, however, than those that have propelled the WFP beyond the comfort of fusion balloting in recent years.

In May 1990, the New Party did not yet exist. But Dan Cantor and Joel Rogers had just drafted a memo called "Party Time." Cantor jokes to Harold Meyerson in a long, journalistic account of the WFP that he "wrote "do not circulate without permission" on the front page, which guaranteed that people would pass it around.'" (Meyerson 2014)

The memo provides a unique view into the political and strategic thinking of the co-founders. They write, "we propose something between the New Democratic Coalition, the American Labor Party, and the Liberal Party. For convenience, let's call it the New Party (NP)." (Cantor and Rogers 1990) In a footnote to this quote, the authors write, "Actually this is more than a matter of convenience. We think it important that the party have a name that seems fresh, simple, and, above all, not weighted down with ideological baggage. It should be allowed to define itself." Though, as one former staffer I interviewed said, "these guys are radicals with a long game," this footnote displays a sensitivity to identity formation in the American context that is not constrained by ideological commitments. A contemporary observer cannot help but think of how the vague term "Occupy" enabled the movement to overcome, for a period of time, the fragmentation that is typical of the left.

However, the document has a clear structural analysis that runs throughout: fusion balloting, in Cantor and Rogers' view, is essential to the success of the New Party, since it avoids the "spoiler" status of most third parties: "If the Democrats run Smith, and the Republicans run Jones, and the NP runs someone else, 'someone else' is likely to lose." The document suggests only running independent candidates in situations where it is feasible for them to win, rather than running them for symbolic purposes that spoil outcomes (in fact this is still the strategy of the WFP). In any case, their aspirations were national, and Rogers is a lawyer—so the document suggests a plan, articulated in some detail in an appendix entitled simply: "SUE!" While their fusion vision, as articulated in the document, works in New York and the six other states (now seven—Oregon has since legalized fusion balloting) where fusion is legal, it did not apply elsewhere. Thus Cantor and Rogers outlined a plan to sue, in an effort to get the Supreme Court to rule all laws banning fusion balloting unconstitutional.

The New Party built some traction in Illinois and other states—in fact they endorsed now President Barak Obama in his first run for State Senator in 1996. (Gray 2012) However, their core strategy still involved legalizing fusion balloting at the national level. But in 1997, they lost their case in the Supreme Court in a 6-3 decision (Legal Information Institute 1997). This decision marked the end of the New Party, and, a short while later, the start of the Working Families Party. Cantor, it seems, had the same

analysis as ever: no fusion, no party. Thus, as one interviewee told me, he connected with his childhood friend and union leader Bob Master, as well as several other New York labor and community leaders, to form the Working Families Party. True to the fusion-centric analysis, the party would focus on New York State and Connecticut, where the ballot line would enable the party to have leverage with candidates, while never spoiling elections.

Back in New York, Beyond New York

Formed in 1998, for the first decade of its existence the WFP did not leave the comfort of fusion states, focusing its efforts on New York and then Connecticut. Their successes in these states include reform of Rockefeller drug laws in New York, the formation of a Progressive Caucus on the New York City Council and the passage of the country's first statewide paid sick leave legislation in Connecticut. Indeed, one staff interviewee told me that the sick leave act was his project for five years. But in 2008, after 10 years focused on these fusion states, the WFP ventured in to New Jersey, a state without fusion balloting. Though the organization does not have party status there, "journalists write about us as if we're a party." The WFP has championed paid sick leave in six New Jersey municipalities, two more will be voted on this November, and statewide legislation is in the works. (Working Families 2014) However, in 2008 the New Jersey project was a relative outlier, while the party still focused the majority of its attention in New York.

The Tea Party formed in 2009, and burst on the national scene in 2010, affecting elections across the country—perhaps most notably, Scott Brown rode the Tea Party wave, filling the recently deceased Ted Kennedy's Senate seat in liberal Massachusetts. The WFP took notice. As Dan Cantor told me, "If these guys [the Tea Party] can have such an influence nationally, why can't we?" Thus, after a decade in only New York and Connecticut, and another two years in just those two states and New Jersey, the WFP expanded rapidly. From 2010 to the present, the party has opened up shop in Washington D.C., Oregon, Maryland, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

I argue that this phase in the New Party-Working Families Party arc represents a rupture. In the past, the New Party operated outside of the fusion context, but largely in

order to gain traction for a Supreme Court case. When the case failed, the New Party closed its doors. Focusing on New York was a concessionary decision, and one that was based on the explicit strategic logic articulated in "Party Time": fusion is key. But in 2008, and accelerating in 2010 and beyond, something new was afoot. The Working Families Party decided to build operations outside the fusion context, and this time not as a pretext for a lawsuit. By at least some accounts, these new operations have been successful (Vail 2014, Giambusso 2014) In what follows, I offer two explanations, the first for *why* they pivoted so sharply—contingent mimetic isomorphism—and the second for why they have been successful—affective sensitivity. Moreover, I make the case that the latter does work to explain the organization's success not just in non-fusion contexts but in fusion contexts as well.

DiMaggio and Powell argue in a now-classic paper (1983) that there are three so-called mechanisms that help to explain why organizations are often so similar: coercive, mimetic and normative isomorphism. The first involves direct pressure (whether formal or informal) on one organization by another, and the third involves, as the term suggests, the normative pressures of professionalization. These two are not particularly relevant to understanding the case of the Working Families Party. The second, however, is salient. *Mimetic isomorphism* conceives of uncertainty as a "force" which compels organizations to imitate one another other. This term begins to offer analytic leverage to understand why the WFP pivoted so dramatically in 2010, after more than two decades (if we include the New Party years) of perusing a fusion strategy.

If we learn nothing else from the literature on American exceptionalism, it is that any particular third party is facing constraints that none of their predecessors (since the rise of the Republicans in any case) has been able to overcome. Put differently, any party that is "certain" they know how to build a successful, scaled third party is likely led by people who simply do not grasp the American political context. In short, the so-called field of third parties is nothing if not uncertain. In this sense, mimetic isomorphism does a great deal of work to explain the WFP's expansion. In no uncertain terms, their founder told me that they viewed the Tea Party as a model worth imitating: hammer away at mainstream candidates in the primary and drag them to the right—or in the case of the

WFP, to the left. In a sense, the uncertainty of the field truly is a force, as DiMaggio and Powell argue.

At the same time, I suggest that a more nuanced explanation of the WFP's change in strategic direction requires an understanding of what I call *contingent mimetic isomorphism*. If mimetic isomorphism is a mechanism, then I offer two sub-mechanisms that help to explain precisely how uncertainty functions as a force; or, put better, under what conditions it will. The first contingency I identify is *organizational goals*. Uncertainty may well be a force, but the direction in which it pushes—or whether it is able to push at all—is in part determined by organizational specificity. A comparison between the Liberal Party and the Working Families Party will illustrate the point clearly.

The Liberal Party was formed as an anti-Communist alternative to American Labor Party, which was significantly influenced by CPUSA members. But by the 1990s, the Liberal Party was by all accounts a patronage machine. (Benson 1999) Though the Liberal Party survived for decades using fusion balloting, it was a New York-specific project from the outset. Neither the organization nor those who led it—most notably the notorious Ray Harding—had aspirations beyond New York State. Such a party, though similar to the WFP in almost every structural way—a third party using fusion balloting in New York State—did not have the *goal* to expand beyond state boundaries. Hence the uncertainty that characterizes the US third party field did not compel it to do more than maintain the 50,000 votes necessary at the state level to keep its ballot line. Finally in 2002 it lost even those votes, and the party essentially folded.

The WFP on the other hand had a different goal from the outset. Though the failure of the NP effort led Cantor to focus on New York, the NP history combined with the 2008 New Jersey experiment, indicate that the organization's national aspirations never truly disappeared. Thus, in an uncertain field, this specific organizational goal—again, one quite different that of the Liberal Party—interacted with the force of the Tea Party movement, causing the WFP to seriously reconsider its focus on the fusion context. We can aptly call this process contingent mimetic isomorphism, and imagine that, in other contexts, uncertainty may be a causal force that functions *through* different sub-mechanisms.

In addition, I identify a second sub-mechanism through which the force of uncertainty is channeled, what I call *tactical openness*. Jasper (2014) uses the phrase 'taste in tactics' to explain why some groups have favored tactics in "almost all circumstances" (130). Indeed this is often the case. But here I suggest that we may be able to explain the endurance and success of organizations and movements by their degree of tactical flexibility, as opposed to simply positing that they typically lack it. In fact, the pivot that the WFP made in mimetic response to the Tea Party suggests a significant amount of tactical openness on the part of the organization's leadership. After decades of operating on the fusion logic, it was far from a foregone conclusion that uncertainty would necessarily lead the WFP to imitate the Tea Party. I find supporting, micro-level evidence for the tactical openness of the organization in a strange place: In the summer of 2014, I met with Dan Cantor to obtain organizational permission for my project. In addition to pitching a book on the party based on my dissertation research, I suggested running as a series of field experiments, where I would work with key staff to design and implement experiments on members and voters. I was surprised by his response: "This all sounds great. You have any other good ideas?" He quickly gave me written permission to study the organization, and put me in touch with the people with whom I would need to work to design the experiments. Leaders in the labor movement are characteristically closed to tactics that deviate from the norm—that is, they often have strong tastes in tactics. In this context especially, Cantor's openness to my project—especially the experiments—was surprising.

Thus I argue that uncertainty-as-force is contingent on the *tactical openness* of organizations and their leaders. In a sense, tactical openness can function both as a sub-mechanism of mimetic isomorphism and a mechanism in its own right. I posit that on the organization-movement continuum, it is sub-mechanism on the organization end, and a freestanding mechanism on the movement end—largely because uncertainty is a given for most movements. In any case, I argue that the 2010 WFP pivot is a case of contingent mimetic isomorphism. Future research might do well to use this concept, with the contingent elements it suggests, as an independent variable explaining organizational and movement success. Here I use it to explain the organization's expansion in an uncertain field.

Fusion, Beyond Fusion

Contingent mimetic isomorphism does a good deal of work to explain *why* the WFP pivoted in response to the Tea Party movement's success. However, it does not explain *what precisely* has made the WFP successful, either before or after the pivot. This question of causal mechanisms is especially salient, given that the core strategic analysis of the party—the centrality of fusion, an analysis which is mirrored by journalists—does little to explain the WFP's ability to operate with efficacy in non-fusion contexts. Thus, to explain the party's success, both before *and* after the pivot, I turn to a distinctly micro-level mechanism, what I call *affective sensitivity*.

Though the Party Time document discussed above is firmly grounded in a structural analysis—again, the central importance of fusion balloting—I argue that something else is on display in the writing: affective sensitivity. As quoted above, the authors write, "If the Democrats run Smith, and the Republicans run Jones, and the NP runs someone else, 'someone else' is likely to lose." But the subsequent line is key: "If that happens each election, or for all offices available in the election, *NP members are likely to get discouraged*, and the NP is not likely to last" [my emphasis]. Later, when listing the potential economic and political virtues of the party they seek to form, the authors write, "All this, we might add, while being *exciting and fun* for NP activists and members" [my emphasis]. Finally, near the end of the document when discussing the financial strains that working people have, Cantor and Rogers argue that "the lack of meaning in their lives... is no less important." I suggest that these statements are examples of what I call *affective sensitivity*—an individual-level awareness of emotional dynamics in organizations and movements. Like the concept of tactical openness above, I suggest that the degree of affective sensitivity in organizations and especially organizational leaders is a key independent variable in explaining success over the long term. To be clear, these are the kinds of variables to which writers on American exceptionalism rarely have access, but I argue that they are no less central than historical-structural constraints to developing an explanation of the success and failure of third parties like the Working Families Party.

Indeed, I suggest that it was affective sensitivity that drew Cantor and Rogers to fusion balloting *in the first place*. As the formulation above suggests, they are particularly interested in fusion precisely because they want to prevent *discouragement* among members and voters. Moreover, they suggest that their organization will be "fun and exciting" and seek for it to address a kind of existential void, at the same time that it fights economic inequality. A rank and file leader in the WFP described the role of fusion balloting this way: "Honestly, it's mostly psychological." This is true for its impact on politicians as much as on members. Indeed, even the startling polls that drew Cuomo to seek the party's endorsement in 2014 were not so significant that he would have lost the election without the WFP. Unnamed candidates fair far better in polls than named candidates, and it seems highly unlikely that a WFP candidate, Teachout or otherwise, would have been able to topple Cuomo. Yet the WFP brought Cuomo to the table, or better put, to the video. Fusion, it appears, is as affective as it is structural.

There is further evidence for this affective sensitivity in Meyerson's article (2014), which draws a great deal on interviews with key organizational leaders. One of the significant achievements of the Working Families Party has been to get most major New York unions at the table together, and, at least in some cases, to act together. As one interviewee told me, "You have to understand, there is no labor movement in New York." But, to the extent that there is, the WFP deserves some of the credit, at least according to another interviewee: "Look, minimum wage used to be #20 on their [referring to a NYC union local] list, now it's maybe #5." Meyerson quotes Cantor discussing the so-called table of labor unions he has helped to create: "People have to develop trust with one another, so that even if we don't win every time, they still won't go away" (2014). Again, Cantor sees an affective dynamic as central to turning individual unions into a collective actor—unfortunately, structural and historical explanations seem unlikely to see this sensitivity as salient.

There is certainly a structural element to the strategy the WFP has deployed in non-fusion states, one that is sometimes employed even in fusion contexts and that I witnessed first hand as a participant observer. The WFP ran one of its activists—an employee of a member union for the past six years—in a Democratic primary against a longtime neighborhood activist. Though they lost, the WFP successfully framed their

candidate as an insurgent running against a "machine Democrat" (to what extent this is an accurate description is another question altogether). In any case, the campaign, though technically in the Democratic Primary, was WFP from start to finish—the candidate was a WFP activist, and the campaign was run from the WFP main office, led by the staff members of the organization. Structurally, this is the strategy the WFP employs in non-fusion states: without the fusion ballot as an option in the general election, the WFP seeks to influence the primaries. This strategy appears to have been successful in one of their newest operations in Maryland. (Vail 2014)

But there is more at work here than a strategic savvy about where the party has structural "ins." Again, I argue that the causal mechanism is *affective sensitivity*. Indeed, this sensitivity undergirds the strategic analysis that the party should seek to influence only the primaries in non-fusion states. It is precisely to maintain good energy toward the party and to avoid a sense of discouragement that the WFP chooses not to engage general elections in non-fusion contexts. Thus, I argue that in *both* fusion and non-fusion situations, affective sensitivity does significant work to explain the WFP's relative success, against a backdrop of failed labor party efforts. Future work (including my future work on the WFP) should look more precisely at how and to what extent the affective sensitivity of organizational leaders becomes imprinted on organizational culture and practice. (Johnson 2007)

Conclusion

This paper offers two causal variables to explain a) why the Working Families Party pivoted so sharply in 2010 (contingent mimetic isomorphism) and b) how the Working Families Party has found relative success where other similar attempts have faltered (affective sensitivity). I have argued that mimetic isomorphism is a useful explanatory concept—that is, that uncertainty has a power of its own—but that the force of uncertainty is channeled by certain contingencies, which scholars of movements and organizations must identify in each unique empirical context. I identify tactical openness as a sub-mechanism of contingent mimetic isomorphism, suggesting that the *degree* of tactical flexibility does work to explain the success of an organization pressured by the

forces of uncertainty. Finally I have offered the concept of affective sensitivity as a micro-level causal mechanism that explains how organizations that face significant structural constraints are able to survive and sometimes thrive.

More generally, I argue that the methods that have traditionally been employed to address questions surrounding American exceptionalism suffer from an inherent bias against the types of causal mechanisms discussed in this paper. This is not to undermine the structural constraints that have been identified by comparative-historical researchers, but rather to suggest that how specific individual and organizational actors navigate those constraints is every bit as important to understanding exceptionalism as the constraints themselves.

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