


Republicans Pick Up Unlikely Allies in Key House Races: Unions

Democrats still dominate with organized labor. But in must-win swing races, Republicans are peeling off some union support, and feeling the benefits.

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By Nicholas Fandos

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The president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters praised one Republican congressman on national television. A major transportation union rated another among its most loyal supporters in Congress. And an influential building trades group said a third would help begin “restoring the sense of unity” the country had lost.

After years of antagonism between the labor movement and Republican Party leadership, a growing number of moderate Republican lawmakers are trying to break from their party’s union-hostile policies as they defend House swing seats this fall, and they have found surprising support.

The shift remains nascent, largely limited to building trades and other blue-collar groups in the union-heavy Northeast. Yet, with the elections looming, it has already injected an unpredictable new element into a half-dozen races that could determine control of the House of Representatives.

In New York's Hudson Valley, Representative Mike Lawler has collected tens of thousands of dollars more in union donations than his Democratic opponent. Further upstate, a 1,500-member electrical workers' union that once opposed Representative Marc Molinaro is now working to re-elect him. And in New Jersey, the state's Building and Construction Trades Council not only flipped sides to support Representative Tom Kean Jr. but helped keep the Democrat-aligned A.F.L.-C.I.O. on the sidelines.

Representative Tom Kean Jr., Republican of New Jersey, is being backed by the state's Building and Construction Trades Council. Bill Clark/CQ Roll Call, via Associated Press

“Institutionally, the Republicans are still anti-worker,” said John Samuelson, the head of the 150,000-member Transport Workers Union of America, a group that has turned heads by wading into several hard-fought contests to back Republicans. But he said he was also frustrated with the Democrats who appeared to be taking union support for granted.

“It makes it more important that those individual Republicans who stand up and support workers and their trade unions not be abandoned,” Mr. Samuelson said.

The high-profile endorsements, which often bring five-figure checks and armies of door knockers, reflect an emerging trend in American politics, where the ties that once bound Democrats and organized labor together appear to be loosening, if not exactly broken.

Last week, the 1.3-million-member Teamsters voted to stay neutral in the race for president, a blow to Democrats after years of support. Prominent Republicans, including former President Trump and his running mate, Senator JD Vance of Ohio, have begun to speak in more explicitly pro-worker terms, though many labor leaders say their policies do not match their rhetoric. And leaders of some of the nation’s oldest unions increasingly find themselves grappling with how to respond to members shifting rightward.

“That might be giving cover to more down-ballot Republicans,” said Jake Rosenfeld, a sociologist who studies unions at Washington University in St. Louis. “Ten or 15 years ago, if you staked out a real pro-union position as a G.O.P. lawmaker, you were going to be hearing from the Chamber of Commerce or the National Association of Manufacturers.”

Democrats say they see little reason for concern, arguing that endorsements represent tactical transactions between union leaders and Republican candidates who know they need labor support to win on contested turf, rather than a more lasting realignment in the labor movement.

Many of the unions supporting Republicans like Mr. Lawler or Representative Brian Fitzpatrick of Pennsylvania are also overwhelmingly endorsing Vice President Kamala Harris for president. Some are also fighting against Republican majorities

in Congress that would almost certainly block their priorities or advance outright hostile measures, like national right-to-work legislation that would cripple unions' organizing force.

In nearly every competitive race, Democratic candidates still have support from major public-sector unions and large service worker groups, including the American Federation of Teachers and the A.F.L.-C.I.O., that are planning to spend millions of dollars helping them. And some Democrats defending swing seats, like Representatives Tom Suozzi and Pat Ryan of New York, have picked up support from law enforcement unions that typically back Republicans.

Gabby Seay, a longtime labor leader involved in a pro-Democrat turnout organization called Battleground New York, likened the Republican courtship of unions to costumed mimicry. "They are cosplaying this right now because they are feeling a little bit of heat," she said. "But we know who they really are, and we will remind voters of that on the doors."

And yet, even the idea of Republicans and Democrats fighting in a general election over who is more friendly to working people represents a change.

In a sprawling upstate New York district, Mr. Molinaro's opponent, Josh Riley, is running as a staunchly pro-union Democrat and accusing Mr. Molinaro of supporting policies that have undermined American jobs. Like most of his party, Mr. Riley supports raising the minimum wage and the PRO Act, legislation that would make it easier for workers to unionize and costlier for employers to retaliate.

Mr. Molinaro's positions have more caveats, but he also uses terms like "corporate stooges" that most of his fellow Republicans scoff at. This month, he visited a picket line of striking Teamsters and said in an interview that he would vote for the PRO Act, though he has reservations. Mr. Riley remained skeptical.

"He's telling labor that he supports the PRO Act, but it's been sitting on his desk for two years and he refuses to put his name on it," he said.

Mondaire Jones, a former Democratic congressman running against Mr. Lawler in the lower Hudson Valley, has made similar arguments. He pointed to Mr. Lawler's vote to rescind a key Biden administration labor rule, and hundreds of thousands of

dollars in campaign contributions that the Republican took from corporate political action committees. (Mr. Jones does not accept corporate PAC money.)

“The endorsement of Mike Lawler by some of these building and trades unions cannot possibly be based on policy,” Mr. Jones said, accusing some unions of “turning their backs on pro-labor candidates.”

He attributed the endorsements in part to national unions’ having “a better understanding of which candidates are pro-labor and which candidates are antilabor than some of the local leadership.”

In the two years since he took office, Mr. Lawler has won over unions representing boilermakers, electrical workers, plumbers and steamfitters who supported his Democratic opponent in 2022. On Wednesday, two more groups, the Uniformed Fire Officers Association and the transport workers, were expected to endorse him.

“When someone does the right thing, it’s not like is there an R or D behind your name,” said Kevin Elkins, the political director for the New York City area carpenters’ union.

Mr. Lawler said he believed he could stand with both businesses and workers. “It doesn’t have to be an adversarial relationship,” he said. Like Mr. Molinaro, he said he would vote for the PRO Act, though he argued that it needed changes.

He and Mr. Molinaro also took deliberate actions to help the transport workers that have paid dividends. Both bucked their party to sign a letter urging JetBlue not to interfere with an organizing drive among its jet mechanics and airline dispatchers. And they teamed up with Democrats to introduce legislation to establish new cabin air safety standards for airplanes and to stop carriers from outsourcing jet maintenance offshore.

“Lawler stepped up and took flak from Republicans in his own caucus for the T.W.U.,” said Mr. Samuelsen. “I’m not forgetting that type of help.”

Mr. Jones, on the other hand, had made little effort to court the union, Mr. Samuelsen said.

“Mondaire Jones wouldn’t recognize me if he bumped into me at a fund-raiser,” he said. “He literally bumped into me at a Nancy Pelosi event at the Democratic convention, and he didn’t know who I was.”

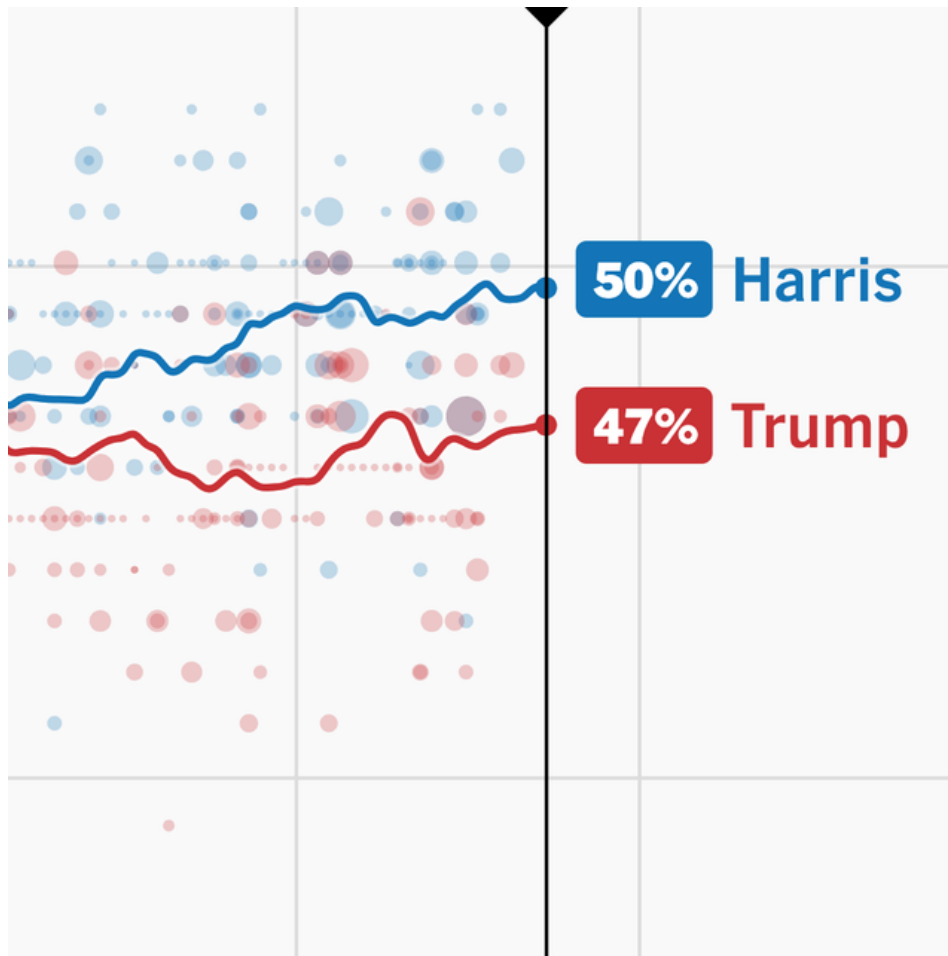
Mr. Jones said that explanation only “proves my point that their endorsement of Mike Lawler is not based on his pro-labor record, but rather something other than what their endorsement is supposed to be about.”

Nicholas Fandos is a Times reporter covering New York politics and government. More about Nicholas Fandos

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