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Hannah Walker^a & Dylan Bennett^b

^a University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA

^b University of Wisconsin, Waukesha, WI, USA

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The Whiteness of Wisconsin's Wages: Racial Geography and the Defeat of Public Sector Labor Unions in Wisconsin

Hannah Walker

University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA

Dylan Bennett

University of Wisconsin, Waukesha, WI, USA

Abstract *In 2011, the passage of Wisconsin Act 10 eliminated substantive collective bargaining rights for public employees in Wisconsin. How did politicians in Wisconsin invoke racial symbolism in the policy contest over public sector collective bargaining rights? To what extent did this policy battle reconstruct racial identities of blackness and whiteness? In this analysis, we leverage a multi-method approach to speak to these questions. We use a historical analysis of race in Milwaukee and current public opinion around support for public sector cuts to frame a discourse analysis of political rhetoric employed by the Walker campaign. We join critical race perspectives to examine how politicians play on existing inequalities as a method of gaining political and electoral legitimacy and achieving a retrenchment of the modern state. Moreover, we build a case supporting the claim that Governor Walker and his allies activated the racial animus of white workers.*

Introduction

In 2011 the passage of Wisconsin Act 10, also known as the “budget repair bill,” eliminated substantive collective bargaining rights for public employees in Wisconsin. In this inquiry, we ask: how did the conservative attack on Wisconsin’s public sector labor rights leverage symbolically racialized frames in the tradition of welfare and crime policy? Scholars across critical scholarly traditions have explained political attacks on the public sector as class-based, gendered, and racialized. We join critical race perspectives to examine how politicians leverage existing inequalities as a method of gaining political and electoral legitimacy and achieving a retrenchment of the modern state.

Labor scholars who focus on economic class see the “opportunism of American plutocracy” exploiting the financial crisis for a historical political victory,¹ or just the latest step backward in the long retreat of militant labor,² and a

¹ Kenneth Glenn Dau-Schmidt and Winston Lin, “The Great Recession, the Resulting Budget Shortfalls, the 2010 Elections and the Attack on Public Sector Collective Bargaining,” *Hofstra Labor and Employment Law Journal* 29:2 (2012), pp. 407–432.

² Stanley Aronowitz, “Reflections on the Madison Uprising,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 111:1 (2012), pp. 214–222.

confirmation of the death of organized labor.³ Women's studies scholars spotlight the disproportionate harm to women given the very high percentage of women in public sector jobs such as teachers, nurses, social workers, and home health aides.⁴ These scholars also stress the importance of bargained rights such as health benefits, sick days, and living wages in raising healthy families. Racial analysis sees the union defeat as particularly harmful to African Americans for whom the public sector is the single most important source of employment.⁵ Racial activists see the defeat of public unions as just one part of a general attack on black equality that includes repressive voter identification laws, the undermining of fair education, housing, and police practices.⁶ In this racial context, gender scholars note the particular harm to African American women.⁷

In this article, we shift the racial analysis to explore racial identity in the political process of defeating organized labor in the public sector in Wisconsin. The long season of labor's defeat, from the spring of 2011 to the unsuccessful recall of Governor Scott Walker in June 2012, was accompanied by distinctive discourse about an undeserving minority of public workers. State and local workers were cast as taking advantage of excessive benefits at the expense of private sector workers feeling the brunt of post-industrial working conditions without affordable health care or pay increases. In a state that was historically among the most unionized states in the country, teachers unions, and especially teachers of Milwaukee, Wisconsin Public Schools (MPS), were depicted by political elites and common citizens alike as indefensibly overpaid and ineffective, echoing the nationwide agenda to privatize the public school system.⁸ That portrayal occurred in the context of a starkly racialized urban-exurban divide. Wisconsin has an overwhelmingly white suburban and rural population and an intensely segregated, impoverished Black population in Milwaukee surrounded by a belt of wealthy, hard-core Republican, suburban communities known as the "iron ring." Thus, the state of Wisconsin is characterized by racial segregation along urban/suburban lines, where the city of Milwaukee, for many white Wisconsin voters, is largely synonymous with blackness and a familiar theory of Black moral failings. From this perspective, the moral corruption of the Black community pairs easily with the political corruption of the public sector.

The rhetorical attack on public labor takes a different tack than the traditional criticism of private sector unions and leverages political corruption rather than distortion of the labor market. Whereas private unions were held responsible for increasing the costs of production, making American industry uncompetitive with foreign industry, a newer argument says that public sector unions not only

³ Nelson Lichtenstein and Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, *The Right and Labor in America: Politics, Ideology, and Imagination* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

⁴ Jane Collins, "Statement of the University of Wisconsin System Women's Studies Consortium on the Budget Repair Bill Proposal, March 2011," *Feminist Studies* 37:1 (2011), pp. 218–221; Mari Jo Buhle, "Women and Power in the Wisconsin Uprising," *Dissent* (Winter 2013), pp. 70–73.

⁵ Steven C. Pitts, *Black Workers and the Public Sector*, Research Brief (Berkeley: UC Berkeley Center for Labor Research and Education, 2011), pp. 1–12.

⁶ Buhle, "Women and Power," pp. 70–73.

⁷ Collins, "University of Wisconsin System Women's Studies Consortium," pp. 218–221.

⁸ Diane Ravitch, *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013).

produce inefficient workers but also have undue influence on government policy to push for increasing government spending.⁹ In this view public unions enjoy an exclusive circle of influence wherein their support of Democratic Party candidates decisively elects officials who are beholden to the public unions and thus cannot limit the claims of public labor to excessive pay and benefits. In essence, public unions elect their own management. Government funding does not provide the natural limits that the market imposes on private sector unions. All told, the conservative opposition to organized labor adapts an emphasis on inefficiency previously assigned to private unions to a headier charge of political injustice, and ultimately, political corruption.

For us, Wisconsin's labor battle invites two questions regarding the manner in which economic fairness and virtue intersect with racial meaning. First, how did politicians and voters in Wisconsin invoke racial symbolism in the policy contest over public sector collective bargaining rights? Second, to what extent did this policy battle reconstruct racial identities of blackness and whiteness? In this article, we argue that to fully understand the Wisconsin case, one must account for the racialized content of (a) labor identity in anxious economic times, (b) populist appeals from political elites, (c) debates over the American welfare state, as well as (d) the presence of latent racial resentment among the electorate, and (e) the harsh racial geography of the Milwaukee, Wisconsin metropolitan area.

After considering these factors, we use descriptive statistics to speak to the extent to which anti-public sector labor union messaging finds a primarily white audience. Here, we draw on Current Population Survey (CPS) data examining the racial makeup of the public sector, and public opinion data broken down by race collected in the lead-up to the 2012 recall election. This sets the stage for a qualitative analysis of racial discourse among politicians and voters. The qualitative discourse analysis examines the use of explicitly and implicitly raced language at three levels of political discourse: opinion pieces written by Governor Walker and published in local newspapers, letters to the editor on budget reforms proposed in Act 10, and anonymous online comments on a newspaper article covering budget cuts to MPS. In Wisconsin, we find a strong support for the claim that an underlying current of racial animus characterizes anti-state rhetoric. While elite rhetoric is antiseptic in character, it finds a predominately white audience, whites have less to lose by cuts to the public sector, and popular responses to policy proposals are overtly racist.

Racial Identity of Labor, Populism, and Anti-Welfare Politics

The history of the American labor movement is characterized by racial exclusion, where *white* as an identity emerged as a method of carving out difference between white and Black workers who shared class status but not skin color. Conservative elite appeals to popular dissatisfaction implicitly address a white constituency. Like labor, welfare policy is highly racialized political terrain. In this section, we describe how white racial identity itself is deeply connected to the racially exclusive labor movement; how right-wing populism instrumentally harnesses that identity; how labor unions historically excluded people of color; and how the

⁹ Daniel DiSalvio, "The Trouble with Public Sector Unions," *National Affairs* (Fall 2010), pp. 1–19.

modern welfare state has been racially stigmatized as an institution. We draw on this understanding to locate racial identity as a meaningful factor in Wisconsin's battle over public employee unions.

White Labor, White Populism. David Roediger shows how nineteenth century American workers of European ancestry, anxiously facing dependence on industrial wage labor, constructed the racial category of *white worker* in contrast to enslaved Black workers.¹⁰ The primary claim of European Americans for human dignity was the color of their skin, and they carved out a definition for *white* by first defining *black*. Blacks were slaves; they were hedonistic, lazy, not truly American, and not fully human under the law. Whites, then, understood themselves to be hardworking, sober, and legal equals to their wealthy counterparts, where their shared whiteness became a vehicle claiming individual rights. In Roediger's history, the Irish became "white," leveraged the desire for a higher status into organized labor, and achieved victories including a minimum wage and a maximum hour workday. Organized labor thus developed as a racialized institution designed to protect the dignity of the white worker. Whiteness, insofar as it is associated with the core values of work ethic and sobriety, is intrinsic to what it means to be an American worker.¹¹ This powerful racialized mental association is a key theoretical tool for analyzing contemporary labor battles.

Institutionally, organized labor progressed into the post-war era as a formally segregated political force that separated the goal of justice for workers from justice for African Americans.¹² Court-ordered desegregation of labor unions resulted not in a racial rapprochement but rather the defection of working class white voters from the Democratic Party, leaving radical whites and people of color as the party's core constituency linking labor and party. As a result, the white working class became a potentially contested voting block, particularly in anxious times of economic recession, due to the dual identities of class and race that can be made to work at cross purposes.¹³ A primarily class-based identity should locate them within the Democratic Party. However, because the Democratic Party is home to African American voters, whiteness can be leveraged to locate the white working class segment of the electorate within the Republican Party, as has been the case in the latter half of the 20th century.¹⁴ This pattern of racialized

¹⁰ David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1999).

¹¹ Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

¹² Paul Frymer, *Black and Blue: African Americans, the Labor Movement, and the Decline of the Democratic Party* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

¹³ Frymer, *Black and Blue*.

¹⁴ In his work on the impact of the enfranchisement of African Americans on party politics in the post-civil rights era, Paul Frymer identifies the phenomenon of vote capture that characterizes the relationship between the Democratic Party and Blacks. That is, during the civil rights movement the Democratic Party served as the primary legislative engine driving the passage of civil rights acts of the 1960s. Consequently, African American voters flocked to the Democratic Party, driving primarily Southern Whites to the Republican Party. The African American constituency votes near unanimously for the Democratic Party, but Frymer argues, they do so out of necessity and lack of options, not because the Democratic Party continues to champion race conscious policies. On the contrary, the Democratic Party, in order to protect more moderate, left-leaning white voters who might be tempted to

party competition continues to play out in the post-industrial stage of Wisconsin politics.

In Wisconsin, white workers are anxious again, and debates frame public workers as urban, undeserving and Black. But in the post-industrial version the political project is inverted. Instead of renewing their own set of labor rights, the anxious private workers tear down the position of the public workers to achieve racial victory. Conservative leaders do this through leveraging populist appeals that place the white working class between out-of-touch liberal elites, on the one hand, who support policies that take from their pockets (taxes) to support the undeserving poor (minorities who receive welfare) on the other. Such populist appeals employ rhetoric that addresses the emotion and heart of the "people" which constitutes a vague popular majority evoked with a language of exclusivity.¹⁵ The right uses populist rhetoric to capture the sympathies of working class whites, leveraging covert racist fears around the loss of power in the face of progressive civil rights era policy, where tax and welfare policy are the site of conflict.

In the populist appeal, the political victims of public unions are the private sector workers who must pay the bill for overly generous union compensation while suffering enduring declines in living standards. Those outside the corrupt, exclusionary circle of influence are a victimized majority often classified as the "taxpayers." The "defense" of "taxpayers" is the central argument among Wisconsin economic conservatives from Governor Walker to local school boards. The terms imply a virtuous, victimized person and functions as an enormously effective frame. The frame inoculates the agenda from criticism. The frame also reinforces latent white identity. Those who pay by definition must be virtuous. Labor virtue is white virtue. Those who receive from the taxpayers are dependent and morally corrupt. The link to blackness is silent and efficient. White workers heed the call to resist racial integration by rejecting organized labor, which is portrayed as the vehicle that promises to end white privilege.¹⁶ We see Governor Walker's populism appealing to white voters, without irony, as economically excluded.

Racialized Welfare Policy and Symbolic Racism. Social welfare policy is profoundly racialized because discourse around welfare invokes race-specific imagery. Public bias toward the support given to low-income women underwent a seismic shift from its positive association with white motherhood between the Civil War and the New Deal era to its negative association with an undeserving

Footnote 14 continued

disaffect to the Republican Party, avoids explicit race-centric policy discussion. Thus, race-based issues such as affirmative action have fallen off the policy agenda, and African American voters remain staunchly entrenched in the Democratic Party. Thus, it is the median white who remains the contested voter in American politics, where working class whites have class interests rooted in the Democratic Party, but whose whiteness has historically been leveraged by the Republican Party. Paul Frymer, *Uneasy Alliances: Race and Party Competition in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

¹⁵ Micheal Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1998).

¹⁶ Michael Pierce, "Orval Faubus and the Rise of Anti-Labor Populism in Northwestern Arkansas," in Nelson Lichtenstein and Elizabeth Tandy Sheerer (eds), *The Right and Labor in America: Politics, Ideology, and Imagination* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), pp. 98–113.

Black underclass in the 1960s.¹⁷ This shift was aided by a report written by the Assistant Secretary of Labor at the U.S. Department of Labor, Daniel Moynihan, in 1965. The report, titled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (referred to as the Moynihan Report), located the failings of the African American underclass in Black culture. The Moynihan Report codified two categories of poor people identified in Roediger's analysis of white workers: the deserving, white working class, and the undeserving, Black underclass.¹⁸ Thereafter, opposition to social welfare policies has been rooted in the idea of the undeserving poor, who Americans perceive as predominately Black.¹⁹

Race coding extends beyond social welfare policy to encompass any policy that has a racial tinge, where white antipathy for non-whites hides within language around the appropriate role of the state, crime control, and recently, border control.²⁰ Theories of symbolic racism provide a link between holding traditional American values and anti-Black affect, on the one hand, and policy positions, on the other hand.²¹ Symbolic racism is tapped not through explicitly racist language, but through coded language that conjures up racialized imagery.

Work by Joseph Lowndes exemplifies the theoretical turn that attaches racial animus to anti-state rhetoric, beyond just welfare policy, to include labor policy and public bargaining rights.²² That transference is apparent in the Tea Party movement, the most recent expression of right wing, largely white, Populism.²³ Lowndes argues that while the movement purports to focus exclusively on fiscal policy and limiting government spending, the antics of party members demonizing President Obama as a socialist belie a significant, not fringe, racial undercurrent. Conservative gains in the last part of the 20th century in racialized policy areas undercut the usefulness of rallying anxious white workers around issues such as affirmative action and welfare. Instead, vilifying President Obama

¹⁷ Gwendolyn Mink, *Welfare's End* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971); Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

¹⁸ Dionne Bensonsmith, "Jezebels, Matriarchs, and Welfare Queens: The Moynihan Report of 1965 and the Social Construction of African-American Women in Welfare Policy," in Anne L. Schneider and Helen M. Ingram (eds), *Deserving and Entitled: Social Constructions and Public Policy* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2005), pp. 243–259.

¹⁹ Martin Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1999).

²⁰ Eva G.T. Green, Christian Staerkle and David O. Sears, "Symbolic Racism and Whites' Attitudes Towards Punitive and Preventive Crime Policies," *Law and Human Behavior*, 30:4 (2006), pp. 435–454; Joshua L. Rabinowitz, David O. Sears, Jim Sidanius, and Jon A. Krosnick, "Why do White Americans Oppose Race-Targeted Policies? Clarifying the Impact of Symbolic Racism," *Political Psychology*, 30:5 (2009), pp. 805–828.

²¹ David O. Sears and P.J. Henry, "The Origins of Symbolic Racism," *Interpersonal Relations and Group Processes*, 85:2 (2003), pp. 259–275; David O. Sears and Tom Jessor, "Whites' Racial Policy Attitudes: The Role of White Racism," *Social Science Quarterly* 77 (December 1996), pp. 751–759.

²² Joseph Lowndes, "The Past and Future of Race in the Tea Party Movement," in Lawrence Rosenthal and Christine Trost (eds), *Steep: Vertiginous Rise of the Tea Party* (University of California Press, 2012), pp. 152–170.

²³ Lowndes, "The Past and Future of Race"; Matt A. Barreto, Betsy L. Cooper, Benjamin Gonzolez, Christopher S. Parker and Christopher Tolwer, "The Tea Party in the Age of Obama: Mainstream Conservatism or Out-Group Anxiety?," *Political Power and Social Theory* 22:1 (2011).

as a socialist while using racial epithets, Lowndes theorizes, signifies transference of racial animus from specifically social welfare policy to broad anti-state sentiment. "Welfare has been largely dismantled, and the prison industrial complex fully realized," Lowndes writes, "Racial affect for the Tea Party circulates most powerfully in attacks on Obama . . . thus, attacks on Obama become assaults on taxation, social spending and more recently, public sector unions."²⁴

Lowndes crucially links racialized attacks on the welfare state and attacks on public bargaining rights as racialized. Within this framework, Governor Walker's race-free, paradigm-shifting conservative economic appeals around public sector bargaining rights are appropriately interpreted as racially coded. In Governor Walker's own words, public workers with affordable health insurance and secure retirement programs are the "haves" and private workers without those advantages are the "have-nots." The idea that public workers had unfair advantages had extraordinary sticking power. It was a small step to imply that public employees do not authentically work hard or perform well for their overly generous benefits. The basic structure of this implication matches the stereotypical, racial-imbued suggestion that racial minorities lack work ethic, moral cohesion, and illegitimately take advantage of public assistance benefits.

In sum, we have outlined how racial categories developed in response to economic anxiety; demonstrated how those racial categories became associated with welfare and labor policy, and anti-Black affect embedded in those policies; identified the white working class as a contested voting block due to their dual identities as white and poor; and suggested that the current incarnation of this trend is to attach anti-Black affect to a broader notion of anti-statism, including, but not limited to, attacks on public sector bargaining rights. From this foundation we build an empirical analysis of the role of race in Wisconsin's debate over public sector bargaining rights. We begin with an historical look at race in Wisconsin.

Historical Context: Black Milwaukee, White Waukesha

The city of Milwaukee plays a central role in the identity of Wisconsin. Like other cities in the Midwest and Northeast, Milwaukee is deeply segregated by race. Black-white segregation in the metropolis is tied with Detroit as the worst in the country.²⁵ A black "inner core" in the northern and western parts of the city is notably distinguished from white neighborhoods strongly imprinted by the identity of European immigrant communities. The city itself is surrounded by an "iron ring" of some of the whitest suburbs in the country such as Brookfield and Waukesha. Milwaukee is fully contained by more than a dozen separate municipalities protected by annexation law, settled in the 1950s, favoring small cities against metropolitan annexation that might redistribute public goods more equitably.²⁶ Like other major cities, residential racial segregation is a political construct erected by white power, a product of Milwaukee's European ethnic immigrant identity and exclusionary policies and practices in housing and labor.

²⁴ Lowndes, "The Past and Future of Race," pp. 166–167.

²⁵ John R. Logan and Brian J. Stults, "The Persistence of Segregation in the Metropolis: New Findings from the 2010 Census," (Census Brief Prepared for Project US2010, 2011).

²⁶ Nathan J. Zolik, "Suburbs, Separatism, and Segregation: The Story of Milwaukee's Boundary Through the Lens of Annexation Law," *Wisconsin Law Review* 501 (2001).

Milwaukee embodies blackness, bad schools, and moral failure for fearful white Wisconsinites living outside the city.

Residential segregation in Milwaukee is at least a century in the making. Between the mid-1800s and 1940, racial exclusion for Milwaukee's small Black population grew as major waves of immigrants arrived from Germany, Poland, and Italy. By the twentieth century, more than three-quarters of Milwaukee's residents were immigrants and the city was characterized by a patchwork of tight-knit, white, ethnic neighborhoods. These groups dominated economic opportunity in one of the country's most industrialized cities. Blacks were excluded from good union jobs produced by a thriving labor movement. Stuck in unskilled and manual labor jobs, housing for the Black population meant living in the city's worst conditions, renting from white landlords who lived outside the city. This discriminatory template was intensified after 1940, when the Black population increased 700 percent in 25 years to top 10 percent in 1965.²⁷ The increase occurred in a city, described by Patrick Jones as, "marked by ethnic pride, moral traditionalism and a tendency toward xenophobia."²⁸

In the post-war era, whites fled the city to wealthy suburbs as the Black inner core experienced high unemployment, poverty, and the accompanying social problems of crime and drug use. Continuing segregation was made possible by a familiar recipe of discriminatory mortgage lending, federal highway funding, urban redevelopment, restrictive zoning that limits development to upscale single family uses, and laws that made it easy to establish new suburban cities and restrict annexation by the metropolis.²⁹ The construction of Highway 43, linking the city's business center to outlying white communities, cut through the African American business district. The new freeway destroyed 14,219 housing units and counts as a major contribution to Black poverty and segregation.³⁰ By 2010 Milwaukee was roughly 40 percent Black with a similar percentage of Black unemployment thought to be the result of the country's highest rates of Black incarceration linked to the drug war and get-tough sentencing policies.³¹

Today, many white Wisconsin voters hold stereotypical and discriminatory ideas about African Americans and see them as the cause rather than the victims of economic and social changes.³² Accordingly, acrimonious discourse swirling around the topic of MPS characterized the Act 10 debate. Governor Walker supporters condemned MPS for an over-sized budget, and overpaid, ineffective teachers. In Wisconsin, employees in primary and secondary education constitute 42 percent of all public workers.³³ Teachers are not the only target of public union critics who point to the excessive benefits for city workers and police in various

²⁷ Patrick J. Jones, *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

²⁸ Jones, *Selma of the North*, p. 25.

²⁹ Greg J. Carman, *Wall of Exclusion: The Persistence of Residential Racial Segregation in Metropolitan Milwaukee* (Milwaukee, WI: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2010).

³⁰ Niles William Niemuth, *Urban Renewal and the Development of Milwaukee's African American Community: 1960–1980* (Milwaukee, WI: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2014).

³¹ John Pawasarat and Lois M. Quinn, *Wisconsin's Mass Incarceration of African American Males: Workforce Challenges for 2013* (Milwaukee, WI: Employment and Training Institute University of Milwaukee-Wisconsin, 2013).

³² Carman, *Wall of Exclusion*.

³³ DiSalvio, "The Trouble with Unions," pp. 1–19.

states around the country. Yet, teachers are the most visible public workers in the daily lives of many citizens, and given Milwaukee, Wisconsin's racial legacy, the most easily racialized. Unionized public workers in police and fire departments were exempted from Act 10, leaving public educators, and MPS in particular, in the spotlight.

The average Milwaukee teacher who allegedly costs the state of Wisconsin more than \$100,000 a year in total compensation became a central icon in the debate. In the mind of conservative partisans this teacher lives an indulgent life, belongs to a union that serves its members more than the students, and is responsible for the apparent failure of students of Milwaukee schools. By insinuation, the school district and the teachers' union share an indulgent, failed, social welfare mission to mitigate Black cultural failure. The political project of defeating public unions for economic reasons was thus also a project for white Wisconsin voters to defeat Black Milwaukee.

Our analysis centers on the political success of Governor Walker, whose political career embodies both Milwaukee's racial geography and the long arc of racial mobilization at the heart of party competition since the 1960s. Walker came of age in the 1980s with a veneration of President Ronald Reagan, who is well known for his electoral appeals to racial identity. As a career politician, Governor Walker first won elected office in 1993 at the age of 25 representing the state assembly district containing Wauwatosa, a privileged white community on the edge of Black Milwaukee. Then, as Milwaukee county executive beginning in 2002, Governor Walker fought the county's labor and African American constituency with a budget-reducing agenda until his campaign for governor in 2010. Milwaukee County's border encloses disparate municipalities, some white and wealthy, others black and impoverished. This core racial divide served as a microcosm of the coming state labor battle. Governor Walker's campaign for governor in 2010 benefitted from both the financial crisis and a major lawsuit regarding a controversial Milwaukee pension deal that lavishly rewarded a top layer of city managers and law enforcement officials but was widely perceived as a symptom of urban corruption in general.

Further, Governor Walker's gubernatorial opponent in 2010 and again in the recall election of 2013 was Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett. Thus, Governor Walker pursued, won, and defended Wisconsin's highest state office with a political narrative that articulated Milwaukee's historical fault lines of race, labor, and party. Moreover, due to the solidified political alliance of the Democratic Party, African Americans, and public sector unions, when Governor Walker campaigned against unions he simultaneously campaigned against Milwaukee and African Americans, even when posturing behind the familiar conservative language of austerity and flexibility. The history of race and labor means the exclusion of an alternative hypothesis that Governor Walker's appeals could contain a race-free message in a contest over economic policies. To alienate Milwaukee voters with a narrative about urban union failure is to marginalize the poor and people of color while prompting working class whites to forsake class for race and support the Republican Party. At the same time, the two-party system incentivizes the Democratic Party to protect its left-leaning moderate position from the defection of working class whites by remaining silent on matters of race.³⁴

³⁴ Frymer, *Uneasy Alliances*.

The Court of Public Opinion: Walker's White Audience

We argue that attacks on the public sector in Wisconsin are racialized. The counterargument is simply that such attacks are *not* racialized, and instead reflect a genuine concern for public austerity and lower taxes. We set the stage for a discourse analysis of Governor Walker's attacks on the public sector by establishing that his audience is white. We do this through a two-pronged approach. First, we draw on CPS data from 2010 to show that cuts to the public sector disproportionately affect non-whites.³⁵ Second, we draw on relevant public opinion data that suggests whites are much more receptive to attacks on public sector spending and public unions than are non-whites.

We argue that one way to discern whether the idea that Governor Walker's messaging solely regards public austerity, and alternatively the idea that it is racialized, is to determine if non-whites are just as likely as whites to be receptive to his appeals. If non-whites and whites were equally likely to support public sector cuts, this would undermine our claim that such appeals are racialized. Instead, a review of CPS data suggests whites have less to lose from public sector cuts, and public opinion data suggests that whites are more receptive to Governor Walker's appeals than are non-whites. Governor Walker's campaign messaging is most likely to reach economically anxious whites, and thus likely to also target that same group.

Empirically, the public sector is racially contested terrain. Given more than 40 years of affirmative action policies in government employment, the public sector is the location of more opportunity for minorities than the private sector. Employment in the public sector does much for the non-white population to improve socio-economic position. The limit to such employment inclusion is in managerial positions with more authority and pay that are dominated by whites.³⁶ Income disparities between women, people of color and whites exist in public employment, but differences are smaller than in the private sector and have improved over time.³⁷ Thus, we can understand Wisconsin's Act 10, in so far as it cuts public spending, reduces compensation, and reduces job security, as a particular decline in economic progress for non-whites and women.

Currently in Wisconsin, in keeping with previous research, the public sector serves as an equalizing force in terms of socio-economic status as well as race. Data displayed in [Figure 1](#) illustrates income distribution by sector. Public sector workers make up the bulk of Wisconsin's middle class. Working outside the public sector increases income inequality significantly, where most workers make above \$100,000 annually, or below \$20,000 annually.³⁸

At first glance, it appears that whites are slightly overrepresented in the public sector ([Figure 2](#)). Yet, among both public and private sector workers, non-whites are more likely to live below the poverty line than are whites ([Figure 3](#)). Moreover,

³⁵ Steven J. Ruggles, Trend Alexander, Katie Genadek, Ronald Goeken, Matthew B. Schroeder, and Matthew Sobek, *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 5.0, Machine-Readable Database* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2010).

³⁶ Norma M. Riccucci, *Managing Diversity in Public Sector Workforces* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2002).

³⁷ M.V. Badgett, "The Impact of Affirmative Action on Public-Sector Employment in California, 1970–1990," in Paul M. Ong (ed.), *Impacts of Affirmative Action: Policies and Consequences in California* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 1999), pp. 83–102.

³⁸ Ruggles et al., *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series*.

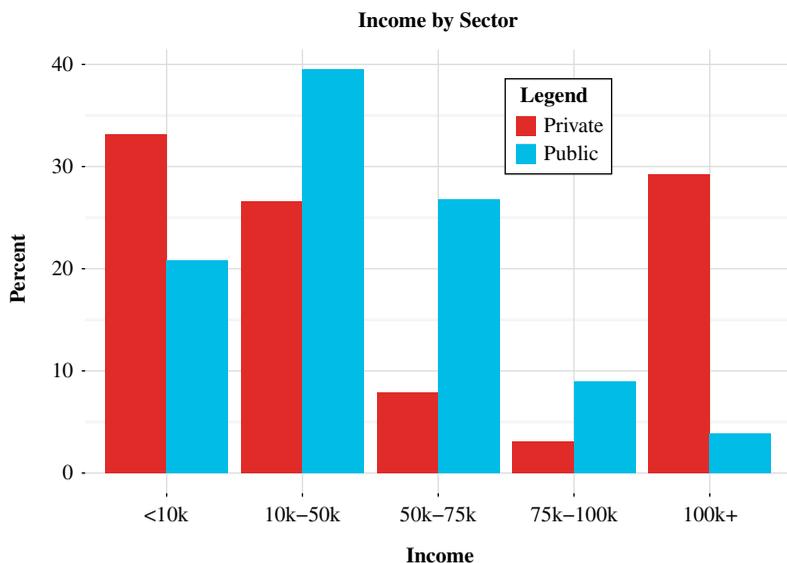


Figure 1. In Wisconsin, middle class workers are located in the public sector, where the very wealthy and the very poor are more likely to be located in the private sector.

a higher percentage of non-whites in the general population live below the poverty line compared with those who work in the public sector. That is, though not eliminating inequality, the public sector does more to lift non-whites out of poverty than it does for whites (Figure 4). Thus, non-whites are more sensitive to

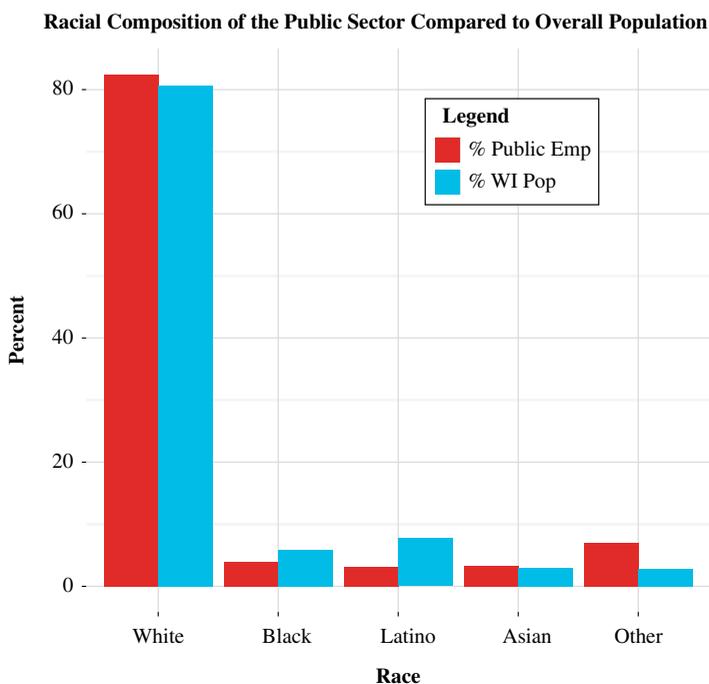


Figure 2. Whites are slightly overrepresented in the public sector.

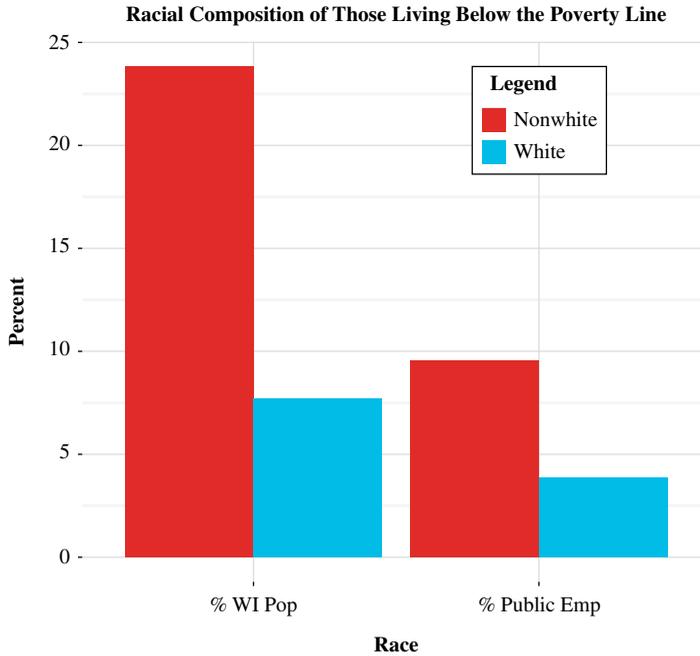


Figure 3. Among the total population in Wisconsin, non-whites are more likely than their white counterparts. However, among those working in public sector, the gap between whites and nonwhites living below the poverty line is reduced. This supports the idea that the public sector is an equalizing force in Wisconsin.

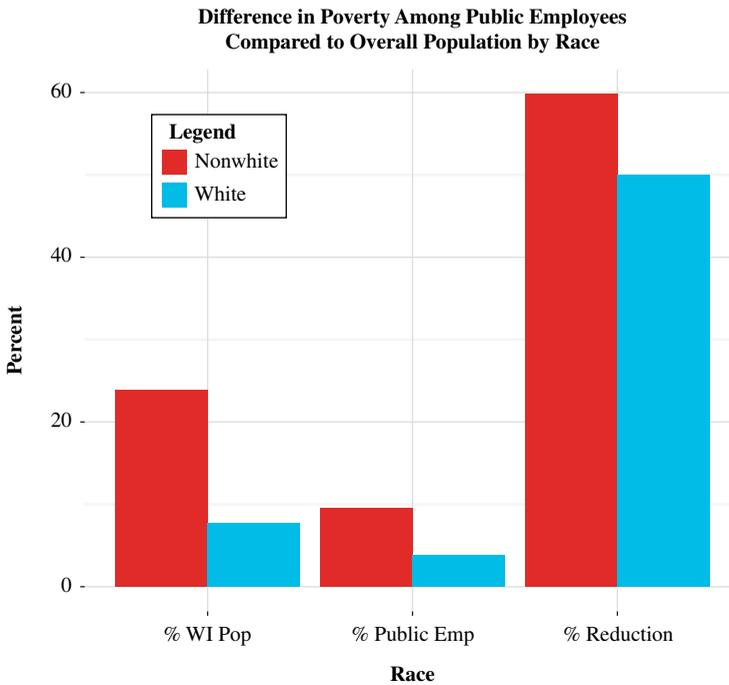


Figure 4. Public sector employment reduces poverty among nonwhites by about 60 percent, compared to a 50 percent reduction among whites.

Downloaded by [Hannah Walker] at 06:11 21 April 2015

the poverty reducing benefits of the public sector. When public sector workers are framed as receiving undeserved benefits, non-white public sector workers are implicated in that frame. This suggests that non-white workers have more to lose in the battle over cuts to the public sector than do their white counterparts.

Public opinion data reflect the empirical reality that whites have less to lose by cuts to the public sector. A Marquette Law School poll conducted in April (just two months before the election) demonstrated that support for public and private employee unions diverges along lines of race, and more interestingly, diverges between the private and the public.³⁹ That is, non-whites are much more likely to support public unions than are whites, but whites are much more likely to support private unions than public unions. About 42 percent of whites hold unfavorable feelings towards public employee unions, compared to only six percent and 23.9 percent of Blacks and Hispanics, respectively.⁴⁰ Moreover, white workers are more likely to feel anxious about the economy than their non-white counterparts. When asked whether they thought the economy would get worse, better or stay the same over the next year, white respondents were much more likely to say they thought it would get worse than their non-white counterparts (15.4% of whites said so, compared to only 6.3% of Blacks and 12.8% of Hispanics).⁴¹ Again, this suggests that if political rhetoric is designed to play off the fears of anxious workers, whites are more likely to be the appropriate audience than non-whites.

Further, when respondents were given a choice between higher taxes and more services, or lower taxes and fewer services, racial divisions again emerge. Over 68 percent of Blacks and 53 percent of Hispanics responded that they preferred higher taxes and more services, compared to only 43 percent of whites.⁴² When asked about requiring public workers to contribute more to their own pensions and healthcare (policy changes made by Wisconsin Act 10), a full 76.8 percent of whites were in favor, compared to only 43.2 percent and 66.8 percent of Blacks and Hispanics, respectively.⁴³ This supports the idea that for whites, funding for public pensions and welfare services holds similar meaning, a key theoretical point made in the above paragraphs.

A review of relevant public opinion data approaching the time of the election builds on a descriptive analysis of the socio-economic divergence of non-whites and whites in Wisconsin. Using the recent CPS data we showed through descriptive statistics that non-whites are more sensitive to losses to the public sector, where the public sector has an equalizing influence on racialized class inequality. Public opinion data further suggests that whites are more likely to be both economically anxious and more receptive to attacks on public sector spending than their non-white counterparts. This analysis sets the stage for a content analysis of rhetoric surrounding the re-election campaign of Governor Walker. It does this by identifying a clear audience for elite messaging that attacks public sector unions and other benefits for public workers. White voters comprise that audience. We theorize that politicians play on covert white racism through the use of racially coded language in order to bolster their campaigns, and that the most recent rash of successful attacks on

³⁹ Marquette University Law School, "Marquette Law School Poll," *Milwaukee*, April 26–29, 2012.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

public sector goods represents a continuation of economic anxiety expressing itself as racial animus. The following section examines this rhetoric, identifying a two-layer discourse: one that focuses cleanly on economic responsibility and austerity, and a second that campaigns against the moral failings of the city of Milwaukee.

Racial Discourse in Wisconsin

To build an understanding of how racial identity and animosity affect Wisconsin's debate over public sector labor unions, we conduct a qualitative critical discourse analysis to observe how political narratives practiced by political elites and common voters express and contribute to racialized political identities and, ultimately, racialized ideologies that draw "political frontiers between 'insiders' and outsiders'."⁴⁴ Discourse has been recognized as not only talk and speech, but speech that matters as a social practice that both reflects and contributes to, constitutes, or builds, the political identity and the objective interests of political actors, like voters.⁴⁵ Discourses contain codes that carry implicit rather than explicit meanings.⁴⁶ "There is no intelligible discourse without the operation of a code," writes Stuart Hall.⁴⁷ Language terms do not simply denote plain reality, but rather also connote varied associated meanings. Human utterances, Hall writes, thus can "have the whole range of social meanings, practices and usages, power and interest, 'written' in them and become fragments of ideology."⁴⁸ Specifically, "Language," writes Ange-Marie Hancock, "plays an essential part in constructing inequality in American political culture."⁴⁹ Here we consider discourse in three locations intentionally selected to explore the rhetorical use of racial symbolism and the reproduction of racial identities among both elites and the general public. First, we consider the elite, top-down narrative of Governor Walker's public editorials. Second, we explore the bottom-up public sentiments of citizens willing to write open letters to the editor of major newspapers. Third, we dig deeper to behold the anonymous, horizontal talk of online public comments in the discussion forum of a news story about labor unions representing school teachers.

We employ a purposive heterogeneity sampling strategy to capture a range of discourses that address and link themes of public sector unions, public assistance, and racial identity, rather than counting how many people hold a particular opinion. We examine 13 major newspaper opinion articles by Governor Walker to reflect elite messaging, and 357 letters to the editor as popular, formal discourse. Both the opinion articles and the letters to the editor come from the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* published in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and the *Wisconsin State Journal*

⁴⁴ David Howarth and Yannis Stavrakakis, "Introducing Discourse Theory and Political Analysis" in David Howarth, A. J. Norval, and Yannis Stavrakakis (eds), *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis: Identities, Hegemonies and Social Change* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 3.

⁴⁵ Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (London: Longman Group Limited, 1995).

⁴⁶ Tali Mendelberg, *The Race Card: Campaign Strategy, Implicit Messages, and the Norm of Equality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁴⁷ Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in Stuart Hall (ed.), *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-1979* (London: Hutchinson, 1980), p. 131.

⁴⁸ Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," p. 134.

⁴⁹ Ange-Marie Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), p. 19.

published in Madison, Wisconsin. The time period is the spring of 2011 when the state responded to the Act 10 proposal that would eliminate public sector collective bargaining rights, and in the two months leading up to the recall election in 2012. We then examine 648 comments in the discussion forum of a newspaper article in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* on the topic of Milwaukee Public School District layoffs due to impending budget cuts, published in the spring of 2012. This forum was selected for its topical intersection of race, education, and public sector labor unionism. In each location, we identify major themes and select particular examples as qualitatively representative or, as in some cases, telling exceptions to the rule. The strength of this approach is that we go to where meaningful civic talk is located and rely on theoretically informed interpretation. The weakness is that the speakers are self-selected activists lacking further demographic data and by no means can be portrayed as a scientific random sample of public opinion.

Overall, we see how Governor Walker's public editorials maintain a cheerful, populist appeal for a state united by common sense and good values that ignore fundamental ideological divisions while his campaign narrative takes direct aim at the city of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. We also see hundreds of superficially race-free letters to the editor reflect mainstream liberal and conservative positions on economic issues. Only a handful of hundreds of letters touch upon the role of race directly, but it is the naturalized, middle-class values of work ethic and accountability that merit interpretation of whiteness reinforcing itself. Then, hundreds of anonymous online comments responding to a news article in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* about public schools reveal a tense intersection of urban race relations, poverty, "failed" schools, rotten kids, and failed parents where the codes of racial identity veritably howl.

Governor Walker's Coded Populism. In more than a dozen newspaper editorials over a period of two years, Governor Walker, as the standard bearer for Wisconsin's reforms, adopts the tone of a confident county official, solicitous candidate, and self-assured governor. The texts are polished, controlled messages about what must be done to create a better future that matches an idealized lost past. The messages attempt to unify the populace in name of common sense and shared goals. Not once during the recall election campaign does Governor Walker plainly describe how his administration eliminated collective bargaining rights for state employees. Instead he euphemistically described how his administration supplied the "tools" and "flexibility" for school districts to do more with less. A year before becoming Governor, Walker's editorials in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* address economic policy with a standard economic conservative agenda in which he criticizes state budget deficits and promotes tax cuts, while invoking President John F. Kennedy, President Ronald Reagan, and President Barack Obama to substantiate his position.⁵⁰ Governor Walker says the state must "streamline" government and make it more "cost effective." Governor Walker describes "job-killing taxes" and positions himself as the defender of major

⁵⁰Scott Walker, "Don't Use Stimulus to Build in Swell Budgets," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, January 10, 2009; Scott Walker, "Doyle's Budget Shows Impact of One-Party Rule in our State," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, February 21, 2009.

employers, workers, crime victims, and consumers.⁵¹ Governor Walker continues his conservative economic message in a campaign season editorial in which he described the “ingenuity and hard work” of Wisconsin people and the “Midwestern work ethic.” It is this editorial where he describes public employees as the “haves” and private sector employees as the “have-nots” in a dramatic inversion of the class perspective of that idiom.⁵² Governor Walker promises to “put the government back on the side of the people again” and claimed his agenda reflected not a party affiliation, but instead those “who among us know the difference between what is right and what is wrong.” On education, Governor Walker argues his policies are working and referred to the anecdotal testimony of district administrators to support his point. In one editorial he wrote: “Another school district is making changes so its teachers work eight hours a day instead of seven.”⁵³ Governor Walker engages a strong, populist message directed at a vague popular majority with an exclusive claim to common sense, morality, and hard work.

Governor Walker’s discourse simultaneously seeks to downplay stark partisan divisions in an appeal to majority unity, while connoting a clear antagonism between hard working voters and not-very-hard-working public school teachers. In the tradition of covert racism such appeals to common sense, morality, and hard work are references to whiteness. People who work only seven hours a day and have more than others while not knowing the difference between right and wrong constitute a strong code for blackness. Governor Walker’s inversion of the haves versus the have-not idiom is something more than the clever politics of inserting envy between groups of workers, given that the “haves” carry a hint of blackness, the “have-nots” are white workers whose interests are discursively organized to resent organized labor interests.

More blatant codes thrived in Governor Walker’s advertising campaigns, which the authors did not witness. Here we rely on two letters, one in the Madison newspaper, the *Wisconsin State Journal*, and one in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*. Both identify Governor Walker’s campaign focus on Milwaukee. In one letter, George Krall, an apparent retiree in northern Wisconsin, states the author lived in the city of Milwaukee for 35 years and takes issue with Governor Walker running advertisements:

... depicting Barrett [Milwaukee mayor and two-time electoral opponent of Walker] as a failed mayor of a typical American city ... I have witnessed firsthand the discrimination that kept black men in that city from being employed in industrial or skilled trade jobs. The population in Milwaukee is over a third black, with nearly half of the black men currently unemployed. Much of the population lives below the poverty line, and the University of Michigan in 2011 did a study showing the Milwaukee metropolitan area is the most segregated in America. When you see ads faulting Barrett with Milwaukee’s problems, such as high taxes (an eroded tax base requires that those with jobs pay more), school dropout rates and high unemployment, consider the circumstances. For eight years Barrett has dealt

⁵¹ Walker, “Don’t Use Stimulus to Build”; Walker, “Doyle’s Budget Shows Impact.”

⁵² Scott Walker, “Time to Take the State in a New Direction,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, October 30, 2010.

⁵³ Scott Walker, “Policies Working, State is on Track,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, August 6, 2011.

with problems not of his own making. Perhaps he should be commended for keeping the city from economic collapse.⁵⁴

Krall's letter is valuable for the legitimacy he establishes as an observer of the three bundled campaign issues of high taxes, dropout rates, and high unemployment. These campaign issues qualify as a rich code of racial meaning. White people pay the high taxes. Black people drop out of school and do not work.

Another letter writer, Willie Hines, president of Milwaukee's Common Council,⁵⁵ faults Governor Walker for crisscrossing the state with an anti-Milwaukee campaign. Hines takes the high road and argues that the city of Milwaukee and Wisconsin "deserve better," and describes the city's many conventional virtues rather than describe conflict in direct racial terms. However, Hines' meaning is clear:

His divisive rhetoric has alienated the majority of every minority group that calls Milwaukee home: African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, Asians, the LGBT community and others One can conclude that Walker's real agenda is to 'divide and conquer' our state by giving those outside of Milwaukee the impression that we are different from them.⁵⁶

Hines' public position and restrained criticism also establish his legitimacy as he makes a core argument: Governor Walker's political strategy was focused on urban-rural, black-white divides in the Wisconsin electorate.

The letters by Krall and Hines provide valuable insight because they capture the important difference between the responsible, euphemistic language of major editorials and Wisconsin's latent racial politics. The historical nature of the city of Milwaukee's role in Wisconsin's identity makes the difference compelling. A similar two-level discourse is apparent in the comparison of letters to the editor and online discussion comments regarding public employee unions.

Racial Identity and Letters to the Editors. The second part of our discourse analysis explores letters to the editor as texts reflecting the racial identity of concerned and anxious citizens. We scrutinize 357 letters in two different cities, in two crucial periods, the early spring of 2011 when state Republicans proposed to emasculate public sector unions, and the late spring of 2012 when Governor Walker faced a rare recall election. The cities are Milwaukee, known for its racial segregation and surrounding ring of white suburbs, and Madison, the state capital, home to University of Wisconsin's flagship campus, and known for progressive politics and culture. These letters are useful for what they mostly do not say. The letters conform to the expectation that public statements with the required self-identification of the authors do not openly register racial animus because of strong social norms against such prejudice and the self-perception of many citizens as non-racist even as they are susceptible to racial appeals from

⁵⁴George Krall, "Barrett Blamed for Problems He Inherited," *Wisconsin State Journal*, May 6, 2012.

⁵⁵The Milwaukee Common Council is a city council comprised of 15 elected members, and constitute the municipal legislative body presiding over the city of Milwaukee.

⁵⁶Willie L. Hines, Jr. "Walker's Attack on Milwaukee Hurts the Entire State," *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*, May 26, 2012.

political elites.⁵⁷ Without a theory of covert racism these letters are overwhelming evidence of the absence of race in the fight over public sector unions. Letters to the editor are thought to represent ideological parity between liberals and conservatives and under-represent the views of women, the young, and African Americans.⁵⁸ The letters thus provide an informative approximation of white, male, middle-aged identity.

The debate here hews tightly to the standard back-and-forth on the political-economic spectrum regarding the legitimacy of unions. Letters in support of Act 10 generally fit into several major themes. First, public sector unions have an illegitimate role in politics because they negotiate with officials they help get elected, with no market controls to regulate cost. Second, such highly paid public workers are not affordable and “stealing more from wealth creators” to pay them is part of the state’s problem.⁵⁹ Third, well-paid public workers should sacrifice their fair share to help balance the state budget during hard economic times. Fourth, various letters condemn protestors in Madison, Wisconsin’s Democratic legislators who fled to Illinois to delay a quorum, and Madison teachers taking sick days en masse, as irresponsible and abhorrent. A vivid subset of letters assails the value and integrity of teachers. One letter in particular encapsulates the urban-rural, black-white divide lurking beneath the plethora of letters dueling over economic fairness and eloquently captures a taste of what is in online discussion forums: “[Governor] Walker is a straight arrow, a small town, family focused man with American foundational values rooted in God and country. His opponent leads a city whose notoriety comes from crime, welfare, a failed school system and increasing taxes.”⁶⁰

Letters in opposition to Governor Walker and Wisconsin Act 10 also fit into several primary themes. The main argument unsurprisingly is the legitimacy and benefit of unions for union members, the wage levels of private sector workers, and the positive workplace performance of organized employees. Second, letter writers lament the harm to education. Third, letter writers testify to the financial suffering of public sector households. Fourth, many complain of the lack of a legitimate, deliberative, compromising democratic process by the Republican majority.

The dominant overall theme of the discourse in these letters, both for and against, is the simplistic race-free dualism of private versus public sector fairness. This debate perpetuates a historical structure of unmentioned white privilege. Even pro-union liberals, with the rare exception of George Krall, enjoy a race-free defense of their worthiness as workers, thus reinforcing the theme of labor worthiness that triggers the latent whiteness of the anti-union voter. There is no explicit agenda for civil rights or racial justice in the letters to the editor. In a state where public radio and public research would soon after focus with great

⁵⁷ Ian Haney-Lopez, *Dog Whistle Politics How Coded Racial Appeals have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁵⁸ Christopher Cooper, H. Gibbs Knotts and Moshe Haspel, “The Content of Political Participation: Letters to the Editor and the People Who Write Them,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 42 (January 2009), pp. 131–137.

⁵⁹ Matt Bittrick, “Walker Knows How Market Forces Work,” *Wisconsin State Journal*, June 1, 2012.

⁶⁰ Don Hilbig, “Business Climate has Improved with Walker,” *Wisconsin State Journal*, June 2, 2012.

intensity on an astounding crisis of unemployment in Milwaukee's Black ghetto, liberal letter writers express generic concern for education, principled support of union representation, and advocacy for economic fairness, but no outrage over Black poverty and lack of opportunity. Thus, the absence of active coalition between the privileged white liberals of Madison and the destitute Blacks of Milwaukee abandons the political field to effective racial framing from the right.

Online Discussion. A level of discourse below the respectful forum of letters to the editor, constrained as it is by norms of civility, is the discussion forum found at the end of online news articles. A purposive sample of this discourse counts as evidence that nearly race-free content of letters to the editor masks much more vociferous and visceral perceptions among the electorate. The discussion forum for a news article in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* announcing major budget cuts to MPS provides an environment to observe public sentiments unfiltered by opinion page editors or the self-selection of letter writers who submit their sentiments as public comment constrained by propriety.⁶¹ The news article in question generates 648 comments, many of which range widely into the politics of Act 10 with comments addressing MPS, unions, the work ethic of teachers, benefits for public workers and notably the character of Milwaukee's Black underclass.⁶² Many discussion entries see MPS as an indisputably failed institution over a long period of time. Money spent has thus been money wasted. Students belonging to bad parents in a culturally broken social milieu simply cannot be educated. Therefore teachers are not really teachers at all, but rather day care providers. As babysitters teachers are grossly overpaid. More pointedly, the population cannot be improved and thus the entire budget is wasted:

This is a failing school system because of the upbringing 90% of these kids have. You could give all the money to MPS, and short of making it a military academy it would still fail. It has nothing to do with the teachers, politicians, facilities, books, technology, or budget. I have an idea to get out of this budget crisis statewide, two words: REGULATE WELFARE. The elephant in the room here is a complete lack of family structure and parenting not a lack of teaching skills, schools and budgets. He can cut as many dollars out of the budget as he thinks will help, but until the society changes and gets back to civic values, responsibility and self-reliance, the ROI [return on investment] is always going to be in the red.⁶³

At this point the conventional argument that welfare liberalism has created a dependent, immoral Black community is in full force. Thus a news article about budget cuts to schools moves directly to a discussion of public assistance. Some of the sentiments here are startling in their authoritarian quality, notably requiring conformity to strict behavioral standards for both children and parents as a requirement for receiving public assistance. In such a context of racial perceptions it follows that the education budget is "bloated" by administrators and the "lavish" retirement and health insurance benefits of employees.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Erin Richards, "Proposed MPS Budget Cuts Almost 1,000 Full-Time Positions," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, May 3, 2011.

⁶² Richards, "Proposed MPS Budget Cuts".

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

The budget debate contains character-driven comments around the merits of teachers. Advocates describe teachers as dedicated, hardworking, and worthy of their pay. Detractors, while sometimes acknowledging that teachers are generally good, focus on teachers as low-value underachievers with weak credentials, who do not work full days, or full years, and are illegitimately protected from competition by their union. Texts contain hints of ageism and sexism in depicting old, ineffective teachers: sloth, lazy, and hag.

The description of teachers as hothouse flowers sheltered from capitalism and of Black families as immoral is paired with a recurring lament of a hard-working working class losing ground economically and offended by perceptions of security and comfort. This lament is fantastic in its “leveling” insistence that other workers should not fare better than, suffering blue-collar, low-wage workers.⁶⁵ The lament is supported by the elevation of public funds to an illegitimate status, rejection of state-regulated work qualifications, and a persistent superiority complex built on a heroic narrative of self-reliance. The following quotation is representative of an anti-union sentiment denying labor solidarity from the perspective of declining private sector fortunes:

I am sick and tired of hearing how hard teachers work. Everybody I know works hard and they do it 12 months a year, have less benefits, pay for their benefits, do work for their job at home, work second jobs to make ends meet, have experienced pay cuts, layoffs at their companies and earn the same or less than a teacher when you figure the 12 month work schedule versus a teacher’s nine.⁶⁶

The next quotation bridges between the self-reliance narrative and a traditional racialized *welfare queen*⁶⁷ narrative:

Just wondering how all of the elders and baby boomers got an education. Maybe it was because we didn’t get all of these freebies for having children, food stamps (then the kids get free meals) not denying those that need them, but maybe we had parents or are parents who gave up all the goodies to make sure our kids had food and some guidance. Seems like all want freebies. We lived through three strikes (unions) which did nothing but deprive us from working. My husband collected garbage to make some money, I went to work third shift so I did not need babysitters. People just don’t want to do for themselves. We raised three kids who did well because we made sure they did their homework and appreciated money. Get nothing for nothing.⁶⁸

Race emerges occasionally on the issue of immigration. “Reduce the number of students attending classes by requiring that they show proof of citizenship at registration,” suggests one letter writer. “This will allow students who belong here to get a better education and not be limited by the thousands of students who are in the class taking resources from the schools.”⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ The image of the welfare queen emerged from anti-social spending rhetoric employed by then presidential candidate Ronald Reagan in 1976. It connotes Black, single mothers collecting excessive welfare payments in lieu of working, is pejorative, raced, and is shorthand for referencing someone undeserving of government assistance; Benson-Smith, “Jezebels, Matriarchs, and Welfare Queens.”

⁶⁸ Richard, “Proposed MPS Budget Cuts.”

⁶⁹ Ibid.

The discussion about a news article about the school budget includes a scolding rejection of cultural equality:

The schools have been run by liberals, lefties and do-gooders for years and look where it has gotten us. Kids can't read, write or do math but they know how and what to recycle, sing songs to solar panels, and hug trees and bunnies. They also can't find Wisconsin on a map or know US history, but they have extensive knowledge of Africa. They don't celebrate Christmas but they celebrate Kwanza and Ramadan. So I hope the liberals are happy.⁷⁰

Here we find racialized logic that fuses the public worker to the urban teacher and thus the urban problem—Moynihan's enduring "Negro problem" immortalized in the Moynihan Report. The fusion implicates a female, Black teacher, overpaid, ineffective, a perpetrator against white values. This is the emotional racial calculus harkened by the buoyant Governor Walker, but avoided by the good company of the editorial page.

Conclusion

Building on previous research that links contemporary expressions of racial animus to lack of support for race targeted and racialized policies, we theorize that such racial animus is currently embodied in anti-state expressions more broadly. We use this theory to interpret appeals to cut public sector spending and bargaining rights made during Wisconsin's defeat of public sector labor unions. We see such appeals as inherently racialized, where messages that attack public employees as lazy and see private sector workers as morally superior, echo rhetoric around social welfare spending. That is, we see the elite narratives that construct private workers as deserving and public workers as undeserving as a new expression of an entrenched thread in American political history, situating the white worker in opposition to the non-white worker.

We argue that Governor Walker and his allies activated the racial animus of white workers. We cannot directly test the presence of racial animus held by individual voters, and its relationship to support for cuts to public sector spending. Instead, we gather as much proxy evidence as possible to support our proposition. To begin, we review the long history of racial division in Wisconsin. We then leverage the real impacts of the public sector on racialized economic inequality, alongside public opinion data to develop the claim that elite messaging attacking the public sector has a primarily white audience. This sets up a content analysis of rhetoric employed by the Governor Walker campaign, and the reactions to such rhetoric by voters. An analysis of elite messaging focuses on letters to the editor. Here we find, as we would expect, antiseptic language around public sector cuts, free of explicitly raced language. We then turn to online comments responding to newspaper articles covering budget cuts to draw out the idea that voters receive such messaging in highly racialized ways. Thus, we find support for our theory that attacks on public sector spending in the contemporary environment of economic anxiety carries with it undercurrents of racism.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Our inability to test the presence of anti-Black affect among the white working class in Wisconsin is the key limitation of our analysis. However, taken together the evidence we assemble supports the idea that an undercurrent of race is present in public discourses around cuts to public sector spending. Our inquiry has a second limitation: we look at two elections in one state during a short period of time. Inquiry into multiple elections in Wisconsin, where several state senate seats were also contested during the same time period, could improve the analysis.

Yet, with this research, we provide compelling impetus for just such future scholarship. Although seldom acknowledged in public debate about the public sector, the public sector is a location for fairer treatment for non-white workers. When conservative public policy acts to eliminate collective bargaining from the public sector and reduces the pay of workers through legislatively mandated increases in employee contributions to health insurance and retirement funds, that policy disproportionately affects non-whites. The role race plays in motivating support for those reforms is difficult to estimate. Few voters will openly express their racial antipathy, and many who respond to racialized appeals neither consider themselves racially biased nor realize they are receiving affective, coded messaging.

To understand the role of race it is necessary to historicize the identity of American labor. Moreover, in the current era of partisan polarization in which elites outpace their constituents in staking nearly irreconcilable positions, the Wisconsin case of racial mobilization over material conflicts may hold some larger lessons for race and elections.⁷¹ Race scholars have suggested that whereas whites once mobilized against images of Black welfare recipients and criminals, whiteness is now mobilized directly against the state.⁷² On one pole there is a weakly veiled, hard-right racial animus. On the other a center-left racial silence has dropped racial justice from the institutional agenda since at least 1984.⁷³ The American left wing has thus abandoned the cultural field to a mobilized American right that leverages a highly symbolic racial geography of urban segregation to gain the political advantage.⁷⁴ The fusion of racial geography and party makes a particularly potent recipe for gaining leverage over white median voters. Thus, we understand elite appeals to the “people” to connote the unity of whiteness. We have seen that the welfare state has been painted Black and accompanying racial anger has been reassigned to the state in general. We have studied racial discourse using interpretive methods to overcome the idea that people do not talk openly about race. We witness those codes in operation from the strategic public scripts of Governor Walker to the race-free comparisons of the worthy and the undeserving in public letters, to the unrestrained fury and loathing of public comments in online discussion forums.

⁷¹ Kathleen Bawn, Martin Cohen, David Carol, Seth Masket, Hans Noel and John Zaller, “A Theory of Political Parties: Groups, Policy Demands, and Nominations in American Politics,” *Perspectives on Politics* 10:3 (2012), pp. 571–597; Morris Fiorina, “Parties, Participation and Representation in America: Old Theories Face New Realities,” Presentation, *Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association* (Washington, DC, 2000).

⁷² Lowndes, “The Past and Future of Race,” pp. 152–170.

⁷³ Frymer, *Uneasy Alliances*.

⁷⁴ Pierre Bourdieu and Loic J.D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1992).

Notes on contributors

Dylan Bennett is an Associate Professor of Political Science at University of Wisconsin-Waukesha. He thanks Peter Dreier of Occidental College for introducing him to the topic of urban racial segregation. Bennett lives in Kewaskum, Wisconsin, with his wife Laura and daughter Eleanor.

Hannah Walker is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Political Science at the University of Washington. Her research examines the impact of the criminal justice system on the political incorporation of highly policed communities, with special attention to immigrants and people of color.