



THE FELDMAN GROUP, INC.

MEMBERS' MOOD

NEA's Education Support Professional (ESP) members are anxious about their economic security and concerned about where their state, and the nation, is headed. Asked to describe their mood, most members (with the exception of those in Pennsylvania) respond in a chorus of unease: "nervous," "sad," "confused," "angry," "overwhelmed," "worried," and "frustrated," among similar sentiments.

For many, and especially those in the service trades, their pessimism is rooted in a profound sense of disempowerment. Members suggest that a tier of powerful people and institutions, connected to each other but completely disconnected from the working and middle class, control major decisions in their community and, on the broader scale, in their state. In Florida, they call this the "good ole boy" network, and members are as sure of its influence as they are that they are not part of it.

Okay, being a Southerner, one thing you have to learn is who's on top and who's on the bottom. And mess around with the person that's left there, you're gonna go down there. And that's the Good Ole Boy network. It's not what you know; it's who you know [Florida, Service trades].

These Florida members also worry about threats to the community they have come to know. They discuss an array of "outsiders" who are moving there, driving up housing costs, creating more traffic congestion, and hurting community cohesiveness.

Everything changes, but you get more northerners here in Florida now. I think their ways, they've brought their attitudes and their ways and all this here in Florida. Florida used to be more of a southern laid back atmosphere. And now it's gotten to be out of control [Florida, Paraprofessionals and office staff].

Members say the "good ole boy" network is only exacerbating many of these problems. There is no consistent, statewide (or even citywide) plan to accommodate growth because the big developers have the money and power to get their way, no matter the consequences.

I think it's, we can have growth, but there's no plan, there's not rhyme or reason what Orange County's doing, Seminole's doing, Volusia's doing. They're all doing their own thing. [Florida, Service trades].

In Ohio, scene of numerous recent political scandals, members have witnessed first hand how their elected leaders have lost their way. Their frustration has now almost metastasized into resigned defeat; rousing these members to discuss the scandals with any emotion whatsoever takes significant prompting. They say there is no accountability in government and that the politicians they elected to lead them behave like children, avoiding responsibility and pointing fingers. Politicians dither while real problems – insufficient school funding, a struggling economy – demand attention. To call members' mood “exasperated” is a severe understatement.

I think I would like them to be more accountable for what happens to the money that is in the State of Ohio. You know, now everybody is pointing fingers at everybody else and Taft with his golf things and I mean just things like that that shouldn't be there, that they should be responsible adults. I mean they are high in political power and you are supposed to be looking up to them and they are just worse than the average crook that is up there. [Ohio, Service trades]

In Michigan, ESPs perceive their world through the prism of an absolutely anemic economy. Their anxiety about jobs colors everything. “And you know somebody. Somebody somewhere is always losing their job,” as one Michigan ESP sums it up, calling it the “bad news state.” Layoffs in the automotive industry impact entire communities in a vicious cycle as businesses that depend on that industry close, families move away, the tax base shrinks, and social services decline.

Privatizing, layoffs, cutting hours, losing jobs. I mean schools and everywhere. It is a trickle down affect. My husband is affected too and he is in janitorial supplies [Michigan, Service trades].

Economic despair extends in many directions. Seeing neighbors who have lost jobs, ESPs fear for their own. In no other state is the sense of economy insecurity quite so acute as in Michigan.

It's depressing. And it's a general pall over the whole area, I think. So you've either lost your job, you might lose your job, or people you know are losing their jobs. [Michigan, Paraprofessionals and office staff].

Members in Pennsylvania stand in sharp contrast to their peers elsewhere. They

do not think everything is perfect – road conditions were a near-universal lament – but they are much more content with how things are going. They enjoy the weather and feel connected to their community. They are happy to raise their kids here.

I think it's a great area. I've lived here about 25 years. I moved here from western Pennsylvania when this was farm country. Now it is overly populated, but I think it's a great area to live in. Great education for the children [Pennsylvania, Service trades].

Even amid the anxiety in Florida, Ohio, and Michigan, however, most members remain consistent about one thing: they enjoy their job, and they enjoy working with children.

CONDITIONS ON THE JOB

Most ESPs find their interactions with kids to be their major source of job satisfaction. They could be paid more for similar work in a parallel profession – driving other buses, cleaning other buildings, or working in a private school – but these members believe in public education and find working with kids to be a tangible reward. It is “fulfilling” in a manner that goes a long way towards compensating for inadequate pay. In this regard, ESPs and the teachers we have talked with before speak with one voice.

I went to work for the schools because it is something I always wanted to do. I love being around the children. I am making less money. My benefits aren't as good as when I worked at the telephone company but I work right around the corner from my house. I enjoy the environment of the children, of interacting with the student, so much more than sitting at a desk, paperwork or sitting in front of a computer. I like the environment of working with the schools so I chose at this stage of my life, I want to do something that is fulfilling for a job rather than something that maybe pays better [Ohio, Service Trades].

The fulfillment of working with kids, however, has for some members begun to wane in the face of mounting frustrations: disciplinary issues, a lack of respect from administrators and from parents, and the looming threat of privatization among others. Most still love their job, but it is increasingly a tiring, demanding, and underappreciated one.

Cutbacks

Many members say that in their school district, there are not enough teachers and support personnel to provide for a growing student population. This is a particularly acute problem in Florida, where growth and overdevelopment is top of mind for members. ESPs are finding more demanded of them: bus drivers point to longer routes and more crowded buses; cafeteria workers say there are ever more meals to prepare and serve but not enough time to do it. School funding has not kept pace with the changes in their areas. Members are concerned that administrators and politicians will turn to privatization as a misguided answer.

It is not good. It is not good. But not only privatization as far as what you say. There is a little bit more to it too. You take a high school or middle school who have many cooks in cooking and instead of paying everybody's salary and

everybody's health insurance and everybody's benefits, they can call a company and they don't have to pay anybody. [Michigan, Service trades].

ESPs, particularly those in the service trades, suggest they are more vulnerable than teachers to outsourcing. In Michigan a shrinking population and struggling economy leaves open the possibility of school realignments. Members have seen their friends and neighbors laid off in other fields, and wonder about their own job security. Rumors are rampant and morale inevitably suffers.

I also heard and I don't usually remember where I hear things because I don't like to repeat names or anything what could be coming to Southfield is both high schools combining into one, putting all the middle schools in the opposite high school and then putting the elementary schools into middle schools, therefore the schools districts itself can save a lot of money because they would get rid of a lot of people in all areas [Michigan, Service trades].

Paraprofessionals, echoing the teachers with whom they work closely, lament overcrowded classrooms and a staff shortage. Many now work in trailers or other portable classrooms because there is simply not enough space in the schools, and new construction has not kept up. Many paraprofessionals also mention a severe teacher shortage that is forcing more of them to act as de facto teachers.

Our school has done a lot of cutbacks and then what happens is, then we have to pick up somebody else's work. We are expected to do more work than what our job actually calls for. Right now, I am doing two jobs in one [Pennsylvania, Paraprofessionals and office staff].

Cutbacks have also forced many schools to eliminate the counselors, psychologists, nurses, and other support staff that once helped troubled or depressed kids. In their absence, many ESPs feel they are acting as “surrogate parents” – a job few of them signed up for in the beginning.

Not only am I the secretary, I am the Nurse, I am sometimes the principal, I am sometimes a Mom, Dad to a child. I feel that my position, if they let me go tomorrow, that school would fold on a daily basis. I mean I'm not in a regular job. [Ohio, Paraprofessionals and office staff]

For bus drivers, janitors, and security guards, that may mean keeping an especially close eye on some kids, or giving them a sympathetic ear. For paraprofessionals, that means they are now doing much more than just teaching the three r's.

We place a lot of burdens on schools from years ago and schools are just supposed to teach your kids to read, write, arithmetic and now we have so much in there that is the school's responsibility to teach, where I think a lot of it the families teaching it. I think the schools have a big burden on it now on what they are expected to teach kids these days [Pennsylvania, Paraprofessionals and office staff].

These members are tired. Some paraprofessionals report that they would not want to be a teacher anymore, because it is simply too draining.

Discipline

Both service trade ESPs and paraprofessionals are deeply aggravated by increasingly undisciplined kids. Unruly students disrupt the conditions of learning for everyone, regardless of whether they act out on the bus, in the cafeteria, or in the classroom. They also make working conditions less enjoyable. Some members remark that teachers and administrators exacerbate this problem by refusing to take strong measures against rowdy kids. There is widespread consensus that serious “rules” prevent school employees from effectively disciplining kids, although few seem sure what these rules actually say. Breaking the rules, however, could cost someone their job.

Like she said, teachers are afraid because the principal might not back them up if they try to discipline a child, even just verbally. And I think they are afraid because they don't want to lose their job [Pennsylvania, Service Trades].

Members draw different class distinctions when it comes to disciplinary problems. Some feel kids from single-parent homes, where the parent may be working full time, have the most trouble because their parent simply cannot be around to supervise them. Others suggest kids from wealthy homes are among the most rude because they bring a sense of entitlement to the classroom and have little respect for ESPs.

Members agree, however, that a few “bad apples” are making their jobs unpleasant and interfering with the education of all the other kids, whom members adore. Unfortunately, there seems to be more bad apples every year.

When we were growing up, your teachers told you sit down, be quiet. Now they are not allowed to discipline these kids at all. The kids have the rule of the roost. And it's sad [Pennsylvania, Service Trades].

Testing

Paraprofessionals in particular are entirely familiar with an intrusive testing regime that is reducing their flexibility in their classroom, forcing them (and their teacher partners) to teach to the test, and creating more stress. That stress certainly affects teachers and paraprofessionals, who feel acute pressure to raise scores or risk jeopardizing their school's funding. It also, however, gets to the kids.

FCAT: I see both sides of the story. I think there is a need for some type of standardized testing, but I think when you have third grade children who are throwing up because they are so afraid of the test ... my second grade granddaughter didn't want to the third grade ... 'Why don't you want to go to the third grade honey?' 'I don't want to take FCAT' [Florida, Paraprofessionals and office staff].

Simply mentioning the standardizing testing among paraprofessionals typically evokes a roomful of groans and eye-rolling. It is often the first concern paraprofessionals mention, even in response to a generic “how are things going?”

Wages

As is typically the case with both teachers and ESPs, members focus first on problems that affect the kids, not their own financial situation. Only after prompting do these ESPs voice dissatisfaction with their wages, and even then their comments are tinged with a tone of resignation. They see inadequate compensation as part of the job and do not anticipate a change anytime soon. Indeed, when asked how they feel about their pay, members laugh heartily and remark that they thought it went without saying that wages are too low.

Members may be resigned to inadequate pay, but they do draw a sharp comparison with administrators and the education “consultants” they often see wandering the halls. ESPs in nearly every group remark that they did not enter this field to get rich – but they do not expect others to, either.

Farmington is paying a lady that goes around and tells everybody how to save energy. They pay her \$88,000 to tell us to shut the lights off. [Michigan, Service trades]

Respect

Members expect to be respected on the job and have sharp words for those who do not value or understand their contributions to the school. The sentiment that ESPs are integral to the educational environment – that “the schools could not function without us” – is widespread, but members say many people in the community, particularly parents, do not appreciate it.

Many ESPs have a close bond with the kids under their watch and strive mightily to contribute to their health, well being, and growth. The value of that work is not commensurate with their pay, but recognition and respect helps bridge that gap.

We are the only ones, other than the bus drivers...no, not even the bus drivers...we are the only ones who see every child every day. We are the only ones. We see a lot of the teachers. And what's funny is, we'll know a lot more of what's going on, at least for us, because the teachers will come down and tell us. So, there's a lot that I think the administrators aren't even aware of that goes on that we know [Pennsylvania, Service trades].

Many members, however – particularly those in the service trades – have personal stories of parents treating them with indifference or even disrespect. This disrespect frequently takes the form of an unruly student causing disruptions, such as on a bus. Parents refuse to back up the driver as an authority figure and complain to administrators, who too often acquiesce to the parents – thus clearly showing these ESPs exactly who is in charge.

Many members believe that their administrators and teachers are more respectful of their work, although there are certainly exceptions. They suggest each administrator sets the tone at their school, and that teachers often follow that cue. Administrators have a choice of whether to include ESPs in staff meetings, for example. Choosing to include them signals respect; leaving them out shows exactly the opposite.

Now some of the schools are kind of shaky, but if you get one good administrator, and there are some good administrators in there, so if you get one good administrator, they'll work with you [Florida, Service trades].

Some members describe administrators who are disrespectful, although these stories are relatively rare. Telling them in the groups, however, provokes the scorn of other ESPs,

who clearly have little patience for administrators who undervalue them.

You got an administrator that would refer to the para-pros in our building. I mean we're para-professionals, we were hired in a professional sense and he would refer to us as the library mom. 'Go ask the library mom' or 'Go ask the lunch mom' or 'Go ask the medicine mom' [Michigan, Paraprofessionals and office staff].

In a time of budget cuts and teacher shortages, many paraprofessionals are essentially functioning as teachers. Most report that the teachers they work with treat them as equals and give them high levels of authority.

My job changed within the last couple years. And I was more like the old teacher aide where you ran papers to the teacher and you worked for five different teachers and you were running everywhere. And then they transferred me and they changed all our jobs, nobody's supposed to be doing that anymore, we all have specific children that we are responsible for. And it changed the whole way everybody treated me, I'm more of a partner in the school now with the teachers. [Ohio, Paraprofessionals and office staff]

These paraprofessionals do voice some frustration that they have all the work and stress of teaching but are not compensated similarly. They do not blame teachers, however, but rather poor administrative and political planning, and inadequate incentives to attract more teachers.

I have six classes a day that I have, including the teacher who gets paid more than me. But I still do the same thing as he does. I do the same exact thing. I have to know what child has medical problems and I'm responsible for that, just as he is. I have to know CPR. I don't have to know it, but they require me in my position to know that type of stuff. I also go in there for teacher's conference. I don't get paid extra for that, but he might get paid extra for that. I have to come in on open house [Florida, Paraprofessionals and office staff].

The 65 Percent Solution

Members are in general agreement that a good deal of education funding is wasted on unnecessary bureaucratic expenses. Most members, both skilled trades and paraprofessionals, have a story about waste they have seen on the job. Many say such displays of waste offend them as taxpayers. At least on the surface, they are receptive to proposals that aim to cut wasteful spending from the school budget (and they suggest regular voters would be, also).

In a kindergarten class, a couple months into the year a teacher throwing away all the crayons, picking through the bins, each table has a bin of crayons, going through them and throwing them in the trash can. I asked; why are you throwing the crayons out? They don't have a point anymore. Throwing good crayons out just because the point was off them and put out new ones. To me that is criminal [Pennsylvania, Paraprofessionals and office staff].

The so-called “65 Percent Solution,” which would force school districts to spend at least 65 percent of funding on classroom spending, is initially attractive but quickly turns problematic. In Ohio, for example, service trade members start enthusiastic, but then the discussion turns to what might be included in the 65 percent, and what would not. That uncertainty fuels doubts about the spending formula.

It depends on what is in that 65 percent. Does it include the grooming for the trees outside so they can see out? Does that include working on the computers in the room? [Ohio, Service trades]

The pattern repeated itself in Florida, as it did elsewhere. Members inevitably begin to question what is and what is not a “classroom expenditure,” and wonder who will be in charge of making that distinction.

Wait a minute because are you talking about books, are you talking about tables? Are you talking about four psychologists for that child that's having a hard time or to give food to that child because the mother is negligent? How is that money going to be spent? Who determines that? [Florida, Paraprofessionals and office staff].

Importantly, however, few members initially talk about a link between the 65 Percent Solution and their own job security; they tend to view it in the abstract. After some prompting, however, members – especially those in the service trades – recognize that their job description might not qualify as “classroom” spending at all; they may be on the losing side of the 65 percent equation. This discussion again raises the prospect of outsourcing, because members certainly do not trust administrators to make tough spending decisions in a way that protects ESPs.

I mean, we're going to have to just drive our buses into the classroom, that's all. [Ohio, Service Trades].

Members are also supremely confident in administrators' ability to get around such a formula to suit their own purposes. Few suspect administrators will make deep

cuts in their own benefits and perks to meet the 65 percent floor.

Yeah, the \$110 food bill is still going to be there, trust me. Our jobs won't be [Michigan, Service Trades].

Members also agree there is no silver bullet to education reform and that a spending formula is not a panacea. A fragmented, changing, atomistic culture; more broken homes – these are issues that profoundly affect the conditions of teaching and learning but have nothing to do with spending ratios. Such things simply cannot be quantified.

It's about priorities; that's the problem. I mean it doesn't matter if you take 65 percent of the money and put it in a classroom. It doesn't make a hill of beans. If you don't have a qualified teacher and the rooms a shambles ...I mean you can pack a zillion kids into a room, it doesn't mean they're gonna learn anything or you're gonna be a successful teacher if the lights don't work, if the electricity's not working in three of the sockets, you can't do the computers and you know, the windows won't close and there's rain coming in. It's not just throwing people in a room and putting them in front of a teacher. [Florida, Service trades]

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

These ESPs are acutely sensitive to the political atmosphere they live and work in and portray themselves as outsiders looking in. In many ways, they are both disenfranchised and disengaged – two feelings that play off each other and, taken together, fuel a profound mood of political pessimism. Members say the powerful – a designation that does not necessarily align with partisanship but often takes explicitly populist intonations – look out for their own interests and ignore the needs of the working and middle class.

The disconnect between members' daily lives and the political system as they understand it means that members increasingly perceive politics as largely irrelevant. They are frustrated by gamesmanship, by partisanship mattering more than policy. Some are on the verge of disengaging in the political process altogether, an especially dramatic statement from members who are otherwise so invested in their community.

It bores me. I'm not interested. I see it in the paper. I watch the news. But I flip the channel, I could care less. It's politics. It's a political game they play. You can't be straightforward in it because you have to play the politics game. So, I'm not interested and I turn it off. I don't read that section of the paper [Pennsylvania, Service trades].

Members hunger for a genuine politician who understands them and can make politics relevant again; indeed, some sound ready to storm the barracks now. But most have been burned so many times before, and in some places, such as Ohio, their frustration is calcifying into cynicism. Breaking through, for any candidate and for the association, will be a challenge.

I can tell you why I believe why politicians are all alike and why I believe that every time, no matter if you are talking nationwide, it doesn't matter what you talk in government, the reason why they all do the same thing is because, take for instance, you can take a mayor of a small city compared to the President of the United States, to get in office you have to have a lot of money, to what, it takes millions of dollars. The reason for that is why the politician gets in there and doesn't do a job for us is because at one time in our Constitution it says; "for the people." "For the people" and that person is supposed to represent us as people, well they don't represent us nothing but the green stuff because they have so much money. They get in not on their, they don't get in on what they are doing for us; they get in because they have so much money. It is money that, the issue is really money if you want to get down to brass tacks. What I'm saying is that

the rich get in there [Michigan, Service Trades].

Even among the most cynical members, however, there remains a kernel of hope and optimism. Members still want to believe in the capacity for change; they just worry about getting their hopes up again: “fooled me once, fooled me twice...” says one Ohio member. Even in Michigan, where members spoke of the “pall” over their community, they suggest that regular people can still bring change by working (and voting) as one.

Right, but how many middle class people are there? If everyone voted we would make a difference. But you are still voting. I vote, I believe in voting. [Michigan, Service Trades].

Members say the elections matter and all of them plan to vote this November. They may not be enthusiastic about it, yet, but they remain at least guardedly hopeful that a charismatic, genuine candidate will emerge to get them excited again.

The Status Quo

ESPs perceive a deeply entrenched political power structure that is increasingly tilted against them and oriented towards self-preservation. The winners in this status quo are those with connections, money, and power. The losers are ordinary, working and middle class Americans, whose interests are subsidiary. Populism is alive and well in many of these groups. Echoes of this theme pop up in every state: in Florida, it was the “good ole boy network” that gets what it wants. In Pennsylvania, “lobbyists run politics.” In Michigan, the “rich are getting richer” and take care of their own, because “the rich are putting the politicians in, who they want in.” And not surprisingly, the politicians let members down.

If I had to shake somebody, I'd say “We trusted you. What happened? Why are you making laws that will help you get elected or help this interest group” so that, you know? They're out for themselves [Ohio, Paraprofessionals and office staff].

Members feel that politicians conduct unfair and unethical deals behind closed doors and are more interested in protecting their own job than in helping ordinary people. That means favoring the powerful special interests that control who is in charge, and who is not. The system corrupts even those who run for office with the best of intentions.

Oh sure, I believe that, I believe they go to Tallahassee with good intentions. But once they get there, if there is something that you feel strongly about that needs to be passed, then if somebody over here has got something you don't believe in, but you need to get this passed, you got to go along with this guy whether you believe in it or not, it ought to your stuff done. See, so if you make somebody mad, hang it up, 'cause they'll all vote against it anyway. [Florida, Service trades]

Members are tired of believing in change, only to see nothing come of it. They have started to resign themselves to a status quo that they find deeply unresponsive. “We complain and nothing gets changed,” says one Ohio ESP. Politicians promise to cut taxes, and they keep going up. Traffic keeps getting worse. More newcomers move into their communities, and the infrastructure cannot keep up. Schools are overcrowded, support personnel are doing more with less, and yet their salaries are stagnant and many suspect the politicians in charge would gladly outsource their job to the lowest bidder. It is not that politicians are not accountable; it is just that they are entirely accountable to the people who donate to their campaigns.

Well, I believe that the politicians are accountable but they are just not accountable to the everyday person. They are accountable to the people that donate to their campaigns. (Many people agreeing). And as long as they have to depend on these special interest groups to get the money to pay for these million dollar campaigns they are going to keep accommodating these people whether we like it or not. [Ohio, Service trades]

Members also perceive a growing class divide between themselves and their elected representatives. Most politicians, whether willfully or not, evolve into enthusiastic members of a club of insiders; they cannot understand members' interests, or the state of the schools, because they come from privileged backgrounds, have never had to work a day in their lives, and send their kids to private schools.

I think they should have their children in public schools, then their views would change. They all have private schools, tutors, no. In order for you to tell me how to teach, you better have your child in my class. [Florida, Paraprofessionals and office staff]

Character and Values

Members' frustration with their current leadership and the political system as they perceive it manifests itself in an almost palpable hunger for leaders who are genuine,

honest, who understand regular people, and who above all else can bring real change.

They want a representative in the literal sense of the word: someone who can effectively advocate for those who otherwise have less of a voice. It is a question of character, and in members' estimation far too few leaders have it now.

I think generally speaking our politicians are supposed to be our representatives. They are suppose to care what we want and in our whole government, I mean an awful lot of people act like, if you say you don't agree with something then you're not patriotic. Well, I thought that they were suppose to represent us. I thought our opinion mattered. [Pennsylvania, Paraprofessionals and office staff]

Members are tired of platitudes and have a finely tuned radar to hackneyed political-speak. They want leaders who will respect them in the same way they want administrators and parents to respect their jobs. That means politicians who listen to them and politicians who tell them the truth, even if members may not agree with it. They call out those who flip-flop with the latest poll numbers and who tell people exactly what they think they want to hear.

I think you want them to be approachable so when a question is asked, you get an answer, you don't get an empty promise or puff of air. [Michigan, paraprofessionals and office staff]

I think they are glad-handing you and telling you what they think you want to hear. Oh yes, we are going to lower taxes. Oh yes, we are going to stop that bill when it comes along. [Pennsylvania, Service trades]

They want a candidate like themselves: someone who is genuine, honest, and ethical, which is in direct contrast to the qualities they see in the current elected officials. Members in Ohio, not surprisingly, emphasize honesty and integrity.

It's totally abstract, but I would support a candidate that has those values and, you know, honesty, integrity and all of that stuff, even though I may not agree with some of their issues. [Ohio, paraprofessionals and office staff]

The word "real" emerged in a few different contexts, but the idea was generally the same. Telling the truth is real, pandering is not (and members have a sophisticated ear for pandering). Public schools are real, but sending children to private schools (or supporting vouchers) is not. Diversity is real, isolationism is not.

When you are in the private schools you don't get to see that and that is not the

real world to me and that is really what I like about the school district that I am in, it is extremely diverse. [Pennsylvania, Paraprofessionals and office staff].

Voters look for many cues to distinguish “real” politicians from the imposters who have let them down so many times before. They are skeptical of campaign promises and policy proposals (particularly those that lack details, or information about how they intend to pay for their promises). A candidate’s background and story, however, can tell members where they came from and whose interests they are likely to represent.

Their history. Do they have children in school? Do they have children in public school? What have they been doing all their life? If they’ve been an attorney in a very posh neighborhood all their life and they are millionaires, I have no use for them. They don’t know us. They don’t know us and they don’t care [Florida, paraprofessionals and office staff].

Members want someone they can relate to: someone who has built a life, who has neighbors and friends, and who might be nice to have over to dinner. They are uninterested in politicians who are putting on a “show.” Members have difficulty verbalizing what that show looks like, but they surely know it when they see it.

Well, I think you don’t have to put on a big show and be showy. I think just by doing it, living it, I don’t know how else to say it. And maybe your neighbors are gonna know you, and then they know you’re that. You know, the people that really know you are gonna know it, and then maybe word will kind of trickle around. I don’t know. [Ohio, Paraprofessionals and office staff]

A candidates’ faith is an important cue, but members are suspicious of politicians who wear their faith on their sleeves. They are dismissive of politicians trotting out their families for the photo op every Sunday at church, and they have little use for politicians who make transparent attempts to inject faith into their speeches. “Faith has become a great political tool,” notes a paraprofessional in Ohio, deriding gubernatorial candidate Jim Petro’s attempts to leverage it:

I don’t know, snake oil comes to mind. And I personally resented Mr. Petro coming out with his commercial that was so blatantly, “Look at me, I’m a good Christian person, my church, my faith.” It was just, God is not a tool you use to sell your political future. And I really felt that was what was going on. That really just bothered me a lot. [Ohio, Paraprofessionals and office staff]

The Issues

Members balance their impressions of a candidate's character with their stance on the issues when making their decisions. They have a diverse array of issues they will consider this November, and many are the same across the states: the schools, the economy, taxes, and health care among others. Others are more specific to each state. In Florida, members worry about uncontrolled growth and the lack of planning to accommodate it. They are aware that new people bring with them congestion and a greater demand on public services, including the schools. They are overworked and overstressed. They wonder why no candidates seem to have a feasible plan for managing growth.

Have some sort of way for funding it. Like if you wanna develop a property, it's fine, develop it, but come up with some sort of plan for fire protection, policing it, schools. [Florida, Service trades]

In Ohio, the political scandals that have buffeted that state profoundly affect members' political orientation heading into November. These members worry about a struggling industrial economy, sharply higher taxes, and desperately underfunded schools, and they draw links between them all to corruption in their government. Endless scandal has distracted their political leaders from the pressing issues of members' daily lives. Now they want someone who can clean house and set Ohio on a new course. Members believe that starts with holding their elected leaders to a higher standard.

It's not true and as long as we believe that than we are not going to make anybody accountable for what they do. You know, as long as we say, well they're all corrupt, they all cheat, they all do this, they all do that, they are going to continue to go on with that [Ohio, Service trades]

In Michigan, of course, the economy dominates members' concerns. They feel that the struggling economy threatens their own job security and the health of their entire community. Crime, education, taxes, the roads, and the cost of gasoline are major concerns. ESPs in Michigan take a more holistic view, tying one issue to another, as in a discussion of the price of gasoline affecting the schools.

And that also affects the schools. I mean it affects the buses for the schools, the heating and that is why the schools are in trouble. That is a lot of reasons. It

adds to why the schools are in trouble.[Michigan, Service trades]

Among all these places, Pennsylvanian members voice the fewest serious concerns. They see their communities and their state as a pleasant place to live and work. Problems emerge – everyone seems to hate the Pennsylvania Turnpike – but, in the big picture, things are going well. Members suggest that taxes are too high, and petty crimes (especially among the young) have increased. Yet Pennsylvania is a good place to raise a family. The mood for change is weaker here than in the other states (but not so weak that they completely dismiss an outsider candidate like Lynn Swann, as discussed below).

If you say Pennsylvania, I'm comfortable with my state. I think we have a wonderful state, I really do and I am originally from New Jersey so I know what I'm talking about. [Pennsylvania, Paraprofessionals and office staff]

The Elections

Against a backdrop of cynicism, members admit they are paying little attention to the upcoming elections. Almost to a number they agree the outcome of the elections matter, but their reservoir of optimism that anything will really change is running dry.

I think that says a lot when nobody knows who is running. It gets to the point that we are so fed up that it's going to be another one that's not going to help. [Florida, paraprofessionals and office staff]

At this point, members are generally unfamiliar with the non-incumbent candidates for Governor in their respective states. To the extent they know who is running, their impressions are fleeting and tentative. Some say there has simply been too little media coverage.

I watch the news every single day. I watch the news every morning and every evening at six o'clock in the morning and eleven o'clock at night, and I haven't heard ... I didn't even know that Jeb Bush isn't running again. And I haven't heard anybody that was going to be running [Florida, paraprofessionals and office staff]

When the candidate is a challenger, members have even less to say.

I don't even know if Dick DeVos is a Democrat. [Michigan, Service trades].

The fact that he is a, I mean I know Ted, I think he is a decent guy, Baptist minister besides. I mean he doesn't have a lot of name recognition I don't believe but I think he has some interesting, I think he is a decent human being,

which starts the process [Ohio, Service trades].

In Florida, members have yet to focus on the fact that Jeb Bush is not running for reelection. In neither group can members volunteer the names of those running to replace him. Some worry about this – if members have not heard about the candidates by now, is there any reason to suspect they will be excited about them by November?

Yeah, there's a problem there, at least for me, because and I try to read the paper every day, and I can't remember the Democratic candidates to save my life. I mean and that to me is a major problem. [Florida, Service trades]

One Florida member described a recent meeting they saw with Democrat Jim Davis at their association. Others in the group are impressed that Davis took time out of his day to meet with educators and listen to their concerns and priorities. David apparently explained his voting record and when, and why, he voted “against the teachers.” The other members react enthusiastically to this story, remarking that this was the type of “listening” that politicians needed to do more.

...there was another group of teachers, the CTE, and a gentlemen talking to them. I wasn't paying much attention and come to find out it was Jim Davis. And what I can remember is I would look up every so often and try to listen, but he was very honest and open with them, listened a lot, told his positions, told things that he'd voted on and that was against the teachers and why he did it. He explained why he did this and he explained why he wanted to do this. And he listened and he was supposed to be someplace at a certain time and I remember him staying an extra half hour to an hour longer just to listen to their issues. [Florida, paraprofessionals and office staff]

In Ohio, members do not know much about Jim Petro, Ken Blackwell, or Ted Strickland, although a few members' mood for change (and disgust with the status quo) is sufficiently strong that they would vote for anybody who was not in the Republican Party.

If I knew zero, at this moment, if I knew absolutely nothing about any of them, I would probably go to Mr. Strickland because it is now time for a change. [Ohio, Service trades]

The few members who are familiar with Strickland are positive, but their impressions are unformed. He seems a “nice guy” who has “done right by people,” and they remark favorably upon hearing he is a minister. Given the mood of this state now, however, those

basic credentials are enough to merit a second look. Strickland's allure as a regular guy with integrity is sufficiently enticing that even one life-long Republican contemplates supporting him.

But based on what I'm hearing from his point of view and probably his professional and personal dealings that I'm aware of, his views on education are right there. And he's so supportive of public education for all, finding good ways to fund that. He's actually an ordained minister. And I just get a better feeling about him, about his being a real person. I think he honestly does want to do the right thing, and his dealings in Congress have been very above-board. So as I said, hard as it is, I feel more comfortable with the Democrat. It's scary. [Ohio, Paraprofessionals and office staff]

Members in Pennsylvania are positive but not passionate about incumbent Governor Ed Rendell. They note he has roots in eastern Pennsylvania and that while he once enjoyed a high profile as Mayor of Philadelphia, he has had a curiously lower profile since winning the Governorship. Their impressions of him focus around his status as a "regular guy."

Even in a state where the mood is optimistic (at least as compared to the other places), some members are intrigued by Lynn Swann as the outsider candidate. They know little about him besides his sports legacy and suggest Swann himself probably does not have very strong policy positions yet. Some are troubled by his lack of experience, but about as many suggest it does not matter. Indeed, it may be a positive, given members' low esteem for career politicians.

Rendell's into sports heavily in Philadelphia. He's got his own show, an emcee on his own show. His roots are all Philly. Swann is being picked on because he was a Pittsburgh Steeler. Swann has no political experience whatsoever. But he's an educated person. He does say a lot of good things, but he has no background. I think a lot of people will look at that as a positive. [Pennsylvania, Service trades].

Asked why Swann might want to put himself through a grueling run for Governor, members return to their usual interpretation of politics:

The power thing, that's exactly what it is. Why would anybody want any kind of job like that? [Pennsylvania, Service trades]

In Michigan, members know and generally like incumbent Governor Jennifer

Granholm. Members credit her for maintaining a high profile and while some worry she has not accomplished much, others blame former Governor Engler for creating a host of intractable problems that she inherited. Members also suggest a gridlocked legislature is blocking many of her initiatives.

*I think there is still that gridlock too. There is still that, she can push and push and push and then she's got all these people under there voting, you know maybe she wants it and then you have all these other people that are going, well we can't afford it, so what do you think you're doing and then they vote it out.
[Michigan, Service trades]*

Nevertheless, members here are deeply anxious and things have not much improved during Granholm's tenure. Many will consider Dick DeVos, whom few know beyond what they have seen in his advertisements. Their sensitive ear for "spin," however, reveals itself again as they dissect his ads.

I think one of the things and Dick DeVos has already started campaigning on television, there are already commercials for him and it is coming up that he is a man that's been through manufacturing and he's a man coming from business and he knows exactly where to lead Michigan. I think that is his pitch. They show him walking through factories, shaking hands and he is going to be the hands-on governor that will change the economy of Michigan. That is his big pitch. [Michigan, Paraprofessionals and office staff]

DeVos' advocacy of vouchers, however, is deeply problematic, particularly among paraprofessionals. Many say they refuse to support him after hearing that DeVos' foundation provided millions of dollars to the campaign six years ago in favor of a ballot initiative to expand vouchers in Michigan. Asked if that would be a deal-breaker, one member responds: "There are a few things but that is one. We should be working to make public schools, like, awesome."

THE ASSOCIATION

Members across states are generally very positive towards their association and, at a time when they see most politicians and institutions as indifferent or even hostile to their interests, appreciate that the association is fighting for them. There was, as expected, some dissent – a few participants in each group who felt the association was of no use to them, or resented being “forced” into a union – and intensity of feeling differed across the states, but most members are glad to belong (even if they confess they are less involved than they should be, or would like).

In Florida, members are soundly positive towards the FEA and give it high marks. They are glad to belong to an institution that wields power and can take on the “good ole boy” network that marginalizes their interests. The entrenched powers have to acknowledge the FEA, and give it a place at the table, because the association has money and influence. As one member remarks when asked which association they belong to,

The most powerful union there is, is the teacher’s union [Florida, paraprofessionals and office staff].

They acknowledge that the FEA’s power is artificially limited, however, because Florida is a right-to-work state. Many also feel their leverage at the bargaining table is limited because teachers cannot strike.

I think that the union is held back for the simple reason that it’s, even though we have one voice, that’s all it is is voice. We cannot strike. [Florida, Service trades]

In Michigan, where members feel their job is in constant jeopardy (and have seen so many of their friends and neighbors lose theirs), they are deeply appreciative of the MEA’s effort to fight outsourcing and protect their livelihoods.

They give us the higher wages and benefits. Without them we’d be like the privatization that we don’t want. [Michigan, Service trades].

The plight of other unions in Michigan weighs heavily on these members. They have seen other union contracts thrown out by judges and massive layoffs in heavily unionized industries, and feel that many politicians are trying to weaken unions further.

These “external forces” are fighting the MEA at every pass, perhaps even trying to break the association altogether. As such, members give the MEA a significant amount of credit for simply protecting their jobs, even if things are not necessarily getting better.

In our own district and probably everybody else's districts have gone out and hired all these high power attorneys, which again they are spending billions of dollars on to fight, so we can only do so much. They do what they can but the power has pretty much been taken away and it is being more and more away everyday and they are sitting back watching this stuff going on with the airlines and the minute the judge says; oh, your contracts don't mean anything and throws them out, they are all going to do the same thing to us too. They are all just kind of sitting around waiting to see how far they can push. I really think they are trying to break the union. [Michigan, Paraprofessionals and office staff]

Michigan members say their association leaders are people like them: who are used to working for a living and who understand what it means to make ends meet. Their leaders relate to members and understand their concerns and priorities (unlike so many politicians these days).

Some of our members were in our position like our president use to be a custodian so he could relate too. [Michigan, Service trades]

Members in Pennsylvania, reflecting their more upbeat mood, appear satisfied with the job their association is doing – and if there is less passion, there is also little anger. A few members do suggest the association has a “monopoly,” however, and that the PSEA cares more about teachers than ESPs.

When you can't work in Philadelphia unless you are in a union, (interrupted)... it is like a monopoly. [Pennsylvania, Paraprofessionals and office staff]

In Ohio, members seem less satisfied with their association than their peers elsewhere. A discussion about “fair share” initially animates the discussion, with members lining up on both sides. Some feel obliged to join the union because they will end up paying dues one way or the other.

You have to belong to the union or pay a fair share, which is the same as paying the union dues so you might as well join the union. [Ohio, Service trades]

Other members suggest the OEA is “weak” and is not effectively representing their interests (or is heavily favoring teachers). One service trade member, who had

belonged to the CWA, drew an unfavorable contrast with the OEA, eliciting agreement from some other members in the room.

I can give you my personal opinion of comparison. I was CWA for 22 years, Communication Workers of America and I saw that union work their butts off, and keep people's job, get their jobs back for them, get us raises, get us paid holidays, get us health benefits at the phone company and then I'm working for the schools and I see the most weak union I've ever (laughter and clapping). We just got shoved down our throats, classified employees an insurance plan that sucks.. the teachers got to vote on it and it was shoved down our throats, the classified employees. Our union didn't even want us to vote on it or anything [Ohio, Service trades]

For every naysayer, however, another member speaks up to defend the association.

I absolutely love my job and I feel like I get paid very well and I have good benefits. We do not have as good of benefits now as we did when I first started and I think that is going to be a trend that is going to continue. [Ohio, Service trades]

The Association Role

Most members see their association first and foremost as an “insurance policy” or “safety net” that gives them peace of mind in an increasingly difficult work environment. They may not always need the association, but it is an insurance policy that they are glad to have – particularly with the proliferation of new rules and regulations about how school employees can interact with kids.

Anybody who handles kids needs to be in the union to protect you [Florida, Service trades].

It many regards, members see the association as preserving their respect on the job. With more and more kids talking back to them, some administrators favoring pushy parents, and even some teachers dismissive of what ESPs do, the association backs them up. It is validation.

But I think in a way for the union, a lot of things, just their child came and said, “Ooh, she looked at me wrong,” and go kill somebody. See the union gives us lawyers, gives us a backing. It makes them, 'cause see, they'll attack you, you'll get fired. [Florida, Service trades]

Members also value the benefits that come with joining their state association.

They site the credit union, mortgage offers, credit cards, insurance, and discounts. A few, however, feel bombarded with these offers and typically ignore them (often the same members, not surprisingly, who are less than enthusiastic about the association from the start).

We get a lot of things for member's benefits, which really comes from NEA, and that's trying to sell you insurance (inaudible), they offer you insurance or mortgages or magazines). [Ohio, Paraprofessionals and office staff]

Representation

These ESPs are generally familiar with the structure of their association – that they belong to a local association that is affiliated with a state and national association. They also acknowledge that the state association represents both teachers and ESPs and have very mixed feelings about that: some feel teachers and ESPs have essentially the same interests and that the association does a good job of representing them, while others feel their interests are quite different from those of teachers, and that the association favors the latter.

At least on the broadest scale, most ESPs do perceive a set of shared interests with teachers. Those chiefly include protecting public education and helping the kids succeed.

The global, the global education issues, sure. I mean we're all interested in better pay, better benefits, you know, having smaller class sizes so the kids could have a better learning experience. We all want the kids to succeed. [Florida, Service trades]

Beyond that broad interest, many ESPs – and particularly paraprofessionals – feel a kinship with teachers because they face the same daily frustrations on the job: unruly kids, long hours, and capricious rules. That shared experience means they are “all in the same boat” and depend on the association to protect all of them. Paraprofessionals are more likely to see their interests as closely aligned with teachers and are less likely to voice concerns that the association does not understand them.

But you know, going back to this division like with educators and support and stuff, my husband's a teacher in Seminole County, so I see it sort of from both ends. And they're at wits end too. I mean we're all in the same boat no matter if you're a top feeder or if you're down at the bottom, everybody's sort of got the same thing going ... And teachers join the union for the same reasons, you know,

because of their contracts and because if you grab a kid or what you've supposedly done or haven't done, it's across the board I think. I don't think it's just our interests, I think it's the whole thing [Florida, Service trades].

Indeed, paraprofessionals speak with pride about teachers who call them “co-teachers” and consider them partners in the classroom.

We are all teachers. Whether you believe it or not, we are all teaching. [Florida, paraprofessionals and office staff]

A few paraprofessionals say the power and leverage of the association almost entirely depends on the teachers and that ESPs should acknowledge that reality. They suggest some teachers may resent that teachers often lead the big fights, and ESPs enjoy the rewards. This type of attitude, however, is most common in Michigan (where members feel besieged and are glad for any benefits) and relatively rare elsewhere.

Well, she was talking about how we tie it onto the teachers, like the teachers fight the fight to try to get the raises and benefits and if they got a 2% raise, we could also most likely get a 2% raise because they got, of course it is not as much money because 2% of \$20,000.00 is not nearly 2% of \$60,000.00 but at least we, we let them fight the battle, well they resent that a little bit. They are saying; why do we have to fight for all the unions. We are the ones with the education, we're the ones that got the masters, we shouldn't have to fight for them. [Michigan, Paraprofessionals and office staff]

In contrast, many ESPs can identify circumstances where their interests are quite different from the teachers. ESPs, for example, feel the threat of privatization much more closely, and they want an advocate to preserve their respect on the job (a problem, they suspect, that teachers have only infrequently). These members suggest that because ESPs make up a minority of the membership, the association's efforts to address their concerns often get second billing to pleasing the teachers. One ESP calls this the “red-haired stepchild” syndrome.

Yeah, the administrators are top, the teachers are second, the bus drivers, the custodians, the people in the cafeteria, we all ride the bottom of the pole. And we get what's left. [Pennsylvania, Service trades]

Service trade professionals, in particular, acknowledge their interests may be quite divergent than those of teachers. Some do not work with children directly, and few work in a classroom. There was a pronounced undercurrent of frustration among these

members that teachers sometimes dominate the agenda, even though they feel support personnel are absolutely essential to a functional school system.

Well, everybody assumes, in my personal opinion, that teachers make the county education system run. And I think the bus drivers and security and some of that, those other stepping stones are kind of put on the back burner [Florida, Service trades].

Involvement

The association as “safety net” gives members peace of mind and they appreciate the support, but it also has a clear downside: most members say they do not maintain a particularly close relationship with their association, or even pay much attention to what the association is saying, unless there is a major issue at stake, or they have a grievance. The association is there for them and they are glad of it, but it is not something they think about often.

I don't think that you necessarily have that close relationship with OEA unless you are having an issue or you're negotiating. It's kind of like they're there if you need them, they're that safety-net. [Ohio, Paraprofessionals and office staff]

Unless there is a major issue on the table, involvement in the association is low. Members say there are already too many demands on their busy lives and they simply do not have the time to participate as they might wish. Few are rigorous about attending association meetings. Michigan members sound like their peers in other states when asked if they would attend an association meeting after school: “It all depends on what day it is,” “what time,” “and if you remember.” Few said yes outright. The topic of the meeting matters, as well: “if you talk about contracts that is when a huge room will be jam packed.”

In almost every group, however, there are at least one or two members who are very enthusiastic about the association and consider themselves strongly pro-labor. For one of these members, their unionism is personal and essential a value.

I grew up in the church of trade unionism and seriously it is not about me but a union is about as democratic of an institution as there is and it is only as strong as the membership and people and their interest in that organization [Ohio, Service trades].

Members do perceive a connection between involvement in the association and its effectiveness. Dynamic and aggressive leadership on the local level helps engage members and often results in better outcomes. The difficulty is that too few members are willing to take on those leadership positions.

I've worked for forty years and this is the first time I've ever been in a union situation. And I liked what the union can do in terms of protection, in terms of providing a buffer between someone who gets a burr in their saddle and wants to take it out on you. But it is still a function of the local people in your group who are going to be in front of the school or on the negotiating team as to what actually happens. There may be some support, which may be good, bad or indifferent. But it still comes down to who your team is and what they are doing in the negotiation process. There's no guarantee as to what's going to happen for a wage increase or wage loss. [Pennsylvania, Service trades]

These more activist members express great frustration with their peers who do not participate, because they say the association is only as strong as the membership is united and active.

If we don't have numbers, then we are silent. They don't look at us, they won't listen to us. So how can you expect your leaders in the union to go out there and fight for you when you won't even come to any of their meetings? [Florida, paraprofessionals and office staff]

THE ASSOCIATION AND POLITICS

Without prompting, members rarely list “lobbying” or “campaigning” as one of the jobs of their association. Occasionally, they are astonished to learn that it does; as one Florida member says, “I didn’t know my dues money did that!” Members endorse their association getting involved in politics, however, because there is strength in numbers. They do not like politics, but they hold their nose and expect the association to play by the rules of the game, however distasteful they may be, because it is the only way to protect members’ interests in a system that favors the powerful, the connected, and the rich.

See that’s a thing people don’t realize, you’re union, you are Jack Abramoff. I mean let’s be honest. I mean not all the bad stuff, but I mean they’re doing the same type of thing where they’re using our clout financially and vote-wise, the number of votes, to do what any lobbyist does, which is get people to vote, you know, things in our interest. [Florida, Service trades]

The association’s political involvement helps protect members against politicians and institutions that would cut their benefits and their jobs, or worse. They see outsourcing and more vouchers on the horizon and consider both stalking horses for eventually dismantling public education altogether. They are glad the association is on their side.

The politicians don’t wanna admit it, but it’s because of their fear of the FEA and the AFT. We are the only large union in this state, and most of what they do that hurts the school systems, they’re doing to try to stomp out the public school structure as it is today. And anybody that tells you that’s hokum doesn’t know what they’re talking about. [Florida, Service trades]

In an environment of bitter partisan gridlock and division, even if the association can not always make things better, members respect it for trying. Against a range of institutions and politicians who self-evidently are not listening to them, and who do not understand or care to understand their interests, most members feel the association is looking out for them. It is no coincidence, for example, that members in Michigan were among the most positive towards their association even amidst some of the bleakest circumstances. The association is a “port in the storm” for these members and that gives the association real influence – if not quite determinant influence – over their political instincts.

The Association Endorsement

Just as members weigh different criteria in selecting a candidate to support, including their character, values, and issue positions, they also rely on multiple sources of information to research upcoming elections. Members suggest that consulting multiple sources of information helps guard against getting “hoodwinked” by yet another deceitful politician, or a special interest with a hidden agenda. Everyone, though, seems to have a family member or friend who closely follows politics, and whose advice is especially important.

Members read the newspaper and watch television news, but they regard this information with some skepticism too. They suspect the media may have an agenda and often distorts the facts to suit their needs. Some suggest the media overdoes negative coverage and is degrading the political process even further. They are tired of “mud slinging.”

I think a problem is the press too. I distrust the press and the media. So other than meeting you face to face coming door to door, when you talk to your neighbors and things, I don't think you're gonna get a fair ride in the press, 'cause they're gonna dig, and they misquote [Ohio, Paraprofessionals and office staff].

Against this backdrop, the association recommendation arrives. Members appreciate the information and seriously consider the recommendation, but almost without exception they say the endorsement is only one piece in a larger puzzle.

It's one piece of the puzzle that they're addressing for the most part. There are other pieces to that big puzzle that I would look at. [Florida, Service trades]

Most members find the association a credible source of information. That does not mean, however, that they automatically embrace the recommended candidate. They suspect the association mainly considers education when issuing its recommendation – but members' vote on a range of considerations, including character and values, not just the candidate's position on education.

This candidate may be more for education and everything but I look at the whole package. Is it going to be someone who is going to do more than just education? [Michigan, Paraprofessionals and office staff]

Logically, members do assign more credibility to what the association says about a candidate's education position. Clarifying the candidate's positions is important, because all politicians claim to care about education, and members have heard it all before. Members are less sure they would find information from the association credible if it concerned issues other than education, such as the economy or the environment.

I feel that in the education, certainly do research and look at the person a lot other than just the education. I trust who they would recommend insofar as education. I mean, they have, I think have done their research and will do it, who will be best for education and recommend that person but education isn't the whole ball of wax. [Michigan, Paraprofessionals and office staff]

Being "for education" can also mean very different things to different members, and they question whether their association's interpretation of "pro-education" necessarily matches their own.

Because of my job, because if they are for education, which everyone, like you said, is for education, what does that mean for education? That means you want to give more money to education, that means you want to raise my taxes to get the money or cut other programs that might also be important. [Pennsylvania, Paraprofessionals and office staff]

Even strong supporters of the association say they are hesitant to simply vote the association line without any additional research of their own. In a sense, members' deep rooted suspicion of politicians and the political process affects their perception of the association's political efforts. The association is a political actor, by matter of necessity, and that means there is always the possibility of a hidden agenda. Preserving their independence and protecting against that (remote) possibility is important to these members. They do not want to get fooled again.

Within the union, a lobby group like you know, the union is a lobby group. And then you got these other people out here, the police saying, "We nominate this candidate, we're signing on for this person," you know. So I think the union has that same voice. Now once again, just because you told me this was an excellent policeman, that does not make me vote for that person for Sheriff. And then I strongly believe in the union because I've been a member for a long time. But I still don't believe nobody tells me who to vote for. [Florida, Service trades]

A few members do in fact see the association endorsement as yet another attempt to take political power away from regular people, or to force a decision on them. They

reject such efforts out of hand. Some report tossing association political communications in the trash before they even look at them (a position that earns derision from other participants).

I think it's [the FEA] just part of the network of politicians, under the table, over the table now. They don't care, whoever has the bigger bucks gets the most done for them. [Florida, paraprofessionals and office staff]

A few members also chafe at what they perceive as their association's automatic preference for Democrats. They suggest the association should attempt to interview more candidates from both parties and, even if they do not recommend the Republican, at least let members know why. They also prefer association recommendations that inform members about the pros and cons of all the major candidates, so members can see for themselves how the association reached its recommendation.

[List] Pros and cons on both sides. Not just one. Not just go for the Democrat but also list the pros and cons of the Republican. [Michigan, Service trades]

Providing more balanced information can help the association deliver its endorsement more effectively, but ultimately members in every state made it quite clear, in many different ways, that they are loathe to vote one way simply because someone told them to (or, at least in terms of focus group dynamics, loathe to *admit* they will vote the way someone told them to).

You are talking about educated people here that; you're not going to tell me how to vote. You are not going to tell me how to do things. I want to make up my own mind by what I see [Ohio, Service trades].

One potential endorsement criteria does generate more intensity and breaks through members' guardedness: vouchers. Members, and particularly the paraprofessionals, feel passionately about vouchers and hearing that a candidate supports them is, for many, a deal breaker. In Michigan, for example, after members hear that Republican gubernatorial candidate Dick DeVos supported an initiative to expand vouchers, most move against him immediately.

NEA Fund

Few members are truly familiar with the NEA Fund or their state association's PAC, and even fewer say they donate to it. After learning more about it, a few members are bothered that their association gives directly to candidates. Most, however, believe this again is just "working the system" and do not object. It takes money to get a seat at the table, and these members believe the association has to pay up.

Well, I believe that the politicians are accountable but they are just not accountable to the everyday person. They are accountable to the people that donate to their campaigns. (Many people agreeing). And as long as they have to depend on these special interest groups to get the money to pay for these million dollar campaigns they are going to keep accommodating these people whether we like it or not [Ohio, Service trades].

Few, however, are willing to donate additional money to the Fund. Many are just making ends meet as it is, and their association dues seems a sufficient contribution for now.

I have limited income to do what I'm doing to stay close to home for my kids. Enough is taken out of my check every week, I can't give out any more [Pennsylvania, Service trades].

Association Communications

These ESPs receive a great deal of mail and other communications from their association. Generally, this is a good thing. They appreciate the offers and, as described above, feel the association offers certain perks and benefits that they enjoy.

They solicit us a lot with papers to get us better credit cards, better car insurance, life insurance ... something for supposedly a cheaper price if you want it. [Pennsylvania, Service trades].

The plethora of solicitations and communications, however, makes it harder for members to differentiate political communications from all the other information they receive from their local, state, and national association. Many have become inured. "It's a lot easier to just throw the mail away," as one Ohio paraprofessional says.

For the same reasons, email is also problematic. Some members do not have an email account they check with any regularity, and those that do say it is often too easy (or tempting) to click "delete" before they read content. Some joked that they make

aggressive use of their spam filter to remove association emails before they ever reach their inbox.

Other options for reaching out to members and mobilizing them for political purposes include meetings, but members concede they are disinclined to go to optional meetings and that their peers generally feel similarly. They simply have no time and many feel organizing workplace meetings to discuss politics is inappropriate, even if they are optional.

The only time you get 80% of union people to come to meetings is when I give out turkeys for Christmas. [Pennsylvania, Service trades]

Members are, however, interested in getting to know candidates and say they might take time out of their day for that purpose. They agree that one-on-one or even group meetings with the actual candidate provides valuable insight into their character – into whether they are a “real” person – that no amount of television advertisements or mail could ever provide.

The candidate coming out to the schools so we can see somebody face to face, not just read about them. Face to face, come and talk to us, come and see where we live, come and see what it is all about, not just come for, not just read it on a piece of paper and expect us, let us come out and ask questions, let us be there to talk to them. [Ohio, Service trades]

The Jim Davis incident from Florida, described above, is instructive. Members remark with surprise and appreciation after hearing about how Davis took time to meet with educators and hear their concerns.

In a membership that is deeply wary of people and politicians fooling them, comparative communications work best. Providing information about all the candidates, both Democratic and Republican, helps assure members that the association endorsement is in fact the correct one, because the facts are in front of them.

Apples to apples, this issue to this issue, this candidate to this candidate. You look at them side by side, you usually judge for yourself which is the better of the two [Pennsylvania, Paraprofessionals and office staff].

In both tone and content, association communications also need to capture

members' mood for change and acute aversion to political language. The usual and the conventional – “working for families” and so forth – will not click with a membership that is on the verge of political disengagement. Members' sensitivity to clichéd political-speak also extends to the visual. They mock politicians who try to paint idyllic images of themselves and their families in their visual communications.

It is being fed to you on a silver platter. It is in a nice brochure. It is easy to read. This guys is a loving father. He is pictured with his dog. He is in front of some field with no houses, no population. There is no fog, there is no buses. He is probably a vegetarian on Tuesday and Thursday and he only eats meat on Wednesday and he is not trying to upset any political group in any direction. [Pennsylvania, Paraprofessionals and office staff]

These images do not portray a world that any of these ESPs inhabit and it smacks of pandering. Indeed, candidates' attempts to court members by using visuals such as this only heightens the divide between them, because it simply validates members' default perception of politicians as out-of-touch, phony, and insincere.

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