



# The NEA Pyramid

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As You Rise to the Top of the  
Nation's Largest Union

A Special Report of the Education Intelligence Agency  
October 2005

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Debates about the policies and practices of the National Education Association often revolve around whether the union accurately represents the views and wishes of its members. It does not take a lot of research to learn that NEA donates upwards of 90 percent of its political money to Democrats, or that its resolutions and new business items skew to the left of the political spectrum, or that enactment of its legislative agenda would increase both taxes and the size of government.

EIA has witnessed heated arguments among people who are in complete agreement about how harmful unions can be to public education, but cannot agree on whether this is because union leaders have appropriated the organization's power for their own interests, or because union leaders are acting out the desires of their members.

NEA, like any other large membership organization, is structured like a pyramid. The base is the membership, with their local representatives and presidents above them, the state representatives and officials above them, and national representatives and officials above them. Residing at the top are the nine members of the NEA Executive Committee. Communications, directives and funds are passed in both directions up and down the sides of this pyramid.

Each year, NEA commissions an annual survey of the rank-and-file membership, in an effort to ascertain their feelings about the union and certain issues. The survey allows the top of the pyramid to receive direct feedback from the base, without the intervening levels of bureaucracy.

Last April 25, EIA reported that the [annual NEA member survey](#) would include questions on whether the religious beliefs of members affect their voting on political candidates and issues, and how they feel about private accounts in the Social Security system. That survey was conducted in May by Michigan-based Star Research and delivered to NEA in July. Concurrently, the firm conducted a parallel survey of NEA's local affiliation presidents, completing it in August. The union has nearly 14,000 locals of varying size, and the survey's sample admirably accounts for these variations.

EIA has the results of those surveys, and is now equipped to definitively answer once and for all the question: Does NEA represent the views of its members?

Answer: It depends.

As unsatisfying as that short conclusion may be, the two surveys, examined together, explain clearly how an organization of 2.7 million members of widely divergent political and social views can end up championing a narrowly liberal worldview.

Let's begin with those items where NEA and its members are in mutual harmony. The union asked both its members and local presidents to rate on a five-point scale the most important priorities for the Association. This formulation does not give us the best possible picture, since the respondents were not in fact asked to prioritize, so that almost all the items listed were judged very important. However, in a relative sense, their marching orders to NEA are obvious.

"Improve/protect medical insurance" and "protect members against unfair actions" were deemed important by 90 percent of member respondents (local presidents agreed by 94 and 95 percent, respectively). Eighty-five percent want the Association to "provide legal protection" (local presidents agreed at 88 percent), and 84 percent want NEA to help "increase salaries" (local presidents – 93 percent). The only meaningful divergence of opinion between the two groups was on class size reduction. Seventy-five percent of members thought this should be a priority, but only 52 percent of local presidents thought so.

It is no accident that the three top priorities of members include some form of the word "protect," while the fourth is higher pay. To the extent that members have given NEA a mission to accomplish, it is to *defend them*. This cannot be overemphasized. When school district or legislative policies call for a reduction in teacher protections ("takebacks" in bargaining, or loss of tenure in state law, et al.), one can expect the union to battle furiously, and for the members to support the union wholeheartedly. NEA builds a mighty wall of protection around teachers.

It is when the union goes on offense that this consensus begins to break down. Union members and officers can agree on what is bad, but have a much more difficult time finding common ground on what is good. This may help explain why teacher union demands always seem to amount to a call for more money. This is the one proactive position that will garner unanimous support from the rank-and-file. As we have seen in the past with initiatives such as peer review and performance pay (or even national certification), there is a significant undercurrent of opposition within the union.

So how does an organization that walks a tightrope on its substantive educational initiatives end up in liberal lockstep when it comes to other issues? How does an organization with a plurality of Democrat members end up virtually intertwined with the party at the state and national levels? Why does a union open its convention with the Pledge of Allegiance, but feel compelled to change the lyrics in "God Bless the U.S.A." to "I Love the U.S.A." during an Independence Day celebration?

In short, why does the mighty wall of protection lean to the left?

The surveys provide some answers. One question asked members how involved they were in the union at either the local, state or national level. Thirty-six percent of them said "not at all." Right away, you can write off approximately 972,000 NEA members who do nothing to affect the union's direction one way or the other. Among new members, those who have been with NEA for three years or less, the "not at all" group rises to 48 percent. When these new members were asked why they joined NEA, the top answer (20 percent) was that they had "no choice."

How many are the real movers and shakers in NEA? Those that answered they were "quite a bit" or "a great deal" involved in the union amounted to only 15 percent of the total. Among new members, that number was a paltry 5 percent.

Above this active group of members are the local presidents, who by themselves constitute about 6 percent of the employed membership. The local president survey divides these folks into groups based on the size of their membership – less than 50, 50-149, 150-499, 500-999, and 1,000+. To eliminate a few numbers, let's refer to these locals as tiny, small, medium, large and jumbo.

Disaggregated in this way, we get a very vivid picture of NEA's value pyramid and the tendencies of those at the top compared to those at the base. For example, males make up 21 percent of NEA membership, but 23 percent of presidents of tiny locals are male. Among presidents of small locals, 27 percent are male. Among presidents of medium locals, 41 percent are male. Among presidents of large locals, 40 percent are male, and among presidents of jumbo locals, 45 percent are male.

Let's make a similar comparison with age. I have no data on how many NEA members are 55 or over, but 22 percent of the presidents of tiny locals are in this age group, 24 percent of small locals, 36 percent of medium locals, 37 percent of large locals, and 49 percent of jumbo locals.

This is the only demographic information in the surveys, but clearly the top of the pyramid has fewer women and young people than the base. Do the answers to the questions on religious beliefs and Social Security betray similar characteristics?

Members were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statement "I tend to vote for elected officials who share my religious beliefs." Twenty-nine percent of members agreed or strongly agreed with that statement (44 percent in states without mandatory collective bargaining). Here are the percentages for local presidents:

Tiny = 34%  
Small = 19%  
Medium = 17%  
Large = 11%  
Jumbo = 6%

The presidents of tiny locals were more likely to vote for a candidate who shared their religious beliefs than their members did, but otherwise the higher you climbed on the pyramid, the less likely you were to do that.

Members were also asked if it were important for the union to share their religious beliefs. Only 12 percent thought it was (22 percent in non-bargaining states). But it was still a higher percentage than that of the local presidents:

Tiny = 6%  
Small = 4%  
Medium = 3%  
Large = 4%  
Jumbo = 5%

There appears to be no correlation here between increasing size of the local and the presidents' answers. However, in this case the percentages are so small, there is little room for a significant spread.

Finally, members were asked if their religious beliefs affected most of their major decisions. Forty-four percent of them agreed (56 percent in non-bargaining states). The local presidents said:

Tiny = 45%  
Small = 27%  
Medium = 33%  
Large = 31%  
Jumbo = 21%

Again, the decrease is not consistent as you climb, but people at the top of the pyramid are less inclined to apply their religious beliefs to life decisions than those at the base.

Did these tendencies affect their views of Social Security? Members were asked how they felt "about the attempts to privatize portions of Social Security." Twelve percent favored it, 50 percent were opposed and 31 percent had no opinion. The local presidents saw it this way:

Tiny = 10% favor, 60% oppose, 28% no opinion  
Small = 3% favor, 77% oppose, 17% no opinion  
Medium = 8% favor, 83% oppose, 8% no opinion  
Large = 3% favor, 87% oppose, 10% no opinion  
Jumbo = 0% favor, 95% oppose, 4% no opinion

The surveys even broke down the total numbers into age groups. Of those members under the age of 45, 11 percent were in favor, 38 percent opposed, and 46 percent had no opinion. Of local presidents under the age of 45, 8 percent were in favor, 54 percent opposed, and 36 percent had no opinion.

These results lead to two conclusions: a) age affects one's view of Social Security privatization, but not as much as one's place in the union hierarchy does; and b) though there is no significant support within NEA for Social Security privatization, the degree of determination to defeat it rises as you climb up the pyramid.

The surveys also asked both members and local presidents to self-identify their political philosophies. This may well be the most controversial finding of the surveys, although it is consistent with previous surveys of NEA members.

Respondents were asked if they were conservative, tend conservative, liberal, tend liberal, or don't know. Fifty percent of NEA members said they were conservative or tend conservative (an amazing 61 percent of education support employees lean to the right). Only 40 percent described themselves as liberal or tend liberal.

Watch what happens to these percentages with the NEA local presidents:

Tiny = 44% conservative, 49% liberal  
Small = 40% conservative, 54% liberal  
Medium = 34% conservative, 63% liberal  
Large = 26% conservative, 70% liberal  
Jumbo = 14% conservative, 82% liberal

You can argue until doomsday about what is liberal and what is conservative, but these numbers are stark. If you are an NEA member, your local president is more likely to be a liberal than you are and those odds grow along with the size of your local.

Of course, local presidents are not at the top of the NEA pyramid. There are state and national representatives, and state and national executives. There is no comparable survey of their beliefs, but it isn't much of a stretch to infer that all these tendencies would continue as we moved further up. The local presidents' survey asks an intriguing question: "Would you say that the Association's political beliefs are more liberal, more conservative or about the same as yours?"

Remember that the larger the local is, the more likely the president is to be a liberal. Therefore one would expect the percentage of "about the same" to rise with the size of the local, and the percentage of "more liberal" to decrease. But the responses are not that easily interpreted:

Tiny = 33% NEA more liberal, 18% NEA more conservative, 44% about the same.  
Small = 26% NEA more liberal, 16% NEA more conservative, 54% about the same  
Medium = 34% NEA more liberal, 14% NEA more conservative, 51% about the same  
Large = 21% NEA more liberal, 16% NEA more conservative, 59% about the same  
Jumbo = 24% NEA more liberal, 19% NEA more conservative, 57% about the same

There are too many permutations to make a blanket conclusion about these numbers, but it is reasonably safe to say that even among a group of NEA members who are more liberal than average, there is a significant number who perceive the Association as a whole to be even more liberal.

The local president survey contains a number of tables on release time, work hours for union business, training, and other topics too pedestrian even for me. But there are a few extra tidbits worth noting:

\* The biggest barrier to joining the union (when employees are not required to join) is that it is "too expensive." Sixty percent of local presidents chose this reason; no other choice got a double-digit response.

\* As the size of the local increased, the presidents' assessment of local union reps declined. Only 49 percent of presidents of jumbo locals felt their reps were effective or very effective – even though the larger locals were more likely to provide training to reps on their duties.

\* As the size of the local increased, the presidents' assessment of internal communications declined. Only 13 percent of presidents of tiny locals thought their internal communications were ineffective, but 31 percent of presidents of jumbo locals thought so.

\* As the size of the local increased, the presidents' desire for additional training in member involvement increased. Only 27 percent of the presidents of tiny locals wanted such training, but 55 percent of the presidents of large and jumbo locals wanted it.

\* Of all NEA local affiliate presidents, 42 percent have been elected 4 times or more. Eighty-nine percent of NEA local affiliate presidents were unopposed in their last election.

Judging solely from the surveys, it would be unfair to characterize NEA as acting in opposition to the desires of its members. But the preponderance of the evidence suggests that the organization intensifies members' positions, sometimes to extremes, and always in a leftward direction. The larger a local affiliate is, the less likely the local affiliate president will reflect the demographics, philosophies and tendencies of his or her constituent members.

How do liberal union leaders get away with policies that might irk their more moderate rank-and-file? The best way is to frame these policies in such a way as to make them relevant to the rank-and-file's expressed priority: security. This is an easy sell when it comes to issues like budget cuts or tenure. It gets to be a problem when it comes to issues like charter schools, the 65 percent solution, or even paycheck protection or the No Child Left Behind Act. But turning vague uneasiness into organized opposition is a union specialty.

There are many lessons in these surveys for teachers, school administrators, legislators, and concerned citizens. But I believe the main one is that NEA is not a single-minded juggernaut being pushed along by willing acolytes from Miami to Anchorage. It is more like a ship, with its officers all steering to port, but with people at the oars capable of changing direction if they could only see outside.

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