



Annenberg Institute

BROWN UNIVERSITY

EdWorkingPaper No. 24-966

Staff and Faculty Unionizations in Higher Education, 2007-2023

Stephen Mirabello
Davidson College

Rylie C. Martin
Duke University

Christopher R. Marsicano
Davidson College

Labor organization efforts grew following the pandemic in the United States at tech companies, automakers, and even higher education institutions. This brief examines unionization trends at private colleges and universities from 2007 to 2023, revealing staff as the main force behind unionization attempts, followed by contingent faculty. The SEIU plays a significant role in representing college and university employees. This study underscores the importance of understanding historic unionization efforts, shedding light on often overlooked staff categories like maintenance and security.

VERSION: May 2025

Suggested citation: Mirabello, Stephen, Rylie C. Martin, and Christopher R. Marsicano. (2025). Staff and Faculty Unionizations in Higher Education, 2007-2023. (EdWorkingPaper: 24-966). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: <https://doi.org/10.26300/d2cg-px71>

Staff and Faculty Unionizations in Higher Education, 2007-2023

Stephen Mirabello ¹, Rylie C. Martin ², and Christopher R. Marsicano ³

Abstract: Labor organization efforts grew following the pandemic in the United States at tech companies, automakers, and even higher education institutions. This brief examines unionization trends at private colleges and universities from 2007 to 2023, revealing staff as the main force behind unionization attempts, followed by contingent faculty. The SEIU plays a significant role in representing college and university employees. This study underscores the importance of understanding historic unionization efforts, shedding light on often overlooked staff categories like maintenance and security.

Author Note: Stephen Mirabello is an incoming MSc student at the London School of Economics and Political Science and a Team Leader with the College Crisis Initiative (C2i). Rylie Martin is a Master of Public Policy student at Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy; she serves as the corresponding author. Christopher R. Marsicano is an Assistant Professor of Educational Studies and Public Policy and the Founding Director of C2i. Authors declare that they have no competing interests. The authors would like to thank Christopher T. Bennett for his helpful advice on early stages of this work.

Correspondence concerning this article should be directed to Rylie C. Martin, 201 Science Dr, Durham, NC 27708. Email: c2i@davidson.edu.



THE LONDON SCHOOL
OF ECONOMICS AND
POLITICAL SCIENCE

Duke | SANFORD SCHOOL of
PUBLIC POLICY

¹ London School of Economics and Political Science, College Crisis Initiative (C2i), Box 5000, Davidson, NC 28035. +1. 704. 894.3502

² Duke University Sanford School of Public Policy, 201 Science Dr, Durham, NC 27708

³ Davidson College, Educational Studies Department and the College Crisis Initiative (C2i), Box 5000, Davidson, NC 28035. +1. 704. 894.3065

Staff and Faculty Unionizations in Higher Education, 2007-2023

From Santa Clara faculty to Duke graduate students to Dartmouth basketball players, labor organizing is flourishing in higher education. Most prior research has focused on organizing efforts by contingent faculty, students, and other academic or administrative workers (Bennett, 2023; Herbert et al., 2024; Herbert et al., 2023; Herbert & Apkarian, 2017). These workers have driven some of the most successful recent organizing efforts of any industry (Herbert et al., 2023). Nevertheless, researchers have largely ignored food service, maintenance, campus security, and other employees who form the backbone of institutions' day-to-day operations.

This brief is a descriptive study of these understudied staff groups, exploring trends in unionization efforts at private American colleges and universities from 2007 through 2023. We examine the types of workers attempting to unionize, the unions seeking to represent them, and the characteristics of the states and universities where union elections occurred. We find a majority of unionization elections involved staff, while contingent faculty accounted for a third of organizing efforts. We also find the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) accounted for nearly three in ten unionization attempts. Finally, we observe a concentration of elections in five union-friendly states and a handful of well-resourced institutions.

Methodology

Using National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) election and case reports, we compiled an original dataset of union certification elections at private colleges and universities. If 30% of workers sign a petition, the NLRB oversees a certification election to determine if the workers will unionize. Our analysis spans January 2007-December 2023 (see supplemental materials for

methodology details). Because the NLRB certifies private sector elections, our dataset includes only private institutions. We coded voting units (employees seeking union representation) into nine categories: tenured/tenure-track faculty; contingent faculty; library; campus safety; residence life; maintenance; research assistants/fellows; food services; and other staff.

Unionization Trends

Workers filed 346 election petitions from 2007-2023, comprising 94,565 eligible voters at 186 colleges and universities. Petitions spiked in 2014-2017 and 2022-2023. Figure 1 panel A shows from 2014-2016, between 53% and 66% of election reports included contingent faculty. Overall, 32% of elections included contingent faculty, while 68% included only staff. Panel B shows the breakdown of elections by employee group. Campus safety (involved in 23% of elections) and maintenance (involved in 15% of elections) consistently appeared in voting units. Residence life and research assistants/fellows—categories more likely to involve student employees—emerged more frequently starting in 2021. Indeed, in 2022 and 2023, around 42% of union elections included students (see panel C). All 47 elections involving students from 2007-2023 resulted in a successful unionization. Panel D shows roughly 85% of the elections resulted in unionization, including 100% of elections in 2022 and 2023. Faculty and staff win elections at nearly identical rates, though the win rates of campus safety (76%) and maintenance (79%) workers trail those of residence life (100%), food services (100%), research assistants/fellows (96%), and other staff (89%).

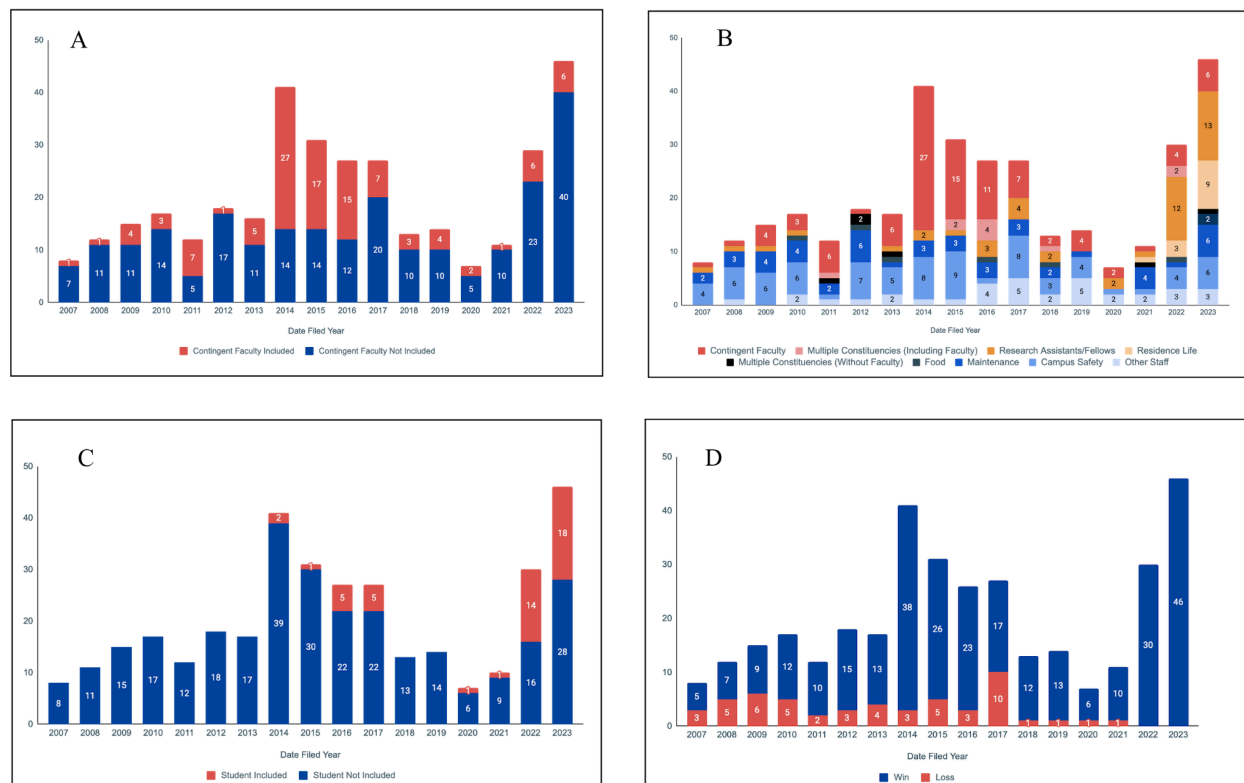
Workers seeking to unionize on college campuses sought support from a handful of national unions. The SEIU accounted for nearly 30% of all elections; no other union accounted for more than 7% of elections. SEIU received the most votes in 64 of 101 contingent faculty

elections. The predominant representative labor organization differs by staff type. Of 45 research assistant/fellow elections, the SEIU received the most votes in 14, while the International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America (UAW) received the most votes in 12. The International Union, Security, Police and Fire Professionals of America (SPFA) won the most votes in 23 of 80 campus safety worker elections. The Teamsters and International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE) each received the most votes in 11 of 48 maintenance worker elections. Of 13 residence life worker elections, the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU) received the most votes in eight. UNITE HERE won the most votes in four of eight food worker elections.

About seven in ten union elections were in New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, California, or Illinois. A small group of colleges and universities accounted for a disproportionate share of elections. Table 1 shows almost one in six elections occurred at just nine well-resourced institutions; the nine had a collective \$61,877,671,885 in endowment assets at the end of FY 2023. The most frequent voting unit in these 62 elections was research assistants/fellows, followed by contingent faculty and campus safety staff.

Figure 1

Trends in Unionization Efforts in Higher Education, 2007-2023



Note. The “Multiple Campus Constituencies” category reflects instances in which more than one campus constituency was co-listed on the voting unit. For example, in 2016, all full-time and part-time English Language Learning Program/ESL faculty and team members (adjunct instructors, instructors, ESL professors, ESL teachers, and ESL tutors) voted to unionize. Because the voting unit included both faculty and other staff, we categorized this voting unit as “Multiple Campus Constituencies (Including Faculty).” Panel C reflects the count of undergraduate and/or graduate students. The X-Axis in each panel is the year each petition was filed. The Y-Axis is the number of petitions in a given year.

Discussion and Conclusion

Staff members account for over two thirds of voting units in unionization attempts. Staff often have weaker job security and less flexibility than faculty, possibly leading them to seek additional protections from unionization and collective bargaining. Campus security, maintenance, and research assistants/fellows are the employee groups who have most frequently sought to unionize. Student research assistants/fellow and residence life workers have driven the

2022-2023 surge in staff unionizations—and they haven’t lost an election yet. Reasons for their success range from Covid-19’s impact on working conditions to strong support among young workers for unions (Herbert et al., 2023).

Contingent faculty accounted for another 30% of unionization attempts. Other scholars have observed the rise of unionization elections including graduate students and contingent faculty in the last decade (Bennett, 2023; Herbert et al., 2023; Herbert & Apkarian, 2017). A shift in the higher education labor market may explain this trend; institutions increasingly rely on the cheaper labor of graduate students and contingent faculty (Herbert & Apkarian, 2017). This spike in contingent faculty organizing from 2014-2016 corresponds with the start of SEIU’s efforts to unionize contingent faculty, including the Faculty Forward campaign (Bennett, 2023; Herbert et al., 2023). Around 70% of elections were concentrated in five union-friendly states, none of which have “right-to-work” laws that are associated with lower union membership (Dasgupta & Merchant, 2023).

Previous research has concentrated on contingent faculty and graduate student unionization. While we also document these elections, we shed light on other key campus staff constituencies and their efforts to unionize. Future research should identify the factors associated with unionizations in higher education and evaluate the impact of these unionizations on salaries and working conditions.

References

- Bennett, C. T. (2023). On the Tenuous Track: Unionization Efforts Among Contingent Faculty at Private Colleges and Universities. *Review of Higher Education*, 46(4), 485–515.
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/900570>
- Dasgupta, K. & Merchant, Z. (2023, September 08). *Understanding Workers' Financial Wellbeing in States with Right-to-Work Laws (FEDS Notes)*. Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System.
<https://www.federalreserve.gov/econres/notes/feds-notes/understanding-workers-financial-wellbeing-in-states-with-right-to-work-laws-20230908.html#:~:text=The%20share%20of%20unionized%20workers,states%20without%20a%20RTW%20regulation>
- Herbert, W. A. & Apkarian, J. (2017). Everything Passes, Everything Changes: Unionization and Collective Bargaining in Higher Education. *Perspectives on Work*.
<https://ssrn.com/abstract=3085214>
- Herbert, W. A., Apkarian, J., van der Naald, J. (2023). Union Organizing and Strikes in Higher Education: The 2022-2023 Upsurge in Historical Context. In R. Milkman & J. van der Naald, *State of the Unions 2023: A Profile of Organized Labor in New York City, New York State, and the United States*. CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies.
<https://slu.cuny.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Union-Density-2023.pdf>
- Herbert, W. A., Apkarian, J., van der Naald, J. (2024). *Directory of New Bargaining Agents and Contracts in Institutions of Higher Education*. National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions, Hunter College.
<https://research-data.hunter.cuny.edu/ncscbhep/2024DirectoryofBargainingAgentsandContractsinInstitutionsofHigherEducation.pdf>
- National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). (2024). *The NLRB Process*.
<https://www.nlr.gov/resources/nlr-process>

Table 1*Institutions with five or more union elections, 2007-2023*

IPEDS Unit ID	Institution	State	Number of Elections	AAU Member	Endowment Size
144050	University of Chicago	IL	13	Yes	\$8,552,674,498
123961	University of Southern California	CA	8	Yes	\$7,589,079,000
164988	Boston University	MA	7	Yes	\$3,138,326,000
168148	Tufts University	MA	6	Yes	\$2,405,498,000
190150	Columbia University	NY	6	Yes	\$13,642,667,000
147767	Northwestern University	IL	6	Yes	\$10,553,989,000
165662	Emerson College	MA	6	No	\$240,725,036
190415	Cornell University	NY	5	Yes	\$9,553,279,351
217156	Brown University	RI	5	Yes	\$6,201,434,000

Notes. Our dataset includes 346 elections from 2007-2023 with an institutional IPEDS Unit ID, year filed, and a coded voting unit. Those 346 elections occurred at a total of 186 institutions. 109 institutions had only one union election, comprising three fifths (58.6%) of the institutions in the dataset, but only around one third (31.5%) of the union elections. The remaining 77 each had more than one union election, accounting for around two thirds (68.5%) of all elections. This table lists the nine institutions with at least five union elections, representing around five percent of institutions in the dataset but almost a sixth (17.9%) of elections. The University of Chicago alone accounts for nearly one in 25 elections (13/346, 3.8%). Endowment figures represent the end of year totals for FY 2023. Emerson College is the lone institution with five or more unionization votes that is not a member of the Association of American Universities (AAU) and does not have an endowment over \$2 billion. It is, however, fewer than 10 miles from Tufts and Boston University and multiple attempts at Emerson happened shortly after attempts at those two institutions – occasionally involving the same labor organization. For example, Emerson contingent faculty held an election in 2015 following votes of contingent faculty in 2013 and 2014 at Tufts and 2014 at Boston University. Emerson residence life workers held a unionization vote in 2023, following a unionization attempt of residence life workers in 2022 at Tufts; both Emerson and Tufts workers voted to be represented by AFL-CIO affiliate, the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU), Local 153.

Supporting Online Material

Data and Methods

Borrowing from Bennett's (2023) methodology, we scanned NLRB election reports through March 2025 for the terms *college*, *university*, *institute*, and *school* to identify elections held at higher education institutions. We collected data on Certification of Representative Petitions (RC petitions) filed with the NLRB. Employees or a labor organization may file an RC petition for a representation election after collecting signatures of at least 30% of workers in the potential bargaining unit (NLRB, 2024). After the NLRB receives the RC petition, eligible employees vote in a secret ballot election to unionize a workplace. After a union wins a majority of votes, the employer must recognize the union as the exclusive bargaining representative. Following a successful certification election, employees must still reach a collective bargaining agreement with the employer.

NLRB reports offer valuable insights into unionization efforts but only include private colleges and universities. We chose to focus on private institutions because of the availability of reliable data and the fact that private, not-for-profit institutions largely drove recent faculty unionization growth (Herbert et al., 2024). Our search sometimes yielded hospitals, museums, or research entities affiliated with the college or university. We included these entities in the dataset only if they are governed by the same board as the college or university. Our dataset does not include private hospitals governed by public higher education institutions. We did not collect data on RM petitions, RD petitions, or elections that were withdrawn. Employers file RM petitions to demonstrate that the currently recognized union has lost its majority status (NLRB, 2024). Employees file RD petitions when they no longer want to be represented by the currently recognized union (NLRB, 2024).

We consolidated cases with duplicate case numbers, unless multiple voting units were involved in the election. When there was a discrepancy between an election report and a case report, we used the information listed in the case report, as it was typically more detailed. We collected data on all union elections from 2001-2023, but our analysis focuses on data from 2007-2023. Many election reports from 2001-2006 were missing corresponding case reports, which include the year workers filed the petition, voting unit, ballot count, and the number of void and challenged votes.

We coded the employees into nine voting unit categories. Table S1 shows examples of employee titles and how we categorized them. There is some potential overlap between voting unit categories. For example, some institutions consider librarians as faculty with a role in shared governance. In our dataset, we coded librarians as staff; they are not included in faculty counts. We aimed to develop mutually exclusive voting unit categories, but some overlap may exist.

We cross-checked our data with information on institutional websites to confirm we correctly identified student employees. For example, if a case report listed “Residence Advisors” in the voting unit, we verified residence advisors at the institution were student employees, not full-time staff members. Figure 1 panel C shows eight RC petitions filed from 2014-2016 that include students. These cases did not appear on election reports until at least 2016 when the NLRB ruled in *Columbia University*, 364 NLRB No. 90 that “student teaching assistants” and “student research assistants” at private institutions were legally considered employees under the National Labor Relations Act (Herbert & Apkarian, 2017).

We also cross-checked our data with Bennett’s (2023) Table 1 “Certification Elections for Contingent Faculty Unions, 2001-2018” to ensure that we did not miss any elections involving

contingent faculty. We added one contingent faculty election from Bennett (2023) that was not listed in the 2014 election report.

We found three instances where contingent faculty and tenured/tenure-track faculty were co-listed on the voting unit. In all three cases, the voting unit included “full-time faculty.” We coded full-time faculty as tenured/tenure-track faculty if IPEDS confirmed the institution had a tenure system in the year of the election. In the 1980 *NLRB v. Yeshiva University* case, the Supreme Court ruled that faculty at Yeshiva University were de facto managerial employees and therefore not subject to the protections of the National Labor Relations Act. Following this ruling, unionization efforts among tenure-track faculty at private colleges and universities slowed (Herbert & Apkarian 2017). The NLRB’s 2014 ruling in the *Pacific Lutheran University* case changed the standard that Yeshiva set for determining if faculty are managerial employees (Herbert et al., 2024). The *Pacific Lutheran University* ruling may help explain why the petitions including tenured/tenure-track faculty only appeared in the dataset after 2014.

We found seven instances in which postdoctoral scholars were specifically listed on the voting unit. In four of those cases—the California Institute of Technology, Columbia University, Weill Cornell Medical College, and Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai—we classified postdoctoral scholars as research assistants due to the clear research nature of their work in the petitions. In the remaining three cases, postdoctoral scholars were specifically listed on the voting unit alongside contingent faculty. In those cases, we counted postdoctoral scholars as contingent faculty. Due to the short-term nature of postdoctoral scholar employment, it is likely that other voting units for contingent faculty and research fellows include postdoctoral scholars without explicitly mentioning them by job title in the voting unit.

Table S1*Voting Unit Categorization*

Voting Unit Categories	Examples
Tenured/Tenure-Track Faculty	Full-time faculty (validated by IPEDS), tenured faculty, tenure-track faculty
Contingent Faculty	Instructor, part-time faculty, lecturers, unranked, professor of the practice, clinical faculty, contingent faculty, adjunct faculty
Library	Employees of the library, associate librarians, library techs/assistants/clerks
Campus Safety	Police, security, guards, emergency service, sergeants, firefighters
Residence Life	Residence advisor, housing assistant, resident assistant
Maintenance Staff	Custodians, groundskeepers, repair/maintenance, facilities assistants, parking monitors
Research Assistants/Fellows	Teaching assistant, research assistant, teaching fellow, medical assistant, laboratory technician
Food Service Staff	Cashiers, food servers, catering operations, dining services staff, bakers, cooks
Other Staff	Administrative coordinator, production/marketing coordinator, business services, web developer, communications staff, clerical employees

Table S2*Union Elections by Voting Unit*

Voting Unit	Win	Loss	Totals
Contingent Faculty	85	16	101
Library	1	0	1
Campus Safety	61	19	80
Residence Life	13	0	13
Maintenance	38	10	48
Other Staff	30	4	34
Research Assistants/Fellows	43	2	45
Food Service	8	0	8
Contingent Faculty + TT Faculty	2	0	2
Contingent Faculty + TT Faculty + Library	1	0	1
Contingent Faculty + Library	3	0	3
Contingent Faculty + Other Staff	2	1	3
Contingent Faculty + Research Assistants/Fellows	1	0	1
Library + Other Staff	1	0	1
Library + Other Staff + Food Service	1	0	1
Maintenance + Campus Safety	1	0	1
Maintenance + Other Staff	1	1	2
Maintenance + Food Service	1	0	1
Totals	293	53	346

Note. 346 reflects the number of elections for which we have coded voting units and complete case report information from 2007-2023. TT refers to tenured/tenure-track.

Table S3*Union Elections by Collapsed Voting Units*

Voting Unit	Win	Loss	Totals
Contingent Faculty	85	16	101
Research Assistants/Fellows	43	2	45
Residence Life	13	0	13
Food	8	0	8
Maintenance	38	10	48
Campus Safety	61	19	80
Other Staff	31	4	35
Multiple Constituencies (Including Faculty)	9	1	10
Multiple Constituencies (Without Faculty)	5	1	6
Totals	293	53	346

Note. 346 reflects the number of elections from 2007-2023 for which we have coded voting units and complete case report information.

Individual Graphs from Figure 1

Figure S1

Number of Union Elections Including Contingent Faculty, 2007-2023 (Figure 1A)

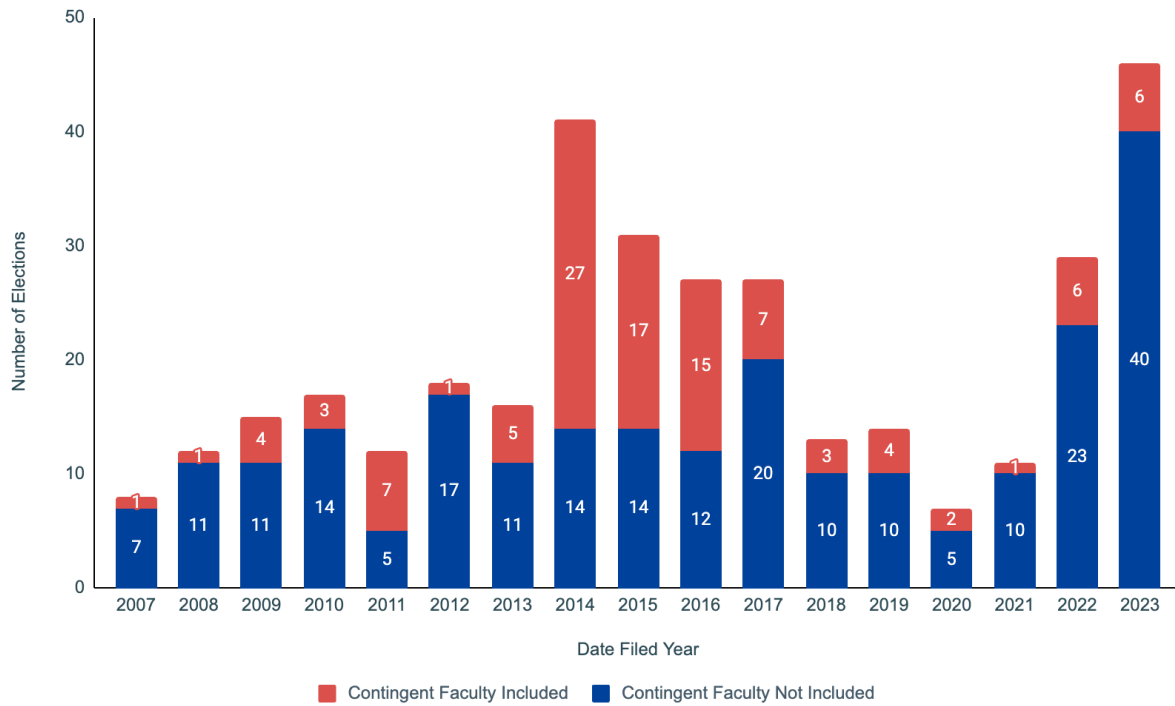
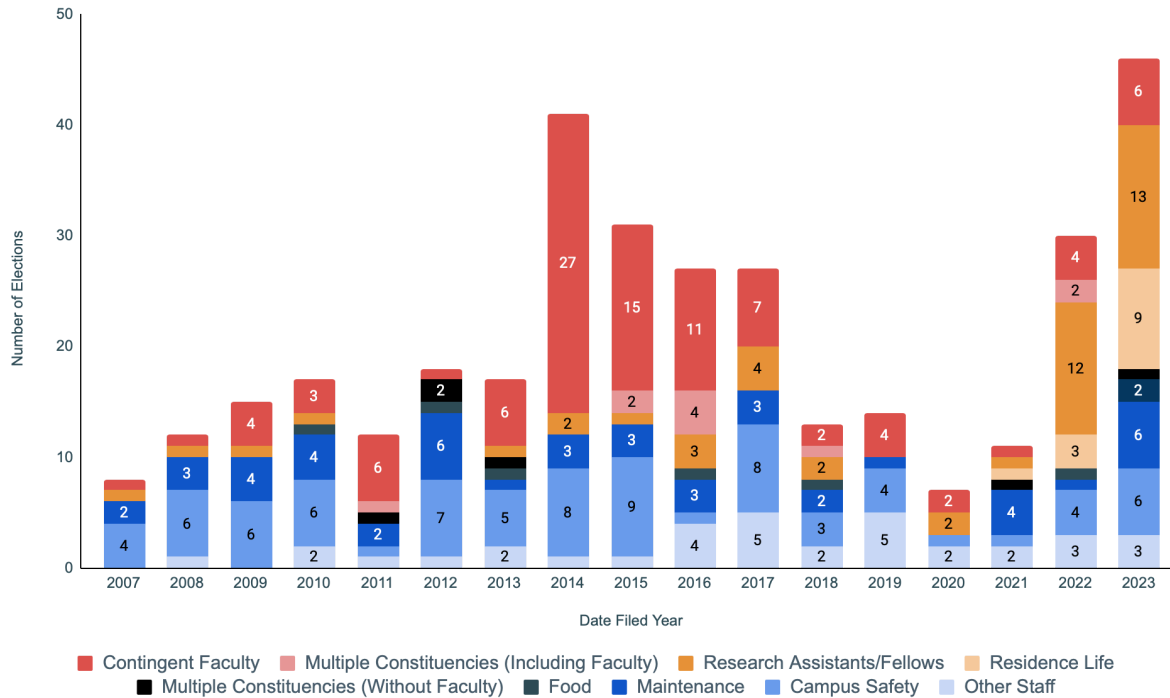


Figure S2

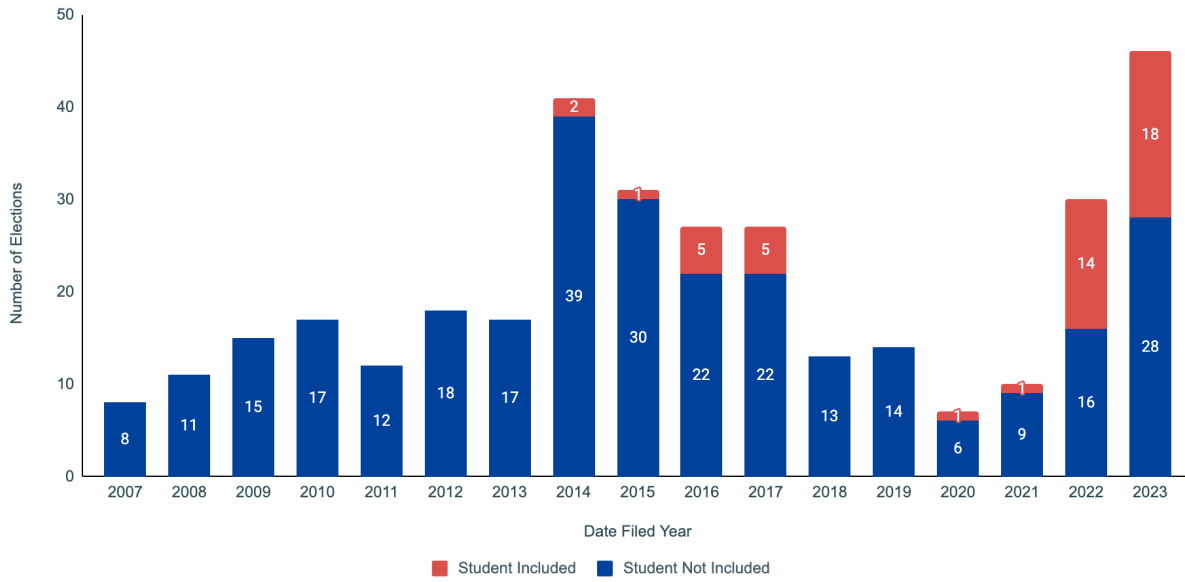
Voting Units Included in Election Petitions, 2007-2023 (Figure 1B)



Note. The “Multiple Constituencies” categories reflect instances in which more than one campus constituency was co-listed on the voting unit. For example, in 2016, all full-time and part-time English Language Learning Program/ESL faculty and team members (adjunct instructors, instructors, ESL professors, ESL teachers, and ESL tutors) voted to unionize. Because the voting unit included both faculty and other staff, we categorized this voting unit as “Multiple Constituencies (Including Faculty).”

Figure S3

Number of Union Elections Including Students, 2007-2023 (Figure 1C)



Note. The term “student” includes undergraduate and graduate students.

Figure S4

Number of Union Elections by Result, 2007-2023 (Figure 1D)

