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## Staff and Faculty Unionizations in Higher Education, 2007-2023

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Labor organizing efforts grew following the Covid-19 pandemic in American higher education institutions. This research brief examines unionization trends at private colleges and universities from 2007 through 2023, revealing staff as the main force behind unionization attempts, followed by contingent faculty. SEIU plays a significant role in representing college and university employees. A disproportionate number of elections occurred in a handful of union-friendly states and well-resourced institutions. This study underscores the importance of understanding historic unionization efforts, shedding light on often overlooked staff categories like maintenance and security.

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## Staff and Faculty Unionization Efforts in Private Higher Education, 2007-2023

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**Abstract:** Labor organizing efforts grew following the Covid-19 pandemic in American higher education institutions. This research brief examines unionization trends at private colleges and universities from 2007 through 2023, revealing staff as the main force behind unionization attempts, followed by contingent faculty. SEIU plays a significant role in representing college and university employees. A disproportionate number of elections occurred in a handful of union-friendly states and well-resourced institutions. This study underscores the importance of understanding historic unionization efforts, shedding light on often overlooked staff categories like maintenance and security.

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## **Staff and Faculty Unionization Efforts in Private Higher Education, 2007-2023**

From Santa Clara faculty to Duke graduate students to Dartmouth basketball players, labor organizing is flourishing in higher education. 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 descriptive research brief explores trends in unionization efforts among understudied groups 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 states and universities where union elections occurred. We find more than two thirds of unionization elections involved staff, while contingent faculty accounted for less than a third. We also find the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) accounted for 30% of unionization attempts. Finally, we observe a concentration of elections in a handful of union-friendly states and well-resourced institutions.

### **Methodology**

Using National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) election and case reports, we compiled an original dataset of non-withdrawn union certification elections at private colleges and universities. Because the NLRB certifies private sector elections, our dataset doesn't include public institutions. 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). 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**

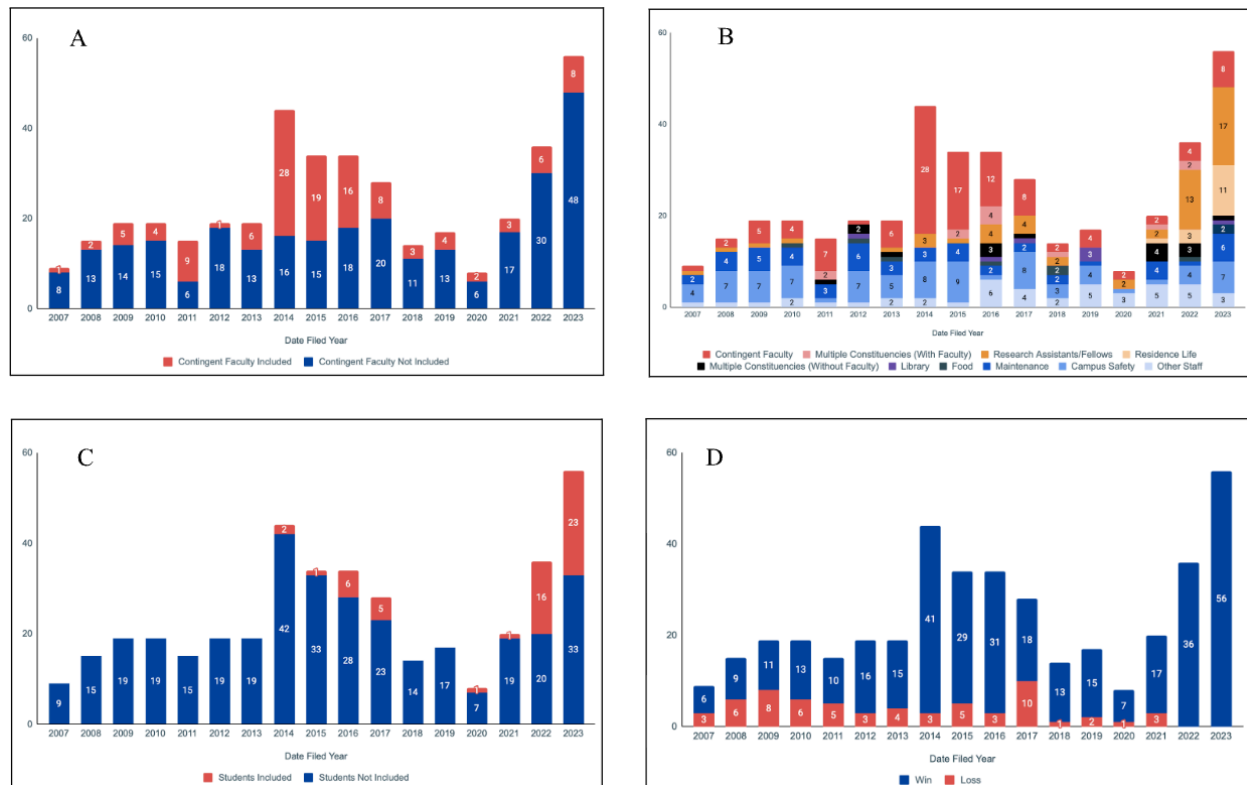
Workers filed 406 election petitions from 2007-2023, comprising 107,242 eligible voters at 196 colleges and universities. Petitions spiked in 2014-2017 and 2022-2023. Figure 1 panel A shows from 2014-2016, between 47% and 64% of election reports included contingent faculty. Overall, 31% of elections included contingent faculty, while 69% included only staff. Panel B shows the breakdown of elections by employee group. Campus safety (involved in 21% of elections) and maintenance (16% of elections) consistently appeared in voting units. Residence life and research assistants/fellows—categories likely to involve student employees—emerged more frequently starting in 2021. In 2022 and 2023, around 42% of union elections included students (panel C). Of 55 elections involving students from 2007-2023, 54 resulted in successful unionization. Panel D shows roughly 84% 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 (81%) workers trail those of residence life (100%), food services (100%), research assistants/fellows (94%), and other staff (87%).

Workers on college campuses sought support from a handful of unions. SEIU accounted for 30% of elections; no other union accounted for more than 7%. SEIU received the most votes in 70 of 113 contingent faculty elections. The predominant representative labor organization differs by staff type. Of 53 research assistant/fellow elections, SEIU received the most votes in 17, while the International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America (UAW) received the most votes in 14. Of 84 campus safety worker elections, the International Union, Security, Police and Fire Professionals of America (SPFA) won the most votes in 23 and the American Coalition of Public Safety (ACOPS) won the most votes in 18. The International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE) and Teamsters each received the most votes in 11 of 52 maintenance worker elections. Of 15 residence life staff elections, the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU) received the most votes in eight. UNITE HERE won the most votes in four of nine food worker elections.

Nearly 70% of union elections were in New York, Massachusetts, California, Illinois, or Pennsylvania. A small group of institutions accounted for a disproportionate share of elections. Table 1 shows almost one in four elections occurred at just 12 well-resourced institutions with \$91,169,375,125 in collective endowment assets in FY 2023. The most frequent voting unit in these 99 elections was research assistants/fellows.

**Figure 1**

*Trends in unionization efforts in higher education, 2007-2023*



*Note.* The “Multiple Campus Constituencies” categories in panel B reflect instances in which more than one campus constituency was co-listed on the voting unit. For example, in one 2016 election, 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).” In panel C, the term “students” includes undergraduate and 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

Staff members accounted 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,

research assistants/fellows, and maintenance are the employee groups who have most frequently sought to unionize. Student research assistants/fellows and residence life workers drove the 2022-2023 surge in staff unionizations—and they’ve only lost one non-withdrawn election. Reasons for their success range from Covid-19’s impact on working conditions to young workers’ pro-union attitudes (Herbert et al., 2023).

Contingent faculty accounted for another 31% of unionization attempts. Other scholars have observed the rise of unionization elections among 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). The 2014-2016 spike in contingent faculty organizing corresponds with the start of SEIU’s efforts to unionize contingent faculty, including the Faculty Forward campaign (Bennett, 2023; Herbert et al., 2023).

Though federal law governs private sector unionizations, state policies can influence organizing conditions. Seven in ten elections were concentrated in five union-friendly states; none have “right-to-work” laws that are associated with lower union membership (Dasgupta & Merchant, 2023).

Previous research has focused on contingent faculty and student unionization. While we also document these elections, we shed light on other key campus staff constituencies and their efforts to unionize. Our dataset can enable future research on the factors associated with unionizations in higher education and their impact on salaries and working conditions.

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

<b>IPEDS Unit ID</b>	<b>Institution</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Number of Elections</b>	<b>AAU Member</b>	<b>Endowment Size</b>
144050	University of Chicago	IL	14	Yes	\$8,552,674,498
164988	Boston University	MA	11	Yes	\$3,138,326,000
165662	Emerson College	MA	11	No	\$240,725,036
123961	University of Southern California	CA	10	Yes	\$7,589,079,000
217156	Brown University	RI	8	Yes	\$6,201,434,000
190150	Columbia University	NY	7	Yes	\$13,642,667,000
182670	Dartmouth College	NH	7	Yes	\$7,930,125,009
168148	Tufts University	MA	7	Yes	\$2,405,498,000
190415	Cornell University	NY	6	Yes	\$9,553,279,351
147767	Northwestern University	IL	6	Yes	\$10,553,989,000
217493	Rhode Island School of Design	RI	6	No	\$398,637,231
215062	University of Pennsylvania	PA	6	Yes	\$20,962,941,000

*Notes.* Our dataset includes 406 elections from 2007-2023 with an institutional IPEDS Unit ID, year filed, and a coded voting unit. Those 406 elections occurred at 196 institutions. 113 institutions had only one union election, comprising nearly three fifths (57.7%) of the institutions in the dataset, but only around one quarter (27.8%) of the union elections. The remaining 83 each had more than one union election, accounting for nearly three quarters (72.2%) of elections. This table lists the 12 institutions with at least six union elections, representing around six percent of institutions in the dataset but almost a quarter (24.4%) of elections. The University of Chicago alone accounted for nearly one in 30 elections (3.4%). Endowment figures represent the end of year totals for FY 2023. Emerson College and the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) are the lone institutions with more than five unionization votes that are not members of the Association of American Universities (AAU) and do not have an endowment over \$2 billion. Emerson is, however, fewer than 10 miles from Tufts University and Boston University and multiple attempts at Emerson happened shortly after attempts at those two institutions, at times involving the same labor organization. Emerson contingent faculty held elections in 2015 and 2017 following votes by contingent faculty in 2013 and 2014 at Tufts and 2014 and 2015 at Boston University. Emerson residence life student workers held a unionization vote in 2023, following a unionization attempt of residence life student workers in 2022 at Tufts; both Emerson and Tufts workers voted to be represented by the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU), Local 153. While not a powerhouse research university, RISD is among the nation's most prestigious arts schools and shares a close partnership with neighboring Brown University.

## Supporting Online Material

### Data and Methods

Borrowing from Bennett's (2023) methodology, we scanned NLRB election reports through June 2025 for the terms *college*, *university*, *institute*, and *school* to identify elections held at higher education institutions. We also used NLRB's Advanced Data Search to search election results for the same four terms, identifying several dozen elections not listed in election reports. We cross-checked our data with Bennett's (2023) Table 1 "Certification Elections for Contingent Faculty Unions, 2001-2018" to ensure we did not miss elections involving contingent faculty.

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. If 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 because private, not-for-profit institutions largely drove recent faculty unionization growth (Herbert et al., 2024). Our search sometimes yielded hospitals, museums, radio stations, 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 withdrawn elections. Employers file RM petitions to demonstrate 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. In some elections involving multiple voting units (e.g., 13-RC-228679 and 01-RC-316836), NLRB election reports consolidated the units' vote counts and corresponding case reports failed to distinguish vote counts by unit. In these cases, we consolidated the cases. 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 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 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 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 eight instances in which postdoctoral scholars were specifically listed on the voting unit. In four of those cases—02-RC-225405, 02-RC-295559, 02-RC-327093, and 21-RC-331056—we classified postdoctoral scholars as research assistants due to the clear research nature of their work in the petitions. In another three cases (01-RC-330948, 05-RC-139478, and 13-RC-164309), postdoctoral scholars were specifically listed on the voting unit alongside contingent faculty. In those cases, we counted postdoctoral scholars as contingent

faculty. Finally, in Boston University (01-RC-321901), postdoctoral scholars were listed alone in the election “to determine if they desired to be included in the existing unit of non-tenured or non-tenure-track lecturers, senior lecturers, master lecturers, and instructors currently represented by Service Employees International Union, Local 509.” As a result, we also coded these postdoctoral scholars as contingent faculty. Due to the short-term nature of postdoctoral scholar employment, other voting units for contingent faculty and research fellows likely include postdoctoral scholars without explicitly mentioning them by job title in the voting unit.

**Table S1***Voting Unit Categorization*

<b>Voting Unit Categories</b>	<b>Examples</b>
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	Custodians, groundskeepers, repair/maintenance, facilities assistants, parking monitors
Research Assistants/Fellows	Teaching assistant, research assistant, teaching fellow, medical assistant, laboratory technician
Food Service	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*

<b>Voting Unit</b>	<b>Win</b>	<b>Loss</b>	<b>Totals</b>
Contingent Faculty	94	19	113
Library	6	1	7
Campus Safety	64	20	84
Residence Life	15	0	15
Maintenance	42	10	52
Other Staff	39	6	45
Research Assistants/Fellows	50	3	53
Food Service	9	0	9
Contingent Faculty + TT Faculty	2	0	2
Contingent Faculty + TT Faculty + Library	1	0	1
Contingent Faculty + Library	3	0	3
Contingent Faculty + Library + Residence Life + Maintenance + Other Staff + Food Service	0	1	1
Contingent Faculty + Other Staff	2	2	4
Contingent Faculty + Research Assistants/Fellows	1	0	1
Library + Residence Life + Maintenance + Other Staff	1	0	1
Library + Maintenance + Other Staff	2	0	2
Library + Other Staff	3	0	3
Library + Other Staff + Food Service	1	0	1
Residence Life + Other Staff + Research Assistants/Fellows	1	0	1
Maintenance + Campus Safety	1	0	1
Maintenance + Other Staff	4	1	5
Maintenance + Food Service	1	0	1
Other Staff + Research Assistants/Fellows	1	0	1
<b>Totals</b>	<b>343</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>406</b>

*Note.* 406 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*

<b>Voting Unit</b>	<b>Win</b>	<b>Loss</b>	<b>Totals</b>
Contingent Faculty	94	19	113
Library	6	1	7
Campus Safety	64	20	84
Residence Life	15	0	15
Maintenance	42	10	52
Other Staff	39	6	45
Research Assistants/Fellows	50	3	53
Food Service	9	0	9
Multiple Constituencies (Including Faculty)	9	3	10
Multiple Constituencies (Without Faculty)	15	1	16
<b>Totals</b>	<b>343</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>406</b>

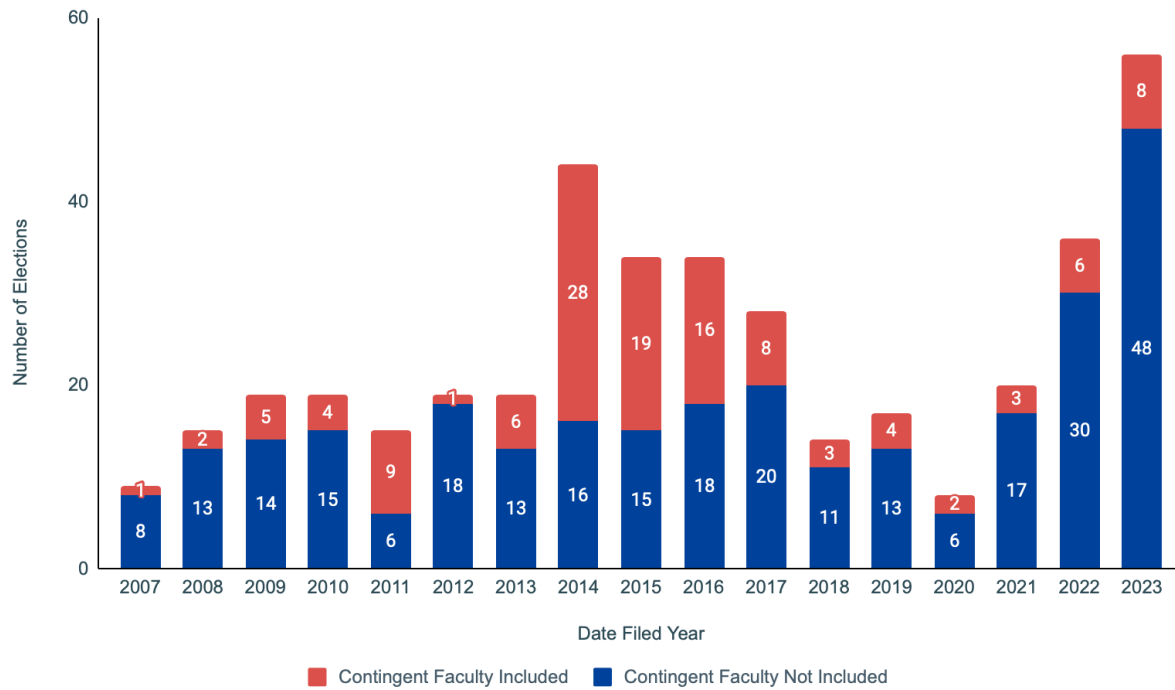
*Note.* 406 reflects the number of elections from 2007-2023 for which we have coded voting units and complete case report information.



## Individual Graphs from Figure 1

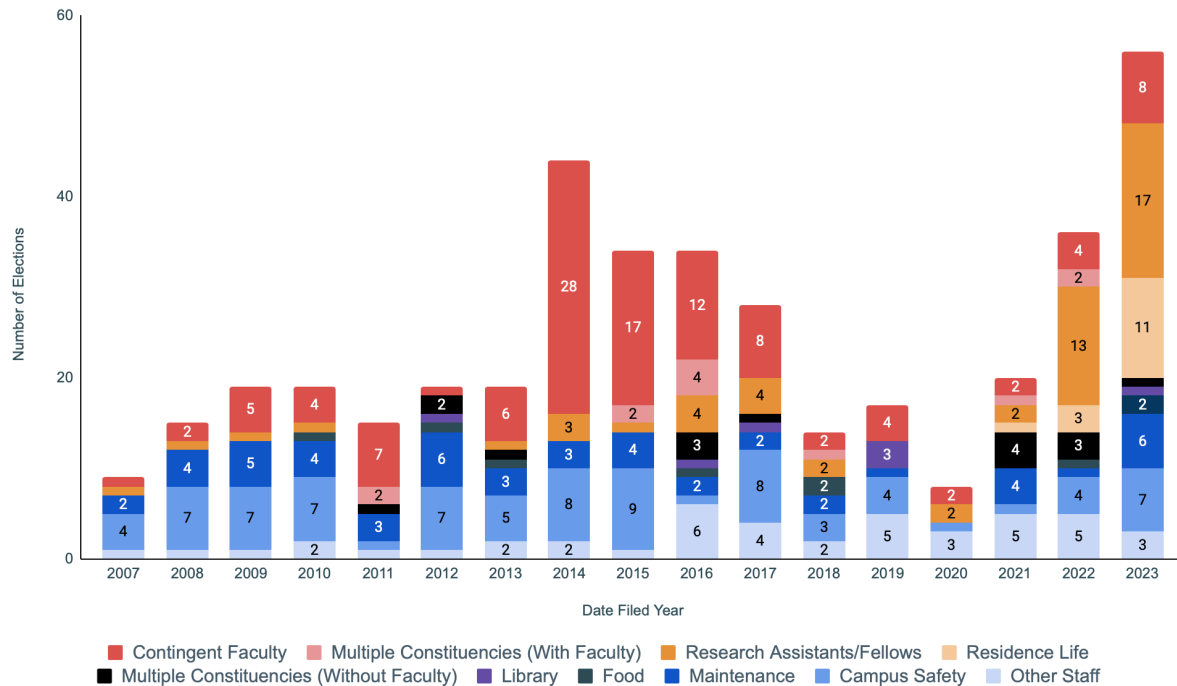
**Figure S1**

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



**Figure S2**

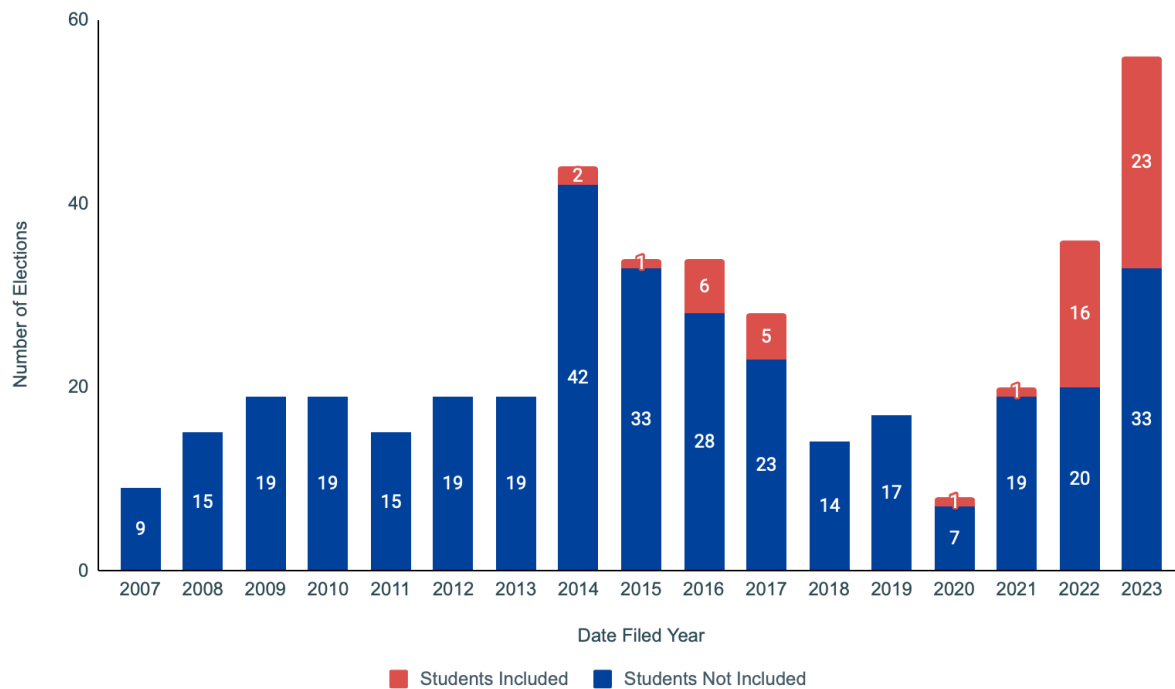
*Voting Units Included in Election Petitions, 2007-2023 (Figure 1B)*



*Note.* The “Multiple Constituencies” categories reflect instances in which more than one campus constituency was co-listed on the voting unit. For example, in one 2016 election, 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 “students” includes undergraduate and graduate students.

**Figure S4**

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

