



Employment patterns in political organizations

By Douglas Himes

The political organizations industry—which includes political parties, political action committees (PACs), political campaign organizations, and political organizations and clubs that are engaged in promoting the interests of national, state, or local political parties or candidates—employs only a small portion of the U.S. workforce. Over the 2001–14 period, political organizations employment has averaged 8,900, although it varies considerably from year to year. In recent years, when employment in political organizations has been at its highest, it made up about 0.9 percent of employment in the membership associations and organizations industry. That industry in turn accounted for about 1.0 percent of all wage and salary civilian employment. Thus, even when it was at its

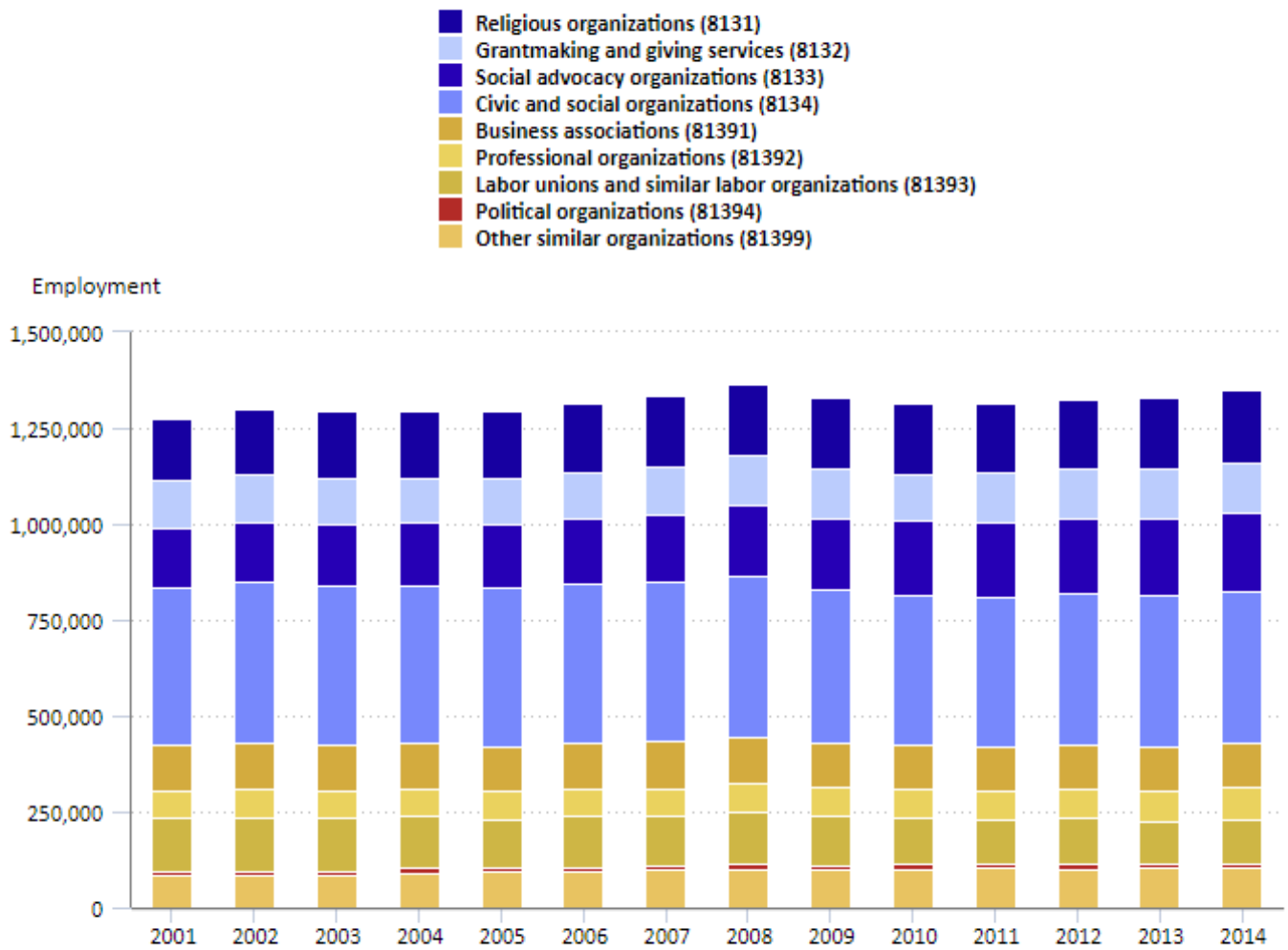
highest employment level in recent years, the political organizations industry still employed less than 1/100 of 1.0 percent, or less than 1 in 10,000, of all civilian wage and salary workers. (See chart 1.)¹

This **Beyond the Numbers** article takes a look at employment and wage data for the political organizations industry from the Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW) program.² This industry is strongly affected by the U.S. election calendar, its employment and wages varying accordingly. Anyone interested in a career in political organizations might well heed the lesson presented by these data: opportunities in this industry may be abundant one year and scarce the next.

The 4-year political cycle

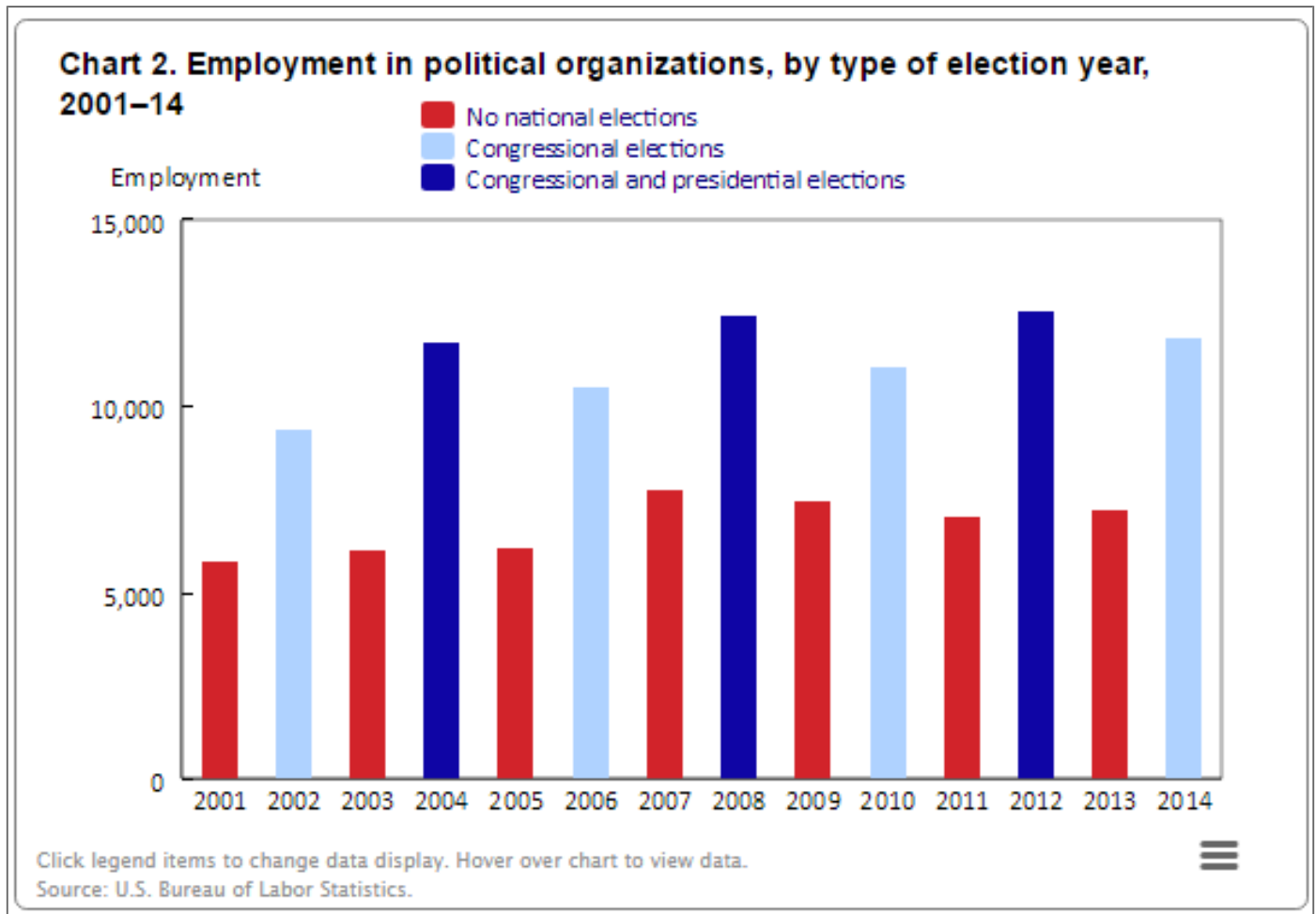
Employment in many industries increases or decreases about the same time each year because of holidays, the seasonal weather of [summer](#) and [winter](#), school and sports [schedules](#), and even the [deadline to file income tax returns](#). Unlike most other industries, the political organizations industry is affected by the congressional and presidential election calendar. Congressional elections occur in all even-numbered years. Presidential elections occur in even-numbered years divisible by 4. (Thus, a year with a presidential election is also a year with a Summer Olympics and is usually a leap year with an extra day at the end of February.) Odd-numbered years have no presidential elections and few, if any, congressional elections (although special elections are sometimes held to fill congressional vacancies). Elections for state, county, and municipal offices are often, but not always, held on the same day as congressional and presidential elections. National, state, and municipal elections held on the same day produce an easily discernible effect on employment in the political organizations industry at the national level. Elections scheduled for odd-numbered ("off") years, usually at the municipal level, may be discernible at the state, metropolitan area, or county level.

Chart 1. Employment in membership associations and organizations and its component industries, annual average, 2001–14



Click legend items to change data display. Hover over chart to view data.
 Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

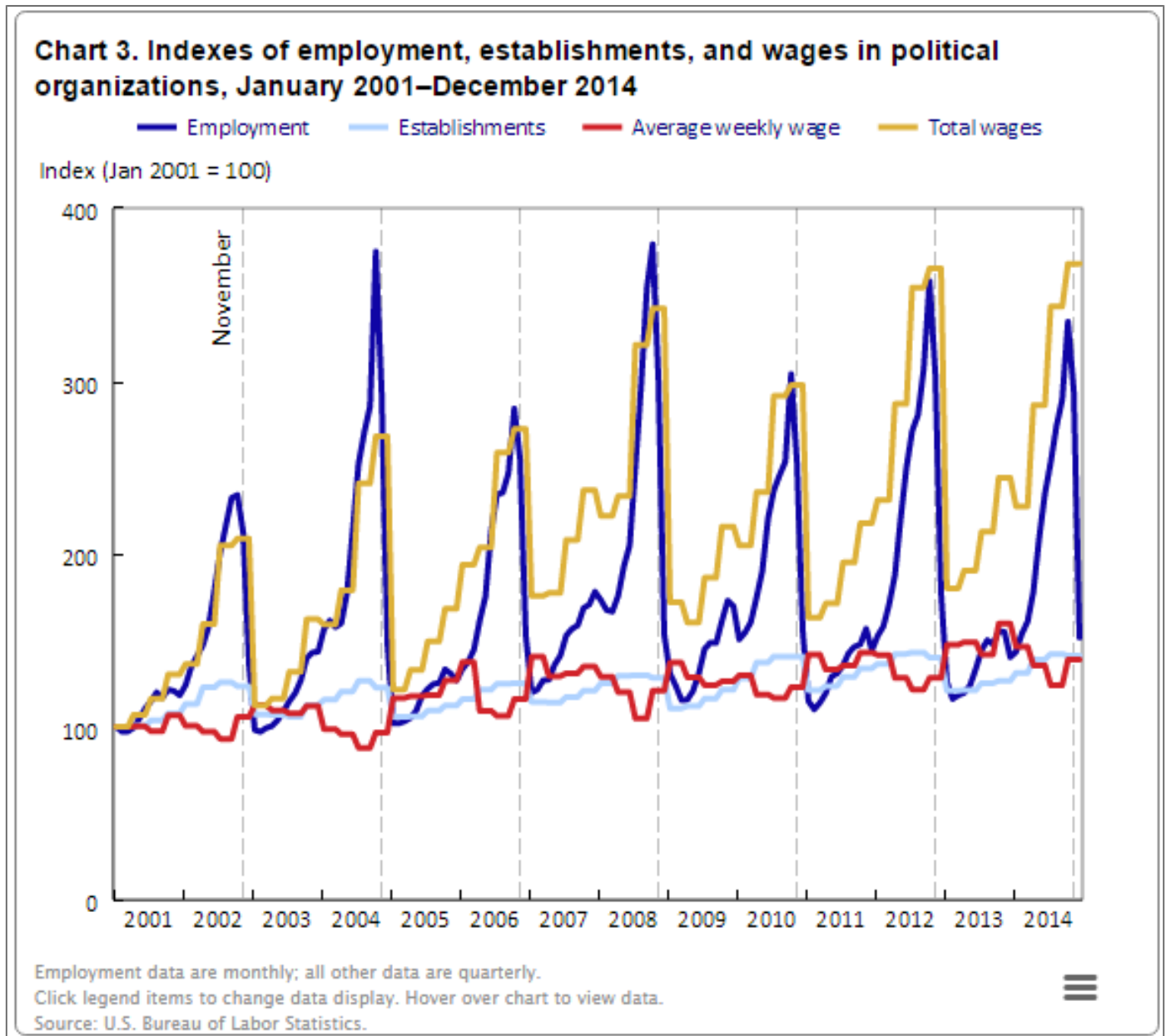
As shown in chart 2, employment in political organizations averaged 11,775 during the presidential election year of 2004; the average was 12,507 in 2008 and 12,607 in 2012. Employment in years with congressional elections (but no presidential elections) showed more of an increase over the 2001–14 period. Employment increased from 9,395 in 2002 to 10,543 in 2006 and then to 11,102 in 2010 and 11,886 in 2014. Average annual employment in political organizations during odd-numbered years has ranged from 5,866 in 2001 to 7,808 in 2007. Since 2007, employment in odd-numbered years has averaged 7,464 or less. In 2007, political organizations might have been especially keen to hire workers in preparation for the presidential election of 2008 (which did not have an incumbent running for reelection). Employment in 2009 and onward may have been affected by the 2007–09 recession.



The effects of the presidential and congressional election calendar are clearer in monthly and quarterly data. Presidential and (regularly scheduled) congressional elections are always held on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November, meaning that they always occur on November 2, November 8, or a day between those dates.

In even-numbered years over the 2001–14 period, political organizations employment has peaked in October (because most of November is after Election Day). Employment has been higher in Octobers with both presidential and congressional elections than in Octobers with only congressional elections. October employment reached 20,207 in 2008, 16,025 in 2010, 19,073 in 2012, and 17,819 in 2014. Steep decreases have occurred after these election-year peaks. Employment lows occurred during the first three months of odd-numbered years (6,148 in March 2009, 5,866 in February 2011, and 6,187 in February 2013). Employment rose during the remaining months of odd-numbered years.

Chart 3 shows that the number of establishments (the physical locations where employees work, such as offices and call centers) and the total wages paid to employees exhibit a similar pattern: peaks in the third or fourth quarter of even-numbered years, followed by sharp declines and lows in the first quarter of the following year and then gradual increases to the next election peak.

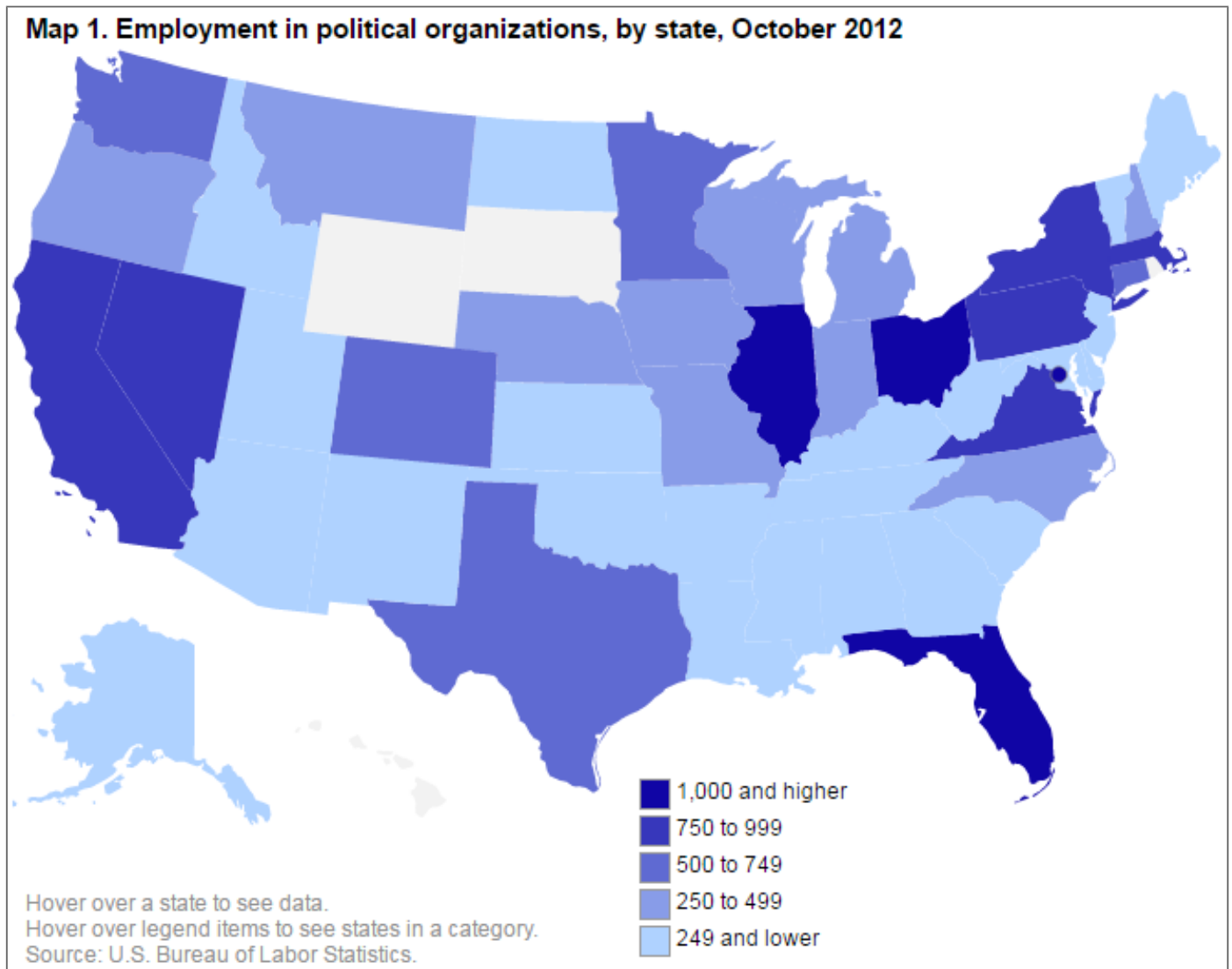


The average weekly wage in the political organizations industry did not follow this pattern. The average weekly wage reached lows around Election Day, then increased just after elections, and varied during other periods. Large numbers of temporary workers hired for relatively low wages in the months before an election caused the average to decrease. The workers who were employed during both election years and off years were relatively higher paid. When there were fewer lower paid workers, the average rose. Average wages in political organizations (like wages in most industries) have generally increased over the past dozen years. Since the 2008 election, average weekly wages have ranged from \$687 to \$1,047.

Employment by state

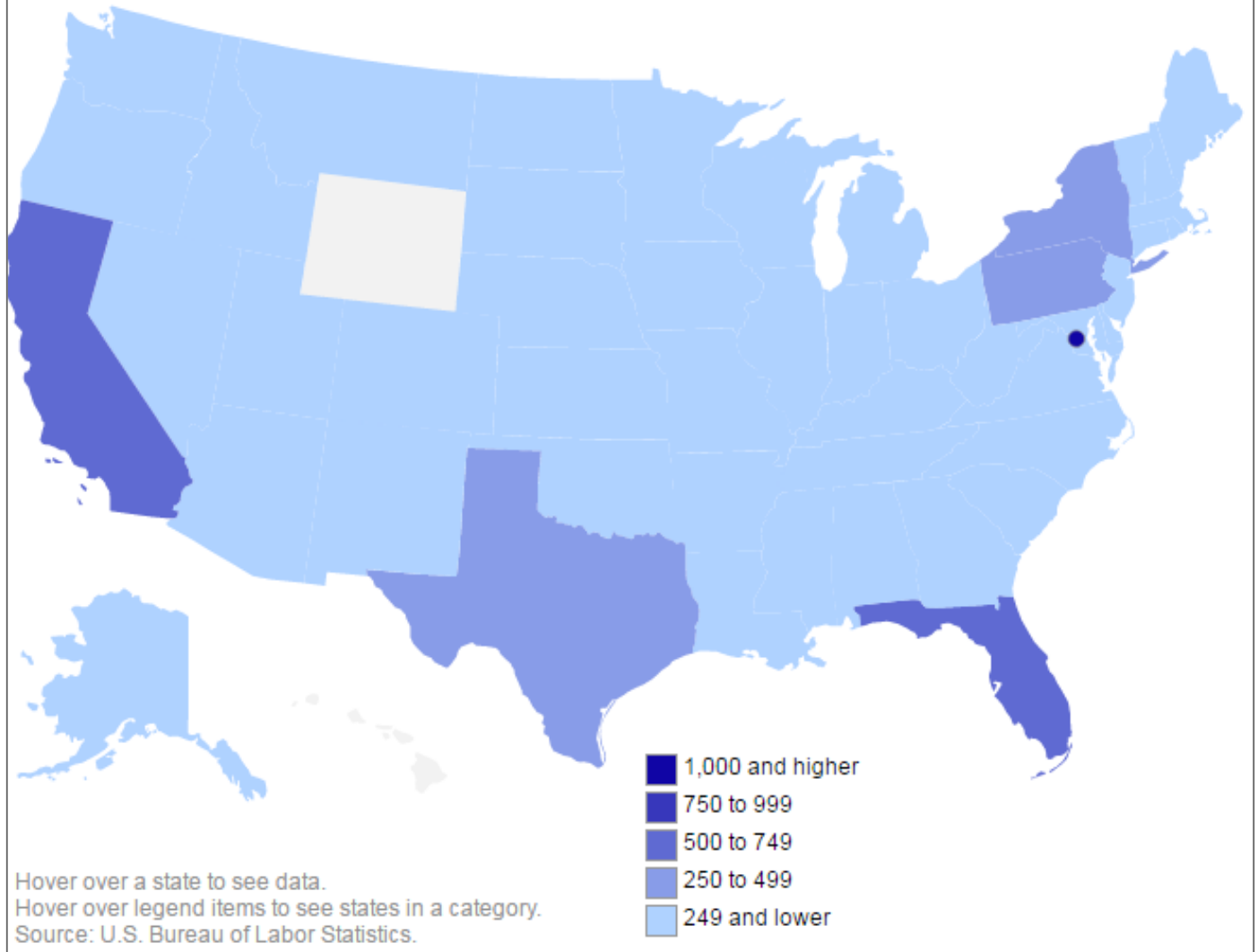
Employment in political organizations reached its recent peak (19,073) in October 2012, just before the congressional and presidential elections in November of that year. During October, only three states—Florida,

Ohio, and Illinois—had employment of over 1,000 in this industry (1,571; 1,273; and 1,164, respectively, see maps 1 and 2.). Six states had employment between 750 and 999: California, Nevada, New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. More people were employed in political organizations in the District of Columbia (1,311) than in 49 of the 50 states.

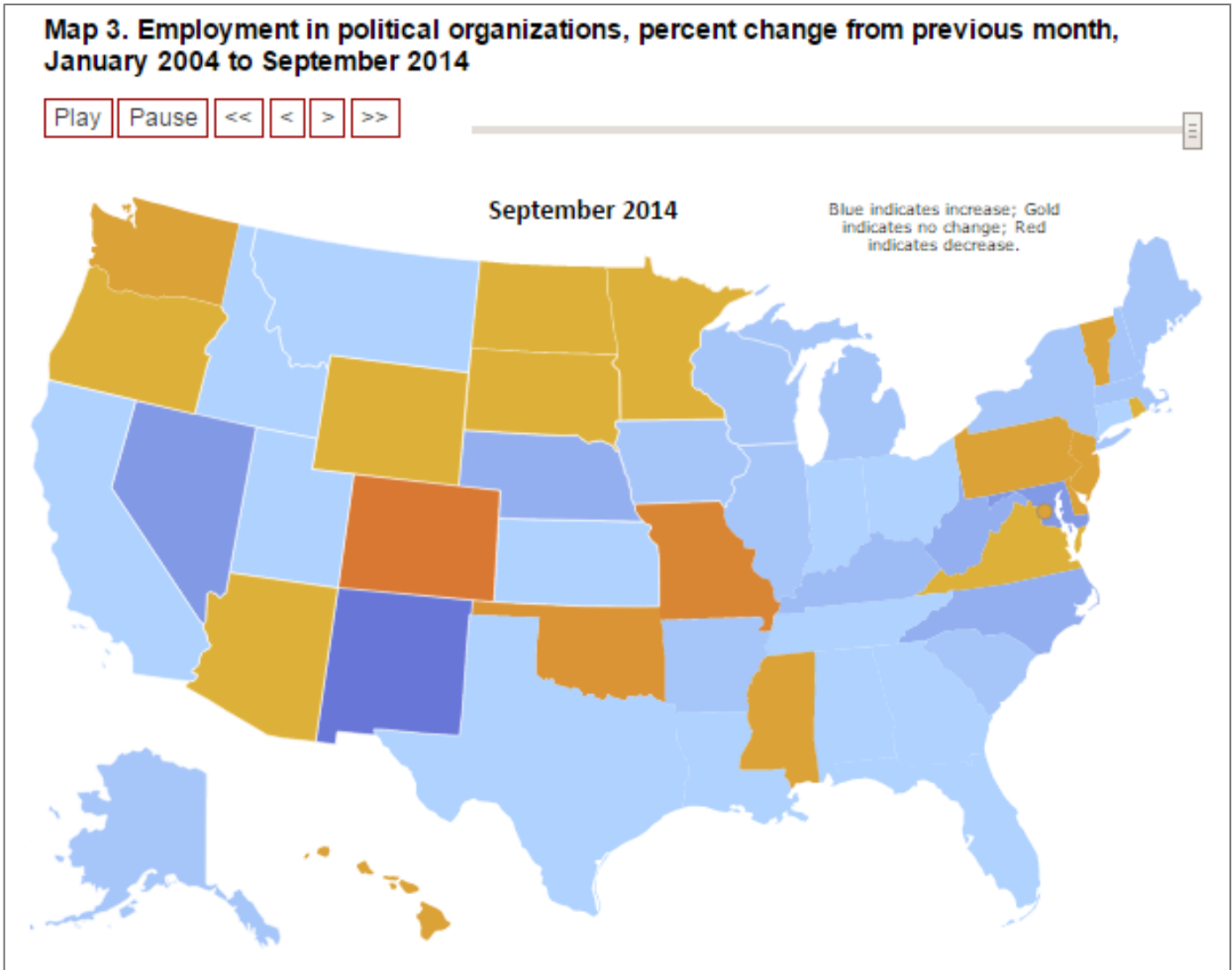


Just 4 months later, in February 2013, employment had declined to its postelection low (6,187), a 68-percent decrease. No state had political organizations employment over 750. Only two states, California and Florida, had employment greater than 500. New York, Texas, and Pennsylvania were the only other states with employment over 250. More than 1,000 workers (1,129, to be exact) were employed in the political organizations industry in the District of Columbia in February 2013, a comparatively small decrease of 14 percent from the October 2012 figure.

Map 2. Employment in political organizations, by state, February 2013



As shown in map 3, in many states political organizations employment often underwent extreme month-to-month variations. As political organizations responded to national, state, and municipal election schedules, it was not uncommon to see increases of over 100 percent from one month to the next and decreases of 100 percent as well.³ Recent large percent changes in political organizations employment include an increase of 147 percent in Arizona when employment rose from 43 to 106 from September to October 2013, the largest of a string of double-digit percent changes among states that year. In the same year, employment increased 200 percent (from 93 to 279) in Massachusetts from February to March. In contrast, from November to December 2012, political organizations employment decreased by more than 80 percent in both Iowa and Nebraska.



Although political organizations employment in the District of Columbia has also varied quite a bit, it rarely fell below 1,000. Political organizations employment in the District of Columbia has been under 1,000 in only about a dozen months since 1990 (mostly in the early 1990s) and has averaged around 1,200 for several years. Since a decline after an unusually high peak before the 2004 election, it has ranged from 999 to 1,882.

Knowing the employment patterns of the political organizations industry could be useful for jobseekers interested in this field because some areas in the country and certain times during the political calendar are more likely to present opportunities than others. The District of Columbia, location of the headquarters of both major political parties and many political organizations, may be a good place for those seeking employment or advancement in this industry. Jobseekers may face strong competition in the D.C. area, and education and work experience at the municipal or state level may be essential.

This **Beyond the Numbers** article was prepared by Douglas Himes, Technical Writer-Editor in the Division of New Media, Office of Publications and Special Studies, Email:himes.douglas@bls.gov, Telephone: (202) 691-6503.

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NOTES

¹ During the 2004, 2008, and 2012 presidential election years, employment in political organizations averaged about 12,300. Membership associations and organizations employment over the 2001–14 period averaged 1,314,000. Total U.S. employment over this period averaged about 131,000,000.

² See "Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages" (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics), <https://www.bls.gov/cew>.

³ A decrease of 100 percent in a given state might mean that there is no employment remaining in the political organizations industry in that state, or it might indicate that the QCEW program is unable to publish data because those data do not meet standards of confidentiality or reliability.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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