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Activism and Willingness to Help in Union Organizing

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Abstract

Member activism and willingness to help unions organize are arguably invaluable constructs for unions and union renewal. We investigated four antecedents to these variables: pro-union attitudes, perceptions of union instrumentality, collectivism beliefs, and ideological orientation, controlling for demographic and other influences. A member's pro-union attitude appeared to be the most crucial factor, with a relatively large effect size. There was some suggestion in the results that pro-union attitude may be more important for willingness to help organize than for more general activism, and more important than union instrumentality perceptions for both activism outcomes. Implications and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Introduction

Lay member activism is a critical variable for union vitality, both before and after union certification elections. Activism is required during an organizing campaign to help persuade voters to elect the union (Dickens, Wholey, and Robinson 1987) and afterward to keep the union operating successfully (Kuruvilla and Fiorito 1994). Much of the work behind a successful certification campaign (arranging meetings, creating and distributing information, etc.) requires volunteer efforts. The ordinary functioning of unions outside of organizing campaigns also requires volunteers to hold union offices, staff committees, monitor contract compliance, and perform numerous other duties (Kelloway and Barling 1993, Kuruvilla and Fiorito 1994, McShane 1986).

The substantial decline of union density in the United States, as well as other parts of the world, begs for the investigation of important factors associated with potential renewal (Fairbrother 2000). Activism has been linked to union renewal (Fairbrother 2000, Fiorito 2004, Heery 2003). Member participation and activism is required to effectively influence others (in workplaces, governments, and elsewhere), and to grow membership. Paradoxically, while activism is integral to union vitality, it is also elusive and not well understood.

An important aspect of activism is that it is truly discretionary. There are usually no immediate or explicit monetary rewards associated with union activism (but there are personal and political rewards and self-

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actualization), and there are typically no explicit punishments for withholding efforts (e.g., see Olson 1971), although there is possible social shunning, demotion, and the like, for not being on the “right side” or “doing one’s share.” A meta-analysis conducted by Bamberger, Kluger, and Suchard (1999) showed that there are important psychological inducements for union commitment, a critical antecedent of participation, including pro-union attitudes and perceived union instrumentality. If unions want to induce their members to participate, they must first understand the nature of the activism construct and its most significant antecedents.

In this paper, we investigate some important antecedents to both general activism and a more specific measure of activism intent—willingness to help unions organize. In fact, we offer what may be the first direct empirical investigation of a “willingness to help organize” construct. This may be considered a specific manifestation or facet of a broader “willingness to work” construct (Gordon et al. 1980, Kuruville and Fiorito 1994), that is, the willingness to perform unpaid “work” on behalf of the union. There may also be differences, as organizing of unorganized workers is more likely to be a conflict-bound situation, and even recruiting among free-riders in workplaces with union recognition will likely face individual resistance. We argue that attitudes toward unions are more important predictors of activism (and activism intent) than union instrumentality beliefs. The results suggest that the nature of inducements for participation go well beyond pragmatic concerns. Further, we base our findings on a broad sample of union members across the United States. Hence, we present relatively generalizable results on a crucial set of union variables.

Theory and Hypotheses

Intentions and Behaviors

Behavioral intentions and actual behaviors are intimately linked (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975). One dependent variable in our study is a general class of behaviors (activism), while the other is a more specific behavioral intention (willingness to help the union organize). Helping unions organize is a specific behavior that falls within the overall activism domain, so we suggest that our two dependent variables will share antecedents, such as pro-union attitudes.

Helping unions organize is part of overall activism. There is, however, an obvious divergence in specificity. Ajzen and Fishbein (1977) showed that to have strong attitude–behavior correlations, the two must be compatible in their specificity along four dimensions: target, activity, context, and time. Therefore, we expect that there may be differences in the degree to which common antecedents relate to our dependent variables.

Antecedents from Union Commitment and Participation Literature

Activism is largely synonymous with participation. Union participation includes activities such as holding union offices, serving on committees, participating in meetings, talking to union leaders, voting on union matters, and reading union literature (Kelloway and Barling 1993). Activism is also sometimes about policy development and consequent implementation as well as recruitment, retention, and achieving participation and mobilization. Activism often distinguishes between truly active forms of participation (e.g., McShane’s distinction [1986] between “administrative” participation and more passive forms, such as reading newsletters). Both constructs assess helping behaviors on behalf of the union. Therefore, activism and participation will share common antecedents.

Union commitment and participation are distinct constructs that are significantly related (see Bamberger, Kluger, and Suchard 1999). Union commitment includes a “willingness to work for the union” dimension (e.g., Gordon et al. 1980). “Willingness to help organize” is part of the union commitment construct domain, especially the “willingness to work for the union” dimension. Consequently, “willingness to help organize” should share common antecedents with the union commitment construct, and particularly its “willingness to work” facet.

Bamberger and his colleagues (Bamberger, Kluger, and Suchard 1999) conducted a meta-analysis of the important antecedents of union commitment and participation. They found that pro-union attitudes and union instrumentality perceptions were the most important, especially pro-union attitudes. In fact, they noted that pro-union attitudes were stronger predictors of union commitment than instrumentality perceptions. Professed theoretical explanations of the results were complex, as the best-fitting model represented an integration of dominant perspectives.

The first perspective is that union commitment is predominantly ideology-based (Tetrick 1995). The second is that union commitment is predominantly instrumentality-based (Kochan 1980; Kochan, Katz, and McKersie 1986). Another view is that commitment is both ideology- and instrumentality-based, but it is established upon instrumentality beliefs (Newton and Shore 1992). The conclusions of Bamberger, Kluger, and Suchard (1999) conclusions seemed to most confirm the view of Newton and Shore.

Following results from previous studies (i.e., Bamberger, Kluger, and Suchard 1999), and assuming that “willingness to help organize” is part of the union commitment domain, we hypothesize that activism and “willingness to help organize” will correlate with pro-union attitudes and perceptions of union instrumentality as follows:

H1a: Activism is positively related to pro-union attitudes.

H1b: Willingness to help organize is positively related to pro-union attitudes.

H2a: Activism is positively related to perceptions of union instrumentality.

H2b: Willingness to help organize is positively related to perceptions of union instrumentality.

Again, the activism hypotheses are not new, as participation is already known to correlate with these antecedents. However, “willingness to help organize” is new. We included general activism in our analyses to contrast results with the “willingness to help organize” results.

Ideological Orientation and Collectivism Beliefs as Antecedents

Activism and especially “willingness to help organize” are likely associated with perceptions of challenging the status quo. Wright, Taylor, and Moghaddam (1990) reasoned that the degree of social change varies on two dimensions: individual vs. collective and normative vs. non-normative. Collective and non-normative actions, such as organizing a union to change the social structure, are perceived to be the most socially disruptive and difficult. The easiest actions are individual and normative, such as meeting with a supervisor one-on-one.

According to system justification theory, political ideology is a significant predictor of social change resistance, where conservatives are typically more resistant to social change than liberals (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, and Sulloway 2003). Union voting literature also supports the assertion that conservatives would be less likely to advocate social change (Hemmasi and Graf 1993). Consequently, we expect that union members with a Democratic Party (liberal) “leaning” will be more likely to be inclined to activism. For these reasons, we contend the following:

H3a: Activism is positively related to collectivism beliefs.

H3b: Willingness to help organize is positively related to collectivism beliefs.

H4a: Activism is positively related to Democrat ideology (i.e., liberalism).

H4b: Willingness to help organize is positively related to Democrat ideology.

To summarize, we argue that activism and “willingness to help organize” likely share antecedents. Union commitment literature suggests that pro-union attitudes and union instrumentality perceptions will correlate with both outcome measures. Further, ideological orientation and collectivism beliefs will also correlate with our dependent variables.

Method

Data

Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc., conducted a telephone poll in 2003 on behalf of the AFL-CIO. Self-reported data were collected from a stratified random sample of 1,602 adults (age 18 and over) across the United States. Respondents were selected using random-digit dialing of households. Sponsorship of the telephone poll was not revealed to respondents. The authors were not involved in any aspect of the data collection. The survey included both union members and nonmembers. Our analysis used only

responses from union members. Case-wise deletion was used for missing data. This left a sample of 326 union members for our study. Descriptive statistics reveal that the sample was diverse and fairly representative of U.S. union members. The sample's 326 union members consisted of approximately 36 percent females, 6 percent Hispanics, 8 percent Blacks, 71 percent married persons, 21 percent professionals or managers, 24 percent other white collar workers, 51 percent public sector workers, and 96 percent fulltime workers. Mean values for age group and schooling variables indicated that the modal age fell in the 45- to 49-years range and modal schooling was some college or a two-year degree, but less than a four-year degree. These figures are based on unweighted values.

Measures

Our study includes two dependent variables, four focal antecedents (or independent variables), and several control variables. Ordinal variables were treated as interval variables because they possessed equal-appearing interval scales (e.g., see Schwab 2005:99–100).

- *Activism.* Union activism was assessed with one item: “How active and involved would you say you are in your union—very active, fairly active, not that active, or not active at all?” Responses were recoded such that 1 = not active at all, 2 = not that active, 3 = fairly active, and 4 = very active.
- *Willingness to help organize.* This variable was operationalized with one item: “How interested would you personally be in working through your union to help nonunion workers to organize and gain union representation—very interested, fairly interested, just somewhat interested, or not interested?” Response options were recoded such that 1 = not interested, 2 = just somewhat interested, 3 = fairly interested, and 4 = very interested.
- *Pro-union attitudes.* Attitudes toward unions were measured with one item: “Rate your feelings toward [labor unions] as either very negative, somewhat negative, neutral, somewhat positive, or very positive.” Response options were recoded such that 1 = very negative, 2 = somewhat negative, 3 = neutral, 4 = somewhat positive, and 5 = very positive.
- *Union instrumentality.* Union instrumentality was captured with one item: “Overall, how effective do you think labor unions are these days in improving wages, benefits, and working conditions for their members—not very effective, just somewhat effective, fairly effective, or very effective?” These responses were recoded such that 1 = not very effective, 2 = just somewhat effective, 3 = fairly effective, and 4 = very effective. This question is obviously “double-barreled,” having multiple foci, though it is representative of the construct.
- *Collectivism beliefs.* One item was used to assess collectivism beliefs: “Do you think that employees are more successful in getting problems resolved at work when they bring these problems up as a group or when they bring them up as individuals?” The response options were recoded such that 1 = more successful as individuals, 2 = makes no difference or not sure, and 3 = more successful as a group.
- *Democrat ideology.* This item was captured by asking respondents to indicate their political party affiliations: “How would you describe your overall point of view in terms of the political parties? Would you say that you are mostly Democratic, leaning Democratic, completely independent, leaning Republican, or mostly Republican?” The response options were recoded such that 1 = mostly Republican, 2 = leaning Republican, 3 = completely independent, 4 = leaning Democrat, and 5 = mostly Democrat. Hence, higher scores corresponded with higher degrees of liberalism, or at least “Democrat-leaning” ideology.
- *Pro-employer attitudes.* Impacts of pro-employer attitudes on constructs such as union commitment and participation have been somewhat ambivalent. For example, Bamberger, Kluger, and Suchard (1999) reported that correlations between pro-employer attitudes and union commitment range from moderately negative to strongly positive. We control for pro-employer attitudes to avoid confounding and rule out a potential alternative explanation. Attitudes toward employers were

operationalized with one item: “Rate your feelings toward [your employer] as either very negative, somewhat negative, neutral, somewhat positive, or very positive.” Responses were recoded as 1 = very negative, 2 = somewhat negative, 3 = neutral, 4 = somewhat positive, and 5 = very positive.

- *Controls.* Additional variables were included to help avoid confounding and rule out alternative explanations. For example, previous studies have suggested that women may be less likely to commit to union activism due to outside constraints such as child care responsibilities (Snape, Redman, and Chan 2000).

Analyses Techniques

Correlation and regression analyses were used to test the hypotheses. Ordered logistic regressions and weighted regressions were employed to check results for sensitivity to estimation method. The results did not differ appreciably. To provide a clearer discussion of results, we only report weighted correlation and weighted ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analyses. Our sample size (N = 326) provided over 80 percent statistical power for the correlation and regression models with a .05 alpha level, two-tailed tests, and medium effect sizes (see Cohen 1992).

Results

Correlation Analyses

Sample characteristics and simple correlations for the variables of main interest are summarized in Table 1, using sample weights provided with the data. Pro-union attitudes demonstrated strong positive correlations with both dependent variables. The positive correlation between pro-union attitudes and activism ($r = .43, p < .05$) provided initial support for H1a. Also, the large correlation between pro-union attitudes and “willingness to help organize” ($r = .50, p < .05$) provided initial support for H1b.

TABLE 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Simple Correlations for Selected Study Variables (N = 326^a)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
Activism	2.55	0.47	—					
Willingness to help organize	2.27	0.56	.48*					
Pro-union attitudes	3.96	0.56	.43*	.50*				
Union instrumentality	2.87	0.39	.39*	.36*	.57*			
Pro-employer attitudes	3.83	0.63	0.07	0.02	.27*	.27*		
Collectivism	2.72	0.35	0.09	0.05	.13*	0.11	-0.1	
Democrat ideology	3.3	0.83	.15*	.26*	.22*	0.07	-0.08	0.05

^aThe number of union members’ responses remaining after case-wise deletion for missing data was 326. Figures shown are based on calculations using sample weights, but they did not differ importantly from figures using unweighted calculations. Correlations between all predictors and the outcome variables are shown in Table 2. Correlations among all variables and other study details are available from the first author.

*Significant at the .05 level or better, two-tailed tests.

Perceptions of union instrumentality had moderate correlations with both dependent variables. The positive correlation between perceptions of union instrumentality and activism ($r = .39, p < .05$) provided initial support for H2a. The positive correlation between perceptions of union instrumentality and “willingness to help union organize” ($r = .36, p < .05$) provided initial support for H2b.

Collectivism beliefs showed nil to weak relations with both dependent variables. The correlations between collectivism beliefs and activism ($r = .09, NS$) and between collectivism beliefs and “willingness to help organize” ($r = .05, NS$) failed to support H3a or H3b.

Democrat ideological orientation correlated positively with activism ($r=.15, p < .05$) and “willingness to help organize” ($r = .26, p < .05$). This provides modest initial support for H4a and H4b.

In sum, correlation analyses offered some preliminary support for most hypotheses. Clearly, pro-union attitudes dominated with regards to effect sizes, followed by union instrumentality perceptions, then Democrat ideology, with no support for the hypothesized collectivism influence.

Multiple Regression Analyses

Regression models provide more formal bases for evaluating our hypotheses. Table 2 provides the results of the weighted OLS regression analyses for the activism and “willingness to help organize” outcome variables. (Weighted simple correlations for all predictors with the outcome measures are also shown for reference.) The model explained approximately 26 percent of the variance in activism and 34 percent of the variance in “willingness to help organize.” Standardized beta estimates suggested that the pro-union attitude variable was the most influential for both general activism ($\beta = 0.33, p < .05$) and for “willingness to help organize” ($\beta = 0.39, p < .05$) after controlling for numerous other predictors. Union instrumentality perceptions was also important for both outcome variables, with a modest positive effect ($0.15 < \beta < 0.20$).

Results for other predictors, including controls, diverged somewhat for the two activism-dependent variables, although there is general similarity across the two equations. For general activism, age appeared to be an inhibiting factor ($\beta = -0.13, p < .05$), and Black ethnic/race group was associated with greater activism ($\beta = 0.14, p < .05$). Neither collectivism beliefs nor Democrat ideology evidenced a significant impact on general activism. For “willingness to help organize,” pro-employer attitude and being female appeared to be inhibiting factors ($\beta = -0.12$ and $\beta = -0.15$ respectively, $p < .05$ for each), while Democrat ideology and being a nonprofessional and nonmanagerial white collar worker (relative to the omitted group, blue collar) appeared to be facilitating factors ($\beta = 0.12$ and $p < .05$ for each).

TABLE 2
Simple Correlation (r) and Multiple Regression Results (Standardized Beta Coefficients, β)
for Activism and Willingness to Help Organize ($N = 326^a$)

Variable	Activism		Willingness to help organize	
	r	β	r	β
Pro-union attitudes	.43*	.33*	.50*	.39*
Union instrumentality	.39*	.20*	.36*	.15*
Pro-employer attitudes	0.07	-0.07	0.02	-.12*
Collectivism	0.09	-0.01	0.05	-0.03
Democrat ideology	.15*	0.04	.26*	.12*
Age	-0.1	-.13*	.11*	0.07
Education level	-0.03	-0.02	-0.08	-0.04
Female	-0.07	0.02	-.21*	-.15*
Hispanic	-0.02	0.01	0.06	0.09
Black	.16*	.14*	0.1	0.06
Married	0.07	0.06	0.08	0.05
Full-time	-0.04	-0.01	0.02	0.01
Professional or manager	0.02	0.05	-0.04	0.1
Other white collar	-0.08	-0.01	0.01	.12*
Public sector	-0.09	-0.04	-.14*	-0.05
R ²		0.26		0.34
Adjusted R ²		0.23		0.31
F-ratio		7.36*		10.74*

^aFigures shown are based on calculations using sample weights, but did not differ importantly from results using unweighted calculations. Additional details on results are available from the first author. *Significant at the .05 level or better, two-tailed tests for correlations and regression coefficients.

In sum, the results of the OLS regression analyses provided consistent support for two hypotheses: 1) pro-union attitudes predict union activism (H1a), and pro-union attitudes predict willingness to help organize (H1b); and, 2) union instrumentality perceptions predict union activism (H2a) and willingness to help organize (H2b). In addition, the hypothesis on ideology effects was supported for the “willingness to help organize” outcome (only). It also may be notable that certain control variables showed statistically significant effects on the outcome variables. Hispanic and Black race/ethnic group, being female, and age were all found to have significant effects for at least one outcome measure.

Discussion

In this paper, we investigated two potentially valuable constructs for unions and union renewal: activism and member willingness to help unions organize. We derived hypotheses concerning potential antecedents to these variables using the union commitment and participation literature, system justification theory, and related research. Specifically, we hypothesized that pro-union attitudes, perceived union instrumentality, collectivism beliefs, and liberal ideological orientations would lead to activism and willingness to help organize. Our analyses suggested that the pro-union attitudes factor was dominant, although union instrumentality beliefs were also important. Also, at least for willingness to help organize, ideological orientation was a statistically significant factor.

A general conclusion from our study may be that activism reflects both ideology-based and instrumentality-based perspectives (consistent with Newton and Shore 1992 and Bamberger, Kluger, and Suchard 1999), but perhaps more so the attitudinal- or ideology-based perspective. Pro-union attitudes showed relatively stronger relationships with the dependent variables, whereas union instrumentality perceptions related only moderately with them and may have been partially mediated by pro-union attitudes.

Implications

Union renewal researchers frequently conclude that member activism plays a critical role in union renewal (Fairbrother 2000, Fiorito 2004, Heery 2003). The current study implies that pro-union attitudes also play a critical role, as they are strong predictors of member activism and willingness to help organize. Perhaps unions should continue to broaden their scope of influence to include the general public—possibly reinforcing perceived legitimacy, union reputation, and overall public approval would inspire members. Because activism is not solely instrumentality-based, perhaps others, especially people who are more ideologically inclined to do so but are not union members, might be willing to work on behalf of unions.

Our results suggest that important ideology factors were in part already captured by the union attitude construct. Admittedly, we did not hypothesize, a priori, that the pro-union attitude construct would mediate other effects. However, previous research that offers theoretical explanations for these results does exist, mostly from the political science and social psychology literatures. For example, Converse (1964) argued that political ideologies signify clusters of related values and attitudes and hence are higher-level constructs relative to attitudes. And Maio and Olson (1995) concluded that values and ideologies influence attitudes directly and indirectly.

Limitations

The most significant threats to internal validity included the cross-sectional design for data collection; all variables were self-reported by the same respondents. The cross-sectional design made the study vulnerable to measurement context effects (see Podasakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, and Podasakoff 2003 for a review of common method biases). Self-reports from the same respondents may have produced some artificial covariance due to common rater effects (biases from moods, social desirability, etc.). Also, the cross-sectional nature of the data suggests caution in drawing causal inferences. And finally, the single-item measures made it impossible to assess construct reliabilities, and they limited certainties around content validity.

The study also possessed some potential threats to external validity. Two concerns were that all data came from respondents in one nation and that the telephone interview situation may have interacted with

respondents. Caution thus must be exercised if one wants to generalize the results to union members from other nations.

Strengths

Despite limitations, the study also possessed considerable strengths. First, the data represented a relatively broad and representative sample of union members across the United States. This is particularly notable because most studies concerning union participation have relied on single-site analyses. We offer results that thus are comparatively more generalizable. Also, we brought into focus a new and potentially valuable construct to unions and union researchers: willingness to help unions organize. This variable taps into a much more specific aspect of the union commitment domain and directly relates to important union renewal efforts.

Future Research

Immediate opportunities for research include development of better measures. For example, a worthwhile project might be the development of a psychometrically sound scale to assess volunteer willingness to help unions organize. Also, longitudinal data or experimental data may provide a stronger foundation for causal inferences.

Another potentially fruitful area for future research is to look at possible consequences, in addition to other antecedents. Does the intention to help organize actually lead to specific organizing behaviors? And do these behaviors meaningfully affect union renewal? Hickey, Kuruvilla, and Lakhani (in press) contend that member activism's role may be overstated in union renewal efforts, whereas Gall and Fiorito (2009) maintain that activism is vital.

Researchers could also determine if different solicitation strategies affect a member's willingness to help organize (or overall activism level). Do different types of invitations to participate matter? For example, should union leaders directly or indirectly ask their members to participate? If so, how should they ask (considering parameters such as frequency, accountability, personal vs. impersonal appeals, etc.)?

Finally, future research should continue to explore potentially important antecedents to pro-union attitudes. They predict an employee's likelihood of voting for a union during a certification election (Getman, Goldberg, and Herman 1976; Martinez and Fiorito 2009). They also predict a union member's union commitment and participation in union activity. In this study, we showed that pro-union attitudes are a relatively strong predictor of activism and of the likelihood of a member's willingness to help organize other potential members.

Conclusion

Unions necessarily rely on their members for effectiveness and survival. Perhaps as important as receiving dues, unions need their members to volunteer their ideas, creativity, resourcefulness, passion, and effort to keep their unions running efficiently and effectively. Union renewal requires members, and others, to care about all present and future union members, even those outside of their own bargaining units. Researchers need to help unions understand the forces that induce their members to participate. This study investigated overall union activism and the willingness to help unions organize and found that pro-union attitudes are a necessary prerequisite. Perceptions of union instrumentality were also important but somewhat secondary. Democrat (liberal) ideological leanings were found to influence willingness to help organize, but not general union activism. So to mobilize workers, unions are advised to focus more on attitudinal and ideology-based perspectives rather than solely on instrumentality-based perspectives.

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