



Unions Foster Middle Class Leadership in American Democracy

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Labor unions are known to improve wages and benefits for their members. Yet economic results are not all that unions accomplish. They also make a difference in democratic politics by lobbying for policies, by providing money and volunteers in elections – and also by fostering leadership skills among their members and helping some win elected public offices.

The role of unions in helping members win elected office has not received as much scholarly attention as the other economic and political functions unions perform. In part that is because this function is not easy to study in a rigorous, empirical manner. I have devised a new way to test the hypothesis that unions foster elected officials – and my findings open the door for further explorations of how union membership facilitates electoral careers – and why this matters.

How Unions Can Generate Elected Officials

The idea that occupational associations can encourage members to run successfully for elected office strikes most people as obvious for elites. No one is surprised that the American Medical Association promotes leadership among physicians – some of whom end up winning elected office. That Chambers of Commerce and Bar Associations generate business leaders and lawyers who run for office is even less surprising. Yet very similar processes can play out for members of unions as well. Just as business and professional associations help members run for office, unions offer similar support to working- and middle-class Americans. Union members are able to climb ladders that carry them, rung by rung, from union activities to public service.

- Most basically, union members have chances to build leadership and political skills as they participate in the life of the organization. They gain valuable and often rare experience making collective decisions, using parliamentary procedure, bargaining for high stakes, engaging in public speaking and persuasion, and building coalitions to campaign for internal union offices. They acquire the very skills needed for public leadership as well.
- Because unions pursue collective objectives on behalf of their members through participation in politics and policymaking in the larger community, they stimulate engagement with public policy among their members. These experiences inspire some members to seek larger roles in public affairs.
- Finally, when an individual member decides to run for public office, her own union and the broader local labor movement are often willing to serve as a base from which to launch an effective campaign. The member does not start from scratch as an isolated individual.

The Occupational Backgrounds of State Legislators

All of this makes sense in theory, but do unions actually facilitate elected office holding by their members? To find out, I designed a study to test whether members of a particular occupation are more likely to hold elected office if the occupation is more unionized. Rates of unionization for various occupations vary greatly across regions and states in the United States, and I was able to take advantage of that fact in my empirical research. Here is what I did:

- I collected occupational data on all state legislators around the country. In practice, I limited the analysis to well-defined occupations that mean much the same thing across all states, and of course I had to find good data for all the states on legislators' backgrounds and on rates of unionization in the occupations I planned to compare. These requisites led to a close focus on four occupations: law enforcement officer, firefighter, construction worker, and teacher of students in the elementary school grades through high school.
- Looking across each state legislator's occupational history using biographical data from Project Vote Smart, I measured each state's share of legislators who ever worked in each of these four occupations. Across all fifty U.S. states on average, 3.7% of legislators have had experience as construction workers; 1.1% of them have had experience as firefighters; 3.2% of them have worked at some point as law enforcement officers; and a hefty 12.4% of them have been employed as school teachers in kindergarten through twelfth grade.
- Finally, I looked at the relationship across the fifty states between how unionized each key occupation is and how large a share of the state's legislators comes from that occupational background. My key finding is quite striking. **Across states and occupations, higher rates of unionization are associated with more elected office-holding by people from that occupation.** This relationship holds up when I do additional statistical tests controlling for many other possible explanatory factors.

Contrasts between states illustrate my findings. For example, in the state of Minnesota, 80% of all teachers report that they are members of unions – and about one-quarter of state legislators report having worked at some point as teachers. By contrast, in the state of South Carolina, less than 20% of teachers are union members – and fewer than ten percent of state legislators say they have worked as teachers. Heavily unionized Minnesota teachers regularly achieve election to the legislature, whereas mostly non-unionized teachers in South Carolina rarely do.

Why Union Pathways to Public Office Matter

Promoting the election of union members to public office is just one of several tactics used by the labor movement to influence public policy, and of course union influence is controversial. Some say that union political influence is exercised only for narrow, self-interested purposes, while others maintain that, especially in an era of rising economic inequalities, unions and the presence of union members in public office serve as a vital counterweight to corporate political influence. My investigations suggest that unions play a unique role these days by investing in the development of political leadership by and for the U.S. middle class. This contribution to our larger democratic life is one we should all keep in mind as debates swirl about the role of unions in American society – today and tomorrow.