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LABOR AND EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS

ASSOCIATION SERIES

**Proceedings of the
64th Annual Meeting**

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Françoise Carré and Christian Weller, Co-Editors

PROCEEDINGS OF THE 64th ANNUAL MEETING

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Discussion

PHANINDRA V. WUNNAVA

Middlebury College and IZA

J. Ryan Lamare's paper, "Does It Pay to Contact the Same Voters ...," examines voter turnout as a function of cumulative, labor-led attempts at political mobilization. The paper's three main queries are (1) whether additional contacts to the same targeted constituents meaningfully influences voter turnout, (2) whether returns from additional contacts diminish over time, and (3) whether the returns to additional contacts vary by type of contact or constituent demographics. The author sets up these three hypotheses to be examined to address the main research questions. Briefly, data were gathered from public records of voter turnout across five elections in South Los Angeles, with more than 62,000 observations. Empirical analysis was based on negative binomial regressions, given the "count" nature of the data. Overall, the effects of mobilization efforts on turnout were shown to be nonlinear. It is worth taking note of such results since they could prevent labor unions or other mobilization-oriented organizations from wasting resources.

In the paper, it is noted that that AFL-CIO mobilization efforts and the expenditures allocated to them rose greatly between 2006 and 2010. The question that comes to mind is what effect would certain outcomes have on AFL-CIO expenditures—in terms of concrete numbers or estimates—or those of other labor organizations engaging in mobilization efforts? Also, a discussion of how socioeconomic status is said to impact voter turnout would be interesting. Finally, the paper cites Goldstein and Rideout's (2002) study that investigated whether changes or declines in aggregate mobilization have a broad influence on turnout but there is no discussion of the study's conclusions.

A justification of why a negative binomial regression¹ is preferred to a straight Poisson regression would be valuable, as would rigorous test(s) to examine the lack of equi-dispersion (i.e., where mean = variance) assumption. In other words, the negative binomial model is employed only if there is evidence of over-dispersion (i.e., mean < variance). Regarding the rigorous test(s), I recommend the following: (1) reporting the actual estimate of the dispersion parameter (known as the alpha parameter) and its statistical significance as part of the negative binomial regression output reported in Tables 2a, 3a, and 4a; and (2) including a formal likelihood ratio test with the dispersion parameter alpha equal to zero. Essentially, both of these test statistics should be significant in order for the negative binomial to be preferred to the Poisson model.²

Sample characteristics of the effective sample (62,786) in Table 1a were not provided. The first time that the scope of the data (all observations are from South Los Angeles) is mentioned is after the Hypotheses section. Aspects of the paper might be a bit clearer if this were addressed earlier in the paper—for example, the mention of ethnicity in Hypothesis 3 (categorizing subjects as Latino or non-Latino). While the data are limited to a very specific population, the results are implied to be relevant on a national scale; there was no argument supporting the relevance of this region-specific data to other regions of the United States.

Given that the five elections range from citywide primary elections to general elections, it is likely that the elections varied greatly in their importance to potential voters; I assume that constituents are more likely to vote in a general election than a citywide primary. This variation in voter likelihood of participation before mobilization could greatly impact the effectiveness of mobilization efforts. The author states that he controlled for each election within the regressions, but it is not clear whether he controlled for different turnout levels or a different likelihood that different election types would be affected by mobilization efforts. This distinction is important with respect to the results discussed in the paper.

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Jack Fiorito and Cheryl Maranto's paper, "Recent Events and Future Unions," provides U.S. labor unions with ideas for organizational and institutional changes that they can make to increase their appeal to employees (potential members), examining what workers want from union representation and what unions do (and can do) to provide the desired services. With respect to what union members want from their union, the authors state that members emphasize values such as fairness and respect, honesty, and social justice, as well as more concrete assurances, such as meaningful work, adequate pay and benefits, prospects for improvement, employment security, and a real say in decision making. Overall, union members are said to want "effective representation they can be proud of ... with little or no risk and at low cost." With respect to the services provided by unions, the authors list actions such as organizing, recruiting, bargaining, lobbying, education, advocacy, counsel, provision of services and benefits, coalition forming, public service, and mobilization to advance member interests and the collective union vision. At the micro level, union organizing can resolve issues of workplace discontent, while at the macro level, union mobilization can tackle societal issues such as governmental policy with respect to compensation or bargaining rights. The authors then give suggestions to answer the main question: what should unions do to revitalize membership? Given that member activism has historically played a crucial role in successful instances of union renewal or revitalization, many of these strategies involve efforts to mobilize members by encouraging participation and leadership.

With regard to the argument that the high price of union membership could be negated by volunteerism, it could be possible that price-sensitive members also lack the time to volunteer in return for reduced dues, or it could be equally time sensitive.

Regarding other initiatives to increase union membership:

- Could the Internet be used as a vehicle to recruit workers and simultaneously keep union dues as low as possible? One of the famous labor economists promoting this kind of argument is Richard Freeman (2004). He named it open-source unionism.³
- One more angle to consider is the "experience good" argument, developed by Gomez and Gunderson (2004), to augment union membership. According to Gomez and Gunderson, unionism is a good that must be experienced in order to understand its attributes. This means that unionization decline begets further decline, as people are less likely to experience unionization. It also means that inducing young people to experience unionization may foster further unionization. Alternative institutions or employee programs appear to be more like substitutes for, rather than complements to, traditional unionism. As with unionization itself, forms of employee involvement are experience goods, suggesting that employee involvement activities that work well could evolve and be sustained over time.
- Given the documented evidence of higher preference on the part of women/minorities to join unions (though most of them are employed in the non-union sector), could specific initiatives designed to attract them?

Daniel Koys, Marty Martin, Marsha Katz, and Helen LaVan's paper, "Unions and Hospitals: Quality, Patient Satisfaction, and Net Income," investigates the link between hospital unionization and hospital performance. The nature of the relationship between unionization and a firm's organizational effectiveness has historically prompted two opposing arguments. The negative argument is that unionization can lead to implementation of work rules or limits on workloads through collective bargaining, which might contribute to production loss via union actions such as slowdowns or strikes, and that unionization can lead to increased wages and benefits for workers, thereby reducing a hospital's level of productivity or competitiveness. The positive argument states that production quality is higher in unionized firms and that unionized firms are generally more productive than non-unionized ones. Given those theories, the authors examined the relationship between levels of unionization in hospitals and hospital performance, as measured in three ways⁴: patient satisfaction, quality of care, and net income of the hospitals in the United States.

The methodology employed in their paper is an extension of earlier research by Seago and Ash (2002) and by Ash and Seago (2004). The authors of the current paper formulated six empirically testable hypotheses based on data from 392 hospitals, half unionized and half non-unionized. They proposed two hypotheses related to patient satisfaction. The first (H1A) is that there is no statistically significant difference

in patient satisfaction between unionized and non-unionized hospitals. The second hypothesis (H1B) is that in hospitals with any level of unionization, there is no significant relationship between union density and patient satisfaction. The authors also proposed two hypotheses with respect to health care quality, as measured by heart attack mortality rates, which “represents an ideal measure” of health care quality according to the literature. The first hypothesis (H2A) posited that there is no statistically significant difference in heart attack mortality between unionized and non-unionized hospitals. The second hypothesis (H2B) stated that in unionized hospitals, union density is not significantly related to heart attack mortality rates. Finally, they developed two more hypotheses related to net income: that there is no statistically significant difference in net income between unionized and non-unionized hospitals (H3A) and that in unionized hospitals, union density is not significantly related to net income (3B).

Questions that could be raised about this paper are how union status of a hospital is determined and, to a lesser extent, how union density is derived. In my judgment, the union status variable suffers from a measurement error⁵ that could bias the estimates. To address this concern, I recommend using only the union density variable and dropping the union status variable.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Christian A. Johnson research intern Sarah B. King for her able research assistance in compiling these comments and Geetha Wunnava for her thoughtful editorial comments. The session chair Ariel C. Avgar should be commended for running a smooth operation.

Endnotes

¹ One should note that the negative binomial model parameter estimates are identical to the Poisson model but with slightly larger standard errors and hence are a bit less conservative than a Poisson model.

² For readers who are not familiar with the basics and choosing among count data models, I highly recommend an article by Hutchinson and Holtman (2005).

³ Freeman in his chapter of a volume edited by Wunnava (2004) forcefully made the argument, “With the Internet offering great opportunities to deliver services to workers who otherwise cannot gain collective bargaining at their workplace and permitting the development of new organizational forms, I expect unions to morph into something akin to the open source described herein” (Freeman 2004:19).

⁴ I switched the order of “quality” and “patient satisfaction” to match the discussion presented in the text.

⁵ As mentioned in the text by the authors, “As long as a hospital had some people in at least one bargaining unit, we considered it a unionized hospital.” This assumption does not realistically capture the union status of a hospital. For example, if one out of one hundred departments is covered by a collective bargaining agreement, treating that hospital as a unionized hospital would generate misleading results about the impact of union status on the response variable.

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