Male-Female Differences in the Potential for Union Growth Outside Traditionally Unionized Industries*

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Using recent NLS data on preferences for union representation, this paper examines whether differences by sex exist in the potential for union organizing outside of traditionally unionized industries. The methodology distinguishes between workers’ preferences for union representation and the relative supply of union jobs in explaining interindustry differences in the extent of unionization. Within the private sector, women employed in industries other than those traditionally unionized are found to have at least as strong a preference for unionization as do comparable men but a considerably lower opportunity for unionized employment given the desire for union representation. Comparing the public sector with traditionally organized industries, the greater extent of unionization in the public sector is largely explained by a stronger desire for union representation on the part of both male and female public sector employees.

I. Introduction

With the shift in employment opportunities away from traditionally unionized industries, there is general agreement that if the decline in the unionized share of the work force is to be reversed unions must more successfully penetrate new growth industries in the private sector. Such industries include trade, services, and finance, insurance, and real estate. Since women represent an increasing fraction of employees in these industries, their appeal to female workers is closely related to unions’ ability to organize outside traditionally unionized industries. Largely for reasons of inadequate data, however, the low rate of unionization among women has received little analysis.¹

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¹Freeman and Medoff (1984, pp. 26-29) report that in 1977 about 27 percent of all male workers were union members as opposed to just 11 percent of female workers. They also provide a brief but useful analysis of this differential. For an earlier analysis, see Antos, Chandler, and Mellow (1980).
Recent discussions in the popular press attribute unions' lack of success in organizing women workers to a negative image of unions as blue-collar institutions run by men for the benefit of other men. The impression yielded by these discussions is that women's preferences are such that they have little desire for union representation. Reinforcing this view is the argument (see Ehrenberg and Smith, 1985, p. 373) that women have little interest in unions because the major benefits of union membership (e.g., seniority rights and retirement benefits) are a function of expected job tenure and women have historically had a shorter expected tenure than men. Freeman and Medoff (1984, chap. 15), however, argue strongly that growth of managerial opposition to unions is the major explanation for the decline in private sector unionism. They also raise the possibility that a lackluster performance of unions in organizing new members may have contributed to this decline.

In an important contribution to this literature, Farber (1983) provides a methodology that takes into account that differences in the extent of unionism across groups of workers may represent differences in the opportunity to be hired in union jobs as opposed to differences in workers' desire for union representation. Using 1977 Quality of Employment Survey (QES) data, Farber finds that important differences exist by race, region, and occupation in the degree to which the supply of union jobs is constrained relative to demand. Leigh (1985) reports evidence based on the young men sample of the National Longitudinal Survey (NLS), which strongly reinforces Farber's results.

Pooling data recently made available for the young women NLS sample with the young men NLS sample, this study employs Farber's methodology to provide new evidence on the importance of worker preferences versus the scarcity of union jobs in accounting for observed sex and industry differences in extent of unionization. The study extends the literature in two ways. First, NLS information on female workers' preferences for union representation permits a more extensive analysis by sex than has previously been carried out. While the QES sample includes females, the relatively small size of the sample permits the preferences of women to be distinguished only by adding a dummy variable in regressions run for a combined sample of male and female workers.

The second way previous analyses are extended relates to the focus on industry differences in the extent of unionization. While Farber (1983) and Leigh (1985) investigate differences by race, region, and occupation, it is the industry dimension of employment that is emphasized in the argument that the survival of the union movement hinges on unions' ability to organize private sector workers

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2 See, for example, Trost (1985a, 1985b).

3 Using the young men NLS sample, Hills (1985) analyzes interindustry differences in workers' preferences for union representation. His analysis, however, is restricted to male workers; and he does not attempt to distinguish between preferences for unionization and the ability to find a union job in explaining industry differences in extent of unionization.