South-Nonsouth Differentials in National Labor Relations Board Certification Election Outcomes*

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This paper investigates and evaluates the magnitude of regional differentials in outcomes in National Labor Relations Board elections. The data for this project include NLRB elections conducted during the period 1973-1978.

I. Introduction

Interest in determinants of National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) certification and decertification elections has increased in recent years. Research literature on union certification and decertification elections is concentrated in three areas: econometric studies framing union election outcomes within the larger context of union growth (Moore and Pearce, 1976; Bain and Elsheikh, 1976; Adams and Krislov, 1974); behavioral studies of the relationship between workplace attitudes and certification election outcomes (Schriesheim, 1978; Hamner and Smith, 1978; Getman, Goldberg, and Herman, 1976); and statistical studies which try to quantify the determinants of individual certification or decertification election outcomes (Anderson, Busman, and O'Reilly, 1979; Dworkin and Extej, 1979).

This study differs from most past NLRB election research in that it examines outcomes in a large number of elections over a six year period (1973-1978) by means of multiple regression analysis. Its aim is to identify the separate effects of several independent variables on election outcomes, with particular attention to the effect of regional location. Identification of the effect of regional location on election outcomes is particularly important because a significant and persistent regional differential may be an important factor for employers in determining plant location or relocation. Any persisting regional differences will also be important in evaluating the success of union organizing campaigns targeted for certain districts or regions. Finally, a negative Southern regional effect on election outcomes may have implications for union growth (or decline) as employers continue to relocate or expand facilities in the South.

*The author wishes to thank Steven Hills, Michael Borus, Gil Nestel and Kezia Sproat of the Center for Human Resource Research for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.
II. Past Research

The first theoretical inquiry into the effects of regional location on union election outcomes came from economists studying union growth. Daniel Bell noted that the South posed a formidable regional bar to unionization, and incorporated this notion into his saturationist theory of trade union stagnation in the early 1940s (Bell, 1943). Bell’s contention was substantiated by an empirical study of union membership conducted by Ruth Kornhauser, who concluded that “region and size of community are related to union membership independently of each other, of occupation, and of sex... the North substantially outranks the South in nearly all comparisons” (1961, p. 39). Further support for the contention that unions have been less successful in the South was given by H. M. Douty (1960), who found a much smaller percentage of the labor force covered by labor agreements in the South than in the Northeast and West.

Even in this early work, however, the notion of an independent “Southern effect” which depressed union membership below expected levels was challenged by some authors. Bernstein (1961) contended that the slow rate of industrialization of the South was a prime factor in the low rates of union membership recorded there. Bernstein cited studies conducted by Frederic Meyers (1954) and Ray Marshall (1960), both of whom found that the industrial classification of the employer and the size of the employer’s labor force were intervening and confounding factors in determining the effects of regional differentials on union organizing. To this extent then, Bernstein was acknowledging that union membership was lower in the South than in other regions and was attempting to offer reasons for this lower incidence of membership.

Several more recent studies have attempted to quantify the “Southern differential” in NLRB election outcomes, or at least have mentioned it as a possibility. Rose in his study of 1,000 NLRB elections failed to find any significant relationship between election outcomes and region (1972, p. 51). Likewise, Anderson, Busman and O’Reilly failed to find any significant relationship between region and outcomes in decertification elections conducted between 1975 and 1977 (1979, p. 34).

Recently, however, descriptive analyses have produced some empirical support for the regional differential hypothesis. Shervin Freed in his study of NLRB elections conducted during a nine-month period from July 1976 through March 1977 found that “it is possible to identify significant differences among geographic regions and among the states within those regions... with respect to the ability of unions to win the NLRB certification election in which they are involved” (1978, p. 19). Unfortunately, Freed used only a comparison of union success/loss rates by state to prove his point and made no attempt to control for other factors such as unit size, industrial categorization of the employer or type of election.

Although few empirical studies indicate a South-nonSouth differential in election outcomes, many authors continue to advance the hypothesis that