Unionization Decisions of Members and Nonmembers of an Employee Association

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The determinants of intent to unionize were investigated using the responses of 405 employees of a large public university, 243 of whom were members of an employee association. Members and nonmembers indicated significantly different levels of union vote intent, general beliefs, specific beliefs, and normative pressures. They also used a different union vote decision model. General beliefs about unions appear to play a significantly greater role in unionization decision of nonmembers. On the other hand, while considering unionization, specific beliefs about unions were significantly more important for association members. Association members were less likely to vote for unionization.

1. Introduction

Several empirical studies have been conducted to examine the determinants of intent to vote for a union in a certification election (DeCotiis and LeLouarn, 1981; Montgomery, 1989; Youngblood et al., 1984; Zalesny, 1985), and meta-analytic cumulation of this literature exists (Deshpande, 1992; Premack and Hunter, 1988). On the other hand, the stagnation/decline of union membership has prompted calls for new forms of organizational memberships (Heckscher, 1988). Associate membership has been proposed as one such approach, although concerns have been raised that associate unionism will undercut traditional unionism, i.e., what Jarley and Fiorito (1990) defined as unionism with a focus on producer interests and what Ichniowski and Zax (1990) defined as unionism with collective bargaining as the central theme. On the other hand, employee associations do not engage in collective bargaining (Ichniowski and Zax, 1990).

An interesting question is whether membership in employee associations affects intent to vote for a union in a certification election. Theoretically, it has been argued that the establishment of employee associations accomplishes some of the tasks necessary to unionize the employees. The cost of organizing may change due to the presence of employee associations (Voos, 1983). Employee associations have been hypothesized as trial runs for members to accept union membership. The rationale is
that membership in employee associations changes the perceptions of the association's members about unions and the various determinants hypothesized to influence the vote for unionization. For example, Hoxie (1921) describes the origin of labor movement as a crystallization of group viewpoint and program of action. An association can engender group viewpoints and thus serve as a stepping stone to unionization via certification. Similarly, the feelings of belonging to a group brought about by membership in associations may facilitate the recognition of the limited nature of job opportunities which in turn leads to the emergence of unions (Perlman, 1928). If this process is valid, the intent to vote for a union in a certification election will change (if not in direction, then at least in magnitude) due to membership in employee associations.

Existing empirical literature is too sparse to answer the question whether membership in employee associations affects intent to vote for a union. Cornfield (1991) examined association-union mergers in terms of the opinions of state employee association members towards merger with a union. Specifically, he examined the impact of socioeconomic status and opportunity for upward mobility of employees on their approval for merger with a labor union, and found significant effects for both factors. Ichniowski and Zax (1990) analyzed data from the Union Image Survey (UIS) conducted by Louis Harris and Associates in 1984 as well as data on change in unionization status of government departments over a period of five years. Ichniowski and Zax (1990) found that the probability of a nonunion unit being unionized in five years was much higher if the unit had an employee association than if there were no employee association in that nonunion unit.

Jarley and Fiorito (1990) conducted an in-depth analysis of the UIS data to examine the determinants of (1) intent to vote for a union, (2) to join an associate membership program, and (3) to join an associate membership program associated with the AFL-CIO. They found that the choice of associate membership appeared to be guided more by consumer-oriented concerns than the traditional union membership choice. The impact of consumer interests was significantly reduced when the respondents were aware of the AFL-CIO affiliation. They also reported that it is unlikely that the two membership forms will be seen as close substitutes (Jarley and Fiorito, 1990, p. 223). An additional analysis of the UIS data indicates that a majority of the employees who said that they would join an employee association said that they would not vote for a union to serve as a bargaining agent (Ichniowski and Zax, 1990). These results suggest that members and nonmembers of employee associations may not only differ in their intent to vote for a union in a certification election but also may use a different decision model in a union election.

Replication of the three studies (Cornfield, 1991; Jarley and Fiorito, 1990; Ichniowski and Zax, 1990) is warranted, since this is an important question for human resource management, union organizers, and for the union movement itself. Furthermore, two of three studies (Jarley and Fiorito, 1990; Ichniowski and Zax, 1990) had some overlap in the samples used, raising questions of independence and generalizability. Finally, our knowledge regarding the effect of membership in employee associations on vote for unionization is largely based on data collected in the early part of