



# Labor union membership and voting across nations<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Despite a large literature on voter turnout around the world, our understanding of the role of labor union membership remains muddled. In this paper, we examine the relationship between union membership and voting. Using individual level International Social Science Program (ISSP) data from thirty-two countries, we find that union members are more likely to vote and that the substantive effect rivals that of other common predictors of voting. This relationship is also largely invariant across an array of demographic factors, indicating that unions tend to be “equal opportunity mobilizers.” We also find that unions have “spillover” effects: controlling for a variety of other factors, even non-union members are more likely to turn out to vote in countries with higher union densities. In sum, we find that labor unions have a consistent political influence across a wide set of countries.

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## 1. Introduction

Voting is the most important and most studied form of political participation. The rate of voter participation has been used to judge the legitimacy of democratic institutions (Piven and Cloward 1988) and numerous studies have demonstrated that voting has important political implications by influencing the behavior of elected officials and the tone and direction of public policy (Hill and Leighley, 1992; Hicks and Misra, 1993; Martin, 2003; Griffin and Newman, 2005). It is no surprise, then, that political scientists have devoted significant attention to explaining the determinants of voter turnout at both the individual (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Verba et al., 1995) and aggregate levels (Abramson and Aldrich,

1982; Powell, 1986; Jackman, 1987; Jackman and Miller, 1995; Franklin, 1999).

Yet even with this large body of literature, the relationship between belonging to a labor union and turning out to vote remains unclear. Given the historical role that organized labor has played in influencing government policy and mobilizing its members to engage in the political process, this shortcoming is quite surprising. Though scholars have tended to conclude that being a member of a labor union increases one's likelihood of voting in the United States (Delaney et al., 1988a; Asher et al., 2001; Radcliff, 2001; Leighley and Nagler, 2007; but see Sousa, 1993), no study to date examines whether this relationship holds across a larger set of countries. Instead, turnout scholars have tended to focus on aggregated levels of union membership (i.e. union density) and aggregated levels of turnout across countries, finding that countries with higher unionization rates tend to have higher levels of voter turnout (Gray and Caul, 2000; Radcliff and Davis, 2000; Gray and Kittilson, 2005; but see Franklin, 2004). We argue, however, that deciding to vote or not to vote is an individual level phenomena that requires analysis of individual level data.

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In this short paper, we examine the relationship between union membership and voting across thirty-two countries.<sup>1</sup> Using individual level data from the International Social Science Program (ISSP), we find that union members are more likely to vote and that the substantive effect rivals that of other common predictors of voting. The relationship is largely invariant across an array of demographic factors that might be expected to moderate it. We also find that unions have “spillover” effects: controlling for a variety of other factors, even non-union members are more likely to turn out to vote in countries with higher levels of unionization. In sum, we find that labor unions have a consistent political influence across a wide set of countries.

## 2. The political implications of labor unions

Why citizens do or do not turn out to vote is one of the most studied questions in political science. Standard models of voter turnout usually emphasize individual level characteristics and how they relate to a citizen's analysis of the costs and benefits of voting (Downs, 1957; Riker and Ordeshook, 1968). Citizens with higher levels of income and education have greater resources to overcome the costs of voting and, thus, are predicted to vote at higher rates (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980; Leighley and Nagler, 1992; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Verba et al., 1995). This socioeconomic effect on turnout leads to an upward bias in the socioeconomic status of actual voters (Hill and Leighley, 1992). Labor unions, whose members traditionally are drawn from the working class, can potentially offset this socioeconomic bias if they are successful in mobilizing workers with lower socioeconomic status (Leighley and Nagler, 2007). So, any relationship between union membership and voting may have a direct impact on the level of political equality within a democracy (Lijphart, 1997).

Why would being a member of a labor union increase a person's propensity to turn out and vote? First, unions are inherently political organizations. Previous research has shown that participation in organizations (Nie et al., 1969; Elden, 1981; Putnam, 2000), and unions in particular (Denney, 1979), increases political sophistication and interest (Elden 1981; Verba et al., 1995). Belonging to a labor union means one is involved, at least on some level, in union and workplace affairs. Selecting members for leadership positions and voting on proposed wages and contracts are both examples of political participation in the workplace. We expect that the use of these political skills translates beyond just the workplace and increases a member's likelihood of becoming involved in the political process and, ultimately, voting.

Belonging to a labor union should also foster greater electoral participation by increasing consumption benefits or changing the subjective perception that one's vote may matter. Uhlaner (1989) makes precisely this point and

argues for the role of organizations such as unions in building the kind of group solidarity that makes voting more sensible. This is much the same point made in a somewhat different way by Verba and Nie (1972), who suggest that participation may have a collective or communal aspect: one votes not simply to see a particular candidate win or to support the system in abstract, but because it is part of one's identity as a member of a community.

Unions themselves also notoriously encourage their members to turn out and vote for union supported candidates, which reduces the time and effort costs to members who are seeking political information. For example, in the United States the AFL-CIO (through its Committee on Political Education) has devoted enormous resources to voter information, registration, and turnout drives (Sorauf, 1988). More broadly, Verba et al. (1978) demonstrate in their classic seven nation study of political participation that labor unions play a key role in mobilizing members to the polls. For union members, these organized efforts may serve as their primary source of political information and mobilization before an election.

Thus, we expect that unions will elevate turnout among their members. But, there are also reasons to expect that the electoral effects of unions will “spillover” to non-members. As Radcliff and Davis (2000) stress, unions as organizations have both the incentives and the resources to mobilize not only members but a wider constituency of the poor, minorities, and the working class – precisely the “peripheral” voters argued to drive cross-national variation in voter turnout. This mobilization occurs through two distinct mechanisms. One mechanism is a direct effect described above, whereby unions organize and fund their own voter registration and get-out-the-vote drives or provide volunteers and activists to parties and candidates for similar purposes. These union-initiated mobilization drives typically include canvassing or phone bank operations that contact both union members and non-members alike. So, in an area where organized labor has a stronger presence in general, these mobilization efforts are more likely to be effective in increasing turnout.

The other mechanism is an indirect effect that occurs through the ability of unions to affect the ideological position of parties so as to create an alternative that is appealing to peripheral voters. As Radcliff and Davis (2000, 133–134) put it:

Unions indirectly encourage turnout through their traditional role as advocates for the interests of low- and middle-income citizens. ... Because unions have typically defined their political agendas in class terms, they are widely agreed to be the most important political advocate for working people, since they serve as the only truly important political “voice” of lower- and middle-status people. ... Unions may compel or enable a party to champion the sorts of policies that benefit working people. The obvious implication is that it is rational for more people to participate, because it is likely that one of the parties will represent their interests. The stronger the unions, the greater this consistency between party policy and the union agenda is

<sup>1</sup> To our knowledge, this represents a substantial increase in the number of countries included in an analysis of the individual level determinates of voting (e.g., Nadeau et al., 2002).

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