

**Forgotten But Not Gone:
Unions and Strike Activity Across U.S. States, 1984-2002***

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Abstract

Much of the theoretically and empirically rich work on U.S. strike activity was undertaken during a unique period of labor peace in America following WW II. Yet the decline of post-war Fordism and resurgence of political and corporate resistance to unionization over the past quarter century have fundamentally transformed American industrial relations. Complicating matters further are the divergent responses of individual unions to these new challenges. Such dramatic changes lead us to question the utility of existing theories of strike activity that provide universalistic explanations of work stoppages and labor activism. Drawing upon a unique dataset of U.S. strikes from 1984-2002, the current research provides a more nuanced approach to labor disputes in the current era that accounts for significant intra-movement diversity and shifts in industrial relations. The findings provide insight into the increasingly contentious nature of strikes today and the more general prospects for unionism in the U.S.

Forgotten But Not Gone

Strikes have long played a central role in working class struggles in the United States and other industrialized nations (Brecher 1972; Franzosi 1995). Employees use this tactic to achieve economic benefits, contest management rights on the shop floor, and pressure state actors. Reflecting the importance of this repertoire, interest in strikes has spanned the social sciences, including sociology, political science, and economics (Ashenfelter and Johnson 1969; Hibbs 1976; Shorter and Tilly 1974; for a review of this research, see Franzosi 1989). Much of this rich theoretical and empirical work on strikes was inspired by the rise of post-war Fordism, when collective bargaining and labor relations were largely institutionalized, especially in core manufacturing industries (Rubin 1986). Indeed, during most of the postwar era strikes tended to be bureaucratic affairs where unions sought better wages and firms were (relatively) willing to share the growing economic pie provided they retained managerial prerogatives.

Yet the past quarter century has witnessed a dramatic change of course as the breakdown of post-war economic arrangements (Harrison and Bluestone 1988; Reich 1991) has given way to a substantial upsurge of both political and business hostility directed at organized labor. Notable events include President Reagan response to the federal air traffic controllers' strike, which signaled to many firms a new era of union busting (Rachleff 1992). This frontal assault on collective bargaining has weakened the labor movement substantially, and, not surprisingly, led to a decline in strike activity. Unions' response to these challenges has been uneven; some have pressed for a renewed dedication to social movement unionism and issues of social justice, yet this trend is by no means widespread (Martin 2007; Mantsios 1998). These debates even led to a split of

labor's largest federation, the AFL-CIO, with the "Change to Win" faction citing the AFL-CIO failure to address these new challenges as a reason for its decision to leave.

Despite this uncertain future, unions continue to strike for a variety of reasons (between 1995-2002 over 1.5 million American workers participated in a work stoppage) and the outcomes of these disputes have major implications for the workers who participate, management's authority on the shop floor, and the ability of unions to make meaningful advances in the contemporary era (Dixon and Martin 2007). In light of the many dramatic changes of the past thirty years or so -- economic restructuring, the growth of political and employer resistance to unionization, and the subsequent revitalization of portions of the labor movement -- we question existing theories of strike activity formed during the post-war period that provide universalistic explanations of work stoppages. Rather, we propose analyzing strikes across unique categories of labor organizations that likely react differently to environmental changes. We also attend to these patterns at the state, rather than national level, as previous research has done, which allows us to take us to take seriously the diversity of political and economic contexts that labor unions face across place as well as over time.

Traditional Explanations of Strike Propensity

The use of strikes by workers to disrupt the production of goods and services has not only granted them significant leverage over employers (Wallace et al. 1989) but also provided the working class a voice in national politics (Jenkins and Brents 1989). This form of industrial conflict, which rose dramatically during the Great Depression (Brecher 1972), increased the number of union members (Rubin et al. 1983), strengthened collective bargaining, and spurred the creation of a number of labor laws designed to institutionalize

working-class militancy (Goldfield 1989). During this post-war period, the strike captured the imagination of researchers across the social sciences, and each discipline has offered its own particular reasons for why these events occurred.

Economic Explanations. Economic analyses of strike activity have focused on the bargaining process as the primary determinant of labor disputes. Scholars have long posited that incomplete information possessed by the central actors involved, which include management, union leaders, and the rank-and-file, can lead to strikes (Ashenfelter and Johnson 1969). While early research conceived of these events as “accidents,” more recent accounts have recognized that the costs of strikes can vary across parties (Gramm 1986). One virtual truism that has emerged from this body of research is that this form of collective action is sensitive to fluctuations in the business cycle (Kaufman 1981). During periods of growth marked by low unemployment, firms are more vulnerable and workers seize this opportunity to press for new gains. In contrast, when unemployment is high and demand is slow, firms can withstand strikes and employees may be risking their jobs due to a larger pool of replacement workers.

Political Explanations. While economic accounts of strikes tend to focus on the business cycle within a single country as accounting for most new strike activity, much of the political research on this phenomenon has adopted a cross-national perspective, examining how the integration of the labor movement into the state affects the propensity of workers to disrupt production (Hibbs 1976; Korpi and Shalev 1980). These scholars find that in nations where labor is an active partner in government, such as the Scandinavian countries, industrial conflicts shift from the market to the political sphere, resulting in a net decline of strikes. Although the labor movement in America has primarily won new gains at the point of production, not the ballot box (Kimeldorf 1999),

politics are a central focus for many unions (Form 1995; Marks 1989), and strikes have figured prominently in some labor policy battles (Cornfield 1991; Jenkins and Brents 1989). Consistent with this focus on state actors (McCammon 1994) and with political opportunity theories of protest (McAdam 1982), we expect that political arrangements that are *unfavorable* to unions will temporarily dampen strike action.

Industrial Conflict at the End of the Twentieth Century

Much of the aforementioned research examined strike activity in a period when organized labor enjoyed an unprecedented degree of legitimacy in America. The institutionalization of the labor movement (Goldfield 1989) was spurred by the growth of violent and often bloody strikes (Brecher 1972). This eventually led to an uneasy postwar labor-management accord that granted unions the freedom to advance the economic interests of their constituency while simultaneously limiting their ability to challenge the prerogative of management rights on the shop floor (Davis 1986; Nissen 1990). Reflecting this transformation, the strike became a routinized, if not completely accepted, part of collective bargaining for much of the post World-War II period. This was especially true for workers in core industries such as auto and steel, who were able to win meaningful concessions in wages and benefits through striking (Rubin 1986).

Yet in the past 30 years the breakdown of Fordist relations (Hoerr 1988) has led to another fundamental shift in the American industrial landscape that has wide-reaching implications for how we analyze strikes. Notable events like President Reagan's firing of more than 10,000 air traffic controllers, and the breaking of strikes by Phelps-Dodge, Hormel, Caterpillar, and other large firms indicates that this tactic may no longer be an effective offensive weapon in the arsenal of unions (Franklin 2001; Rachleff 1992;

Rosenblum 1995). In fact, for many unions strikes are less about securing new economic benefits than holding on to previous gains won at the bargaining table (Wallace 1989).

Corporate resistance has been further emboldened by the state's adoption of neoliberal policies (Campbell and Pederson 2001). Workers have the right to strike, but management has the legal right to permanently replace workers (Lambert 2005; Norwood 2002). In addition, the National Labor Relations Board, created during the New Deal to enforce labor laws, has become increasingly politicized and pro-business (Gould 2001), and, as a result, firms have greater discretion to illegally resist union activity (Fantasia 1988; McCammon 2001b).

Beyond shifts in the political climate, employers are also taking advantage of prevailing economic conditions to resist unions and strikes. Specifically, there is mounting evidence that firms have begun "baiting" unions into strikes during periods of economic downturns in the hopes of replacing union members with strikebreakers (Franklin 2001; Norwood 2002; Rosenblum 1995). To compound matters, a number of industries, particularly those typically regarded as the bulwark of the union movement such as steel and auto manufacturing, have been devastated by overseas competition (Baldwin 2003; Lee 2005; Tilly 1995). Not surprisingly, and as a direct consequence of these changes, strike activity along with union membership has declined considerably in recent years, as indicated by Figure 1.¹ Given the increasingly aggressive posture of many firms, employer countermobilization is now a critical part of understanding strike activity in America today.

¹ Unfortunately, the gap in the data occurs during the early 1980s, a critical period in the history of the strike. The Bureau of Labor Statistics stopped collecting work stoppage data in the late 1970s (it now collects information only on those that idle more 1,000 workers, which is about 5% of all strikes). The FMCS's series began in the mid 1980s. One possible explanation for the drop in strike activity is that the FMCS may not identify all strike events. Other research (Martin 2005) indicates that for two years, 1987 and 1997, its coverage rate was very high, exceeding 99%. Therefore, while the reader is cautioned that some strikes may be missing, the FMCS database is by far the most comprehensive source of information on work stoppages today.

Figure 1 about here

Labor Organizations and the Decision to Strike

Despite the realignment of industrial relations that have created new obstacles for organized labor, some unions have been able to use the strike to advance their interests. Possibly the most famous recent example was the Teamster's strike against UPS in 1997, widely hailed as a victory for the union, although, again, it was primarily about defending existing work arrangements. Strikes have also become increasingly central to unions seeking to expand their membership base through innovative organizing strategies. The Service Employees' International Union's (SEIU) Justice for Janitors' campaigns across major U.S. cities has combined short strikes with other tactics, including civil disobedience, to organize thousands of low-wage and immigrant workers (Waldinger et al. 1998). The Hotel Employees' union (HERE) has also used strikes in major cities to enforce coordinated bargaining that reduces hotels' incentives to resist unionization.

Such examples are consistent with sociological explanations of strikes that place the labor union at the center of these conflicts.² Although early research conceived of working class organizational power as an independent predictor of strike activity (Shorter and Tilly 1974), scholars quickly began to recognize the interactions between union strength and prevailing economic and political conditions. For example, the relationship between unemployment and strike activity tended to be confined primarily to sectors where organized labor was institutionally established (Rubin 1986; Snyder 1975). Yet even as researchers privileged working class organizations, they continued to conceptualize the labor movement as a monolithic entity rather than a diverse set of

² While one could certainly argue that firms can take steps during the process of collective bargaining that will increase the likelihood that the union will strike, it still is the union that must ultimately decide whether or not to strike.

organizational actors with varied histories, industrial and economic constraints, and approaches to collective action.

In contrast, recent accounts of union revitalization have been sensitive to significant intra-movement diversity in organizing and political orientations. For example, Voss and Sherman's (2000) research on renewed organizing activity demonstrates that the SEIU is considerably more aggressive than other unions, while literature on union revitalization often points to HERE and the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) as revitalized or, at least more militant, labor organizations (see Fantasia and Voss 2004). Of course, notable differences exist not just between so-called "new labor movement" organizations and the rest of the labor movement, but also between industrial and craft factions. William Form's (1995) analysis of union political activism provides compelling evidence that this distinction remains important even today.

Such differences are not new; labor history indicates considerable diversity in the political, organizing, and strike activities of particular *types* of unions (Dubofsky 1969; Galenson 1960; Isaac and Christiansen 2002; Kimeldorf 1988; Morris 1958). These past distinctions, coupled with contemporary developments within organized labor, raise the possibility that the broad structural shifts described above play out differently depending upon the union(s) in question. Indeed, Cornfield (1991:35) suggested some time ago that considering strike variation among different types of unions would help "broaden and refine" theorizing on strike activity. Yet, to date, no research has systematically examined this possibility. Even more surprising, is that the now burgeoning union revitalization literature -- which does take intramovement variation seriously -- says almost nothing about the strike.

Given the unique trajectories of labor organizations, and considering the well-documented existence of diversity in organizational populations generally (Stinchcombe 1965), we propose that examining how economic, political, and business resistance indicators affect strikes depends in part on which unions are being analyzed. Specifically, we seek to advance prior strike explanations and the literature on union revitalization by identifying distinct union categories with varying implications for militancy. To develop such a schema, we first consider those unions that still engage strikes and are not legally precluded from such activity.³ We then identify a variety of dimensions that may condition union responses to the diversity of challenges posed by the new economic and political landscape: industrial sector, aggressive organizing orientation,⁴ and craft vs. industrial faction, to name just a few. Given that these dimensions are highly correlated with one another and to the historical legacy of particular unions, we outline four major categories of striking unions with distinct orientations to collective action.

First are the original *CIO unions*. Not only were these organizations the bulwark of the industrial labor movement (Goldfield 1986; Zeigler 1995), they have recently been devastated by deindustrialization and the globalization of trade. Such conditions have forced many of these unions to strike in order to protect existing gains rather than securing new advantages. The second category is the original *AFL craft unions*. While such organizations have a reputation as the conservative segment of the labor movement

³ Unions that continue to engage in strike activity are among the most active and are not, based on their constituency, automatically prohibited from launching strikes (e.g., the National Letter Carriers Association, whose members are legally prohibited from striking, is automatically excluded). While this necessarily limits the diversity of the sample, we are interested in explaining variation among unions for which striking is still a part of their collective action repertoire to a greater or lesser degree. In addition, the first set of analyses, as described below, do consider factors that affect *all* strike activity.

⁴ Martin's (2006) account of organizing today analyzes the activity of local affiliates of many unions included here, with the notable exception of the AFL craft unions. As there is generally little current research on these organizations, it is difficult to assess how aggressively they are recruiting new members.

(Form 1995; Galenson 1960), due to the skilled nature of their members, they tend to be quite powerful on the shop floor, and are thus distinct from both industrial and the more aggressive unions that we describe below. Because of this occupational power and smaller numbers, they usually focus on the firm, not the state, to advance their interests (Marks 1989).

Third are the aggressive or revitalized unions that make up the core of the “*new*” *labor movement* and that have been the primary focus of labor revitalization scholars. Unlike the old AFL craft unions, these organizations are typically viewed as the future of organized labor and are expected to have a more aggressive strike agenda (Lopez 2004; Voss and Sherman 2000). Many of these unions are part of the “Change to Win” faction and were among the most vociferous in the unusually public debate on union revitalization prior to the AFL-CIO split. The fourth and final category is comprised of just one union, the *Teamsters*. Labor movement historiography highlights the unique and sometimes contradictory stances of the Teamsters relative to other labor organizations (Friedman 1982; Russell 2001). Not only does this union not fit neatly into any of the other three categories (not a CIO union, not a craft union, and generally not regarded as the new face of labor even though it has joined the Change to Win faction), but it is also by far the most strike prone union, accounting for nearly 20% of all work stoppages during the period analyzed.

By assessing both the impact of recent economic and political restructuring on *all strike activity* across U.S. states, and then the responses to these changes by distinct factions of the labor movement, we believe our approach significantly advances research on strikes and collective action. The latter focus, moreover, offers a useful window to

empirically examine which organizations offer the most likely source for union renewal in the contemporary era.

Data and Analysis

The analysis presented below assesses how the myriad of factors described above (political, economic, firm resistance, union strength, to name just a few) drive strike activity across US states from 1984-2002. While characteristics of the nation-state clearly influence labor disputes, the decentralized nature of U.S. industrial relations benefits from a more localized analysis. Examining variation in contentious activity across states has been growing among social movement scholars interested in topics from mobilization (van Dyke and Soule 2000; McCammon 2001a) to movement success (McCammon et al. 2001). We draw upon multiple data sources to capture a range of theoretically relevant variables, which are described in Table 1. We first discuss the major theoretical explanations of strikes and then describe our categorization of unions that will be used to assess variation in strike predictors. Because we are employing pooled-time series models (described more below), we also discuss how time is incorporated into each independent variable of interest.

Table 1 about here

Strike Outcomes. Previous research on strikes has attended to various dimensions of work stoppages; from the number of firms that experience such an event to the length of time workers are willing to strike. The dependent variable of interest is the *strike frequency* for each state in a given year.⁵ Earlier research on strikes has tended to

⁵ Earlier research on strikes also examined total strike volume, which is calculated by summing the total persondays lost (size x length) for all strikes in a particular year (Shorter and Tilly 1974). However, the underlying determinants of this outcome are driven by different processes (Vroman 1989), and this variable is also prone to bias due to the effect of large outliers.

examine the strike rate (usually the number of strikes in a given year standardized by the total size of the employed population). Here, we follow recent social movement and labor scholars (e.g., Isaac and Christiansen 2002) and model strike counts. There are a few reasons for this choice. First, because we disaggregate strikes to the state level, and to specific union categories, they are relatively rare events (some states have no strikes in a given year), thus, the strike rate fluctuates widely across states. Secondly, standardizing strikes by total employed population assumes that all workers are at risk of going on strike, when, strikes have typically been limited to unionized workers.⁶ Even if we standardize strike activity by the total number of unionized workers, this ignores the fact that *enterprises*, not workers are the unit at risk of experiencing a strike, and there are no data on the number of unionized firms in a state. This is especially important when disaggregating strikes by individual unions, which lack state level membership data. However, as discussed below, the models do include the total number of enterprises to control for the size of the risk population.⁷

Economic Explanations. The primary economic predictor of strike activity included in the model is the state's *Unemployment Rate*. Because this has a relatively immediate impact, unemployment rate is not lagged. The argument that the risks and rewards to unions, workers, and firms depends on economic shifts like the pool of unemployed workers rests on the assumption that the strike is solely a method of economic advancement during upswings in the business cycle. However, labor militancy has been associated with unfavorable periods as well; the Great Depression experienced a substantial upsurge in strikes despite high unemployment (Brecher 1972; Yellen 1936).

⁶ Even waves of wildcat strikes, like the one following World War II, primarily were limited to heavily unionized core manufacturing industries (Zetka 1992).

⁷ There is almost a perfect correlation (.994) between total number of enterprises and size of the state's employed population. We prefer the former since it is the individual enterprise that is at risk of experiencing a strike.

Often strikes during worsening social conditions have explicit political claims, such as a demand for an eight-hour day. Therefore, we also include *Median Household Income* in the model to assess whether declining living conditions lead to greater strike activity. Because the effect of this variable may culminate over time, it is measured as a two-year moving average.

Political Explanations. In the U.S., strikes are primarily targeted against economic actors (Kimeldorf 1999), yet there is undoubtedly a political dimension as well; labor disputes have always caught the attention of political elites (Lambert 2005). Political opportunity explanations of social movement activity in countries like the U.S. have found that various movement dynamics, from mobilization to outcomes, are sensitive to the broader political climate within which they are embedded (Jenkins et al. 2003; McAdam 1982). There is some ambiguity about the way in which political institutions affect contentious activity (Meyer and Minkoff 2004); as noted above, in nation-states where labor is politically powerful, industrial conflict tends to shift to the political sphere. Because this is not the case in the U.S., we suspect that short-term political changes unfavorable to organized labor will generally reduce strike activity. Therefore, none of these measures are lagged.

In this analysis, two of the measures are concerned with the state-level political climate: the *Percentage of Republicans in the State Legislature* and whether the state has a *Right-to-Work Law*. This statute makes the union shop illegal, increasing the union's difficulty in organizing and maintaining members (Ellwood and Fine 1987; Jacobs and Dixon 2006). In addition, labor unions are often heavily involved in election campaigns (Asher et al. 2001; Form 1995), which may divert resources from strikes, if only temporarily. We therefore include a *Presidential Election Year* dummy. Finally, because

(some) unions have increasingly turned to the public for support during labor disputes (Manheim 2001), we suspect that political leaning of the local community has become a particularly important part of strikes. To capture the “liberalness” of the state’s population, we include a *Citizen Ideology Score*, described by Berry et al. (1998). This taps the electorate’s response to the voting patterns of the state’s Congressional representatives; a higher score indicates a more liberal electorate.⁸

Firm Resistance to Unions. Unlike the period immediately following WW II, when strikers were not constantly being threatened with replacement, today union-busting is pervasive, often in industries once considered the stronghold of the labor movement (Bandzak 1992). Obviously much of this anti-union activity occurs within the work stoppage itself; firms respond to the strike by mobilizing private security forces and replacing strikers. Yet we are interested in aggregate strike activity at the state-level, therefore we expect that such actions will also create a climate where strikes are viewed by unions as risky events. Unfortunately, there is not a great deal of systemic data on firm countermobilization outside of case studies. One that we believe is very useful is the number of *Decertification Elections* in the state, which is not lagged. Decertification elections, which are conducted by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), allow the firm’s employees to vote to remove an existing union as their collective bargaining representative. Because strikebreakers can vote in these elections, they are commonly used to break the union.

Unions and Strikes. Although we disaggregate strikes by specific types of unions, we are also interested in the importance of overall strength/activity of organized labor in a particular state. Since Shorter and Tilly’s (1974) analysis of strikes in France, indigenous labor organizations have been an integral part of strike research (Rubin 1986).

⁸ See Soule and Olzak (2004) for the use of this measure for social movement outcomes.

Resource mobilization theorists (McCarthy and Zald 1977) have pointed to the importance of formal organizations in explaining variation in protest activity, and we expect this argument to hold for strikes as well. With one exception, discussed below, we employ two-year moving averages to capture union strength, as we suspect that this is more relevant for the build-up to the strike. In the analysis we included the state's *Unionization Rate* as a measure of overall union strength. Because we expect a diminishing return on the union density measure, a quadratic term is also included in the model. Given the importance of organizing and the historically close links between organizing and strikes, we measure the number of *NLRB Certification Elections*, the primary mechanism unions employ to organize new workers. Although this measure captures the vitality of the labor movement in the state, organizing may also drain resources devoted to strikes, so the direction of the effect is in question. Finally, unions today often seek to persuade the NLRB to designate a work stoppage as an “unfair labor practice” strike to prevent the use of permanent replacement workers by the employer. Therefore, we include the number of *Unfair Labor Practices* (ULPs) filed by unions against firms, an indicator of organized labor legal activity (McCammon 2001b). Because this last measure is often associated with specific strikes, we do not lag it.

In addition to the theoretically relevant variables described above, we also control for the *Number of Enterprises* in the state. Given the growing challenges of the manufacturing sector in the U.S., we include the *Percent Manufacturing* to capture the decline of this traditional union stronghold. While previous research has largely ignored demographic factors in predicting strikes (although see Dixon and Roscigno 2003; Gramm 1986) we measure *Percentage of Employees that are Female*. As discussed earlier, there have been significant efforts to revitalize the labor movement, and much of

this began with the ascension of John Sweeney to the President of the AFL-CIO in 1995. Therefore, we include a *Post-1995* dummy to capture what impact, if any, this has had on strikes. Finally, we also include four dummy variables for the *Census Region* of the state.

Categorization of Unions. Although previous research has examined all strikes simultaneously, here we argue that it should not be assumed that all labor actors will respond to environmental conditions in a similar way. We are particularly interested in variation in the effects of contextual measures across unions. We first develop a category scheme of unions based on a number of important organizational characteristics identified above. We then selected a few unions that we believe exemplify each category and also continue to engage in significant levels of strike activity, which are described in Table 2.⁹

Table 2 about here

Original CIO Unions include the United Autoworkers, the United Steelworkers, and the United Mineworkers. The second category is the *Original AFL Craft Unions*, including the Carpenters and Joiners Union, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, and the International Union of Electricians. Third are the *Revitalized Unions*, and include the SEIU, HERE, UFCW, and the Communication Workers of America. The fourth and final category includes only the *Teamsters*.

The categories thus include some of the most prominent and indeed militant unions in American today. As a whole, they encompass more than 50% of the strikes

⁹ Note that not all strikes are captured in the categorization scheme, only about 53% of the ones included in the FMCS database. There are a number of reasons for this decision. First, our two objectives were to develop clear categories of unions that were internally similar *and* represented enough strikes for standard data analysis purposes. By including only a few exemplar unions, we minimize the diversity within each category. Second, nearly four hundred different unions struck during this period. Developing a categorization scheme to capture all strikes would lead to a larger number of less meaningful categories of unions. Once possible strategy would be to lump the remaining unions into a single category. However, we believe the level of heterogeneity would render any empirical findings meaningless.

conducted by organized labor during this period and each category includes nearly 10% of union members in America, although as is evident from Table 2, the revitalized unions encompass quite a bit more members. Importantly, this scheme differentiates between those unions in declining industries that are clearly on the defensive in the new era of industrial relations (category 1), from the more aggressive, mostly service sector unions (categories 3 and 4). The original AFL unions (category 2) arguably fall somewhere in between. These significant differences allow us to test whether traditional explanations of strikes are really “universal” in a period when the tenor of labor management conflict has turned the strike into an extremely contentious event, and one that often threatens the very survival of unions.

Analytical Strategy. We employ a pooled cross-sectional time-series design to analyze strike counts across states and over time. Because linear regression with count dependent variables can result in inefficient and biased estimates, researchers typically use special count estimators such as Poisson and negative binomial (Long and Freese 2003). Negative binomial is preferred in this case, and is used for all of the analyses, as there is evidence of overdispersion. We use Stata’s population-averaged estimator for the negative binomial models because this approach can correct for both serial correlation and heteroskedasticity (StataCorp 2005). In the models the betas represent a log change in the number of strikes initiated by unions in a given state in a given year.

The analyses proceed in two steps. First, we assess how traditional strike explanations fair in a more contentious period of labor management relations by analyzing all strike activity from 1984 - 2002. This serves to update strike explanations to the current environment, but also extends this research by considering important variation across states. Secondly, and unlike prior work, we disaggregate strikes by

different types of unions to determine if contextual effects vary across unique labor organizations. Important organizational differences across models support a more nuanced approach to labor movement activism.

Results

The first four models in Table 3 examine the major explanations of strikes separately, along with the control variables, to assess their individual relationship to the state's annual strike frequency. Beginning first with economic predictors (Model 1), it is clear that the unemployment rate is no longer a major predictor of strikes. Again, historical evidence indicated the relationship between fluctuations in the business cycle and strike activity was largely confined to sectors where unions were institutionally powerful (Synder 1975), which is increasingly rare today. However, there is some evidence other economic considerations do matter for strikes; median household income is negative and significant. Earlier we hypothesized that workers may react to declining material benefits by striking, and this model is consistent with such a claim.

Within social movement research political opportunity theorists have maintained that changes in the political structure will have major ramifications for social movement actors (McAdam 1982), and this argument receives support from Model 2. Republican predominance in the state legislature has a negative effect on strike activity. The effect of Right-to-Work statues is even more dramatic; in states where the union shop is outlawed strike propensity is reduced by more than half.¹⁰ This finding provides evidence that the legal definition surrounding organized labor and collective bargaining has significant ramifications for unions' willingness to disrupt production (Lambert 2005). National-

¹⁰ Although Right-to-Work laws tend to be concentrated in the South, which has historically been much less friendly to organized labor, the model includes a series of controls for the region the state is located in.

level politics also appear to play a role in labor disputes; strike activity is significantly reduced in presidential election years, which may indicate either a reallocation of resources from collective bargaining to political concerns or the recognition that potentially unpopular strikes could damage pro-labor candidates (De Boer 1977).

Table 3 about here

As argued previously, economic and political shifts have created new opportunities for firms to resist negotiating with unions, yet Model 3 provides no support for the argument that firm resistance reduces work stoppages. In fact, the decertification election measure has a *positive* effect on strikes, which is surprising since at minimum it is an indicator of general firm resistance to unions, and likely includes instances where firms permanently replaced strikers.¹¹ It does seem reasonable to assume that greater firm resistance to unions will increase the acrimony surrounding collective bargaining, thus spurring new strikes. The effect of this measure of firm resistance is explored in greater detail below when we examine whether it varies across the different types of unions.

The final partial model in the table includes overall indicators of the strength of the labor movement at the state level. As expected, unionization has a strong positive effect on strikes. It does appear, however, that this relationship is nonlinear; the quadratic function is negative and significant. While this could simply indicate a diminishing effect of union density on strikes, the curvilinear relationship was plotted to determine the tipping point at which the effect of unionization shifted from positive to negative. The peak of the curve is at about 23%; which encompassed the five most heavily unionized states. One possible reason for such a relationship is that in highly-organized areas,

¹¹ One could argue for a causal ordering issue: strikes lead to decertification elections. However, the decertification election measure is not lagged, and firms must wait at least one year after replacing workers before holding a decertification election. Therefore, it is impossible for such a relationship to exist.

unions do not necessarily have to strike to win new benefits for their constituents. Rather, they are able to leverage their organizational capacity into new benefits without actually having to disrupt production. Such a relationship between power and the ability to achieve gains without collective action has been demonstrated previously (Wallace, Griffin, and Rubin 1989).

In addition to unionization, organizing activity has a small positive effect on strikes. Because strikes are not part of the NLRB certification election process we suspect that this measure captures how aggressive the labor movement is in a particular state. Lastly, as expected, the number of unfair labor practices filed in the state increased the rate of strike activity. While McCammon (2001b) argues that this legal approach is a substitute for strikes today, our findings suggest that the two strategies go hand in hand. This is not surprising given the fact that the only way firms are barred from hiring permanent replacement workers is for the NLRB to rule the strike an unfair labor practice work stoppage.

The last model in Table 3, which includes all major predictors, is generally consistent with the previous models, with a few notable exceptions. In terms of economic measures, unemployment rate still has no effect on strike activity, and median household income, while still negative, is no longer significant. This is a strong indication that, when taking all possible explanations of strikes into account, economic considerations are much less important than they once were. Political coefficients also function as expected: although Republicans influence in the legislature is no longer significant, Right-to-Work laws and presidential election years continue to reduce strike propensity. In the full model the decertification election measure is not significant, though it is still positive, and indicators of union power/activity continue to function in the

expected direction with the exception of unfair labor practices. The model also indicates that despite the decline of the core manufacturing industry, the size of this sector still has a strong, positive effect on strikes. Of course, one possible explanation is that this strike activity is being driven by unions' efforts to hold on to previous gains won at the bargaining table. Finally, there is no evidence that strikes increased significantly after John Sweeney assumed the office of AFL-CIO president in 1995.

Variation Across Distinct Types of Labor Organizations. Previous accounts of strikes have largely been content with models similar to the ones presented in Table 3, analyzing the collective strike activity of the entire labor movement. The broad conclusions that can be drawn from such an approach would be that the business cycle no longer matters, what is most important are various political indicators and the strength of the labor movement. However, we believe that contextual factors like the economic and political climate, and even the overall strength of the labor movement and firm hostility, cannot be discussed in general terms but are contingent upon *which* union strikes are being analyzed. Again, the effect of resurgent antiunion activity on both the part of the state and corporations may affect unions in different ways depending upon their organizational history, industry, and membership recruitment strategies. Thus, Table 4 provides a breakdown of strikes predictors across the four categories of unions described above.

The first model examines strike activity by the major industrial unions responsible for the rise of the CIO, including the UAW, UMW, and the USW. Although once the bulwark of the labor movement (Zieger 1995), these unions have come under increasing pressure as employment prospects decline due to the rise of a service-based economy and global trade. Interestingly, the model indicates that only a few theoretically relevant

predictors have any effect on their willingness to strike. Economic indicators are not significant, although, as expected, the size of the manufacturing sector in the state has a positive effect. For the most part, political indicators are unrelated to strikes by these organizations as well. The one exception is the presidential election year dummy; industrial unions, while often lacking significant power on the shop floor, have made use of their historically large membership base to influence national politics (Marks 1989), which should reduce strikes during periods of critical national elections.

The set of predictors that does appear to have a consistent effect on strikes by the core CIO unions is the strength of the labor movement in the state. The main effect of unionization is positive, as is the number of certification elections and unfair labor practice in the state. In fact, taking all four models in the table into consideration, the effect of these three coefficients is the most pronounced for CIO unions. While these are general indicators of union strength, it does appear that the vitality of the labor movement is a critical explanation of strikes by those unions facing increasingly unfavorable economic conditions.

The next model examines what is in many respects the antithesis of the industrial union movement, the craft unions of the AFL. Although these organizations have historically been regarded as the conservative wing of organized labor, the occupational prestige of their members has granted them significant power, and studies indicate that they translate this into gains won on the shop floor, avoiding the political sphere (Marks 1989, although see Greene 1998). First, the relationship between both unemployment and median household income and strike activity is marginally significant in the expected direction. Despite the historic lack of interest in politics by craft unions, at least when compared with their industrial counterparts, the political climate does have a clear effect

on their propensity to strike. The presence of a Right-to-Work law has a significant negative effect. That such regulation of industrial relations hit craft unions particularly hard is not surprising given that they are often organized on an apprenticeship basis and were (at least initially) the intended targets of these laws. The lack of a relationship between the presidential election year dummy and strikes by craft unions supports the argument that they are not as heavily invested in political campaigns as many others unions.

Firm resistance has a slight positive effect on strikes by craft unions. Again, because of their historic strength on the shop floor and the emphasis on collective bargaining as the primary avenue to new gains, we suspect that firm hostility will often provoke a militant reaction by these unions. Both the size of the union sector in the state and the level of union organizing activity also increased strike activity by traditional AFL unions. This is somewhat of a surprise given these unions historical reliance on their own strength to win new benefits. Although further research is needed to explore this, these findings may indicate that the waning strength of craft unions requires that they depend upon the labor movement as a whole.

Table 4 about here

The next model evaluates strike activity by the “new” labor movement, those unions that have devoted significant resources to organizing workers in low-wage service industries. Although generally known for their aggressive membership recruitment efforts, these unions are some of the most strike-prone as well. Beginning first with the effects on economic indicators, the unemployment rate of the state has a strong negative effect on strike activity. This is consistent with a traditional, “institutionalized”

explanation of strikes and supports the argument that these unions have become the bulwark of the contemporary labor movement.

Many of the unions included in this category, most notably the SEIU, have left the AFL-CIO because of this organization's emphasis on electoral success at the expense of organizing; thus it should not be surprising that the political structure does not affect their strike propensity, particularly the election year dummy, given their prioritization of collective action over electoral politics. Only in this model does the citizen ideology score significantly increase strike frequency. This supports recent empirical findings that identifies grassroots and community coalition work as a critical strategy of the "new labor movement" (Manheim 2001). What this suggests to us is that building such networks may be far easier in progressive areas.

There is also evidence that the overall level of firm resistance to unions, as measured by the number of decertification elections in the state, has a positive effect on striking. Again, one of the hallmarks of these organizations has been their willingness to directly confront corporate power, so it follows that capital hostility may actually provoke labor disputes. Like craft unions, revitalized unions rely less on the overall strength of the labor movement in the state than do industrialized unions; only the unionization rate has a significant effect on strikes. Interestingly, NLRB certification elections, while not significant, actually reduce strikes by unions in this category. One explanation is that because these unions account for much of the new organizing activity today, resources for strikes are diverted to membership recruitment efforts (Voss and Sherman 2000). Finally, there is some evidence of a Sweeney effect here; the post 1995 dummy is positive and significant, which may indicate a more aggressive posture by these unions after one

of their own (John Sweeney was former president of the SEIU) took control of the largest single labor organization in America.

The last model analyzes the strike activity of a single union, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. This is perhaps the most unique labor organization in existence today: generally associated with organized crime and the corruption of labor, it also happens to be the most militant (in terms of striking) and is one of the Change to Win faction of unions that recently left the AFL-CIO. This exceptional status is confirmed in the model, it is the only category where both the economic and political climate had no effect on the strike propensity by this union.

It appears that strikes by the Teamsters is driven less by the broader political and economic climate than by the actions of firms and the strength of the labor movement as a whole. Firm resistance in the form of decertification elections had a large positive effect on strikes; each additional decertification election increased the Teamster's strike rate by more than half a percentage point. This finding is not entirely unexpected given the historically aggressive nature of this union; like the unions of the revitalized labor movement it should not be surprising that firm hostility provokes more, not less strikes, by the Teamsters. The overall vitality of the union movement in the state was also important here; both the unionization rate and level of union organizing increased Teamsters' strikes.

The results from Table 4 present one of the first efforts to systematically disaggregate theoretically important strike explanations by different types of unions. Although previous research has offered universalistic explanations of strikes, it is clear that disaggregating strikes by union is important for assessing the relationship between various contextual factors and this activity. For example, there has been growing interest

in firm resistance and the role it plays in weakening the labor movement. However, as Figure 2 illustrates, there are substantial differences in the effect of decertification elections depending upon the union in question. The strike rate of both AFL craft unions and revitalized unions is relatively unaffected by firm resistance (slight positive relationship). In contrast, strikes by CIO unions tend to decline when decertification elections increase, while their affect on Teamsters locals is just the opposite, firm resistance spurs new strikes.¹²

Figure 2 about here

In addition, both economic and political indicators also varied considerably across the models. For some unions (AFL craft and revitalized unions) unemployment functioned in the expected direction, reducing strike activity, but this is not the case for CIO organizations or the Teamsters. Not all unions respond the same to anti-union political indicators like Right-to-Work laws and only some temporarily refrain from striking during election years. Finally, while the overall strength and organizing activity of the labor movement in the state generally increased individual union's strike propensity, these effects too are not universal. Strikes by the AFL craft unions, and the more militant organizing unions are less tied to overall union strength than are the Teamsters and particularly CIO unions. Therefore, in light of this evidence, it is clear that understanding how unions interact with the broader environment within which they operate is critical for understanding strike propensity and, we suggest, the prospects for union renewal in America today.

¹² Of course, detailed accounts of specific interactions between unions and firms is needed to fully specify these relationships.

Conclusions

The current research seeks to examine strike activity following the breakdown of traditional collective bargaining relations and a period of growing economic and political resistance to unions. As a direct result of these structural shifts, the American labor movement has also undergone significant restructuring, and many unions have begun advocating a more aggressive response to firm countermobilization. The disparity within organized labor with respect to this strategy, which has led to a split within the AFL-CIO, only serves to complicate analyses of strikes today. We addressed these issues by examining how traditional strike explanations, along with firm resistance, which has been previously ignored, affect strikes by distinct types of unions.

This set of findings clearly indicates that how we think about the factors that drive strike activity cannot be separated from the nuances of the movement itself. Labor unions are not interchangeable organizations; their particular membership base, history, and primary industry all shape how they react to broad shifts in the political and economic climate and to heightened firm countermobilization. While the current research was able to break down strikes by different types of unions, the results were still based on aggregate state level data. Thus, even though we are able to assess the ways in which important predictors vary across unions, these data prevent a more in-depth discussion of just how they matter.

Additionally, although the article was concerned with strike events, it seems reasonable to assume that such variation also exists with regard to explanations of other important union activities, including political involvement and organizing. Indeed, the current research is based partially on the growing evidence that the renewed commitment to membership recruitment by labor unions is concentrated among only a few prominent

organizations like the Service Employees International Union. These findings, and the recent split of the AFL-CIO over the importance of political versus organizing campaigns, demonstrate the significance of examining variations across unions and how they shape such outcomes. We thus see our research as building on and extending prior labor literature (e.g., Lopez 2004; Voss 2000) by both developing a categorization scheme of unions to account for substantial intra-movement diversity and by demonstrating its importance in relation to what has long been an essential tactic in labor's collective action repertoire.

Understanding how broad theoretical explanations interplay with the trajectories and orientations of particular organizations has implications beyond research on labor disputes. Indeed, much of the theoretical foundation of social movement research more generally, such as the political opportunity and resource mobilization perspectives, make broad claims about how changes in the state and the availability of resources affect contentious behavior. As some researchers have shown (Meyer and Minkoff 2004; Minkoff 1999), however, such discussions should consider how such predictors are expected to interact with different types of movement actors – something our analyses and findings strongly support.

Finally, it is important to recall the substantive importance of strikes: historically this repertoire has been by far the most important way in which workers act together to achieve new benefits, whether it is wage increases or control over the shop floor. If strikes have dwindled in recent years, then the prospects of workers' economic progress are reduced (Rosenfeld 2006). Additionally, as the second set of models demonstrates, there is significant variation in the factors that drive strikes by different types of unions. If striking benefits both the rank-and-file and the union, then the larger implications of

structural shifts will also affect unions differently and have enormous ramifications for workers represented by those organizations.

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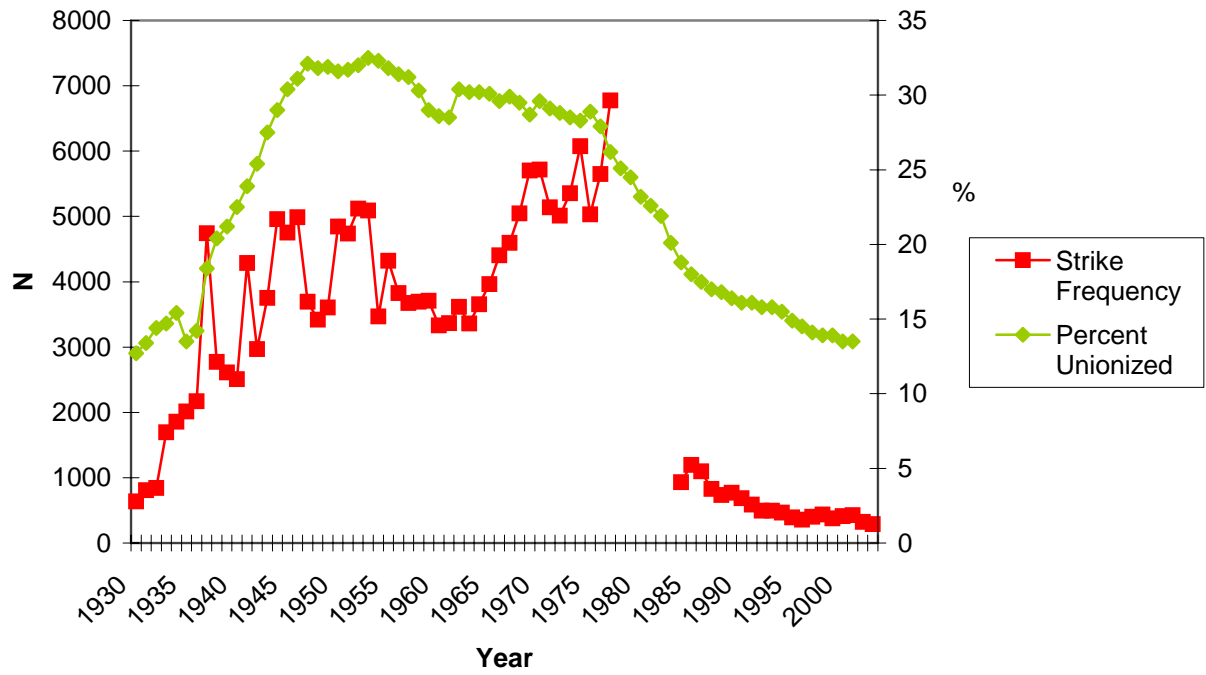
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Figure 1. Strike Activity and Unionization Rate in the United States, 1930-2003



Data Sources: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Measures Included in the Analysis

| Variables | Mean | Standard Deviation | Data Source | Time |
|--|--------|--------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Outcomes | | | | |
| Strike Frequency | 11.93 | 18.35 | FMCS | - |
| Original CIO Strike Frequency | 2.08 | 4.07 | FMCS | - |
| Original AFL Craft Strike Frequency | .90 | 1.74 | FMCS | - |
| AFL Revitalized Strike Frequency | 1.20 | 3.26 | FMCS | - |
| Teamsters Strike Frequency | 2.26 | 3.84 | FMCS | - |
| Economic Predictors | | | | |
| Unemployment Rate | 5.59 | 1.80 | BLS | Not Lagged |
| Median Household Income (in thousands) | 32.41 | 82.38 | Statistical Abstract of the US | Two Year Moving Average |
| Political Predictors | | | | |
| Percentage of Republicans in State Legislature | 44.51 | 16.56 | Statistical Abstract of the US | Not Lagged |
| Right-to-Work Law | .42 | - | US Dept. of Labor | Not Lagged |
| Presidential Election Year | .26 | - | Statistical Abstract of the US | Not Lagged |
| Citizen Ideology Score | 48.43 | 14.82 | Berry et al. (1998) | Not Lagged |
| Firm Resistance | | | | |
| Decertification Elections (in hundreds) | .22 | .30 | NLRB | Not Lagged |
| Union Strength | | | | |
| Unionization Rate | 14.37 | 6.22 | Statistical Abstract of the US | Two Year Moving Average |
| NLRB Certification Elections (in hundreds) | .96 | 1.24 | NLRB | Two Year Moving Average |
| Unfair Labor Practices (in hundreds) | 4.64 | 5.62 | NLRB | Not Lagged |
| Controls | | | | |
| Number of Enterprises (in thousands) | 128.30 | 136.94 | County Business Patterns | Not Lagged |
| Percent Manufacturing | 15.66 | 6.22 | Statistical Abstract of the US | Not Lagged |
| Percentage of Employees that are Female | 45.89 | 1.55 | Statistical Abstract of the US | Not Lagged |
| Post-1995/Sweeney dummy | .37 | - | | |
| <i>Region</i> | | | | |
| West | .26 | - | Census | Time-invariant |
| Midwest | .24 | - | Census | Time-invariant |
| South | .32 | - | Census | Time-invariant |
| Northeast (omitted category) | .18 | - | Census | Time-invariant |

Table 2. Description of Union Categorization

| | Union(s) Included | Total Strike Activity, 1984-2002 | % of All Strikes | Origin | Primary Industrial Sector/Occupation | Total Workers Represented, 1999* | Aggressive Organizing |
|--------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------|------------------|--------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Original CIO | UAW, USW, UMW | 1977 | 17.4 | CIO | Manufacturing | 1,396,491 | No |
| Original AFL Craft | CJU, IBEW, IUE | 853 | 7.5 | AFL | Craft | 1,374,275 | Varied |
| “Revitalized” | SEIU, HERE, UFCW, CWA | 1138 | 10.0 | AFL | Service Sector | 3,503,248 | Yes |
| Teamsters | IBT | 2146 | 18.9 | AFL | Mixed (transportation, warehouse) | 1,402,000 | Yes |

* Data provided by the Office of Labor-Management Standards, Department of Labor

Table 3. Negative Binomial Models of Economic, Political, Firm Resistance, and Union Strength Indicators on State Strike Activity 1985-2002 (numbers in parentheses represent standard errors)

| Variables | Model 1. Economic | Model 2. Political | Model 3. Firm Resistance | Model 4 Union Strength | Model 5. Full Model |
|--|----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------|
| Economic Predictors | | | | | |
| Unemployment Rate | -.009 (.020) | - | - | - | -.029 (.021) |
| Median Household Income (in thousands) | -.020** (.000) | - | - | - | -.010 (.010) |
| Political Predictors | | | | | |
| Percentage of Republicans in State Legislature | - | -.010* (.005) | - | - | -.004 (.005) |
| Right-to-Work Law | - | -.930*** (.189) | - | - | -.534** (.225) |
| Presidential Election Year | - | -.109** (.044) | - | - | -.122** (.048) |
| Citizen Ideology Score | - | .002 (.004) | - | - | .003 (.003) |
| Firm Resistance | | | | | |
| Decertification Elections (in hundreds) | - | - | 1.043 *** (.176) | - | .906 (.238) |
| Union Strength | | | | | |
| Unionization Rate | - | - | - | .230*** (.035) | .204*** (.038) |
| Unionization Rate^2 | - | - | - | -.005*** (.001) | -.005*** (.001) |
| NLRB Certification Elections (in hundreds) | - | - | - | .289*** (.069) | .171** (.077) |
| Unfair Labor Practices (in hundreds) | - | - | - | .036* (.021) | .020 (.019) |
| Controls | | | | | |
| Number of Enterprises (in thousands) | .004*** (.001) | .004*** (.001) | .003*** (.001) | .001 (.001) | .001* (.001) |
| Percent Manufacturing | .078*** (.014) | .095*** (.012) | .077*** (.013) | .063*** (.010) | .053*** (.010) |
| Percentage of Employees that are Female | -.109*** (.028) | -.125*** (.020) | -.104*** (.021) | -.090*** (.022) | -.084 (.023) |
| Post-1995/Sweeney dummy | -.008 (.070) | -.085 (.078) | -.118** (.057) | -.033 (.065) | .032 (.082) |
| <i>Region</i> | | | | | |
| West | -.680** (.310) | -.238 (.255) | -.756** (.274) | -.432 (.270) | -.383* (.225) |
| Midwest | .143 (.266) | .486* (.266) | -.008 (.241) | .172 (.206) | .277 (.187) |
| South | -1.207*** (.264) | -.236 (.352) | -.960*** (.236) | .148 (.238) | .422 (.358) |

Note: N=950 state-years. Standard errors corrected for heteroskedasticity and serial correlation.

*p<0.1 **p<0.05 ***p<.001 (two tailed test)

Table 4. Negative Binomial Models of Economic, Political, Firm Resistance, and Union Strength Indicators on State Strike Activity by Union, 1985-2002 (numbers in parentheses represent standard errors)

| Variables | Model 1. CIO | Model 2. Craft | Model 3. “New” | Model 4 Teamsters |
|--|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| Economic Predictors | | | | |
| Unemployment Rate | -.003 (.036) | -.064* (.035) | -.081** (.039) | -.026 (.029) |
| Median Household Income (in thousands) | -.002 (.015) | -.031* (.019) | .022 (.040) | .002 (.012) |
| Political Predictors | | | | |
| Percentage of Republicans in State Legislature | .001 (.008) | -.001 (.007) | -.006 (.009) | -.003 (.006) |
| Right-to-Work Law | -.145 (.553) | -.972** (.403) | -.312 (.525) | -.154 (.397) |
| Presidential Election Year | -.266*** (.072) | -.062 (.095) | -.150 (.131) | -.103 (.793) |
| Citizen Ideology Score | .001 (.006) | .004 (.007) | .016** (.007) | .007 (.007) |
| Firm Resistance | | | | |
| Decertification Elections (in hundreds) | -.276 (.276) | .005* (.003) | .011** (.005) | .552* (.293) |
| Union Strength | | | | |
| Unionization Rate | .341*** (.068) | .192** (.075) | .280** (.095) | .329*** (.078) |
| Unionization Rate^2 | -.009*** (.002) | -.004** (.002) | -.006** (.002) | -.008*** (.002) |
| NLRB Certification Elections (in hundreds) | .334** (.001) | .225** (.068) | -.266 (.174) | .175** (.082) |
| Unfair Labor Practices (in hundreds) | .139*** (.032) | .008 (.030) | .081 (.059) | .015 (.030) |
| Controls | | | | |
| Number of Enterprises (in thousands) | -.003** (.001) | .001 (.001) | .001 (.002) | .002* (.001) |
| Percent Manufacturing | .070*** (.020) | .025* (.013) | .049** (.021) | .027* (.016) |
| Percentage of Employees that are Female | -.186*** (.043) | -.067 (.044) | -.197** (.079) | -.051 (.047) |
| Post-1995/Sweeney dummy | .142 (.178) | -.215 (.190) | .397** (.195) | -.122 (.143) |
| <i>Region</i> | | | | |
| West | -1.339** (.434) | -.573* (.315) | -.542 (.462) | -.589** (.283) |
| Midwest | .220 (.212) | .053 (.258) | -.613* (.361) | .474* (.269) |
| South | .613 (.576) | .867* (.478) | .340 (.548) | .077 (.444) |

Note: N=950 state-years. Standard errors corrected for heteroskedasticity and serial correlation.

*p<0.1 **p<0.05 ***p<.001 (two tailed test)

Figure 2. Effect of Decertification Elections on Union Strike Rate

