

Labor Union Membership and Life Satisfaction in the United States*

Patrick Flavin
Assistant Professor
Baylor University
Department of Political Science
One Bear Place #97276
Waco, TX 76798
Patrick_J_Flavin@baylor.edu

Gregory Shufeldt
Assistant Professor
University of Arkansas at Little Rock
Department of Political Science
2801 South University Avenue
Stabler Hall 603
Little Rock, AR 72204
gdshufeldt@ualr.edu

This draft: October 27, 2014

* Authors' names are listed alphabetically to reflect equal contributions to the research.

Abstract

While a voluminous literature examines the effects of organized labor on workers' wage and benefit levels in the United States, there has been little investigation into whether membership in a labor union directly contributes to a higher quality of life. Using data from the World Values Survey, we uncover evidence that union members are more satisfied with their lives than those who are not members and that the substantive effect of union membership on life satisfaction rivals other common predictors of quality of life. Moreover, we find that union membership boosts life satisfaction across demographic groups regardless if someone is rich or poor, male or female, young or old, or has a high or low level of education. These results suggest that organized labor in the United States can have significant implications for the quality of life that citizens experience.

Keywords: labor union membership, organized labor, quality of life, life satisfaction

Does belonging to a labor union, one of the central institutions in advanced industrial economies like the United States, affect the quality of life that citizens experience? In a growing research program, scholars have examined the impact of individual economic and psychological factors as well as broader societal and cultural forces on whether citizens lead lives that they deem satisfying (Frey and Stutzer 2002; Diener, Helliwell, and Kahneman 2010; Graham 2010; Radcliff 2013). Recent research has also linked political factors, such as democratic institutions (Frey and Stutzer 2002; Inglehart 2006), the size of government or the welfare state (Bjornskov, Dreher, and Fischer 2007; Radcliff 2013; Flavin, Pacek, and Radcliff 2014), and the ideological and partisan composition of governments (Radcliff 2001; 2013; Alvarez-Diaz, Gonzalez, and Radcliff 2010) with individual and countrywide levels of subjective well-being. However, to date scholars have devoted scarce attention to examining the impact of organized labor on citizens' life satisfaction. Of the limited studies that do consider this question, most have focused on the society-wide effects of union membership levels (i.e. union density) on aggregated measures of well-being in states or countries (Radcliff 2005, 2013; Flavin, Pacek, and Radcliff 2010; Keane, Pacek, and Radcliff 2012), while few have considered whether union members as individuals are more satisfied with their lives compared to those who are not union members.

In the United States, the percent of the working population that belongs to a labor union has been steadily declining. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014), only 11.3% of all wage and salary workers are members of a labor union which reflects a decline of almost ten percent of the American working population in the last thirty years. Moreover, as evidenced by the quick demise of the Employee Free Choice Act in Congress and more recent high profile battles over collective bargaining rights and employee benefits in several states, even the ability to organize and join a labor union has become a politically contentious issue.

Given this growing adversarial political climate for organized labor, we believe it is particularly relevant to assess the potential effects that labor unions can have on the quality of life of their members. Therefore, in this short paper we investigate the relationship between union membership and life satisfaction in the United States. Using data from five waves of the World Values Survey, we uncover evidence that, after controlling for a series of possible confounding factors, union members are more satisfied with their lives than those who are not members and that the substantive effect of union membership on life satisfaction is large and rivals other common predictors of quality of life. Moreover, union membership boosts life satisfaction across demographic groups regardless if someone is rich or poor, male or female, young or old, or has a high or low level of education. These results suggest that organized labor in the United States can have significant implications for the quality of life that citizens experience.

The Scientific Study of Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction or “subjective well-being” is understood as the degree to which individuals positively evaluate the quality of their life when taken as a whole. As the scientific study of life satisfaction has continued to receive more attention across academic disciplines, a thorough and well-developed literature has responded to an array of potential theoretical and methodological concerns. For example, standard or conventional survey items used to measure subjective well-being have been rigorously tested and found reliable and valid (Myers and Diener 1997). Moreover, scholars have grown increasingly confident that the scientific study of well-being is not particularly marred by social desirability bias or the desire to report one is satisfied when that is not the case (Myers and Diener 1995). Individuals who self-report higher

levels of satisfaction on surveys also tend to demonstrate other attitudinal and behavioral characteristics that communicate happiness. For example, they are more likely to laugh, smile, and report higher levels on other (self-reported) measures of satisfaction (Watson and Clark 1991; Myers 1993; Myers and Diener 1997). Self-reported levels of subjective well-being also correlate highly with evaluations that come from external sources, such as family, friends, or professional/clinical assessments (Myers and Diener 1997).

Recent research on subjective well-being frequently relies on a single, direct question that asks respondents to report on how satisfied they feel with their lives “in general.” Asking this question in a simple and direct way has been documented to perform as well or better than more complex multi-item approaches (Veenhoven 1993). After examining in detail a large number of concerns over the scientific utility of self-reported satisfaction, Veenhoven (1996, 4) concludes that most doubts “can be discarded.” As he puts it, the “literature on this point can be summarized as saying that simple questions on happiness and life satisfaction measure subjective appreciation of life quite validly” (1997, 157). In short, the available evidence clearly suggests that we can both measure life satisfaction with reasonable accuracy and compare levels of satisfaction across individuals. This in turn allows us to test empirical propositions, such as the effect of union membership on the life satisfaction of individuals in the United States.

Theoretical Linkages Between Labor Union Membership and Life Satisfaction

Labor unions can contribute to citizens’ quality of life through a variety of possible mechanisms. First, an individual’s employment experience is one of the most demanding and central aspects of their life (Seeman and Anderson 1983). For most Americans, a large (if not the largest) portion of their waking lives is spent at their place of work. To the extent that the work

experience is an agreeable or positive one, people tend to have better physical and mental health that ought to lead them to be more satisfied with their lives (Jenkins 1971; Cooper and Marshall 1976; Rahman and Sen 1987; Sousa-Poza 2000; Argyle 2001). In the American workplace, labor union members are usually given a direct “voice” in how the workplace is run (Hirschman 1970). For example, members are afforded an opportunity to identify, discuss, and seek to improve working conditions which can heighten workers’ sense of self-determination and reduce feelings of alienation.¹ Moreover, union members in many workplaces can appeal the rulings of their employers if they disagree with the outcome. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that previous research has found that labor union members tend to be more satisfied with their work experience as compared with non-members (Pfeffer and Davis-Blake 1990; Bender and Sloane 1998).² This, in turn, likely leads to greater satisfaction with one’s life in general.

Second, labor union members are generally more likely to feel secure in their job as compared with non-members (Sousa-Poza 2000) because one goal of organized labor is to ensure job security for its members. For example, labor negotiated contracts and collective

¹ Alienation can contribute to depression (Erikson 1986), job dissatisfaction (Greenberg and Grunberg 1995), and an overall drop in levels of life satisfaction (Loscocco and Spitze 1990).

² However, some scholars have argued that union members actually report lower rates of job satisfaction (Hammer and Avgar 2005). One possible explanation for this finding is that dissatisfied workers are slightly more likely to join a labor union in the first place (Pfeffer and Davis-Blake 1990; Clark 1996). Once this reality is taken into consideration, previous studies have found that union membership has a positive and significant impact on job satisfaction (Bender and Sloane 1998). For our purposes, these concerns about selection effects in who chooses to join a labor union actually bias against us uncovering a positive relationship between union membership and subjective well-being.

bargaining help to protect workers from arbitrary dismissal and insulate the terms of their employment from the financial bottom-line of their employers. The broader literature on life satisfaction has consistently identified unemployment as a major predictor of lower levels of mental health, physical health, and subjective well-being (Catalano 1991; Laitinen, Ek, and Sovio 2002; Charles and DeCicca 2008). Union protection from unemployment, then, can help to guard against feelings of stress and anxiety that can accompany even the prospect of losing one's job and livelihood. By reducing stress and anxiety about losing one's job, being a member of a labor union can contribute to higher levels of subjective well-being.

Third, labor unions provide multiple opportunities for greater human interaction that lessens feelings of loneliness and social isolation. Unions, by their very definition, are a collection of individuals who join together to pursue common goals. In doing so, bonds of trust and norms of reciprocity are formed among members that can extend even beyond the workplace. Integration into formal and informal professional and social support networks can help reduce job stress and promote solidarity among members (Cohen and Wills 1985; Uehara 1990; Jackson 1992). Given the voluminous literature that documents the positive link between social connection/interpersonal relationships and subjective well-being (Myers and Diener 1995; Veenhoven 1996; Lane 2000; Putnam 2000), it is likely that belonging to a labor union enhances the degree to which citizens are satisfied with their own lives.

Fourth, labor unions can also promote more interested and involved citizenship. The participatory or developmental strand of democratic theory encourages worker participation and involvement in decision making in the workplace precisely because such participation is believed capable of creating better citizens – citizens who are more sophisticated, more knowledgeable, more tolerant, and more civic minded (Pateman 1970). An extensive body of analysis generally

supports the empirical veracity of this presumption (Radcliff and Wingenbach 2000; Flavin and Radcliff 2011). Thus, if participation in organizations contributes to human development, and if being a union member implies at least some degree of participation in the organization, then membership in a labor union should promote more developed (and, by extension, more satisfied) citizens.

Given the arguments discussed above, we believe there are strong theoretical reasons to expect that labor union members will, on average, be more satisfied with their lives than non-members. In addition, we expect the positive relationship between union membership and life satisfaction to hold even as the characteristics of the typical American union member continue to shift from the private to the public sector and from blue-collar jobs to more government and service occupations.³ In other words, we argue there are strong reasons to expect that union membership will boost levels of subjective well-being regardless of personal demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. For example, regardless of their specific occupation, we expect union members to experience greater job satisfaction, have greater job security, have more social connections, and more opportunities for meaningful participation both at work and in politics more generally when compared with those who are not union members. In sum, we expect that belonging to a labor union leads to greater quality of life for all union members in the United States regardless of their particular demographic characteristics.

³ Recent research reveals that, in the last thirty years, the population of union members has become more female, more racially and ethnically diverse, more educated, and older (Schmitt and Warner 2009; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2014).

Data and Empirical Strategy

To evaluate the relationship between labor union membership and life satisfaction, we use pooled data from five waves of the World Values Survey (WVS) conducted in the United States in 1982, 1990, 1995, 1999, and 2006. Self-reported life satisfaction is measured on a 1-10 scale where respondents are asked: “All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days? Using this card on which 1 means you are ‘completely dissatisfied’ and 10 means you are ‘completely satisfied’ where would you put your satisfaction with your life as a whole?” As detailed above, a large and growing literature across the social sciences assesses the validity and reliability of self-reported measures of life satisfaction (e.g., Inglehart 1990; Veenhoven 2002). For example, Myers and Diener (1995) find that self-reports are consistent with external evaluations, display stability over time, and are not particularly troubled by social-desirability bias.

As our measure of labor union membership, we code respondents dichotomously where respondents who reported they are a member of a labor union are coded 1 and all other respondents are coded 0.⁴ As discussed above, we expect that, net of other factors, union members will report higher levels of life satisfaction than non-members such that the coefficient for union member will be positively signed and statistically different from zero.

⁴ To generate this measure, we use survey responses from three different items in the WVS longitudinal data file because union membership status was queried in slightly different ways across survey waves. First, we code respondents as union members if they report being a member (active or inactive) of a labor union using items A067 and A101. Second, we also code respondents as union members if they respond that they alone or they and their spouse are members of a labor union using item X039. We do not code respondents as members of a labor union if they report that only their spouse is a union member.

In our statistical models, we control for a host of possible confounding factors that might also predict individuals' assessments of how satisfied they are with their lives. These factors include respondents' income, education, gender, age, marital status, self-reported health, employment status, and church attendance (Myers and Diener 1995; Radcliff 2001, 2005; Flavin, Pacek, and Radcliff 2014). Income is measured on a 1-10 scale where respondents are split into income deciles in each survey wave. Education is measured on a 1-8 scale with higher values indicating that a higher level of education has been completed. Gender is coded 1 for female and 0 for male. We include a covariate for both age and age squared because of our expectation of a curvilinear relationship such that both young and old respondents tend to, on average, be more satisfied with their lives than those who are middle aged. Marital status is coded as 0 if unmarried and 1 if married (or living together as married). We measure self-reported health using an item that asks respondents: "All in all, how would you describe your state of health these days? Would you say it is very good, good, fair, poor, or very poor?" (healthier responses coded higher). Employment status is measured with two separate dummy variables with respondents coded as 1 if they are unemployed and 0 otherwise and coded as 1 if they are retired and 0 otherwise. We measure church attendance on a 1-8 scale where a higher number indicates more frequent attendance. In addition, to account for the possible downward secular trend in life satisfaction argued to have occurred over recent decades (Lane 2000) as well as any year-to-year idiosyncrasies, we also include fixed effect dummy variables for each survey year (omitting one as a reference category) in all models.

Analysis

We begin by using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to model self-reported life satisfaction as a function of labor union membership and the series of covariates discussed above. Column 1 of Table 1 reports the results of this estimation and reveals that the coefficient for labor union membership is positive and statistically different from zero at conventional levels of statistical significance ($p < .05$). Simply stated, union members report being more satisfied with their lives as compared to respondents who are not members of a labor union even after accounting for a series of possible confounding factors. Turning to some of the other covariates in the model, we find (as previous research leads us to expect) that wealthier, married, healthier, and more religious individuals tend to be more satisfied with their lives while those who are unemployed tend to be less satisfied.

[Table 1 about here]

Given that the response set for life satisfaction has a wide range of 1 to 10 and that the wording of the question asks for a numeric score rather than a verbal ranking (somewhat satisfied, very satisfied, etc.), we believe our assumption of constant distance between response categories and our corresponding decision to treat the dependent variable as interval rather than ordinal is well founded. Nevertheless, we also use the same model specification with an ordered probit estimator and report the results in Column 2 of Table 1. The coefficients reveal nearly identical results and confirm that our finding that labor union members are more satisfied with their lives is robust to an alternative estimation strategy.

Substantively, the magnitude of the relationship between labor union membership and life satisfaction is large. As an illustration, Table 2 displays the substantive effect of union membership and compares it to other common individual-level predictors of life satisfaction

(using the coefficient estimates from Column 1 of Table 1). As the table indicates, being a union member (as compared to not being a member) predicts a greater boost in subjective well-being than moving a step up on either the income or church attendance scale, is roughly half the size of the (negative) effect of being unemployed, and about one quarter the size of the effect of being married. In sum, when compared to traditional predictors of self-reported life satisfaction, the boost in satisfaction that accompanies being a labor union member is substantively important.

[Table 2 about here]

We also examine whether the boost in life satisfaction among union members is confined to certain groups in society or, instead, if it has broad implications for all citizens. In particular, we ask whether low income workers (as compared to the affluent), less educated (as opposed to the well educated), men (as compared to women), and older respondents (compared to the young) are disproportionately benefited by being a union member. To evaluate this question, we interact union membership with (separately) income, education, gender, and age and include these new interaction terms in the same model specification utilized above. The four columns in Table 3 report the results of these new estimations and reveal that none of the four interaction terms are statistically different from zero. From a substantive standpoint, these results indicate that union membership boosts life satisfaction across demographic groups regardless if someone is rich or poor, male or female, young or old, or has a high or low level of education.

[Table 3 about here]

Discussion

Amidst the well documented decline in union membership in the United States, it is important to inquire about what benefits union membership might still hold. In this paper, we

outlined four possible theoretical pathways by which being a member of a labor union might increase quality of life compared to not being a member. To review, these include having greater satisfaction with one's experiences while working, feeling greater job security, being afforded numerous opportunities for social interaction and integration, and enhancing the participatory benefits associated with more engaged democratic citizenship.

Our empirical findings confirm our theoretical expectations. Using data from five waves of the World Values Survey, we uncover evidence that union members are more satisfied with their lives than those who are not members and that the substantive effect of union membership on life satisfaction is large and rivals other common predictors of quality of life. Moreover, union membership boosts life satisfaction across demographic groups regardless if someone is rich or poor, male or female, young or old, or has a high or low level of education.

The degree to which workers are organized in a society and are able to collectively bargain with their employers can have profound effects on social and political arrangements. As articulated by Margaret Levi (2003, 45), organized labor is often viewed as “the most effective popular vehicle for achieving a democratic and equitable society.” Yet in the United States, the ability for labor to effectively organize and bargain collectively has become an increasingly contentious question and source of political conflict. The results we report in this paper provide some insight on this debate by suggesting that, all else equal, citizens lead more satisfying lives when they are afforded the resources and protections that membership in a labor union provides.

While we find no evidence that the effects of union membership on life satisfaction differ based on the demographics of the person in question (i.e. membership boosts satisfaction for all workers), future research should expand on this current paper and investigate if the effects vary for different sectors of the economy or different geographical locations. For example, do

white-collar public sector union members experience the same boost in life satisfaction as blue-collar private sector workers? Do union members in heavily unionized states report being more satisfied than union members in “right to work” states where unions often struggle to organize members? Given the results uncovered here, we believe there are several fruitful avenues to further investigate how organized labor can impact the quality of life that citizens experience.

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Table 1: Union Members Report Living More Satisfying Lives

<i>Estimator:</i>	(1) <i>OLS</i>	(2) <i>Ordered Probit</i>
Union Member	0.121* [0.060]	0.089* [0.036]
Income	0.071* [0.010]	0.035* [0.006]
Education	-0.014 [0.009]	-0.014* [0.006]
Female	0.079 [0.043]	0.058* [0.026]
Age	-0.019* [0.007]	-0.010* [0.004]
Age ²	0.000* [0.000]	0.000* [0.000]
Married	0.463* [0.047]	0.275* [0.028]
Self-reported Health	0.572* [0.026]	0.332* [0.016]
Unemployed	-0.271* [0.092]	-0.112* [0.055]
Retired	0.289* [0.076]	0.201* [0.046]
Church Attendance	0.070* [0.008]	0.041* [0.005]
Constant	4.430* [0.194]	--
Year Effects?	Yes	Yes
R ² /Pseudo R ²	.14	.04
N	6,895	6,895

Dependent variable is self-reported life satisfaction (1-10, more satisfied coded higher). Cell entries are OLS/ordered probit regression coefficients with standard errors reported beneath in brackets. Column 2 omits the coefficients for the cut points. * denotes $p < .05$ using a two-tailed test.

Table 2: Comparing Substantive Effects on Life Satisfaction

Explanatory variable	Change in Life Satisfaction
<i>Union Membership</i> Not a member → Member	.12 [.01, .23]
<i>Income</i> One step increase on 1-10 scale	.07 [.05, .09]
<i>Marital Status</i> Not married → Married	.46 [.36, .54]
<i>Employment Status</i> Employed → Unemployed	-.27 [-.46, -.08]
<i>Church Attendance</i> One step increase on 1-8 scale	.07 [.05, .08]

Cell entries are the predicted change in life satisfaction when varying the independent variable as specified and holding all other variables at their mean values (generated using CLARIFY from the model specification in Table 1, Column 1). The 95% confidence interval for the predicted change is reported in brackets beneath the estimate.

Table 3: Union Membership's Effect on Life Satisfaction is Unrelated to Demographic Factors

<i>Variable used for interaction term:</i>	(1) <i>Income</i>	(2) <i>Education</i>	(3) <i>Gender</i>	(4) <i>Age</i>
Interaction Term with Union Member	0.031 [0.026]	-0.042 [0.025]	0.027 [0.124]	0.000 [0.004]
Union Member	-0.074 [0.172]	0.449* [0.210]	0.111 [0.075]	0.099 [0.175]
Income	0.067* [0.011]	0.070* [0.010]	0.070* [0.010]	0.071* [0.010]
Education	-0.014 [0.009]	-0.009 [0.010]	-0.014 [0.009]	-0.014 [0.009]
Female	0.077 [0.043]	0.081 [0.043]	0.075 [0.046]	0.079 [0.043]
Age	-0.020* [0.007]	-0.020* [0.007]	-0.020* [0.007]	-0.020* [0.007]
Age ²	0.000* [0.000]	0.000* [0.000]	0.000* [0.000]	0.000* [0.000]
Married	0.463* [0.047]	0.462* [0.047]	0.463* [0.047]	0.463* [0.047]
Self-reported Health	0.572* [0.026]	0.572* [0.026]	0.571* [0.026]	0.572* [0.026]
Unemployed	-0.272* [0.092]	-0.275* [0.092]	-0.271* [0.092]	-0.271* [0.092]
Retired	0.293* [0.076]	0.285* [0.076]	0.289* [0.076]	0.288* [0.076]
Church Attendance	0.070* [0.008]	0.070* [0.008]	0.070* [0.008]	0.070* [0.008]
Constant	4.452* [0.195]	4.387* [0.195]	4.434* [0.194]	4.432* [0.195]
Year Effects?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R ²	.14	.14	.14	.14
N	6,895	6,895	6,895	6,895

Dependent variable is self-reported life satisfaction (1-10, more satisfied coded higher). Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients with standard errors reported beneath in brackets. The variable that union membership is interacted with is listed at the top of each column. * denotes $p < .05$ using a two-tailed test.