

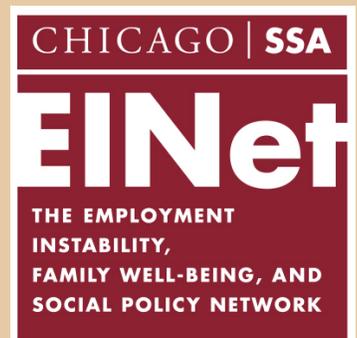


Worker Voice and New Forms of Organizing

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Peter Berg | Michigan State University

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The Employment Instability, Family Well-being, and Social Policy Network (EINet)

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EINet provides a venue for scholars and professionals to interact, collaborate, and develop new research infrastructure to better understand the causes and consequences of employment instability. EINet is particularly concerned with promoting research about instability in the low-wage labor market and its effects on family well-being.

For more information, please contact:

Susan Lambert, Associate Professor and Principal Investigator
The University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration
slambert@uchicago.edu

ssascholars.uchicago.edu/einet

One of the key factors contributing to employment instability among US workers is the low level of worker voice at the workplace. Worker voice can be conceptualized both collectively and individually. The collective voice model has its origin in research conducted by Freeman (1976; 1978; 1980) and Freeman and Medoff (1979; 1983; 1984). In the model, voice is presented as an alternative. In a traditional labor market, when dissatisfied with working conditions, workers can quit or exit their current employment and search for another job in the labor market. Voice, however, offers an alternative to exit. When dissatisfied with their employment, workers may engage in voice and discuss problems at the workplace with their employers without exiting employment. The union provides the voice mechanism to carry out this discussion. In the United States, collective worker voice is typically characterized by collective bargaining and unionization. Establishing a labor union is the sole legal pathway to exercise independent collective worker voice for determining working conditions. Workers must win representation through an election, in which the majority of workers in the bargaining unit must vote for a labor union to represent them in collective negotiations. This process was set up in 1935 under the National Labor Relations Act to reduce workplace conflict and promote employment stability. It was designed to give workers bargaining power to negotiate with management the terms and conditions of their work. However, over time, this pathway has become a very difficult and limited way to achieve collective worker voice.

Collective bargaining has declined in the United States for a variety of reasons. This approach to collective voice was established during the rise of large, integrated manufacturing firms with a high number of workers in traditional, full-time employment relationships. This is not the economy we have today. Manufacturing employment has declined, organizations are more fragmented, and employment relationships more varied (Lazonick, 2009). Our economy is more financially driven, is more dominated by the concept of shareholder value, is more characterized by mobile capital, and is more global, with a larger pool of labor and investment opportunities outside the United States. In addition, our government is less willing to, or perhaps simply not able to, intervene to reform labor laws and standards (Kalleberg, 2011). These developments have contributed to very low collective worker voice, particularly for workers in vulnerable, unstable jobs. US trade union membership density was 11.3% in 2013, far below that of many other developed countries. The rate is only 6.7% in the private sector and 1.3% in sales and related occupations (BLS, 2014).

As workers have faced difficulties achieving independent representation through the increasingly narrow legal pathway of unionism, other forms of advocacy and voice for workers have emerged. Whereas these other forms fall short of collective bargaining, they can be nonetheless helpful to workers. One example is worker centers developed around immigrant communities, which offer services such as English classes, skills training, immigration counseling, and legal services. Other examples include faith-based and community organizations that engage in political campaigns to raise wages or industry-based organizations that seek to increase wages and working conditions, often in partnership with traditional labor unions. Some of these organizations also emphasize worker empowerment and leadership development (Fine, 2006; Milkman & Ott, 2014). The number of these organizations is increasing, but remains small. Milkman (2014) estimates over two hundred nationally, but there is really no way to know. These worker centers and social movement organizations are an evolving form of worker voice, external to the workplace, which is not being captured in nationally representative surveys. Almost exclusively, questions on surveys remain focused on labor union membership and coverage as the exclusive indicators of worker voice.

Whereas collective worker voice exerts power on employers to change working conditions either through collective bargaining or social or political action (i.e., through labor unions, work centers, and social movement organizations), individual worker voice can also be a means to shape working conditions. Individual worker voice is associated with two dimensions (McCabe & Lewin, 1992). First, it refers to the extent to which employees perceive that they have a say about their jobs and feel comfortable speaking

up to management about work issues. This type of voice occurs because of management behavior that is open and encourages this type of interaction with employees. Second, individual worker voice is exercised through employee participation practices that involve workers in some level of decision making. Such practices include problem-solving teams, quality improvement teams, suggestion systems, or forms of work organization that allow for worker discretion (Appelbaum et al., 2000). Care must be taken in interpreting the effect of these participation practices since they can be used simply as tools to intensify work or increase productivity, rather than as forms of job enrichment and mechanisms for employers to respond to employees' ideas. Both of these dimensions of individual worker voice can occur within unionized or nonunion firms and, when combined with collective bargaining, individual worker voice can be quite strong. However, outside of a collective agreement, individual worker voice can be tenuous and is completely dependent on management behavior that can change at any time. Nevertheless, individual worker voice in both union and nonunion environments still can be a real, valued means to bring about change in individuals' job conditions.

Thus, I suggest below some new measures that attempt to capture different forms of worker voice. After briefly discussing the existing measures on unionization, I present a set of suggested survey questions to capture worker voice more effectively for workers in precarious employment. In addition, I take the liberty to suggest a new survey question designed to better capture the current diversity of work arrangements. This is an extra suggestion that I was not asked to do but would like to add to our discussion.

CURRENT ITEMS MEASURING UNIONIZATION AND WORKER VOICE

Measures on unionization can be found in various national surveys.

General Social Survey

Variable name: UNION

Latest survey year: 2012

Do you (or your [SPOUSE]) belong to a labor union? (Who?)

Yes, respondent; Yes, spouse, Yes, both; No, neither belong

Don't know; no answer, not applicable

Variable name: MEMUNION

Survey year: 2004

Now we would like to know something about the groups or organizations to which individuals belong. Here is a list of various organizations. Could you tell me whether or not you are a member of each type?

Yes, No, Don't know; No answer, Not applicable

The General Social Survey also contains questions about individuals' perceptions of unions and voting intentions. These include:

Variable name: UNPOWER
Survey years: 1988-91

Unions in this country have too little power...

Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly disagree, Don't know; No answer, Not applicable

Variable name: UNPROG
Survey years: 1988-91

For the most part, unions just stand in the way of economic progress in this country...

Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly disagree, Don't know; No answer, Not applicable

Variable name: UNVOTE
Survey years: 1988-91

If an election were held with secret ballots, would you vote for or against having a union represent you?

For, Against, Don't know, No answer, Not applicable

Variable name: TRDUNION
Survey years: 2002, 2006, 2010

Workers need strong trade unions to protect their interests...

Current Population Survey

Variable name: peernlab
Survey years: 2010-present

On this job, are you a member of a labor union or employee association similar to a labor union?
a. Yes, No

Variable name: peerncov
Survey years: 2010-present

On this job are you covered by a union or employee association contract?
a. Yes, No

Other surveys present similar questions on unionization or ignore the issue. Whereas questions on worker attitudes toward unions are interesting, I view them as a lower priority than questions focused on workers identifying sources of worker voice.

Perceptions of Individual Worker Voice

The first dimension of individual worker voice can be captured in the following survey questions:

Work-Life Flexibility in Unionized Workplaces Questionnaire (Berg & Kossek, 2009):

1. *How much say do you have about things that affect your job?*
None at all, A little, Some, A lot, Don't know
2. *How comfortable are you making suggestions to your supervisor regarding your work schedules as a way to improve work and family balance in your department, unit, or work group?*
Very uncomfortable, Somewhat uncomfortable, Somewhat comfortable, Very comfortable, Don't know
3. *How comfortable are you expressing your concerns about your work schedules to your supervisor?*
Very uncomfortable, Somewhat uncomfortable, Somewhat comfortable, Very comfortable, Don't know

This three-question scale on worker voice is focused on voice around work schedules and work-family balance. We may want to maintain this focus or modify it, as I do below, to be more general about work.

The participation dimension of individual worker voice could be captured with questions that link workers' participation in problem-solving teams, quality improvement teams, or suggestion systems with improved job conditions or greater management responsiveness to worker concerns. Given that such participation practices are not likely to be widespread among workers in jobs characterized by employment instability, I would put these questions as a low priority.

SUGGESTED NEW MEASURES ON COLLECTIVE AND INDIVIDUAL WORKER VOICE

Standard questions on union membership and coverage are important and well-established in surveys. The new measures I propose are focused more on worker perceptions of support and help to capture emerging social movements and other forms of voice we may not be aware of.

Proposed questions:

1. *Other than your supervisor or family, who has directly or indirectly supported or helped you at work?*
(check all that apply or rank your top three responses [not sure which is best])
 - a. Traditional labor union
 - b. Professional association
 - c. Faith-based group
 - d. Community-based or civic group
 - e. Ethnicity-based group
 - f. Industry-based organization
 - g. Political organization
 - h. Another voluntary organization

2. *If you responded yes to question 1, please identify the types of direct or indirect support or help you received. (check all that apply)*
 - a. Information on wages and salary
 - b. Collective bargaining
 - c. Legal rights awareness
 - d. Skills training
 - e. Job security
 - f. Protection of worker rights
 - g. Support from political campaigns to change employment standards

3. *Have you experienced any positive change at your workplace as a result of this support or help?*
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

Additional worker voice questions include slight modifications to the three-question individual worker voice scale from the Work-Life Flexibility in Unionized Workplaces Questionnaire:

1. *How much say do you have about things that affect your job?*
None at all, A little, Some, A lot, Don't know
2. *How comfortable are you making suggestions to your supervisor regarding your work?*
Very uncomfortable, Somewhat uncomfortable, Somewhat comfortable, Very comfortable, Don't know
3. *How comfortable are you expressing your concerns about your work to your supervisor?*
Very uncomfortable, Somewhat uncomfortable, Somewhat comfortable, Very comfortable, Don't know

MEASURING THE DIVERSITY OF WORK ARRANGEMENTS

Too often, surveys do not adequately capture the variety of arrangements under which employees are classified. I think we can do a better job of measuring these classifications. A more expansive question would allow for a better understanding of the diversity of work arrangements and for better comparisons across these arrangements. I see that Arne is already working on this, but below is my attempt to add to the conversation. This question was taken from the GSS 2010 Quality of Worklife Module (with some additions):

How would you describe your work arrangement in your main job?

1. I work as an independent contractor, independent consultant, or freelance worker
2. I am on-call and work only when called to work
3. I am paid by a temporary agency
4. I work for a contractor who provides workers and services to others under contract
5. I am a regular, permanent employee (standard work arrangement)

Additional Categories

6. I am a temporary worker paid by my company / organization
7. I am a fixed term employee paid by my company / organization

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