

# Prior union experience correlates with voting for pro-labor issues

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Research from U. of I. labor professor Ryan Lamare found that a legislator's past experience with labor unions is associated with an increase in voting for union-supported issues. Credit: Photo by L. Brian Stauffer

A legislator's experience with unionization earlier in life is positively

related to voting in favor of pro-worker legislation once he or she holds elected office, says a new paper from a University of Illinois labor expert who studies unions and politics.

Ryan Lamare, a professor of labor and employment relations at Illinois, found that a legislator's occupational or familial experiences with unions before entering politics is associated with an uptick of between 2.5 to 4.5 percentage points in voting for union-supported issues.

"If you're a politician with union ties or union experience - say, your mother was a steelworker, or you worked as a public school teacher - it means you're slightly more inclined to back policies favorable to workers, and not as inclined to think of unions as the bogeyman," he said. "Because of those formative experiences, legislators often become more interested, later in life, in promoting the policies that might protect workers' interests."

The study, published in the journal *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, employed multilevel, mixed-effects regressions to analyze 2,427 federal and statewide worker-related votes cast by California's legislators from 1999 to 2012. The results indicate that having worked in a unionized occupation or having a family member who belonged to a union are positively associated with voting for worker-friendly laws.

Although the size of the effect is relatively small and is moderated by legislator education and constituency characteristics, the finding that there is an effect of some magnitude is particularly important because the study already accounts for so many things that go into the process of choosing a position on legislation, "including the most obvious: a legislator's party affiliation," Lamare said.

"So that means that even Republicans who have union experience or exposure are going to vote differently from Democrats or Republicans

who don't have that experience," he said. "The magnitude of the finding is important in absolute terms, but it's also important relative to what the study already controls for."

In addition to party affiliation, the study also accounts for union campaign contributions and various legislator characteristics, including ethnicity, gender and tenure in office.

For organized labor, the research "speaks to the need of investing in political training for union members about what it takes to get into office," Lamare said.

"The idea here is that there are two ways that a union can weave itself into the mindset of a legislator and maybe influence their future behavior. One comes from this idea of a sort of intergenerational transfer of organized labor's values - the parent transfers the values to the child, and the child grows up and is imbued with those values."

The other comes from unions as an "experience good," Lamare said.

"That means, you don't understand the value of a union until you belong to one," he said. "So the second question is an experiential question: If legislators have experienced a union - or have at least some high probability, through their occupation, of having union experience in the past - then, later in life, do they become more inclined to favor worker-centric issues? And the answer is, they do."

Beyond its policy implications, the study also fills several gaps in the political science and labor relations literatures, Lamare said.

"In a political climate in which some states have passed legislation that threatens union interests, an understanding of how elected officials behave in relation to union issues is paramount," he said. "An

understanding along these lines also sheds light on the roles of unions in shaping civic engagement and intergenerational socialization, and may inform the strategic dilemmas unions face when deciding how to most efficiently use their resources in attempting to affect policy formation."

Lamare's next study into the topic will look at the issue on a national level because there are "generalizability concerns when you focus on just California," he said.

"California has often been held up by the labor movement as being something of poster state for the revitalization of unions," he said. "Los Angeles in particular was a very anti-union town for most of its history, but because of the confluence of anti-union policies that allowed for a nonentrenched labor movement and its very large immigrant population that was in need of a political voice, it eventually became a unique opportunity to engage in progressive efforts to organize and mobilize nontraditional voters around candidates who would, in theory, be supportive of their issues."

But, Lamare notes, the figure perhaps most associated with California politics and unionization is Ronald Reagan.

"Reagan championed his union ties as president of the Screen Actors Guild when he was running for president in 1979," he said. "In his campaign, Reagan very clearly said that he was a union person with union experience and he would take that experience to the White House - and of course it was a disaster for unions."

Reagan captured just under half of the union vote, "which was incredible for a Republican in 1980," Lamare noted.

"And he may have captured it at least in part because they think he's on the team and will enact a worker-friendly agenda. He certainly didn't

enact a [union](#), labor or worker-friendly legislative agenda after becoming president. So there are really interesting examples from California, but my findings ultimately suggest that - in California, at least - someone like Reagan was more the exception than the rule."

**More information:** "Union Experience and Worker Policy:  
Legislature Behavior in California, 1999-2012"

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