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Immigration, organization, and the Great recession: structural change or continuity?

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Catron's comment extends our 2009 *ASR* article, "Hispanics and Organized Labor in the United States, 1973 to 2007," by analyzing CPS data through the Great Recession. He finds that Hispanic immigrants' odds of union membership declined relative to nonimmigrant whites between 2007 and 2009, and that certain Hispanic immigrant subcategories displayed increased odds of leaving union jobs during the recent recession. Catron interprets these results as revealing a strong business cycle component to the more general relationship between immigrants and labor organizing that we report, and suggests his findings partially undercut "the hopes of those who view immigrants as the key to organized labor's future and organized labor as the key to immigrant prosperity" (p. 315).

We appreciate the extension of our prior work and believe that Catron's focus on the recent recession represents an important area of inquiry. As he highlights, our article juxtaposes solidaristic theories of unionization with positional explanations. We did not focus on how business cycles affect unionization, although we controlled for some of this influence with year fixed effects. We do find certain critiques overdone, such as his observation that our conclusions are "vulnerable to charges of ahistoricism" (p. 316) because they ignore an event—the Great Recession—that was occurring while we were conducting our analyses. Nonetheless, his broader point that business cycles may alter certain patterns we uncovered remains valid. Indeed, we would be quite surprised if the largest economic crisis since the Great Depression failed to disrupt labor force dynamics such as the relationship between Hispanic immigrants and labor organizing. Yet we are unconvinced that Catron's analyses reveal what he claims they do.

Our response has three parts: the first focuses on modeling unionization probabilities before and during the recession; the second on Catron's analysis of union leavers using CPS-Matched datasets; and the third on a broader conceptual issue regarding Catron's interpretation of our article.

UNIONIZATION PROBABILITIES AND THE GREAT RECESSION

In Catron's Tables 1 and 2, he models unionization in 2007 (his pre-recession period) and 2009 (his recession period) to test whether the effects of ethnicity and immigrant status on unionization probabilities changed as the economy soured. Table 1 reveals that Hispanics were no more or less likely to belong to a union compared to non-Hispanic whites in 2007 and 2009, just as we found (see our Table 2 [Rosenfeld and Kleykamp 2009:926]). Table 2 disaggregates the data by Hispanic subcategories. Here Catron finds evidence for his core claim that the recession reduced unionization probabilities among certain Hispanic subpopulations.

For example, in the top panel of Table 2 Catron examines whether the relative odds of unionization for Hispanic immigrants changed between 2007 and 2009. His results indicate that whereas Hispanic immigrants were no more or less likely than non-Hispanic whites to belong to a union in 2007, by 2009 they had roughly half the odds of being unionized as nonimmigrant whites. Is this proof of how the recession disproportionately affected Hispanic immigrants' labor market standing? Our Figure 1 suggests such an interpretation is dependent on the pre-recession comparison year one focuses on.

Figure 1 presents Hispanic immigrants' odds of unionization relative to nonimmigrant whites between 1994 and 2007. To generate the odds ratios, we replicated the model specification from our article (see our Table 2 [Rosenfeld and Kleykamp 2009:926]) and ran separate models on each year of CPS-March data. The results reveal that in 2007, as Catron finds, Hispanic immigrants had similar odds of unionization as nonimmigrant whites. In 2003, 2004, and 2005—three non-recession years—Hispanic immigrants' unionization odds were between half and two-thirds as large as nonimmigrant whites, similar to what Catron finds for 2009. Given the relatively small sample sizes of Hispanic immigrants in any single year of data, Catron's result may reflect random annual variation rather than a systematic trend.

Or take his investigation of how time since arrival affects Hispanic immigrants' unionization probabilities. Catron finds that, for example, in 2007 Hispanic immigrants who had been in the United States for at least two decades had higher odds of unionization than nonimmigrant whites, but by 2009 their odds were statistically indistinguishable. Was this due to the recession? In Figure 2 we plot the odds of unionization for Hispanic immigrants who had been in the United States for 20 or more years relative to nonimmigrant whites. Similar to Catron, our results indicate that in 2007 (and 2006) this particular group of immigrants had higher odds of unionization than did nonimmigrant whites. But for the majority of years covered by our analyses, a period that spans recession and non-recession years, unionization probabilities are statistically indistinguishable from each other—similar to 2009.

Rather than interpreting differences between 2007 and 2009 as indicative of a Great Recession effect, based on our analysis of the full data available from 1994 to 2007, we suggest 2007 (and 2006) data may reflect unusually high periods of immigrant unionization relative to nonimmigrant whites. This may be a real phenomenon or simply random annual

variation in the CPS sample. Regardless of the cause for these somewhat aberrant values, the figure makes clear that they are not representative of the general relationship between unionization and Hispanic immigrants who had been in the United States for at least two decades during the period covered by our data.

As our figures indicate, Catron's evidence for a recession effect on unionization probabilities is heavily dependent on the non-recession year he selects as a baseline. Broadening the focus to include a number of pre-recession years reveals a more complicated picture, one where Hispanic immigrants' relative probability of unionization fluctuates a bit from year to year. Basic patterns do emerge, however: the odds of unionization for all Hispanic immigrants are consistently lower than for nonimmigrant whites (Figure 1). The Hispanic immigrant category is a huge and heterogeneous group, combining subpopulations whose probability of unionization likely differs. One such subgroup is Hispanic immigrants who have been in the United States for decades. As Figure 2 indicates, this population's relative odds of unionization were similar to nonimmigrant whites for the majority of years we analyzed. Catron's finding for 2009 is consistent with this general pattern and not proof of a recession effect.

UNION LEAVERS AND THE GREAT RECESSION

As we note in our article, measures of unionization “combine those who have just secured union employment with those who have been working under a union contract for decades” (Rosenfeld and Kleykamp 2009:917). The effect of contemporary developments, such as successful organizing drives of Hispanic immigrant service workers in certain locales, may be detectable only by focusing on immigrants who recently gained union status. For this reason, in our article we supplemented the unionization analyses with an investigation into individual-level change in union status over a one-year period. The Great Recession's effect may also be best captured by focusing on contemporary patterns. For this reason, Catron's Table 5 investigates the odds of leaving a unionized job before and during the Great Recession. Here he divides his data into three periods: 2004 to 2006 (pre-recession), 2006 to 2008 (intermediary), and 2008 to 2010 (recession/post-recession). Based on results Catron presents in Table 5, he concludes that “compared to non-Hispanic whites, Hispanic immigrants were more likely to lose union jobs ... at an increased rate during the Great Recession” (p. 329). The general finding that many Hispanic subcategories had higher odds of leaving a union job across a one-year period is something we report in our 2009 article (pp. 929–30). We suspect these elevated odds were due to higher levels of job turnover among Hispanics (and African Americans), but without information in the panels on why individuals changed jobs (information that is unavailable in the CPS), we cannot know for sure.

The innovation of this particular piece of the analysis for Catron, then, rests on the recession angle, and here we again see little evidence of a strong recessionary effect. For example, the odds of leaving a union job were higher for Hispanic immigrants than for nonimmigrant whites in all three periods that Catron analyses. In his labor market position model, the odds ratio is 1.8 in the pre-recession period, 1.7 in the intermediate period, and 1.9 in the recession/post-recession period. These estimates seem consistent across the three

comparison periods. Catron goes on to claim that “the odds that Hispanic immigrants left a union increased as the recession unfolded, regardless of how many years they had remained in the United States compared with their non-Hispanic white counterparts” (p. 326). We find this a misreading of the results. Hispanic immigrants who had been in the United States for 20 or more years had 1.5 times higher odds of leaving a union in the pre-recession period, 1.4 times higher odds in the intermediate period, and 1.7 times higher odds in the recession/post-recession period. Again, this strikes us as a pretty stable relationship.

Or take Hispanic immigrants who had been in the United States for five years or less: their odds of leaving a unionized job were 4.0 times those of nonimmigrant whites in the pre-recession period, 2.0 times in the intermediate period, and 4.7 times in the recession/post-recession period. What is the recession story here? Is an odds ratio of 4.0 significantly lower than 4.7? Nowhere in his comment does Catron provide any evidence that the group differences he is interested in—such as whether Hispanic immigrants who have been in the United States 20 or more years are more likely to lose a union job compared to nonimmigrant whites—are significantly different from one another. Standard tests of equality of coefficients are inappropriate when estimating logistic regression models (Allison 1999). Instead, researchers interested in testing group differences with logistic regressions often estimate predicted probabilities to establish whether a shift in an odds ratio from, for example, 4.0 to 4.7 is substantively and statistically meaningful. In the absence of such tests, we find Catron’s claim of recessionary effects to be unwarranted.¹

There is also the issue of workers who *gain* union membership during the recession. On p. 332 Catron reports that “the odds of joining a union ... increased or remained similar over the three periods for many of the race/ethnicity categories compared to native whites.” This would seem to belie the notion that the recession reduced Hispanic immigrants’ attachment to unions. Catron does not display results of the union joiners analysis, however, claiming that “the economic downturn reduced the number of people” who gained union membership (p. 332). He provides no evidence for this claim. Given the long-term decline in union membership over the past half-century, it would certainly not be surprising to see that fewer individuals were union members or union joiners in 2009 versus 2007. That an institution in decline enrolls fewer members over time is not necessarily indicative of a recession effect. Nor do we find it convincing evidence against our claims that certain Hispanic immigrant subpopulations were more attached to unionized work than were white nonimmigrants.

THE BIG PICTURE

Catron’s analyses either fail to establish a recessionary effect, or fail to provide the context necessary to understand the effect. In many cases, the analyses fail to do both. But lost amid all the details about comparison periods and model specifications are the broader conclusions of our original article. Again, we are not suggesting that the Great Recession did not disrupt the relationships between immigrants and unionization. We assume the economic collapse left no labor market dynamic completely untouched, including how employers,

¹Note

For a recent application, see Gauchat (2012). Our 2009 *ASR* article presents predicted probabilities of unionization and union joining for various immigrant subpopulations in Table 4 and p. 931.

unions, and minority workers interrelate. Here we are simply suggesting that Catron's evidence is far from dispositive. But let us assume for a moment that the recession effects he interprets from his models are genuine. A broader question arises as to whether they are of much substantive import.

When the base rates of unionization for all subpopulations are at historic lows, the substantive difference between an odds ratio of, for example, 4.0 and 4.7, is unlikely to be large. Over the past decades, unionization rates among nonimmigrant whites, nonimmigrant Hispanics, immigrant Hispanics, and every other subpopulation have fallen dramatically. As we note in our 2009 article, in terms of unionization "where you work and what kind of work you do matters much more than your ethnicity and immigration status" (p. 933). And those locations in the labor market where unions retain a presence continue to disappear.

The cyclical nature of certain Hispanic subpopulations' unionization propensities is an interesting area of inquiry, as we noted earlier. An analysis that systematically examined the full range of available data to investigate such effects would offer a contribution to the literature on Hispanic and Hispanic immigrant organizing. Our 2009 analyses reveal, however, that no particular group's relative odds of unionization are likely to revitalize the labor movement. Our findings suggest that the real barriers to unionization lie outside of solidaristic ties or the lack thereof among particular subpopulations. As we demonstrated (see, e.g., Table 4 in Rosenfeld and Kleykamp 2009:929), the substantive importance of labor market position far exceeds that of our immigrant analyses in terms of who does or does not belong to or join unions. As we concluded, without a "fundamental restructuring of the institutional underpinnings of organized labor," (p. 933) unionization rates will remain at historic lows for all groups.

Biographies

Jake Rosenfeld is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Washington. His recent research focuses on labor union decline and other changes in pay-setting institutions in the advanced industrial democracies.

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Figure 1.

Odds Ratios from Logistic Regressions Predicting Unionization, 1994 to 2007, Hispanic Immigrants

Note: Point estimates represent the odds ratio of annual regressions predicting unionization for Hispanic immigrants; the reference group is nonimmigrant whites. Surrounding lines represent 95 percent confidence intervals (C/Is). Data come from the CPS-March files, 1994 to 2007. All models include state and metro effects and all covariates shown in Rosenfeld and Kleykamp (2009: Table 2). All models weighted with the appropriate CPS weights. Full model results available from the authors upon request.

Figure 2.

Odds Ratios from Logistic Regressions Predicting Unionization, 1994 to 2007, Hispanic Immigrants Who Had Been in the United States 20 or More Years

Note: Point estimates represent the odds ratio of annual regressions predicting unionization for Hispanic immigrants who had been in the United States 20 or more years; the reference group is nonimmigrant whites. Surrounding lines represent 95 percent C/Is. Data come from the CPS-March files, 1994 to 2007. All models include state and metro effects and all covariates shown in Rosenfeld and Kleykamp (2009: Table 2). All models weighted with the appropriate CPS weights. Full model results available from the authors upon request.