

Understanding Drivers of Worker Organizing and Unionization in the Low-wage Sector Pre-Analysis Plan

Ellora Derenoncourt

Arin Dube

Suresh Naidu

Heather Sarsons

Niharika Singh

December 2024

1 Introduction

This project aims to understand the drivers of the recent increase in worker collective action in the United States. Since 2020, there has been a surge in union organizing activity, particularly among low-wage retail and service sector workers, that has corresponded with two other shifts in the economy. First, labor market tightness increased dramatically, making it easier for workers to find new jobs. Second, organizing attempts received a great deal of media attention, particularly on social media. Each of these factors could independently facilitate organizing efforts, by lowering the costs of organizing and by improving beliefs about the likelihood that organizing will succeed. These factors could also reinforce each other, further driving increases in willingness to engage in collective action.

In this study, we conduct surveys with low-wage workers in the retail and services sectors and embed an information experiment to shock workers' perceptions about labor market tightness and recent union activity. The information experiment will allow us to examine the role of labor market tightness and social learning as separate and joint determinants of union support. This document outlines our experimental design, outcomes of interest, and empirical strategy.

2 Experimental Design

2.1 Sample and Recruitment

Our study sample will be comprised of employed workers in the retail or services sectors who earn an hourly wage. Participants will be recruited by a commercial survey company (YouGov). Our target sample size is between 10,000-12,500 individuals depending on cost. We may supplement our survey with a survey of individuals on Prolific.

Interested individuals across all sampling strategies will be redirected to a study page where they complete a set of pre-treatment modules, receive information treatments, and then answer a set of post-treatment modules.

2.2 Treatments

Participants will be randomly assigned to one of four groups listed below. This randomization is implemented directly on the survey platform. In each group, participants will watch a short

informational video that varies in its content.

Control: Participants receive information on the employment rate in the United States. The video states that “There are currently roughly 158.5 million employed individuals in the U.S.” and notes that the estimate is from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Tightness Treatment: Participants receive information on their local labor market conditions. Specifically, we computed at the state-level how long it took an unemployed person to find a job in the retail or services sectors using Current Population Survey data from the recent past. Respondents are shown this information for their specific state. The customized video contains a message of the following form: “In your state, it usually takes an unemployed person about X months to find a new job in the retail or service sectors that they are willing to work.”

Winning Treatment: Participants receive information on the number of union elections and their success rates from 2017-2023. This information is specific to the retail and services sector and shows a large increase in the number of union elections in the 2022-23 years compared to previous years.

Winning Treatment & Tightness treatment: Participants receive both videos regarding their local labor market conditions as well as recent union activity in the retail and services sectors.

3 Data and Outcomes

3.1 Data Sources

Main Survey: Our pre-treatment modules collect information about each respondent’s demographics, workplace characteristics, familiarity with unions, beliefs about the labor market, and beliefs about union effectiveness and support. Our post-treatment modules again collect information about beliefs about the labor market and unions. In addition, we measure several behavioral outcomes that ask respondents to either pay for information or take effort to indicate willingness to take action in their workplace.

Administrative Data from Partner Organization: For one of our behavioral outcomes, we offer people the chance to connect with a non-profit organization that helps workers take action to improve their workplaces. If a respondent agrees to be connected, we pass their information onto the organization. We will obtain administrative data from the organization about whether the respondent actually spoke with any member of the organization or participated in any of the organization's activities. This outcome will only be observable when our sampling source allows for identifiable information to be passed onto the non-profit organization.

3.2 Primary Outcomes

Our primary outcomes come from the main survey and measure changes in beliefs and behavior about the labor market and union support following the information treatments.

Labor market beliefs and behavior: First, we will measure changes in beliefs about labor market tightness with the following question: *"How much do you agree or disagree with this statement? If I lost my current job for any reason, it would be easy for me to find a new job with similar pay and working conditions as my current job."*

Then, we will examine how the treatments impact respondents' reservation wage and job search intentions using the following two questions:

- Reservation wage: We ask the lowest wage the respondent would require to accept a new job.
- Job search intentions: We ask the respondent about their likelihood of searching for a new job with a different company/employer over the next 3 months.

Union support and effectiveness: We test how treatment impacts beliefs about union support using the following combination of self-reported and behavioral measures.

- Self-reported beliefs
 - Expected benefits of organizing a union: increase wages/benefits, increase respect/dignity on the job
 - Expected costs of organizing a union: getting fired, worksite shutting down, reducing hours

- Likelihood of voting for a union
 - Interest in discussing unions with co-workers
 - Willingness/likelihood of talking to coworkers about a union
 - Co-workers’ willingness to sign a union card or vote in a union election
- Behavioral measures
 - Interest in receiving an information guide about taking action in the workplace with coworkers. Depending on the survey platform, respondents will either be asked to share their email address in order to receive the guide or will receive it at the end of survey.
 - Willingness-to-pay for accessing videos they were shown as per their random assignment.
 - Willingness to provide a testimonial of union support: Respondents are asked to provide an anonymous message stating whether they support organizing a union in their workplace or not, and their reasons for being for or against a union. Respondents are told that these messages will be published on a study page upon the completion of the study.
 - Interest in connecting with non-profit organization: Respondents are offered a chance to get connected with a non-profit partner organization that could help workers take action in their workplace. Respondents must provide basic contact details if they wish to be contacted. We will measure their interest and willingness to provide these details and whether actual contact took place. This measure will only be available where the sampling source allows us to collect personal contact details.

Our belief measures collect information both about a respondent’s own support of unions and their beliefs about their coworkers’ support. We view these as distinct objects and will analyze them separately. We will summarize the measures of union support using the index proposed in Anderson (2008), but will also present them individually.

4 Empirical approach

4.1 Primary Specifications

We will estimate the following two main specifications:

$$y_i = \alpha + \beta \text{Tightness}_i + \gamma \text{Winning}_i + \delta \text{Winning}_i \times \text{Tightness}_i + \psi_s + \epsilon_i \quad (1)$$

$$y_i = \alpha + \beta \text{Tightness}_i + \gamma \text{Winning}_i + \delta \text{Winning}_i \times \text{Tightness}_i + \psi_s + X_i \Gamma + \epsilon_i \quad (2)$$

In specification 1, we include binary indicators for the information treatments and fixed effects for our sampling source, denoted by ψ_s . In specification 2, we also include a vector of demographic and other baseline controls, X_i .

We will also look at heterogeneity by priors about labor market tightness and union activity collected in the pre-treatment modules. Let p_i denote either the prior over tightness or union activity.

$$\begin{aligned} y_i = & \alpha + \beta \text{Tightness}_i + \gamma \text{Winning}_i + \delta \text{Winning}_i \times \text{Tightness}_i + \\ & + p_i + \beta' \text{Tightness}_i \times p_i + \gamma' \text{Winning}_i \times p_i + \delta' \text{Winning}_i \times \text{Tightness}_i \times p_i + \psi_s + X_i \Gamma + \epsilon_i \end{aligned}$$

4.2 Sources of Heterogeneity

We will also look at heterogeneity with respect to:

- Employer quality: Wage-bins as defined by Shift and non-pecuniary job quality from index of survey questions covering job satisfaction; problems at work; voice on the job; and fair treatment by supervisor/management
- Employer partisanship: FEC contributions and other public data available relating to brand perceptions
- Worker Demographics: Age, Education, Gender
- Social proximity to coworkers, as measured by questions about friends at work and close friends who are co-workers
- Concerns about personal finances
- Actual Tightness

- Actual NLRB union activity

Letting z_i denote the above characteristics, we will estimate:

$$y_i = \beta \text{Tightness}_i + \gamma \text{Winning}_i + \delta \text{Winning}_i \times \text{Tightness}_i + \\ + z_i + \beta' \text{Tightness}_i \times z_i + \gamma' \text{Winning}_i \times z_i + \delta' \text{Winning}_i \times \text{Tightness}_i \times z_i + \psi_s + X_i \Gamma + \epsilon_i$$

4.3 Validity and Quality Checks

Balance: Using pre-treatment variables from our main survey, we will assess balance across the four experiment groups. We will compare each treatment group to the control group, as well as to each other.

Sample restrictions to ensure response quality: We will also look at the distribution of survey completion times and plan to exclude respondents who complete surveys either too quickly or too slowly, as they may be unserious or distracted in their efforts, or those who have been flagged by Qualtrics to likely be fraudulent. Relatedly, we have also included an attention check in the survey and will consider restricting our analytical sample to only those include who pass the attention check.

4.4 Multiple Hypothesis Testing

We aim to address concerns around multiple hypothesis testing by using indices of closely related variables as described in the outcomes section. We also plan to report both false discovery rate (FDR) sharpened q-values and the family-wise error rate (FWER) p-values, along with standard p-values.