WHAT FORMS OF REPRESENTATION DO AMERICAN WORKERS WANT? IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY, POLICY, AND PRACTICE

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Recent evidence documents an increased interest among American workers in joining a union. At the same time, there is revived debate among labor scholars, union leaders, politicians, and activists over what forms of labor representation are best suited to meet the needs of the contemporary workforce. Yet little is known about what contemporary workers have to say about these debates. This article draws on a conjoint survey experiment fielded on a nationally representative sample of more than 4,000 employees to explore the forms of representation workers want and are willing to support by paying dues. The authors compare interest in the forms of labor representation that are currently being debated. Results show that while workers value traditional collective bargaining, they would be even more willing to join and financially support organizations currently unavailable under US law and practice. The authors use these results to draw implications for the labor movement, worker advocacy groups, and the future of labor law.

The long-term decline in union representation in the United States has recently sparked broad-ranging debates over whether and how this decline might be reversed. These discussions are happening in academia, think tanks, across the labor movement, and among the candidates running...
for president in the 2020 election. Moreover, these debates encompass models of labor organization that go well beyond the forms of representation anticipated and protected under prevailing labor law, including proposals for sectoral or regional wage setting or bargaining, union-provided portable benefits, and worker representation on corporate boards of directors.

The renewed energy around ambitious labor law reform coincides with an increase in public support for the labor movement and interest from non-union workers in joining a union. For example, in a prior paper our MIT research group reported that the share of non-union workers who say they would vote for a union has increased substantially from about a third of non-union workers in 1979 and 1995 to nearly half of non-union workers in 2017 (Kochan, Yang, Kimball, and Kelly 2019). Evidence of growing dissatisfaction from that survey has been matched by real-world actions by workers who have organized strikes and protests in several unlikely places in recent years. These include red-state public school teachers and employees and contractors at companies such as Instacart, Google, and Amazon.

Missing from the conversation and analysis, however, is evidence of how the renewed public interest in unions or other forms of collective representation might translate into policy reforms that reflect what workers want. In this article, we fill in this gap by answering two questions about workers’ attitudes toward the mix of potential features of new labor organizations. First, what specific forms of representation do contemporary workers want and would be willing to support by paying dues? Specifically, how do workers value the following features of labor representation: membership rules, dues structure, scope of collective bargaining, legal representation on behalf of workers, input to management, selective benefits, use of strikes, and political advocacy? The attributes were chosen to reflect the models of worker representation currently under debate in the United States as well as models present in other advanced economies. Second, how do the relative levels of support across these features of labor representation vary across key groups of workers? We test whether one’s education, political ideology, and personal experience with unions significantly affect the relative value of various forms of labor representation.

We address these questions using a conjoint experiment embedded in a large-scale, nationally representative survey of more than 4,000 employed American workers. We queried workers about their choice between various organizations, as well as the maximum amount in dues respondents would be willing to pay to join these hypothetical organizations. The results show that workers value some features of traditional labor unions, such as collective bargaining, along with features that are not currently supported under US labor law, such as social welfare benefit provision and formal representation on corporate boards of directors.

This study represents, as far as we have determined, the largest and most rigorous experimental analysis ever conducted on worker preferences for
labor representation—including features of traditional unions, alternative labor organizations, and unions that might emerge from a reformed American labor law regime. Of course, our results speak to respondents’ stated preferences for labor organizations, not their revealed behaviors. In the final section we discuss research options for using increased worker activism prompted by the COVID-19 crisis as a laboratory for assessing how workers’ experiences might influence their preferences for representation in the future.

Our research also has important implications for the strategic directions labor unions and worker advocates may wish to pursue, as well as for changes in labor law that would allow a broader range of options for worker voice and representation. Together, our findings help to situate the individual-level preferences of American workers within the political and economic institutions that structure American labor and employment relations. In particular, we highlight how US institutions and laws enable, but more often constrain, labor representation in comparison to peer democracies.

**Alternative Models for Worker Representation**

For the most part, existing theories from the study of labor organizations help us to understand when we might see workers supporting workplace collective representation in general (e.g., Bakke 1945; Clark and Wilson 1961; Olson 1965; Kochan 1979; Moe 1988), but they do not shed much light onto the specific forms of unions that workers would be willing to support (but see Lipset, Trow, and Coleman 1956; Voss and Sherman 2000; Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 2002; Levi, Olson, Agnone, and Kelly 2009; Ahlquist and Levi 2013; and McAlevey 2016 for scholarship documenting variation in union forms, especially union democracy). Notably, little theory or research speaks to the full set of attributes that might matter to workers as they decide whether to join a labor organization despite the fact that worker representation can take many forms. Which forms do workers most value? And how do workers weigh features of labor organizations against one another?

To answer this question, we start with understanding one’s decision to vote for a union as one would consider purchasing a service. This has been a common approach taken in industrial relations to model union status (Pencavel 1971), votes in NLRB elections (Farber and Saks 1980; Maranto and Fiorito 1987), and stated preferences on unions (Freeman and Rogers [1999] 2006). The underlying logic of this approach implicitly adopts a rational choice framework: Workers vote to join a union when the (perceived) benefits of the union outweigh costs (see Farber 1983). Benefits of unionization include the advantage of various job quality aspects of union employment as compared to otherwise equivalent non-union jobs. Most often, studies of union vote or determination focus on pecuniary benefits,
such as the union wage premium or workers' own characteristics (Farber and Saks 1980; but see Maranto and Fiorito 1987; Freeman and Rogers 1999). Unlike past research, however, we are interested in understanding how workers compare individual components of labor organizations with one another. Furthermore, we posit that fundamental shifts in the economy, along with the ongoing ossification of labor law, have likely shifted what little understanding we had of what workers want out of labor representation since earlier studies.

In particular, globalization and technological advances, combined with changes in employer strategies, have changed the labor market in ways that might affect workers' preferences for labor organizations—and especially the specific benefits and services they offer. In a more precarious labor market (Kalleberg 2013), workers may be interested in how labor organizations can smooth transitions across employers or jobs, especially if their existing job is vulnerable to international competition or automation. This trend has led some to argue that unions will need to shift from focusing on representing workers in a given job to providing labor market services and benefits that move with workers across jobs throughout their careers similar to the services unions in a number of European countries provide through Ghent systems (Kochan 2005; Dimick 2012; Rolf 2018). Relatedly, scholars have argued that the firm-based labor regime in the United States fragments union power and increases employer opposition to unionization (e.g., Andrias 2016). As a result, reformers have called for sectoral or regional-based bargaining to strengthen union power (Andrias and Rogers 2018; Rolf 2018; Madland 2019; Block and Sachs 2020).

Another variation in union forms involves the degree to which labor organization representatives are involved in a firm’s decision-making. Traditional US unions have concentrated on collective bargaining over select compensation and work conditions issues but typically abstained from seeking influence on strategic business decisions or from fostering more informal workplace-level participation processes aimed at improving productivity or other aspects of day-to-day operations. Union leaders believed that such involvement would endanger the independence on which they depended for effective collective bargaining (Kochan, Katz, and McKersie 1986; though it also reflects the evolution of labor law, e.g., Pope 2008).

Yet, Kochan et al. (1986) have argued that unions’ absence from the long-term strategy level of industrial relations activity carries significant costs. For one, it leaves unions to negotiate over the consequences of employers’ decisions rather than the decisions themselves. For another, unions’ absence from workplace improvement efforts alienates members (or potential members) who want greater input in firm practices, especially on the shop floor (Kochan et al. 2019). As concerns over these strategic and workplace issues have increased, so too have calls for unions and workplace governance systems to adopt forms of representation more commonly found in Western Europe, such as works councils and formal representation.
on corporate boards (e.g., Madland 2016; Andrias and Rogers 2018; Yglesias 2018).

A final dimension in union form relates to participation in politics. Past work has drawn a sharp distinction between social movement and business or economistic unionism (e.g., Robinson 1993). In the former, unions engage in politics as a means of promoting a broader solidaristic vision of the political economy, prioritizing a cohesive political ideology and continuous political mobilization, often through a representative political party. By comparison, the latter downplays the importance of politics, adopting a more pragmatic approach of “helping friends and punishing enemies” and focusing on policies that strengthen unions’ abilities to bargain collectively with employers for more generous wages and benefits and better working conditions. While no country or union fits perfectly into this typology, the American labor movement generally falls closer to the economistic or business union model (e.g., Eidlin 2018), although some have recently called for unions to embrace a more explicitly social movement orientation to regain political power (e.g., McAlevey 2016). Despite these debates among labor activists and scholars, we lack evidence of which model workers themselves might prefer.

In sum, existing literatures in labor relations and labor law underscore substantial differences between American unions and those in other advanced democracies and thus invite the question of how US employees think about these differences in union models. They also point to ways that worker preferences might have changed given shifts in the US labor market. Accordingly, we seek to explore how workers think about different approaches to workplace representation, collapsing the variation we described above across union forms into four ideal types—while fully recognizing that each model has more features than summarized here or measured in the analysis that follows. These ideal-type models each emphasize distinct aspects of labor representation and imply very different costs, benefits, and potential appeals to workers. These models include:

A \textit{traditional, employer-centered model} of private-sector union representation, emphasizing formal collective bargaining at the level of an individual workplace or enterprise, limited to certain occupations within organizations, mandatory dues for members, limited supplemental benefits and services, relatively limited input to management, and the use of strikes and direct mobilization if needed. These elements are the core of the private-sector model of unionism spelled out in the 1935 National Labor Relations Act. While some private-sector unions go beyond this model—for instance, offering more robust job training and placement opportunities or social welfare benefits—we are interested in testing the baseline model envisioned by the New Deal–era framers of US labor law that represents the typical American union.

An \textit{individual services model} lacking formal collective bargaining rights but offering a broad array of benefits to workers, including labor market services (such as job search help and training for current and future positions), social welfare
benefits (including portable health insurance and retirement benefits, as well as unemployment insurance), and legal representation both in the workplace and for common civil law issues, such as housing or immigration. This model corresponds to the approach pursued by various new alt-labor organizations operating outside of labor law, as well as recent proposals for US unions to consider providing more social welfare benefits in order to attract new members (e.g., Fine 2005; Dimick 2012; Rolf 2018). Currently, US labor organizations are substantially limited in their ability to offer comprehensive health insurance and retirement benefits and are not involved in the direct administration of unemployment benefits.

A participation and voice model that stresses increased worker representation within their firms or organizations, including informal participation and input to management, joint committees of workers and managers to address shop floor issues, and worker representation on organization boards of directors. This model corresponds to long-standing proposals to improve worker voice on the job (e.g., Kochan et al. 1986), as well as new legislative proposals to change corporate governance requirements to build formal representation of workers into management decisions (e.g., Andrias and Rogers 2018; Yglesias 2018). Again, some of these features are possible under current US labor law (such as informal participation and input to management) but others (such as enterprise-wide joint worker-management committees or councils and worker representation on corporate boards of directors) are neither required nor protected by the National Labor Relations Act.

A political mobilization model, in which worker organizations would prioritize policy lobbying and electoral campaigning over workplace activities, especially broad-scale, continuous political recruitment that would bring unions closer to a social movement orientation. This model is what the AFL-CIO has sought to implement with the creation of Working America in 2003, a mass membership organization of non-union members who nevertheless seek to elect pro-labor candidates and pass policies that benefit working-class Americans (AFL-CIO 2019). This is also a model pursued by the recent Fight for Fifteen movement, in which non-union workers used protests, rallies, and lobbying efforts to push for higher state and local minimum wages as well as paid sick and family leave policies. Several legal scholars, for example Kate Andrias and Benjamin Sachs, have called for more politically oriented efforts like these (Sachs 2013; Andrias 2016).

**Methods**

One approach to understanding workers’ preferences for labor representation is to compare union members with non-members. But membership is not necessarily a reliable indicator for a worker’s views on labor organization as not all workers who desire union representation are able to have it—and this is especially true today (e.g., Kochan et al. 2019). Most empirical work on union preferences therefore studies voting behavior from union elections or surveys that ask workers how they would vote if a certification election was held at their workplace.

The former strategy carries the advantage of studying actual worker behavior, whereas the latter necessarily relies on workers’ stated preferences,
which may or may not translate into action. Studies of voting behavior often fall short, however, because they fail to account for the selection process by which organizing drives reach the point of an election. And even among those campaign drives that successfully collect enough initial interest with card collection, very few efforts ever reach successful first contracts (Ferguson 2008). This precedent means that studies of union election voting behavior are representative only of workers in regions, industries, and occupations with sufficient union interest and labor organizing capacity. Just as important, studies of union certification elections necessarily hold constant the form and features of the labor organization workers are selecting (for an exception, see Maranto and Fiorito 1987). We cannot know whether unions with other characteristics—for instance, portable social benefits, more input into corporate decision-making, or legal representation—might change the distribution of worker support. This lack of information limits the ability of union certification elections to shed light on ongoing discussions around labor law reform.

To overcome these limitations of past research on union election voting behavior, we employ a conjoint experiment approach in a nationally representative survey of the US workforce. Our approach allows us to manipulate the features provided by hypothetical labor organizations and test how these features affect respondents’ willingness to join or pay dues to each organization (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Tamamoto 2014). We can thus recover the relative weight that respondents place on each of these characteristics of labor organizations on a common set of outcomes. This method also elicits union preferences from a more representative set of workers beyond just those who manage to make it to the point of certification elections.

Data: The Worker Organization Study

To understand how workers think about these alternative approaches to workplace representation, we commissioned an original, nationally representative survey of 4,203 employed, non-executive, American workers from the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago using their AmeriSpeak panel in the fall of 2018. AmeriSpeak uses area probability sampling as the basis for an equal-probability sample of US households, on which it administers online surveys to an ongoing panel of respondents.1

Our survey—the Worker Organization Study—probed respondents’ current employment situation (including information about their job and employer), as well as their union status and perceptions of the labor

1The non-partisan and objective research organization NORC at the University of Chicago invited 17,124 panelists to participate in the Worker Organization Study, resulting in 5,661 screening interviews and 4,673 panelists eligible for interviews. Panelists were offered the equivalent of $4 for completing the survey, which increased to $10 at the end of the survey to ensure completion. NORC computed statistical weights to match the estimates of the non-managerial, employed population from the Current Population Survey. Online Appendix A summarizes the AmeriSpeak methodology in more detail.
movement. (See Online Appendix B for a complete copy of our survey instrument.) Following those questions, we then administered a conjoint choice analysis, in which we presented respondents with four pairs of hypothetical labor organizations and asked respondents to indicate which organization they would join (“Which of these organizations would you be more likely to join?”) and how much respondents would be willing to pay in dues to both organizations (“Assuming you had a pre-tax annual salary of $50,000, or about $4,200 per month, select the amount below that you would be willing to pay PER MONTH in dues to belong to each labor organization.”). For the second question, we offered respondents five options, including $0 (0% of salary) per month, $40 per month (1%), $100 (2.5%) per month, $200 (5%) per month, or $400 (10%) per month. Note that to ensure respondents were considering these organizations on their own terms, we began the conjoint choice exercise with the following introduction: “For the next few minutes, we are going to ask you about hypothetical labor organizations that you might join in your workplace. These are organizations that would represent employees in your company or organization and are not necessarily unions.”

By randomizing the characteristics of the hypothetical labor organizations we presented to respondents, we are able to identify the causal effect of these characteristics on how workers evaluate the organizations—and thus make important headway over existing observational research on worker preferences for unions and labor representation (Hainmueller et al. 2014; cf. Farber and Saks 1980; Freeman and Rogers 2006). The order in which characteristics were presented remained fixed across tasks to reduce the cognitive burden on respondents, following the advice we received from NORC based on interviews and survey pre-testing.

We derived the causal effects of nine different characteristics of labor organizations, which we selected to reflect the strategies or models of representation summarized above that are under debate and being used to varying degrees by unions and emerging alt-labor groups. These characteristics included rules about who can join the organization; how dues are charged; whether the organization engages in collective bargaining with employers over compensation, hours, and working conditions; whether the organization provides extra services and benefits, such as portable health insurance coverage or unemployment insurance; whether the organization provides legal help and representation; whether the organization engages in political activities, such as election campaigning or lobbying; whether the organization participates in management through board representation, organization-wide committees, or informal workplace participation groups; and whether the organization uses threats of strikes or direct action by workers.

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2We wanted respondents to have relatively equal footing with their baseline income for this question, one for which dues would not be an onerous expense nor would they be trivial.
Table 1 summarizes the levels of each of these characteristics that we randomized and presented to respondents in the conjoint exercise (see Appendix B for an example of a task presented to respondents). In all, these features touch on aspects of unions as they currently exist in the United States (for instance, traditional dues collection, firm-based collective bargaining, and limited input into management decisions), aspects of alternative labor organizations, such as worker centers (including no collective bargaining rights, limited dues collection, and political advocacy and direct action), and features of labor organizations that exist in other countries but not currently in the United States (such as union-provided portable health and retirement benefits, unemployment insurance, regional or sectoral collective bargaining, or representation on company boards). We will look at each characteristic individually and then examine selective combinations that reflect the models described above and the debates over the future of unions and worker representation.

Although we tested more features than are typically fielded on candidate choice conjoint experiments (e.g., Carnes and Lupu 2016; Teele, Kalla, and Rosenbluth 2018), recent research suggests a stability of causal estimates even within the range of attributes that we study (Bansak, Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2017). Moreover, while NORC focus groups indicated that the instrument was more cognitively demanding than typical survey experiments, the respondents in pre-testing trials still meaningfully evaluated the attributes and organizations we presented to them.3 Last, we examined free response items asking respondents why they made the choices they did and found results broadly consistent with those from the closed item outcomes (see Appendix F).

For the purposes of our analysis, we followed the recommendation of Hainmueller et al. (2014) and treated each organization evaluated by respondents as a distinct observation, resulting in a maximum of 33,624 cases (4,203 respondents × 4 rating tasks × 2 organizations in each task). We first validated the assumptions of the instrument, namely that ordering of the exercise and profile did not affect the outcomes (see Appendix C). We then estimated ordinary least squares regression models for both the “join” binary outcome, as well as the 5-point dues scale, though our results are not dependent on this decision (see Appendices D and E). We applied NORC’s survey weights and clustered standard errors by respondent.

Results

How Do American Workers Think about Labor Representation?

How did workers think about the various organizations that we presented to them? Figure 1 presents our main results for the “join” outcome, which

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3This pre-testing included a 100-person trial on Amazon MTurk and a 2,000-respondent survey fielded by Survey Sampling International.
Table 1. Description of Labor Organization Characteristics Tested in Conjoint Experiment

| Attribute description | Level description                                                                                                                                 |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| **Who can join**      | Workers in your business or organization can join  
Workers in your business or organization can join and you can keep receiving membership services and benefits after you leave your job  
Workers in your occupation at your workplace can join  
Workers in your occupation can join and you can keep receiving membership services and benefits if you change employers |
| **Dues**              | All workers required to pay dues  
Workers required to pay dues only if they receive benefits from the organization  
Dues are voluntary |
| **Negotiation with your employer** | Does not negotiate with employer over compensation, hours, or working conditions  
Negotiates with employer over compensation, hours, and working conditions for all workers  
Negotiates with employer over compensation, hours, and working conditions only for dues-paying members  
Negotiates to raise wages and working conditions for all workers in your region and industry |
| **Extra services/benefits** | Does not offer any extra benefits  
Provides health insurance and retirement savings accounts to workers in between jobs or if workers do not have access to them  
Provides extra unemployment insurance benefits to workers who lose their jobs  
Offers training to keep your skills up to date as technologies change  
Offers training for skills needed for other jobs you might want  
Offers help finding and applying for new jobs (like help finding openings, comparing pay, and writing a resume)  
Offers discounts on many products and services you might buy |
| **How you do your work** | Does not get involved in how you and your coworkers do your work or in improving how your organization does its work  
Offers you and your coworkers opportunities to work with management to recommend improvements in how you and your organization does work |
| **Legal help and representation** | Does not deal with legal issues governing worker rights  
Offers information on what workers’ rights are according to employer policy and labor law  
Offers legal representation to ensure that the organization upholds all workers’ rights  
Offers legal representation to workers with individual workplace problems, like harassment or discrimination  
Offers legal representation to workers with common non-workplace legal problems, like housing |
| **Political activities** | Not involved in elections or lobbying  
Campaigns for pro-worker politicians  
Campaigns for policies related to the workplace like family leave and the minimum wage |
| **Input to management** | Does not advise top management on how the organization should operate, including how to use technology or opening and closing plants, stores, or facilities |

(continued)
graphs the difference in the probability that a worker would join a labor organization across each of the features we tested in the conjoint experiment (i.e., the graph plots average marginal component effects). The horizontal spikes around the estimates indicate 90% confidence intervals, and the characteristics below the labels on the left indicate the base (excluded) categories against which the average marginal component effect estimates are computed. So, for instance, the first coefficient plotted in Figure 1 for the “Workers in Org Join and Keep Mem” characteristic indicates that workers were approximately 4 percentage points more likely to want to join a labor organization in which they could enroll if they were employed at a particular business and they could keep their membership after they left that employer, compared to a labor organization in which they could enroll if they were employed at a particular business but could not keep their membership if they lost or changed their job.

In Figure 1 we present results for our full survey sample. (In later sections we discuss how some of these effects differ by subgroups.) Beginning with the first characteristic of the experiment, involving rules about which workers could join each organization, we can see that compared to the status quo in traditional unions (where workers can join only if they are employed at a particular business and cannot keep their membership if they change jobs), respondents were more enthusiastic about models in which they could keep their membership if they changed or left their job.

Other options that expanded union membership beyond a specific firm to all workers in a particular occupation—for instance, the model pursued by alt-labor groups focusing on specific classes of workers like the Taxi Workers Alliance, the Day Laborers Network, or the National Domestic Workers Alliance—were slightly less popular relative to the traditional, firm-based model among workers as a whole.
Moving on to dues, we found large differences in the appeal of labor organizations depending on whether they pursued the traditional union model of mandatory dues for all members compared to either fee-for-service or voluntary dues approaches. Both of those alternatives, more common among alt-labor organizations, had average marginal component effects nearly 10 percentage points above the conventional mandatory dues approach to financing unions. Still, as we will see, the drawbacks of mandatory dues collection for workers can be overcome with an appropriate package of other, offsetting organizational characteristics.

More striking were the variations in worker preferences depending on the presence or absence of collective bargaining, which we described to respondents as “negotiating with employers over compensation, hours, or working conditions.” For this characteristic of labor organizations—the lynchpin of conventional US unions—we provided four alternatives, including no collective bargaining at all (as is the case among alt-labor organizations that operate outside of the labor law framework), collective bargaining on behalf of all workers in a particular employer (the American, firm-centered model of bargaining present under status quo labor law), collective bargaining for only dues-payers of a labor organization (often termed minority unionism), and collective bargaining that spans all employers in a particular region or industry (approximating the Western European model of regional or sectoral bargaining and many proposals for

\[\text{Figure 1. Change in Probability of Choosing Labor Organization, by Labor Organization Features}\]

Notes: Coefficients are based on ordinary least squares estimation. Spikes indicate 90% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered at the individual level. Characteristics in parentheses indicate the base (excluded) categories against which we compute the average marginal component effect estimates.
labor law reform in the United States; e.g., Barenberg 2015; Madland 2016; Block and Sachs 2020).

Compared to no collective bargaining at all, our respondents strongly favored labor organizations that had the legal right to negotiate with employers over wages, benefits, and working conditions. All three of the alternative collective bargaining scenarios we described were more appealing to workers (by more than 14 percentage points) than the option of no bargaining rights at all. These results suggest a significant disadvantage in the popular appeal of alt-labor organizations that do not formally bargain with employers. They also indicate significant worker support for sectoral bargaining proposals—though the absence of sectoral collective bargaining is not apparently a drawback to workers when compared to the conventional, firm-based bargaining model.

The next set of characteristics contains the most significant predictors of workers’ attitudes toward labor organizations and revolves around the benefits and services that these organizations can offer directly to workers aside from collective bargaining or negotiations with management. These benefits also capture the sort of selective incentives that Olson and some labor experts have argued would be important for attracting voluntary worker support for collective organizations like trade unions (Olson 1965; Dimick 2012). Compared to the baseline of no such selective benefits or services, workers found all of the options we provided very appealing. The most appealing benefit involved the provision of portable health insurance and retirement savings coverage to workers who lacked access to such plans from their employer and that workers could continue using even if they switched employers. The presence of these portable social welfare benefits raised the probability that a worker would join an organization by more than 16 percentage points, the largest effect we identified across all organizational characteristics. Under current law, American unions are substantially limited from offering such portable health insurance and retirement benefits on their own, though some do through multi-employer plans (known as Taft-Hartley plans). In addition, some alt-labor organizations, most prominently the Freelancers Guild and the National Domestic Workers Alliance, offer similar portable benefits to workers who would otherwise lack stable coverage because of the nature of their jobs.

Another popular service involved the provision of unemployment benefits, which increased the probability of a worker joining an organization by 13 percentage points relative to no benefits at all. This finding suggests that allowing more unions to offer such jobless benefit coverage—or even building unions into the provision of the benefits directly, as is done in many Western European countries (Western 1997)—would substantially increase the appeal of unions to rank-and-file workers (Dimick 2012). Although some unions have historically offered supplemental jobless benefits, the reach of such benefits has always been narrow. Even when unions were at their historic peak of strength, only a quarter of workers
covered by collective bargaining agreements had access to supplemental union unemployment benefits (Kittner 1964: 19).

The following bundle of benefits referred to training (either for workers’ current jobs or future jobs) and job search help. These benefits were valued (approximately 12 percentage points above no benefits) but were all less popular than health insurance and retirement benefits (the differences were all statistically significant at $p < 0.01$). The final selective benefit we consider is the provision of discounts on “many products and services,” which raised the likelihood of joining unions by approximately 8 percentage points (compared to no benefits at all) but was also substantially less appealing than health insurance and retirement coverage ($p < 0.01$). This offering is a common union benefit (for instance, the AFL-CIO’s “UnionPlus” discount program) (AFL-CIO 2020).

After benefits was a set of characteristics that directly probed the ways that labor organizations can provide democratic representation and voice into workers’ job routines, describing whether an organization “offers . . . opportunities to work with management to recommend improvements in how you and your organization does work.” This kind of voice is something that traditional unions with collective bargaining rights can offer—but do not often do in practice. Indeed, Kochan et al. (2019) found that many current union members still report large voice gaps when it comes to giving workers input into how they do their jobs. Our conjoint experimental results suggest that this kind of voice is appealing to workers, increasing the probability of joining an organization by approximately 5 percentage points relative to the absence of such an option, and making it an important predictor but not as substantial as collective bargaining or several of the social benefits we discussed above.

Another bundle of characteristics we describe involves labor organizations’ input into management decisions, including informal advising to top management, representing workers in joint committees with management, and formal representation on employer boards of directors, the most expansive proposal of “co-determination” present in some Western European countries like Germany. All three of these proposals increased workers’ likelihood of joining labor organizations, though the magnitudes (3 to 4 percentage points) were smaller than for many of the other features we have explored.

Legal assistance and representation formed the next bundle of characteristics we examined, and compared to the absence of any legal help, workers found various forms of legal representation and assistance appealing, on the order of approximately 5 to 8 percentage points. Workers generally found legal information less appealing than formal legal representation. Traditional American unions typically offer workplace legal representation as part of their standard services, as do many alt-labor organizations like worker centers. But unlike traditional unions and more like alt-labor organizations, workers also indicated that they found non-workplace legal
representation valuable as well—that is, legal representation for common civil issues such as housing or immigration. This outcome suggests that alt-labor organizations’ strategy of helping workers with non-workplace issues might be an important way to attract membership in the absence of other formal functions of unions.

Unlike the results we have described so far, political activities were the first set of labor attributes we explored that reduced workers’ likelihood of joining, on average. Compared to an organization that did nothing in politics, a labor organization that we described as campaigning for pro-worker politicians in elections was less likely to be selected by workers. Electorally active organizations were approximately 4 percentage points less likely to be chosen than non-active ones. By comparison, there was no penalty for organizations that lobbied for pro-worker policies. This result suggests an important tension for labor organizations in the United States: Particularly in the current environment where unions face substantial retrenchment of legal rights, unions need to build political power to restore those rights and expand their clout (Hertel-Fernandez 2019). Yet the activities that are necessary for rebuilding labor’s political power may require electoral involvements that are unpopular with some workers, especially when it comes to elections as opposed to legislative lobbying.

Finally, we provided information about whether an organization used threats of strikes or direct action by workers, which is another central component of the labor movement—albeit one that has become substantially less common over time as labor’s clout has declined (Rosenfeld 2006; Burns 2011). Here, too, we found a somewhat paradoxical result. Strikes and direct action are generally thought of as being the fundamental source of labor’s strength (e.g., Lichtenstein 2002; Burns 2011; Gourevitch 2018); yet workers, on average, find the prospect of strike threats to be unappealing as they are considering whether to join a labor organization, reducing their likelihood of joining by approximately 3 percentage points.4 As we will see, this finding reflects substantial heterogeneity by workers’ political views.

Figure 2 plots the second outcome from our survey instrument, examining the average marginal component effect of each characteristic on the maximum amount workers indicated they would be willing to pay in dues. (Recall that the scale for this item ran from 1 to 5, representing dues of $0 per month to $400 per month.) The results encouragingly parallel those from our other outcome, indicating that workers were more likely to pay higher dues to the same organizations they were more likely to want to join. In Appendix E we show that our results are very similar if we recode this variable into a binary outcome, capturing if a respondent is willing to pay any dues at all to a labor organization. Like the “join” outcome, Figure 2 documents that workers were most willing to pay more in dues to

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4See Appendix F for an analysis of open-ended responses in which we find further evidence for respondents’ dislike of strike actions.
organizations that provide collective bargaining (especially sectoral bargaining); that offer valuable selective benefits, especially health insurance and retirement plans and unemployment insurance; that provide legal representation or help; and that advise top management.

Three other findings stand out and merit discussion in comparison to the earlier outcome. First, unlike with the join outcome, we find that workers’ willingness to pay for labor representation is generally unrelated to both membership rules about who can join as well as (perhaps surprisingly) the dues structure. Despite workers’ tendency to favor joining organizations with fee-for-service or voluntary dues, respondents were no more likely to say that they would pay more in dues to labor organizations that lacked mandatory dues payments. This outcome suggests that conditional on attracting members, labor organizations may have more scope to change dues structures without alienating workers. Second, when it comes to willingness to pay, workers are on the whole less enthusiastic about supporting organizations that either campaign in elections or that lobby for policy change, further underscoring the tension that unions may face in trying to maximize their membership and revenue while also building political clout (on average, workers preferred joining an organization that did not engage in either political activity by approximately 3 percentage points, \( p < 0.05 \)). Third, while workers were skeptical of strike threats in their membership decisions, they did not appear to penalize labor organizations that made use of direct action when considering the maximum amount of dues they
Whereas the results so far have assessed the effects of individual organizational characteristics on worker preferences averaging over all respondents we surveyed, our relatively large sample allows us to consider how specific subgroups of respondents might react to the same attributes.\(^5\) In general, what was notable about our findings is just how similar they were across respondents with disparate demographic characteristics whom we might have expected to evaluate labor organizations very differently (e.g., Freeman and Rogers 2006; Kochan et al. 2019; see also Abramson, Koçak, and Magazinnik 2019).

There were, however, several important exceptions to this consistency in preferences (see also Appendix F)—though even these differences were typically modest. More highly educated workers were much more favorable toward collaborating with management on work routines and found the threat of strikes to be much more of a negative compared to workers with less education. Figure 3 compares the average marginal component effects

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\(^5\)Note that we fielded the demographic questions before the conjoint exercise, alleviating concerns that answers to these questions were affected by the conjoint characteristics.
for workers with a high school degree or less, some college, or college or more (note that our results are also consistent when examining differences in marginal means as well; see Leeper, Hobolt, and Tilley 2018).

Another dimension along which labor representation preferences differed is the degree to which respondents belonged to unions or had other personal connections to the labor movement (Barling, Kelloway, and Bremermann 1991; Gomez and Gunderson 2004). Dividing our sample into three categories—workers who currently are or have been union members, those who have never been a union member themselves but have a close family member in a union, and workers who have never been in a union and do not have close family in a union—we find statistically significant differences along four labor organization characteristics (see Figure 4). The less personal contact workers had with the labor movement, the more likely workers were to value alternative dues models, such as fee-for-service dues or voluntary payments. The reverse was true for collective bargaining: The more firsthand contact workers had to unions, the more positive they were about collective bargaining. Workers who had ever been union members were also more likely to value input into managerial decisions and strikes than were workers who had never been in a union, regardless of their family connections to the labor movement. Together, these results suggest certain features of labor organizations that workers value differently if they have had firsthand or personal experience with the labor movement. This may

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**Figure 4. Change in Probability of Choosing Labor Organization, by Labor Organization Feature and Union Experience**

Notes: Coefficients are based on ordinary least squares estimation. Spikes indicate 90% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered at the individual level. Other tested attributes are excluded because they lack statistically significant differences. Respondents are categorized as union if they are currently or have been in a union. Respondents are categorized as “union family” if they have anyone in their family who belongs to a union. Characteristics in parentheses indicate the base (excluded) categories against which we compute the average marginal component effect estimates.
be especially important in thinking about the role of strikes and collective labor action: Workers who have been in unions themselves recognize the value of such action, but other workers do not.

Last, we break out the results by workers’ self-reported partisan attachments. Labor policy is one of the areas in which clear ideological separation in Congress occurred earliest and fastest (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006), at both the national and state levels: Democrats have tended to pursue policies bolstering union rights whereas Republicans have sought to diminish the power of organized labor (e.g., Hertel-Fernandez 2019). Given that degree of political party polarization, we might well expect big differences in how Republican and Democratic workers think about labor representation (see Lenz 2012). Yet this is not what we observe in Figure 5, which breaks workers out by their self-reported partisan affiliation. Republicans and Democrats generally shared very similar preferences for the organizational features they valued.

The two largest exceptions to this partisan stability related to political involvements and strikes, with Democrats much more supportive than Republicans of labor organizations that engaged in both sets of activities. The effect is asymmetric, however, with Republican workers being much more skeptical of the use of strikes than Democrats were supportive. While strikes were a major negative for Republicans, the threat of workplace mobilization was at best a neutral characteristic for Democrats. These differences notwithstanding, the overall lesson appears to be one of partisan unity, not division: Regardless of party, workers share largely similar underlying preferences for labor organization and representation on features such as collective bargaining, social benefits, training, and membership rules.

Given our findings on the partisan divide and the union experience effect, we ask if Republicans who had ever been in unions might have different attitudes from Republicans who had not. Because we found that Independents and Democrats had similar responses to features like political activities and the threat of strike, we group these workers together (Dem/Ind) and compare them to Republican workers. Further, we split both political groupings by whether they currently belong to or have ever belonged to a union.

The results indicate that Republican workers with union experience hold different preferences from Republican workers without union experience. We continue to see a partisan divide in workers’ support for organizations using a strike threat, but Republicans with union experience tended to be less negative toward the use of strikes than were non-union Republicans. Looking at organization dues structures and collective bargaining, union Republicans look much more like non-Republican workers than non-union Republicans. We see an exception, however, with politics: When it came to

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6Of respondents, 98% provided a valid response to the partisan ID question: 33% of respondents identified as Republicans, 23% as Independents, and 44% as Democrats.
political campaigning, union Republicans were even more negative toward these activities than were non-union Republicans. Taken together, our results suggest that having firsthand experience with unions may moderate some Republican opposition to some labor organization characteristics, for example, strikes or mandatory dues, while magnifying opposition to other features, especially politics.

**Combinations of Organizational Features**

While we have focused so far on the independent contribution of each organizational characteristic on workers’ attitudes and preferences, it is also helpful to consider bundles of such attributes together. We can do this by examining workers’ predicted willingness to join labor organizations or their willingness to pay dues based on the characteristics of the hypothetical organizations using the coefficients displayed in Figures 1 and 2. Figures 6 and 7 plot workers’ willingness to join and pay dues, respectively, for organizations at different percentiles of the predicted outcomes distribution as well as the characteristics associated with those organizations. Collectively, these plots highlight how the willingness to join or pay dues rises as organizations offer a combination of services and worker participation in management along with collective bargaining.

Because our main results in Figures 1 and 2 indicate that workers were more enthusiastic about labor organizations providing more services and
benefits, the labor organizations at higher percentiles of the distribution on both outcomes tended to have more such features. As Figures 6 and 7 indicate, labor organizations at the lower end of the distribution tended to lack collective bargaining whereas those at the higher end all deployed collective bargaining in various forms. Indeed, looking across the entire distribution of labor organizations evaluated by respondents, more than 96% of profiles above the 50th percentile on the join outcome mentioned some form of collective bargaining rights (compare this to the baseline expectation that 75% of the attribute’s features include some form of collective bargaining because three out of four conditions mention collective bargaining). Organizations at the higher end of the distribution also tended to have extra benefits, such as jobless coverage or job search help. Looking again across the entire distribution of organization profiles, more than 96% of profiles above the 50th percentile on the join outcome had some form of extra labor market services or benefits (compared to a baseline rate of 86%). And more highly rated organizations tended to include input into management decisions and work routines as well. Nearly 80% of organizations rated above the 50th percentile on the join outcome for advised organizational management (compared to a baseline rate of 75%). These distributional results also illustrate how labor organizations with appropriate features can offset the negative ratings given by respondents to strikes. While labor organizations rated more highly by respondents on both the join and the dues outcomes tended not to use strikes, many organizations still did. Of labor organizations rated above the 50th

Figure 6. Predicted Probability of Choosing Labor Organizations and Their Associated Characteristics, by Percentile

Notes: Lines reflect 95% confidence intervals. Because the question was forced choice, the baseline probability of joining an organization is indicated at 0.5.
percentile on the join outcome, more than 40% mentioned the use of a strike threat (compared to a baseline rate of 50%).

In sum, these results reinforce the notion that the most popular labor organizations were those that combined components of the ideal-type labor models described above: collective bargaining rights, extra labor market services and benefits, and voice and input into management decisions and work routines.

**Implications for Theory, Policy, and Future Research**

In this article, we employed a conjoint survey experiment to identify the causal effects of key labor organization features on workers’ willingness to join or financially support such organizations. These features cover practices of a variety of labor organizations in the United States and other advanced democracies. Overall, our results make clear that the primary function of the traditional American union, collective bargaining, continues to be highly valued by potential members. Still, other benefits and services, such as the provision of health insurance, retirement benefits, unemployment benefits, and labor market training, are also highly valued by all workers. And workers were supportive of organizations offering legal representation and input to their work routines and into management decisions.

These results reinforce the value of bringing theories and evidence from comparative political economy, labor law, and industrial relations into American debates about labor policy reform. Our results show American
workers would support means of achieving industrial democracy at their workplaces that are modeled after those found in systems that provide co-determination, works councils, and more informal engagement in workplace decision-making. They also would value having unions provide labor market services throughout their careers as do unions in Ghent systems found in several European countries.

This raises a critical theoretical and empirical question: Would practices that are embedded in their respective institutional and cultural contexts function similarly if introduced into the US employment relations system? This is an age-old question in labor relations (e.g., Summers 1966). One hypothesis shared by a number of scholars who have studied this question is that practices adopted from other contexts work best not through imitation, but instead through adaptations of the specific practice and the host institutional structures and processes (Westney 1989). Take, for example, the idea of adopting works councils in the United States. Works councils would require significant changes in the role of human resource management departments (sharing power and information with elected council members, training council members, and so on) and similar changes in the roles of existing or future union representatives. The concept of exclusive representation embedded in US labor law would also require modification.

The point here is not to list all the institutional changes required for such a reform but to suggest the need for deeper theoretical and empirical research on how a practice such as this would work effectively in US employment relationships given existing institutions and policies.

This point in turn leads to a specific reform proposal: The ideal way to test and learn about adoption would be to start small, perhaps by lifting the “preemption” rules that limit states from deviating from the National Labor Relations Act while maintaining certain federal floors, as in other federal programs. Allowing states to implement experiments with new forms of representation that do not erode or lower existing rights to representation would be a powerful way to foster the type of research, learning, and adaptations needed to make broader diffusion of new practices successful.

Looking more broadly, our findings support the growing number of labor law and policy scholars (e.g., Sachs 2010; Finkin 2011; Kochan 2011, 2020; Andrias 2016; Madland 2019; Block and Sachs 2020) who are calling for reforms of labor law that would address the current limits of collective bargaining as it functions today and would also open up labor law to new forms of representation and bargaining. Specifically, our results highlight three ways to reform, update, and expand labor law to better match the preferences of the American workforce. First, given the strong support expressed for collective bargaining, the rules governing the union organizing and first contract negotiations processes need to be strengthened to address the reasons why less than 10% of organizing efforts succeed in the face of management resistance (Ferguson 2008). Second, the interest expressed in regional or sectoral bargaining suggests the value of
experimenting with options such as wage boards or other means for creating either minimum or fair employment standards across firms in a region or sector or perhaps for those competing for government contracts. Third, worker interest in organizations that provide services as workers move across jobs and in the various options for worker input into management decisions and organizational governance calls for opening up labor law to allow for new voice and representation options in addition to traditional collective bargaining.

Beyond these recommendations, our results raise a theoretical puzzle that warrants further research: Despite being central to building labor’s economic and political power (Greenstone 1969; Lichtenstein 2002; Schlozman 2015), some workers (especially Republican workers with no union experience) express a preference against labor organizations that use strike threats and engage in election campaigns. Although our analysis of organizational bundles indicates that neither characteristic entirely rules out achieving broad-based worker support, it does underscore the difficulty of building large membership associations dedicated to both representing workers’ narrow workplace concerns and engaging in broader movement politics when workers have little prior experience with unions.

One way of addressing this theoretical and empirical puzzle would be to take advantage of significant changes in the economy and labor action. Our survey was administered in the context of an extensive economic expansion, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the fielding of our survey, there has been a wave of significant worker actions, perhaps most notably mass teacher protests and strikes in predominantly conservative states. And while the COVID-19 pandemic has brought on severe economic disruption, it has also empowered many workers to voice their concerns on issues of paid sick leave, job safety, and organizational strategies in new ways (Hertel-Fernandez, Naidu, and Reich 2020). It would be useful to replicate our research to assess how observation of, or direct experience with, ongoing or past worker protests might change worker preferences toward strikes, political protests, and other features obtained in our study, especially across individuals, occupations, and sectors more or less exposed to the COVID-19 crisis. Initial analysis of the teacher strikes, for instance, has found that exposure to the protests led parents to become more interested in labor action at their own jobs (Hertel-Fernandez, Naidu, and Reich 2019).

Indeed, some of the recent worker protests and efforts to gain greater collective voice have included demands for representation on company boards, stronger voice over how work will be carried out as organizations restart operations regardless of whether a union is present or not, and new benefits and services for both employed and laid-off workers. Interviews of those workers who have experienced and/or participated directly in these actions would be especially helpful in learning whether these campaigns for voice and benefits change worker preferences for future labor law reform. This research would shed light on how our survey-based estimates might
change when workers experience the sort of “deep canvassing” that can change individuals’ attitudes, even on controversial and salient issues like strikes and political actions (Broockman and Kalla 2016) that are often part of a well-run union organizing effort (McAlevey 2016) or other acts of solidarity (Fantasia 1988; Ahlquist and Levi 2013; Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2019).

Finally, our results speak to the strategic options facing labor movement and worker advocacy organizations and leaders. How these organizations move forward warrants further debate and research. We offer a specific hypothesis that can foster both innovation among labor organizations and testing in future research. The strong support for collective bargaining, participation in management decision-making, and provision of individual worker benefits and services suggests American workers want a mix of what both existing unions and emerging advocacy and alt-labor groups have to offer. Thus, we predict that coordinated efforts between existing unions and emerging advocacy groups would have a better chance of broadening and expanding the number of workers represented than either acting independently—or worse, treating each other as competitors or substitutes. Coordinated strategies, combined with changes in labor law that allow new options for representation, could usher in an era of experimentation and learning that reshapes and better aligns American labor and employment relations with what workers want.

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