Rational Mobilization of Ideological Group Members

by

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CEU Nador utca 9, Monument Building #201 | Monday May 11 – 2015 | 15.30-17.10

Abstract: Do labor unions still matter for elections? A prevailing view among social scientists is that declining union membership in the United States has left unions with little power to influence turnout and thus election outcomes. We provide a theoretical model based on rational mobilization and evidence showing that this view is mistaken. The model highlights that strategic union leaders have incentives to concentrate their costly mobilization efforts on ideologically proximate union members in competitive races. Following the model, we estimate the macro-micro interaction between individual ideology, union membership and state-level electoral competitiveness using national election surveys between 1964 and 2008. We find that competitiveness increases turnout among left-leaning union members rather than all members. The magnitude of the effect suggests that union mobilization can still influence the outcome when elections are close. Consistent with strategic targeting, we also find left-leaning but non-unionized individuals unaffected by competitiveness.

Daniel Stegmueller is a Professor of Quantitative Methods in the Social Sciences at the Graduate School of Social and Economic Sciences, University of Mannheim. He is also an associate member of Nuffield College, University of Oxford, and of CAGE, University of Warwick. Stegmueller’s research lies at the intersection of political economy and political behaviour. He studies political preferences and choices in advanced industrialized societies, specifically individuals’ preferences for redistribution and redistributive voting. He is interested in how these are shaped by social structure and institutions, but also by basic individual characteristics, such as cognitive and non-cognitive skills. Professor Daniel Stegmueller has published in renowned journals such as Electoral Studies, Journal of Politics, Americal Journal of Political Science, Political Analysis and European Sociological Review.

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