

Human Resource Management Practices and Worker Desires for Union Representation

JACK FIORITO*

Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306

I. Introduction

A host of factors have been cited in efforts to explain union decline in the U.S. and elsewhere. Principal suspects in this “whodunnit” have included structural changes in the economy, changes in worker attitudes or values, government provision of benefits once obtained largely from unions, internal union problems, and union suppression and union substitution by employers (Fiorito and Maranto, 1987; Lipset and Katchanovski, 2001). All of these suspects have probably played at least some role in union decline, although there is often substantial disagreement about their relative importance.

I focus on the union substitution effects of employers’ HR practices. Both union suppression and union substitution effects may stem from employer opposition to unions, although practices that have union substitution effects can also be motivated by efficiency and other factors unrelated to unionization. On the one hand, *union suppression* refers to direct attacks on *symptoms* of “unionism” (pro-union attitudes, intentions, or actions) among workers. Firing a suspected union supporter would be a quintessential illustration.

On the other hand, *union substitution* refers to the effects that positive employer practices, again, whether designed toward this end or not, have in reducing the *causes* of unionism, i.e., worker dissatisfaction (Kochan, 1980). An example might be an employer deciding to raise wages to improve retention and applicant attraction. A likely side effect is that workers subsequently see less need to consider unionization. A different type of example could be a case where an employer changes HR practices with the *goal* of undercutting union support. For example, an employer adopts an “employee involvement” program in the face of a union organizing drive, signaling to workers that the employer *now* realizes the importance of embracing their input. An intended message is that there is no longer any need for a union. The cause of unionism in this instance, the employer’s unwillingness or inability to listen to employees, has allegedly been eliminated. Both examples might be considered *positive* HR practices in the sense that they address workers’ interests and may enhance job satisfaction and organizational performance. An important distinction, however, is that in the latter example, the employer’s action is clearly manipulative and probably illegal.

Concepts and terminology matters are addressed further in Section II to clarify my study's scope. In Section III, theory, and, in Section IV, evidence from previous research on positive HR practices' effects on worker unionism, and related issues, are reviewed. In Section V, and partly as a response to limited prior evidence, recent data are examined in a modest original empirical analysis. Finally, a concluding section offers an assessment of the influence that positive HR practices have on worker unionism and its importance for previous union decline and unions' future prospects.

II. *Terminology and Conceptual Issues*

My focus is on "positive" human resource practices, i.e., union substitution effects, not union suppression effects. As suggested already, the lines blur in some important regards. First, in terms of legal distinctions, the principal law of the land, the National Labor Relations Act, treats threats and bribes the same, and in *some* circumstances, the introduction of positive HR practices would constitute a "bribe." To threaten retaliation or to take action against workers to punish them for unionism (union suppression) is an unfair labor practice. To offer workers improved human resource management or to implement improvements (e.g., better pay, an involvement program) to dissuade unionism, at least in the face of an active organizing drive (union substitution), is also an unfair labor practice. This might be considered direct or intentional union substitution. Of course, many positive HR practices are introduced without regard to unionization implications, and although they may affect unionization decisions, they would not constitute bribes or attempts to manipulate worker choices. Such might be considered indirect union substitution, and in most instances, would not run afoul of the law. Recall, however, that illegal intent is not a necessary ingredient for finding violations under the NLRA.

Second, apart from the law, the ethical aspects of suppression and substitution may overlap. In either the case of a threat or a bribe, many would question the appropriateness (ethicality) of actions designed to manipulate one's choice. This leads into a third aspect of the "blurring" suggested above: What is the motivation?

There appear to be trends toward top management viewing HR as a "business partner," demanding a more bottom-line or profit-oriented posture. In this light, most HR proponents would assert that the reason for adopting positive HR practices is to get "more from less . . . [in that] the combination, or clustering of certain management practices with methods of employee involvement will engender employee commitment and promote high performance" (Cully et al., 1998, p. 10). Apart from this general efficiency-oriented motivation, organizational culture or the values of top managers may be key influences.

Union substitution was clearly an important motivator for some positive HR practices in the past (Foulkes, 1980). Some would assert that while union "threat effects" might have been important previously, unionization and the threat of its spread have declined to the point where unions are not a major concern to most nonunion firms. They would contend that nonunion managers have many higher priority threats to address and

that unions are “no longer on the radar scope.” In effect, indirect union substitution effects may be growing in importance relative to direct union substitution effects.

Still, although the perceived threat of unionization may have declined with union density, unions are still a concern to many managers. A recent case in the news involving an office supply retail chain refusing to take deliveries from (unionized) UPS couriers for fear that its employees might become infected with union thoughts comes to mind as a prominent example. Also, case studies suggest that positive HR practices are often introduced in management’s anti-union campaigns. For example, see Rundle (1998) on the establishment of employee involvement programs and calls for reform of the “company union” unfair labor practice provision.

For present purposes, it is sufficient to note that a variety of motivations can spur the adoption of HR practices. An interesting question, but one beyond my scope, is how important the various motivators are. Also interesting, and related to this, is the question of how union suppression and union substitution strategies relate to one another. That is, do firms tend to practice one or the other (as substitutes), or use the two in combination (as complements)? While there are many such interesting questions, addressing all of them goes far beyond the scope of this paper. My focus is on the *union substitution effects* of positive HR practices, regardless of motivations.

III. *Theory: Why Should Positive HR Practices Affect Unionism?*

The most obvious reason that positive HR practices should affect unionism lies in the notion that unions are based on discontent. Although other motivations exist, e.g., class consciousness or Marxist beliefs (Barling et al., 1992) and political instrumentality or altruism (Fiorito 1986, 1992; Knoke, 1990), much research has established that U.S. workers turn to unions chiefly as a means of alleviating dissatisfactions with work (Kochan 1979). More formal statements of this argument are available elsewhere (Wheeler and McClendon, 1991; Youngblood et al., 1981). In Youngblood et al.’s formulation, for example, dissatisfaction is a “trigger” that sets in motion a series of decisions that are necessary for workers to support unions. In more general terms, dissatisfaction is one of a number of necessary conditions for unionism. Consequently, HR practices that address and improve conditions that might be sources of discontent (low pay, meager benefits, arbitrariness, favoritism, boring or dead-end jobs, lack of say on the job, lack of due process, etc.) potentially undercut unionism by removing or at least reducing dissatisfaction.

Guest (1995) notes that building worker commitment to the employer (“organizational commitment”) is at the very core of HRM. “It is assumed that a worker who is committed to the organization is unlikely to become involved in ‘industrial relations’ or any type of collective activity. . . .” (Guest, 1995, pp. 112-13). Notably, this view of commitment is at odds with the “dual commitment” phenomenon (to union *and* employer) that has been observed in some studies. It is possible that HRM could enhance commitment to *both* parties, particularly if the union is seen as a partner in

bringing about desired HRM policies. Guest's comments may be based on findings that while interesting, dual commitment is relatively uncommon (Barling et al., 1992, pp. 89-92). Consequently, Guest sees commitment as putting forth an extra effort for the employer and at odds with the traditional union notion of a fair day's work for a fair day's pay, i.e., the effort bargain (Guest, 1995, p. 113). (Of course, pay incentives or gain sharing can be ways to elicit additional effort while establishing a new effort bargain — higher expectations for both pay and effort.)

A next question is *how* HR practices address dissatisfaction. Obviously, wage and benefit practices can directly address dissatisfaction with economic outcomes. In addition, systematic (e.g., job evaluation and other "objective" bases for rewards) and interactive practices (consultative decisions on job requirements, performance standards, assessments, and rewards) can make the procedural aspects more satisfying. Training can provide workers with means to advance within the organization and increase employment security. Careful selection and placement can help to ensure that workers are performing jobs that match their interests and abilities. Interaction at a group level is also relevant given the inherently social nature of many jobs, e.g., the need for specialization, coordination, and teamwork. Employee involvement systems, quality circles, and a variety of other programs reflect HR practices designed to encourage and exploit the value of worker input and are often group-focused. Justice systems, ranging from open-door policies to formal hearings by an independent arbitrator present another example of a positive HR practice that can address and alleviate dissatisfaction.

Note that the HR practices just described may vary in their relevance for union substitution. Some address economic terms of work that may be seen as a traditional area of union impact. Others address matters such as selection, where unions have historically had little direct impact (outside of hiring hall situations). Some address somewhat less tangible outcomes such as worker influence and dignity and justice on the job. Economic issues such as wages and benefits may enter into unionization decisions in a relatively instrumental or calculative manner. Other issues, such as justice, can involve a more emotional element (Wheeler and McClendon, 1991). Such distinctions may be important for a complete understanding of union substitution effects. For now, the key point is that various positive HR practices can influence unionism desires via their impact on worker satisfaction.

Apart from the rationale sketched above, which relates to the demand side (worker demand for union representation), there is some possibility that HR practices affect unionization via the supply side. For example, suppose union organizing strategies are most concerned with low-cost producers as the greatest competitive threats. If positive HR practices reduce a nonunion firm's cost advantage, i.e., if they are "expensive baggage" (Guest, 1995, p. 111), firms with more positive HR practices are less likely to be targeted for organizing. A complementary altruistic effect could operate as well. Workers in firms with the most positive HR practices are least in need of the union's assistance and would be less likely to be targeted on altruistic grounds. There are other possibilities of supply-side influences, but supply-side effects are probably of secondary importance and are not addressed further here.

IV. *Prior Research: Indirect and Direct Evidence*

Evidence on the relation between positive HR practices and unionism comes in varied forms. Much of it is anecdotal or impressionistic. All of us have read or heard accounts such as the following:

The Acme Corporation is a modern, progressive employer. Human resource management is an important function at Acme, and Acme is often regarded as an innovator and an industry leader in HR. Although unions have made several attempts to organize at Acme, Acme's workers have expressed little interest in unions.

American Honda and Nissan auto assembly operations come to mind as prominent real world examples of establishments in a traditionally highly unionized industry that have managed to keep majorities of their workers opposed to unionization. Union organizers would point out union suppression activities by these firms, but it seems that at least a key part of these work forces' nonunion status can be attributed to disinterest by the workers stemming from positive HR practices. Kodak, IBM, Wal-Mart, and Delta (pilots excepted) are other familiar corporate names that often come up in this context. Although not focused on how HR practices affect unionism, Foulkes' (1980) study of HR practices in a wide range of large U.S. corporations suggests that managers often perceive union-inhibiting effects for positive HR practices.

Consistent with anecdotal and case-study-based accounts, various sources have suggested that better human resource management has played a role in decreasing aggregate unionization. Unfortunately, no studies of aggregate unionization have been able to offer a plausible measure of HR practices and, thus, estimate their influence directly (Stepina and Fiorito, 1986).

A series of studies on union voting intentions by Farber and others (Farber and Krueger, 1993) may provide indirect evidence on HR practices' effects. Analyzing voting intent questions from four surveys over the 1977–1992 period, Farber and Krueger conclude that declining demand for unionization can account for virtually all of the decline in union density in that time. They further conclude that increased job satisfaction (as reported by workers) can account for much of the decline in demand. As they note, a “critical question” left for future study is why reported satisfaction increased, in particular reported satisfaction with pay in a period when real wages stagnated (from 1977–1984).

Answering this question goes beyond the scope of this study, but two points merit attention. First, one popular conception of job satisfaction stresses gaps between expectations and perceived outcomes. Hence, if the objective outcome (e.g., real wages) has not changed, expectations or perceptions of those outcomes must have changed. Recall that large numbers of job losses occurred during the earlier part of this period, which encompasses the “Great Recession” of the early 1980s. It is not hard to imagine that worker expectations were diminished or that unchanged outcomes (e.g., a steady job at an average wage rate) were re-evaluated upward by those still holding jobs.

More pertinent to this study, it is also possible that job satisfaction increased in response to better HR practices. There is little direct quantitative evidence on this point,

but the late 1970s and early 1980s were a period of transition in the field of HR. This is the same time that personnel transitioned into HR, signaling a shift from a reactive, record-keeping function playing “second fiddle” to labor relations (in firms that had unions) to a more proactive, strategic function. The HR function in many cases became organizationally superior to its old boss, labor relations (Freedman, 1985; Kaufman, 2000). This is roughly the same period in which import penetration surged in many industries, and this along with increased domestic competition and contemporaneous deregulation issued a “wake-up call” to many firms. Many appear to have taken the opportunity to introduce positive HR practices as a way of trying to become or remain competitive.

Granted, it may be stretching the facts a bit to try and link the specific changes in job satisfaction noted by Farber and Krueger to changes in HR practices. It is nonetheless plausible that in the longer view, say roughly 1950–2000, that there was a meaningful change toward the use of positive HR practices and that this may have increased job satisfaction and thus contributed to union decline).

There is indeed evidence that positive HR practices are linked to worker attitudes in sensible ways. Guest and Conway (1999) report a broadly focused, large-sample study of workers in UK organizations. The HR practices they examine include training and development, formal appraisal, job enrichment/enlargement, internal promotions, learning opportunities, bonus or merit pay, and employee involvement programs. They find workers in “high-HRM” organizations report higher job satisfaction, higher organizational commitment, and better worker-management relations than firms that have adopted few positive HR practices. Also, workers in “high-HRM” organizations without unions are no more likely to express leaving intentions than workers represented by unions, but workers in “low-HRM” firms without unions report dramatically higher leaving intentions.

Studies of HR practices suggest that many were increasingly adopted over time, and for some practices the rate of adoption accelerated noticeably in the 1970s and 1980s (Ichniowski et al., 1989, especially Figures 1-4). This is the part of the basis for inferences such as the following by Strauss:

Whether motivated by ideology or fad, by economic necessity or by a desire to keep unions out, companies are increasingly experimenting with what have become known as human resource policies which are designed to increase employee motivation and job commitment. . . . Taken together, these new company human resource policies, plus new legal regulations . . . have given many workers most of the benefits and protections commonly provided by unionization . . . their net impact has been to make union organizing more difficult (Strauss, 1984, pp. 4-5).

The direct evidence is meager and less clear. As Fiorito et al. (1987) note, it is possible to consider negative wage effects on unionism (and similar evidence) detected in several studies to be indicative. That is, if high-wage policies are part of the positive HR practice and high-wage workers are shown to be less prone to support unions (Farber and Saks, 1980), such evidence could be construed as a union substitution effect. Even

though there is a fair amount of evidence on this particular point, wage practices are but a small part of positive HR practices. Furthermore, there are competing interpretations and theories involving wages, including the notion of a positive wage effect due to union representation being a "normal good."

At least three published studies have examined a broader range of HR practices and their relation to unionism. Kochan et al. (1986) use Conference Board data from employer reports to examine the effect of HR practices on the union status of new facilities and overall union membership in companies. Their measure of positive HR practices combine several indicators (e.g., grievance procedures, participation schemes, and profit sharing) and show a consistent negative effect on union status of new facilities and overall union membership growth in companies.

Using the same data and focusing on the union status of new facilities and representation election results, Fiorito et al. (1987) extend Kochan et al.'s analysis by examining the effects of specific HR practices. Although the results are generally consistent, Fiorito et al. find that effects vary considerably across the various HR practices. To illustrate, while grievance systems, employee participation, and communication programs show fairly consistent negative effects on unionism outcomes, several practices evidence virtually no effect (e.g., flexible schedules, autonomous teams) and others exhibit a disconfirming positive effect, e.g., work sharing and having all workers on salary.

Fiorito and Young (1998) take a slightly different approach in examining the effect of HR practices on workers' voting intentions in response to a question involving a hypothetical union representation election. The Kochan et al. (1986) and Fiorito et al. (1987) studies rely on employer reports regarding union activity as well as HR practices and thus presume that worker attitudes are the intervening mechanism linking HR practices and unionization outcomes. In this sense, the Fiorito and Young study aims to examine the HR practices effect more directly. Using matched employer-worker responses from the 1991 National Organization Survey, they attempt to link employer reports on HR practices to worker self-reports on union voting intention. On the whole, however, they find only modest evidence that HR practices influence unionism after controlling for individual attitudes and other potential influences. (They do find fairly strong evidence that union attitudes and similar variables influence voting intent.) They speculate on the possible reasons for their weak findings on HR practices. In addition to the usual possibilities of low statistical power, bad measures, and the like, they consider two reasons that are particularly relevant to the issue at hand.

First, in controlling for organizational commitment (commitment to the employer) and other attitudes, Fiorito and Young may pose an "artificial hurdle" to finding an effect for HR practices. That is, the effects of HR practices may operate through variables such as organizational commitment and job satisfaction, and at least in terms of *positive* HR practices, this would be consistent with the view that any union substitution effect was merely a byproduct of good HR management. In empirical terms, one may not observe a direct HR practice effect on unionism when controlling for other attitudes since that effect may be largely mediated by attitudes toward work and the

employer. Second, employer reports of HR practices may differ considerably from worker perceptions. To illustrate, an employer may report that a formal complaint system for workers constitutes a dispute resolution mechanism. Workers may, however, see that system as ineffectual for various reasons, e.g., unresponsiveness or fear of reprisal.

McKinlay and Taylor (1996) offer an interesting case study that is relevant to this point and the broader question of HR practices' effects on unionism. They examine a range of arguably progressive HR practices in a "greenfield" manufacturing site. McKinlay and Taylor observe that while management's HR initiatives may have been well intentioned and well received at the outset, production pressures and inherent conflicts of interest between workers and the company led to attitudinal turnarounds. Whereas many workers responded positively to the company's HR initiatives in the early going, many became disillusioned as experience accumulated. Had these workers been surveyed in the early going, one might observe a strong negative relation between unionism and perceptions of HR practices (consistent with the union substitution thesis). But had they been surveyed at the end of the case study period, it is likely there would be little or no relation, possibly even a positive relation. In a cross-sectional database such as Fiorito and Young's, the full range of experience (new practices and old, in effect) is sampled, and a "no apparent effect" result is consistent with McKinlay and Taylor's case. Supporting results from a national survey are reported by Cully et al. (1998). They suggest that "Disillusionment seems to set in over time: those who had been working at the workplace for ten years or more were almost twice as likely as those employed under a year to rate managers as poor or very poor at consulting [with workers]" (1998, p. 21). Consistent with this view, Bruno and Jordan (1999) note a dramatic deterioration in worker attitudes at a large unionized manufacturing plant when comparing measures taken shortly after opening to measures several years later.

Summing up, the evidence is mixed. There seems to be no shortage of anecdotal evidence suggesting that companies have increasingly adopted positive human resource programs that have made union organizing more difficult. This seems to be taken as a given by many. There is systematic quantitative evidence that supports parts of the union substitution thesis. For example, some studies show that positive HR practices are associated with job satisfaction, commitment, etc. (Guest and Conway, 1999). At least one study shows that some positive HR practices have been increasingly adopted (Ichniowski et al., 1989). There is some indirect evidence that is consistent with the union substitution thesis (Farber and Krueger, 1993). Some, albeit limited, systematic evidence links positive HR practices and unionization outcomes as reported by companies (Kochan et al., 1986; Fiorito et al., 1987). Seasoned scholars and observers opine that the cumulative evidence supports a similar conclusion (Strauss, 1984).

Despite this, there is a lack of evidence on a critical part of this "story." That part is the link between HR practices and unionism on the part of workers. Such evidence may simply be hard to generate with extant data resources. Fiorito and Young's (1998) study appears to be the only quantitative analysis addressing this link. Evidence from multiple companies that can provide meaningful variance in HR practices *and* that can

be linked to worker attitudes toward unions is not easy to find. At the same time, there is evidence that calls into question the widely perceived positive link between HR practices and worker attitudes toward work and employers (McKinlay and Taylor, 1996). And, of course, this link is generally presumed in the union substitution thesis.

V. *More Evidence?*

Given the sparsity and ambiguity of the extant research on HR practices and unionism, additional evidence is needed. The Worker Representation and Participation Survey (WRPS) conducted in 1994 offers some potential to shed new light on the relations of interest. Aside from a modest gain in timeliness, the WRPS offers worker responses to questions about HR practices and their intention to vote for a union in a hypothetical representation election. The WRPS provides a national probability sample of workers in private sector establishments with 25 or more workers, and thus is broadly representative of the private sector U.S. work force, apart from workers in very small establishments. Top managers, the self-employed, and owners and their relatives were also excluded (Freeman and Rogers, 1999). In addition, supervisors and other managers included in the WRPS were excluded from the analysis in this study.

An advantage of the WRPS relative to the earlier studies based on employer reports (Kochan et al., 1986; Fiorito et al., 1987) is that the WRPS provides more direct insight on the presumed link between HR practices and attitudes. To a lesser extent the WRPS offers this advantage over the National Organization Survey (NOS) used by Fiorito and Young (1998), although the unionism measure there was drawn from individual responses to a hypothetical voting question. Thus, relative to the NOS, the WRPS removes the discrepancy between employer and worker reports on HR practices as a source of measurement error. In addition, the WRPS asked workers about employee involvement practices, a key issue neglected in the NOS. Of course, there is a trade-off in that whatever association is found in the WRPS is likely to be influenced by common method variance — drawing measures from a single questionnaire. This threat to validity is reduced greatly in that most measures of HR practices used here tend to be very factual. For example, a key HR practice question is “Which of the following, if any, does your (company/organization) have?” This was followed by a list of neutrally-worded descriptions such as “A grievance procedure that uses an outside referee or arbitrator to settle disputes between an employee and management.”

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for measures from the WRPS. The first 12 measures listed represent responses to the “have it/don’t have it”-type questions on HR practices just described. As shown, the incidence of these 12 practices varies from a low of 20 percent of workers reporting their workplace had employee stock ownership programs to a high of 86 percent having an open-door policy for resolving individual worker problems. This list surely omits HR practices that some readers would consider critical, but it represents a fair sampling of contemporary positive HR practices. (Compare these to Guest and Conway’s (1999) 10 HR practices, for example.) These practices loosely tend to occur together, as indicated by a Cronbach alpha of .68 for the

Table 1
Measures, Means, and Standard Deviations

Measure	Mean	SD
Teams, Quality Circles, TQM, Other Employee Involvement Schemes	.49	.50
Personnel/Human Resource Management Department	.71	.46
Open-Door Policy for Individuals	.86	.35
Grievance Procedure with Outside Referee/Arbitrator	.36	.48
Regular Town Meetings	.46	.50
Open-Door Policy for Groups	.64	.48
Employee Committee to Discuss Problems with Management	.39	.49
Profit Sharing Bonuses	.26	.44
Workplace Goal Bonuses	.22	.42
Stock or ESOP	.20	.40
Employer-Assisted Health Insurance	.79	.41
Paid Vacation	.84	.36
HR Practices Index (12 above items standardized and summed)	-.16	5.69
Management Heeds Suggestions (1-4 scale, 4=Almost always)	3.00	.84
Effectiveness of System for Individual Probs. (1-4 scale, 4=v. effect.)	2.99	.82
Hourly Wage (\$)	10.48	8.72
Establishment Size Group (1-5 scale, 5=1000+ employees)	2.59	1.23
Age in Years	36.83	12.14
Education Level (1-7 scale, 7=Post-Grad or Professional)	4.20	1.47
Black or African American (1=yes, 0=no)	.12	.32
Female (1=yes, 0=no)	.48	.50
Satisfaction with Influence on Work Decisions (1-5 scale, 5=v. sat.)	2.84	.89
Employee Organization Seen Effective Even if Mgmt. Opposes (1=yes)	.18	.39
Mgmt. Opposition to Unionization Drive (1=welcomed, 4=threats, etc.)	2.89	.72
Prior Union Experience (1-5 scale, 5=v. good)	3.03	.59
Political Affiliation (1=Repub., 2=Indep., 3=Democrat)	2.01	.78
Vote for Union — Nonunion Workers (1=for, 0=against)	.38	.48
Vote for Union — Union Members (1=for, 0=against)	.93	.26

Note: *N* varies from 199 for the Vote for Union – Union Members question to 1,303 for the race and gender measures. Data for remaining measures are based on responses for at least 779 workers. Details on measures are available from the author on request. All measures are from the 1994 Worker Participation and Representation Survey (Freeman and Rogers, 1999).

composite index of HR practices also shown in the table. (The reliability could not be improved by dropping any items.)

The next two measures in Table 1 are more evaluative judgments about HR practices. On average, workers feel that management takes their suggestions seriously “sometimes” and that systems for resolving individual worker problems are “somewhat effective” — the respective anchors for values of 3 on these 4-point scales.

Most of the remaining measures are included for use as controls in subsequent analysis (below) and are straightforward. The Satisfaction with Influence measure is notable in that it proxies general job satisfaction, a consistently important influence on unionism, and because in theory it is part of the causal chain in the union substitution thesis. Also notable, because they are less standard, are the measures for perceived effectiveness of an employee organization in the face of management opposition, expected management opposition to a hypothetical unionization drive, prior union experience, and political affiliation. The first of these may proxy union instrumentality perceptions that have repeatedly been shown to strongly influence union voting. The union suppression thesis is the obvious basis for the management opposition measure. Prior union experience is based on two questions posed to nonunion workers, the first on whether they had ever worked under union representation and, if so, the quality of that experience. Those indicating they had no union experience were assigned the neutral value (3) on the 5-point scale, along with those indicating their experience was “neither good nor bad.” Political affiliation is included as a proxy for ideological influences on unionism.

Finally, Table 1 includes data for union voting intention questions posed to both union and nonunion workers in the WRPS. As shown, nearly 40 percent of nonunion workers indicating a choice (“undecideds” excluded) say they would vote for a union if an election were held, while over 90 percent of union workers say they would vote for a union if they had none at their workplace. These figures are roughly comparable to those from prior polls (Fiorito, 1987).

Table 2 presents correlations for both voting intentions measures, Satisfaction with Influence, and the HR Practices Index with variables from Table 1. Most notable in Table 2 is that nearly all of the HR practices measures, including the composite index, exhibit a significant negative relation with nonunion worker voting intent, consistent with the union substitution thesis. At the same time, it should be noted that the effect sizes suggested by these correlations are quite modest. The strongest is for the composite index at $-.21$, which implies this index could “explain” about 4 percent of the variance in voting intent. Using the estimated reliability for the index (.68) and assuming a comparable figure for the voting intention measure, adjusting for unreliability yields a true score correlation of about $.31$, which could “explain” about 10 percent of the variance in voting intent. Not surprisingly, the more evaluative responses on HR practices (whether suggestions are heeded or problem-resolving systems are effective) appear to correlate more strongly with voting intent. This contrast may speak to the possible variations in the meaning of simply “having” a particular practice, but the evaluative nature of these

Table 2
Correlation Results for Voting Intent, HR Practices, and Selected Variables

Measure	Nonunion Worker Voting Intent	Union Worker Voting Intent	Satisfaction with Influence	HR Practices Index ^a
Teams, QC, TQM, EI	-.19*	.02	.15*	.62*
P/HR Department	-.11*	.12*	.02	.51*
Open Door – Individuals	-.17*	-.07	.24*	.44*
Grievance Procedure	.01	-.12	.04	.35*
Town Meetings	-.11*	.10	.20*	.52*
Open Door – Groups	-.15*	.18*	.25*	.50*
Employee Committee	-.08*	.09	.16*	.49*
Profit Sharing	-.12*	.09	.04	.47*
Goal Bonuses	-.06*	.02	.07*	.35*
Stock or ESOP	-.14*	.06	.01	.49*
Health Insurance	-.12*	.03	.00	.49*
Paid Vacation	-.01	-.00	.00	.42*
HR Practices Index	-.21*	.08	.22*	1.00
Mgmt. Heeds Suggestions	-.30*	-.07	.48*	.30*
System Effectiveness	-.27*	.04	.47*	.35*
Hourly Wage (\$)	-.04	.11	.03	.22*
Establishment Size	-.08*	.12*	-.10*	.31*
Age in Years	-.10*	.02	-.02	.01
Education Level	-.14*	-.05	.00	.09*
Black (1=yes, 0=no)	.20*	-.06	-.04	-.03
Female (1=yes, 0=no)	.12*	-.10	.03	-.04
Satisfaction with Influence	-.23*	-.07	1.00	.22*
Employee Org. Effectiveness	.09*	.04	.02	-.06*
Management Opposition ^b	.11*	.01	-.25*	-.15*
Prior Union Experience ^c	.24*	NA	.03	-.09*
Political Affiliation	.23*	-.03	-.00	.04

Notes: *Significant at the .10 level or better, two-tailed test. See Table 1 for more complete descriptions of measures. Ns vary due to pair-wise deletion for missing data. Minimum Ns for each column are 509, 156, 767, and 558 from left to right. ^aCorrelations with the first 12 measures are part-whole correlations as these items are included in the HR Practices Index. ^bSeparate questions were asked of union and nonunion workers. For the last two columns, the figures shown are for nonunion workers' responses only. ^cThis question was not asked of union workers.

questions also introduces a strong possibility of common method variance, i.e., an artificial correlation across questions due to mood or other contaminants.

Consistent with the causal chain suggested in the union substitution thesis, several of the HR practice indicators and the composite index show positive correlations with the Satisfaction with Influence measure. Moreover, the pattern of correlations across indicators generally appears to make sense in that some nonetheless important HR practices such as vacations and health insurance have little to do with workplace influence on a day-to-day basis.

The correlations for HR practices with *union* workers' voting intent offer no support for the union substitution thesis, although a lack of variance in this voting intent measure is a possible attenuating factor. It is notable that practically none of the variables correlate with union worker voting intent, although many have been repeatedly linked to nonunion worker voting and show relations to the nonunion worker voting intent measure here.

Since most of the remaining (non-HR practices) measures are not the main focus here, only a few observations will be offered on results involving these. First, note that correlations between nonunion worker voting intent and some of these seem larger than those involving HR practices and voting intent. Here too, in a relative sense, the relevant point is that the relation between HR practices and voting intent is modest. Consistent with much literature on HR practices, the correlation between the HR Practices Index and Establishment Size reinforces the view that positive HR practices are associated with large organizations. Finally, the correlation between Hourly Wage and the HR Practices Index jibes with the last point in that progressive HR practices are often noted in conjunction with a high-wage (rather than cost-minimization) strategy.

Although simple correlations may be generally indicative of relations between two variables that are part of a more complex network, it would be imprudent to fail to consider multivariate evidence. Accordingly, Table 3 presents regression results for nonunion worker voting intentions. It should be noted that the data, the WRPS, constitute a sample of convenience for this purpose. As noted earlier, several measures are included as proxies for factors such as union instrumentality perceptions and ideology previously identified as influences on voting intentions. Nevertheless, in terms of completeness relative to other offerings (e.g., Lipset and Katchanovski, 2001) and in providing some indication of sensitivity of relations to inclusion of other influences, the WRPS provides a reasonably useful database for the multivariate analyses of Table 3.

The first two equations in Table 3 (equations 1a and 1b) employ the HR Practices Composite to summarize the overall influence of HR practices on voting intent and, in effect, an overall test for the union substitution thesis. Consistent with the bivariate results shown earlier, the results indicate that positive HR practices exert a modest negative impact on nonunion worker intentions to vote for a union. The point estimates for the HR Practices Index indicate that these practices uniquely account for 2 to 3 percent of the variance in voting intent. The effect is found with and without controlling for Satisfaction with Influence. The presence of the satisfaction variable does appear to reduce

Table 3
Regression Results for Nonunion Worker Voting Intent
 (Standardized Betas from Ordinary Least Squares)

Measure	Eq. 1a	Eq. 1b	Eq. 2a	Eq. 2b
Teams, QC, TQM, EI			-.05	-.06
P/HR Department			-.09*	-.08*
Open Door – Individual			-.05	-.06
Grievance Procedure			.08*	.07
Town Meetings			.00	-.01
Open Door — Groups			-.06	-.08
Employee Committee			-.01	-.03
Profit Sharing			-.03	-.03
Goal Bonuses			.04	.03
Stock or ESOP			-.06	-.06
Health Insurance			-.04	-.04
Paid Vacation			.07	.07
HR Practices Index	-.13*	-.17*		
Joint <i>F</i> -Test for 12 HR Practices			1.91*	2.49*
Establishment Size	-.06	-.03	-.04	-.02
Age in Years	-.09*	-.09*	-.09*	-.10*
Education Level	-.08*	-.07*	-.07*	-.07*
Black (1=yes, 0=no)	.10*	.11*	.10*	.11*
Female (1=yes, 0=no)	.08*	.09*	.08*	.09*
Satisfaction with Influence	-.18*		-.18*	
Employee Org. Effectiveness	.03	.03	.02	.03
Management Opposition	.06	.11*	.06	.09*
Prior Union Experience	.22*	.21*	.23*	.22*
Political Affiliation	.22*	.21*	.21*	.20*
<i>R</i> ²	.24	.21	.26	.24
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	.22	.20	.23	.20
<i>F</i>	13.35*	12.60*	7.38*	6.78*
<i>N</i>	479	479	479	479

Notes: *Significant at the .10 level or better, two-tailed test for coefficients. See Table 1 for more complete descriptions of measures.

the estimated effect for the HR Practices Index, however, consistent with the presumed causal paths of the union substitution thesis. That this mediation is *partial* indicates that HR practices' effects on voting intentions involve more than increasing worker satisfaction with influence. Given the range of HR practices considered, including several that relate to workplace justice and tangible financial benefits, this is not surprising. (Also note that the results were essentially unaffected when a "subset index" focused on more advanced HR practices such as employee involvement was used.) It is also notable that Prior Union Experience and Political Affiliation appear to exert slightly larger influences than do HR practices. On the former, these results support Bronfenbrenner's (1997) emphasis on union organizing outcomes being about unions rather than solely about employers, that is, the outcomes are very much influenced by unions and not dictated by employers. On the Political Affiliation result, although party affiliation is a proxy for broader ideological influences, these results underscore the point that such influences are relevant. The union voting decision is not solely about workplace governance, i.e., about joint regulation versus management unilateralism. Broader ideological issues are involved as well (Fiorito and Young, 1998; Lipset and Katchanovski, 2001).

Equations 2a and 2b substitute the 12 specific HR practices for the composite index. While as a group, these 12 measures "explain" a significant portion of the variance in voting intent, the implications regarding specific practices are muddled. No one HR practice or subset of practices stands out as *the* critical influence. In fact, the null hypothesis of "no effect" cannot be rejected for most practices. Interestingly, the single practice for which the null can be rejected in both equations (with and without controlling for Satisfaction with Influence) is having a Personnel/Human Resource Management Department. This is hardly cutting-edge HR practice, but it may be salient in indicating an overall philosophy toward workers and the traditional role of HR as the employing organization's "conscience" with respect to employees. The origins of HR in the position of "welfare secretary" come to mind. It should also be noted that collinearity may be an issue in these results. The correlations among pairs of specific practices are not large, but as indicated by the overall Cronbach alpha (.68) for the 12 practices, they do correlate modestly with each other. Distinguishing precise effects for individual HR practices may simply be beyond the power of the data.

As a final note on the regression results, the results for non-HR practices variables are generally in line with prior research. This is true for the "wrongly-signed" Management Opposition variable in Eqs. 1b and 2b as well as those with more sensible results. Deshpande and Fiorito (1989) address a similar disconfirming result in their study and previous analyses. Such results probably say more about common causes of perceptions of management reactions to unions and union voting intent than about workers' true reactions to vigorous management opposition. Distrust of management could lead to perceptions that management will retaliate against union sympathizers *and* contribute to a pro-union vote intent, leading to a positive correlation between the two, without implying that perceptions of management retaliation *cause* pro-union voting. Although less likely, there is also a possible "backfire effect" in that workers may

resent heavy-handed management opposition and thus respond to it by increasing their support for a union. In actual voting, an *apparent* backfire effect could also arise because management opposes unions most strongly where the union has the greatest support, i.e., because the causality is actually reversed. Also remember that we are examining hypothetical voting intentions and not actual vote. Although vote and voting intent may correlate strongly (Fiorito, 1987), vigorous management opposition may easily be one of the matters that does not generalize across the two circumstances. In other words, it may be easy to be defiant in a hypothetical setting. Also note that the opposition variable is not significant in Eq. 1a and 2a.

VI. *Concluding Remarks: Have Positive HR Practices Reduced Unionization?*

The answer to the question of whether positive HR practices have reduced unionization appears to be a qualified “yes.” Consistent with most previous evidence, my results suggest that positive HR practices reduce unionism (e.g., nonunion worker intentions to vote for a union and union success rates in representation elections). They do this by increasing workers’ job satisfaction, thereby undercutting part of the motivation for unionization.

The “yes” response is qualified in a number of ways. First, the effect size appears to be fairly modest, or in modeling terms, HR practices are capable of “explaining” only a small part of the variance in nonunion worker voting intentions. Second, attempts to isolate particular practices’ effects yield muddled results. Although it may be that the critical issue is a configuration or pattern of practices rather than particular practices, it is not clear as yet what that critical configuration might be. What also may be critical and related to the configuration issue is the strategy within which HR practices are applied. Within a cost-minimization strategy, HR practices may be used primarily to promote efficiency with little regard for worker interests. (In fact, this seems to be the sort of situation that McKinlay and Taylor (1996) describe as leading to increasing worker hostility to HR practices.) In contrast, the same practices may be applied with great regard for worker interests within a high-performance work system where top management sincerely believes that worker commitment is a vital ingredient for success.

Third, and related to the last point, it is not yet clear how HR practices should be measured. In the present study, emphasis was placed on using relatively objective indicators of HR practices — whether they worker’s establishment has them or not. Clearly there is potentially great variation in all the programs that might fall under the heading of, say, “self-directed teams, quality circles, total quality management, and other employee involvement programs” (phrasing from a WRPS question). Forcing respondents to give yes/no answers to such broad questions could introduce a form of range restriction that limits the strength of the relation between HR practices and worker attitudes observed. Worker reports on whether management takes seriously worker suggestions are telling in this regard as well. While many workers say management “almost always” takes workers suggestions seriously, many say they “hardly ever” or “never”

do, and the average response corresponds to "sometimes," as noted earlier. Objectivity in measures remains highly desirable, but more refined measures could provide stronger evidence. Another dimension of variation is temporal. As McKinlay and Taylor (1996) show, positive HR practices can start well-intended and be well-received by workers, only to be undermined by production pressures.

A follow-up question is then, to what extent have positive HR practices contributed to the decline of unions over recent decades? To answer this question properly, one needs to include measures of HR practice use over time in a model of aggregate unionization, controlling for other varying influences such as employers' union suppression efforts, economic and work force structure, and worker attitudes or values. The necessary data do not appear to exist at present, and no such modeling effort has been offered. Thus, given the modest impact of HR practices shown in this and previous studies, perhaps the best we can do at present is to conclude that the impact of HR practices on union decline has been modest as well.

And what of the future? There remains some question about whether trends in positive HR diffusion will continue. There has clearly been an upward trend in recent decades, but newer trends of downsizing and outsourcing of HR functions emerged during the 1990s. Perhaps line managers and HR-function providers outside the firm *can* administer some established HR practices and programs, but will they be a force for progressive change? Given data, specification, and technical (e.g., collinearity) limitations, it might be unwise to make too much of the regression result shown above suggesting that simply having an HR department is the one HR practice that clearly exerts a union substitution effect. Yet it is an intriguing result in light of the recent HR downsizing and outsourcing trends. Extrapolating from past experience and expecting further diffusion of positive HR practices, one would expect that private sector unionization would continue to decline, *other things equal*. (Here too, a precise estimate would seem untenable.) But more recent trends of downsizing and outsourcing HR functions raise questions about the further diffusion of positive HR practices.

Other things are not equal, of course. Unions are experimenting with and implementing new organizing philosophies, strategies, and tactics. They are increasing dramatically the resources devoted to organizing, at least according to leader pronouncements. Furthermore, unions learn and adapt, although many would say the union scorecard on this to date is not impressive. But just as employers have learned over time to use the legal system to advantage, unions can learn how to counter possible union-proofing advantages of HR practices or in other ways regain the initiative. Fiorito et al. (1987) suggest and Guest (1995) develops more fully some pro-HRM strategies for unions. In essence they suggest that unions accept that workers value many positive HR practices, and focus their efforts on becoming advocates for such practices.

Some large unions in the UK have developed fairly comprehensive guides to HRM for activists and members (GMB, n.d.; Usdaw, 1997). (GMB is the official name of the union once representing distinct groups of general and municipal workers, boilermakers, and others; Usdaw is the Union of Shop, Distributive, and Allied Workers). The

GMB union's guide to HRM urges its readers to "Address the problem now — it is no good hoping that HRM will go away — it will not. . . . [I]t is our job to maximize the opportunities for our members and minimize the threats" (GMB, n.d., p. 11). The Usdaw union's guide differentiates "bad" or "hard" HRM from "good" or "soft" HRM. Bad or hard HRM is seen as promoting business interests first and foremost with a very much secondary emphasis on work force development, and possibly being part of an anti-union agenda, i.e., direct union substitution. Good or soft HRM, alternatively, is seen as elevating work force development to a high priority and involving cooperation with unions (Usdaw, 1997, p. 7). In both unions' guides, there is a strong emphasis on demystifying HRM for union activists and members and suggesting ways that unionists can work with HRM to serve their members without jeopardizing the union's independent role.

This emphasis resonates with Guest's suggestion that unions "consider turning around the HRM agenda, one which managers might define as their own, and using it to promote workers' interests" (1995, p. 130). "For unions, their distinctive voice as representative and promoter of workers' interests in a democratic society should be seen as being quite compatible with principled advocacy of HRM" (Guest, 1995, p. 136). It would be at least somewhat ironic if programs to increase worker influence, often a key part of positive HRM, turn out to be a critical factor in the demise of unions, organizations dedicated to providing worker influence. Although positive HRM appears to have been a contributing factor in past union decline, it is not clear that it has been a major factor, nor that it will be a key force for union decline in the future. Of course, more research on these issues may yield more precise estimates of past influences and possible future impacts.

NOTE

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