

Highlighting New  
Poverty Research

by Jake Rosenfeld

"Economic Determinants of Voting in an Era of Union Decline." *Social Science Quarterly* 91(2): 379-96.

Jake Rosenfeld is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Washington and a Faculty Affiliate of the West Coast Poverty Center.

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## Economic Determinants of Voting in an Era of Union Decline

**Background.** By promoting the participation of working-class citizens in the political process, labor unions have historically helped to counteract the disproportionate political power held by better-educated and wealthier Americans. Previous research has shown that union members are significantly more likely to vote than otherwise similar nonunion workers. Over the past decades, union membership has been declining, from nearly one-fourth of all workers in the early 1970s to 12 percent today. The entirety of the decline in union strength has been in the private sector. Workers in the public sector, where unionization rates have been stable, are more likely to vote than workers in the private sector, regardless of whether they belong to a union. Thus, union decline is hypothesized to reduce unions' influence on voter turnout through two pathways: 1) through the reduced fraction of the workforce that is organized, and 2) through the reduced impact of unions on voting for public sector workers, where unions are now concentrated.

**Methods.** Using data from the Current Population Survey's November Voting and Registration Supplements for all national elections between 1984 and 2006, WPCPC Affiliate and Assistant Professor of Sociology Jake Rosenfeld tested whether the effect of being in a union on voting behavior varies across the public and private sectors. Rosenfeld used logistic regression models to predict whether or not an individual voted in a given year, controlling for various individual characteristics including marital status, income, occupation, and home ownership, as well as state-level factors such as unionization rates and measures of electoral competitiveness in a given year.

**Findings.** Rosenfeld found that working in the public sector and being in a union each independently increased the likelihood of voting in an election, but that working in the public sector was a stronger predictor of voting than union membership. The effect of being in a union was stronger in the private sector, where it increased the predicted probability of voting by 6.7 points, compared with an increase of 2.4 points in the public sector. These results suggest that the union effect on voter turnout is concentrated in the private sector, where unions are most at risk.

In addition to reducing the overall impact of unions on electoral behavior, the decline of unions in the private sector has important implications for political inequality. Private sector union members tend to be less well-educated and to earn less than their public-sector counterparts. Most of the individual characteristics that increase the likelihood of voting, such as having a higher income and owning a home, suggest that better-educated and higher-earning individuals are more likely to vote. Increased voting among private-sector union members is an exception to this general pattern. As private-sector union strength declines, unions lose their power to bring less educated and lower-earning workers to the polls, reducing their ability to influence political outcomes.

# Poverty Research Flash

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Poverty Research Flash 2010-04

## Economic Determinants of Voting in an Era of Union Decline

New research from Jake Rosenfeld

### Key Findings

- The share of U.S. workers who are union members has declined from roughly one in four workers in the early 1970s to 12 percent today, with all of the losses occurring in the private sector.
- Workers who are union members and those who work in the public sector are more likely to vote than are non-union workers or workers in the private sector, respectively.
- The effect of being in a union on voting behavior is greater in the private sector than in the public sector. Being in a union increased the predicted probability of voting by 2.4 points in the public sector, compared with a 6.7 point increase in the private sector.
- Union jobs are disappearing in the sector in which they have the greatest impact on individuals' voting behavior. As a result, unions may be losing their ability to help bring working-class citizens into the political process and to act as a hedge against inequality.