Socioeconomic Differences in Worker Involvement in Labor Union Activities

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ABSTRACT. The success of organized labor is aided by worker involvement in voluntary, union-related activities such as leadership roles and the socialization of new members. Established models of the attitudinal antecedents of this involvement (e.g., the exchange-covenant model; Snape & Redman, 2004) hold that positive attitudes toward unions in general are involvement’s primary predictor, with effectiveness of one’s own union being of secondary importance. However, these findings are gathered largely from high-socioeconomic status (SES) samples (e.g., university professors; see, e.g., Fiorito et al., 2014), and even more diversely sampled studies do not test for the influence of SES. Therefore, using a socioeconomically and occupationally diverse sample (n = 94), we examined whether established union involvement models apply equally to low- and high-SES union members. We found that, in high-SES individuals, general attitudes about unions positively predicted self-reports of past involvement, $b = 0.70$, $t(79) = 2.57$, $p = .01$, $CI_{95\%} [.16, 2.15]$, and future involvement interest, $b = 0.77$, $t(79) = 2.45$, $p = .02$, $CI_{95\%} [.15, 1.40]$; results were null for average- (past involvement $p = .81$, future $p = .83$) and low-SES workers (past involvement $p = .10$, future $p = .24$). Our findings indeed suggest that the exchange-covenant model is only applicable to high-SES union workers. General union attitudes are ostensibly irrelevant to overall involvement from their low-SES counterparts, possibly due to greater influence of social and material resource exchange on low-SES union members considering becoming involved in union activities. Future union involvement research should account for the influence of socioeconomic factors.

Keywords: labor unions, exchange-covenant model, theory of planned behavior, resource mobilization theory, conservation of resources
volunteer in union activities when they hold positive general union attitudes; that is, positive attitudes toward unions’ existence rather than toward their specific union (Kelly & Kelly, 1994; Newton & Shore, 1992; Snape & Redman, 2004). For example, individuals may hold attitudes that are generally supportive of unions in the aggregate while simultaneously holding negative attitudes about their specific union. Members with positive general union attitudes tend to incorporate union membership into their social identity more readily, and therefore tend to be more involved in union activities even amid possible frustrations with their union (Newton & Shore, 1992; Snape & Redman, 2004). However, one potential unaddressed gap in these models is a relative lack of diversity in the research surrounding their creation (Snape & Redman, 2004).

The study of union involvement antecedents has focused largely on high-socioeconomic status (SES) workers, mainly college professors or other educators (Fiorito et al., 2011; Fiorito et al., 2014; Goeddeke & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2010; Iverson & Kuruvilla, 1995; Kelly & Kelly, 1994; Snape & Redman, 2004). Although a few studies examined low-SES workers (Fullagar et al., 2004; Tetrick et al., 2007), and others captured ostensibly socio-economically diverse samples (Fiorito et al., 2010; Green & Auer, 2013; Kelloway & Barling, 1993; Parks et al., 1995), none directly examine SES’s relationship to union involvement. Some studies did analyze income as a predictor of union membership (e.g., Hirsch, 1980), but not involvement. Only one of the aforementioned studies directly compared union involvement antecedents across industries, but this was primarily for the purpose of validating a self-report measure of involvement (Parks et al., 1995). Administration of the measure to Canadian nurses and retail workers found that higher wages predicted greater involvement in both groups, but more so among nurses. Still, occupation alone is not an adequate indicator of SES (Cornfield & Kim, 1994). Thus, no studies that we are aware of have directly examined SES’s role regarding participation in union activities.

Given that, across and within unions, membership rosters often exhibit much diversity, better understanding of how SES influences the relationship between union involvement and involvements’ antecedents should provide insights informative to the current literature and also for unions seeking to maximize participation from all members. Therefore, we employed a survey study (n = 94) assessing perceived SES as a moderator of relationships between union involvement and potential antecedents. This research contributes to the organizational, personnel, and business psychology literatures by confirming past findings regarding antecedents of union involvement and extending those findings by examining whether SES alters relationships between union involvement and its antecedents.

Antecedents of Union Involvement

Two antecedents are primary to most union involvement models: (a) general union attitudes and (b) the perceived instrumentality/effectiveness of one’s own union in accomplishing its goals (i.e., union instrumentality; Bamberger et al., 1999; Kelly & Kelly, 1994; Newton & Shore, 1992; Snape & Redman, 2004). We defined general union attitudes as feelings and opinions toward unions and their effectiveness in general (Fiorito et al., 2010; McShane, 1986). Thus, general union attitudes reflect individuals’ overall affective assessment of whether unions, across industries, are positive and helpful entities. In contrast, perceived union instrumentality/effectiveness is the degree to which union members believe their specific union can reliably secure them material benefits (Chacko, 1985). Thus, much prior union involvement research has centered on the importance of general union attitudes versus the perceived effectiveness of one’s own union (Bamberger et al., 1999; Snape & Redman, 2004). The prevailing conclusions of these studies, drawn without regard to socioeconomic factors and often utilizing strictly high-SES samples, is that general union attitudes are of primary importance to encouraging union members’ involvement in union activities.

Consistent with the above findings, the exchange-covenant model of union involvement holds that the most committed and involved union members are those who feel most positively about unions in general (Snape & Redman, 2004). Members with positive general union attitudes might view their union activity as a duty resulting from a covenant between the self and the union. Such a significant agreement lacks a transactional element once it is made; regardless of how effective covenant-oriented members perceive their union to be at securing material and social benefits and resources, their level of involvement remains consistent (Newton & Shore, 1992). Conversely, union members who primarily value their union’s...
instrumentality can still be motivated to participate in voluntary activities, but less reliably so (Kelly & Kelly, 1994; Newton & Shore, 1992; Snape & Redman, 2004). Such members value the union only insofar as they can receive material or social benefits from it, seeing their membership as an affectless economic exchange (Snape & Redman, 2004). Although these members may participate in union activities that do not require much commitment or personal sacrifice (e.g., attending union meetings), they will shy away from more difficult or time-consuming forms of participation such as attending national union conferences or running for union office (Kelly & Kelly, 1994; Snape & Redman, 2004). When the benefits of union membership begin to go away, these members will be quicker to abandon the union (Newton & Shore, 1992). Still, both general union attitudes and perceived union instrumentality should lead to the initiation of union participation. In fact, much involvement research has concluded that general union attitudes are largely predicted by the perceived instrumentality of one’s own union (Bamberger et al., 1999; Newton & Shore, 1992). Thus, we expected both general union attitudes and perceived union instrumentality to associate with more union involvement.

Material resource exchange is not the only type of exchange examined in the exchange-covenant model (Snape & Redman, 2004). As opposed to resource-based instrumentality perceptions, perceived union support measures the degree to which workers believe their union cares about them and is sensitive to their needs. Therefore, union support perceptions are based more on social rather than economic considerations. For long-term union members, perceived support from the union seems to influence participation more than instrumentality (Sinclair & Tetrick, 1995; Snape & Redman, 2004; Tetrick et al., 2007). Higher perceived union support also more strongly predicts intentions to stay with the union compared to general union attitudes or instrumentality when membership is voluntary. That finding suggests that perceived union support’s influence on involvement may also be related to union commitment (Snape & Redman, 2004). Therefore, we expected perceived union support to associate positively with union involvement as well.

Besides general attitudes and social/economic exchanges, most union involvement research has examined the role of job satisfaction (Bamberger et al., 1999; Goeddeke & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2010; Kelloway & Barling, 1993; Monnot et al., 2011; Parks et al., 1995). This construct is generally viewed as a proxy for resource allocation attributed to the employer rather than the union. Thus, although some studies have found that job satisfaction correlates positively with perceived union instrumentality and commitment to the union, it relates negatively to participation in all kinds of union activities no matter the amount of resource investment required (Bamberger et al., 1999; Goeddeke & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2010; Kelloway & Barling, 1993; Kuruvilla & Fiorito, 1994; Monnot et al., 2011; Parks et al., 1995). Workers may attribute satisfactory working conditions to their union but simultaneously interpret that satisfaction as an indication they can relax their union involvement. Based on that reasoning, we expected job satisfaction and union involvement to negatively associate.

More recent evidence has suggested that, in addition to the union involvement antecedents discussed thus far, perceived behavioral control may also influence union members’ participation (Fiorito et al., 2014). Workers doubting that their personal efforts will result in positive job outcomes should be less likely to participate in union activities, regardless of their attitudes about unions or their job. Although only Fiorito et al. (2014) has measured the relationship between perceived behavioral control and union involvement, their findings are consistent with other work on perceived behavioral control and job performance (Townsend et al., 2002). Fiorito et al.’s (2014) findings are also consistent with resource mobilization theory (Klandermans, 1984; Obserschall, 1975). That theory holds that union members are more likely to engage in collective action when they believe their own efforts will influence the outcome. Therefore, to add to those limited findings, the present research also examined perceived behavioral control’s relationship to union involvement. Considering the existing evidence for various attitudinal antecedents of union involvement, we sought to confirm those past reports by predicting that (H1a) General union attitudes, (H1b) perceived union instrumentality, (H1c) perceived union support, and (H1d) perceived behavioral control would relate positively to union involvement; and (H2) job satisfaction would relate negatively to union involvement.

**SES and Union Involvement**

Besides confirming past observations, we also focused on extending past work by considering
how SES might alter those relationships. We measured SES in a manner consistent with prior organized labor research. Organized labor typically conceives of SES using a Marxist framework: members of socially dominant groups along the lines of variables like race, gender, occupation, income, citizenship, educational attainment, and age are more likely to have greater access to material resources from society and through their workplace and therefore to be of higher SES (Burgoon et al., 2010; Chang, 2003; Cornfield & Kim, 1994). As such, much prior union involvement research has compared blue-collar workers (i.e., those who perform manual labor) with white-collar ones (i.e., those in the service industry), essentially assuming these groups to represent low- and high-SES workers, respectively (e.g., Cook et al., 1978; Monnot et al., 2011; Owen et al., 1989). However, blue/white-collar status is not an adequate SES proxy: some blue-collar professions net far greater salaries than white-collar ones (Sasso, 2019).

Recent work on SES and union formation interest has taken a different approach: short, subjective, self-report measures (Mellor, 2016; Mellor & Golay, 2016). For that work, study participants chose their closest match from a list of social class options ranging from “poor” to “upper class.” The researchers argued that, although objective demographic variables can predict union interest, such sentiments ultimately hinge on workers’ subjective perceptions of their social identity and their workplace’s collective identity. Thus, measuring perceived social class allows researchers to examine individuals’ perceptions of their resource access (Mellor, 2016). Examining resource access and allocation subjectively rather than objectively is consistent with research on other industrial and organizational and occupational health psychology constructs, such as organizational justice theory (Greenberg, 1987) and conservation of resources theories of stress (Hobfoll, 1989). Consistent with that work, we measured perceived social class to represent SES.

At least two predictions about SES’s relationship to union involvement exist. Most union involvement models and meta-analyses have suggested that general union attitudes are the strongest predictor of involvement (Bamberger et al., 1999; Fiorito et al., 2010; Goeddeke & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2010; Kelly & Kelly, 1994; Monnot et al., 2011; Newton & Shore, 1992; Snape & Redman, 2004). Importantly, low-SES workers tend to hold more positive union attitudes relative to high-SES workers (Cornfield & Kim, 1994; Kerrissey & Schofer, 2013; Mellor, 2016; Mellor & Golay, 2016). Thus, one prediction is that low-SES workers will be more involved with their union than their high-SES counterparts.

Yet, although low-SES workers’ positive general union attitudes might encourage union participation, their actual participation may be hindered because they lack requisite resources required to engage in voluntary and unpaid union activities (Snape & Redman, 2004). According to resource mobilization theory (Klandermans, 1984; Oberschall, 1973), workers lacking time and/or financial resources will be less likely to participate in a movement without immediate returns for resource expenditures. This might suggest that low-SES workers will exhibit a weaker relationship between general union attitudes and union involvement than high-SES workers. Consistent with other resource-based theories of effort expenditures (Demerouti et al., 2001; Greenberg, 1987; Hobfoll, 1989), we hypothesized that (H3) SES would relate positively to union involvement and (H4) SES would moderate the relationship between general union attitudes and union involvement, such that general union attitudes would more strongly relate to union involvement in high-SES workers compared to low-SES workers.

Resource mobilization theory also suggests that lack of resources’ hindrance of involvement can be offset by (a) increasing the perceived benefits of collective action, and/or (b) strengthening an individual’s perceived influence of their own efforts on attaining said outcomes (Klandermans, 1984). Thus, low-SES workers with limited resources might be forced to adopt a more exchange-oriented decision-making process regarding union involvement. They may also be more reluctant to involve themselves in voluntary union activity if they are satisfied with their jobs (i.e., they do not perceive a resource imbalance) or if they do not believe their own efforts will make a difference in the outcome of union action. As such, we predicted that (H5a) SES would moderate the relationships between perceived union instrumentality, (H5b) perceived union support, (H5c) job satisfaction, and (H5d) perceived behavioral control and union involvement, such that they will more strongly relate to union involvement in low-SES workers compared to high-SES ones.
Method
Participants and Procedures

This project was approved by Southern Connecticut State University’s Institutional Review Board after expedited review. Participants provided electronic consent to participate after reading a short study description describing the study’s purposes and the types of questions they would answer.

Union workers (N = 120) from the United States were recruited in one of three ways: (a) via posters placed in various establishments and outdoor bulletin boards in the Northeast, (b) through local union leaders and/or employees who informed workers of the study via internal mailing lists after approving the survey, or (c) via posts on the social media site Reddit.com. All potential survey respondents viewed the same recruitment flyer, which invited them to take a 10-minute, online survey hosted on Qualtrics regarding their “opinions about [their] union, unions in general, and [their] job” for a chance to win one of 10 Amazon gift cards ($100.00 USD). Twenty-two participants were eliminated for completing an insufficient amount of the survey (between 4% and 38%). Per procedures of Tabachnick and Fidell (2013), an additional four participants were excluded for completing surveys in more than three standard deviations greater or less than the mean reading time, resulting in a final n of 94.

The sample was comprised mostly of men (60.6%, n = 57). Women accounted for 36.2% of the sample (n = 34), whereas three participants (3.2%) reported their gender as “other” or “prefer not to answer.” Most participants racially identified as White (81.9%, n = 77), with two identifying as Black (2.1%), two as Hispanic or Latino (2.1%), three as Asian or Pacific Islander (3.2%), and four as multiracial (4.3%). Six participants (6.4%) declined to report their race. All participants ranged in age from 21 to 80 years (M = 48.85, SD = 13.27). About 70% of participants reported their political affiliation with the Democratic Party (n = 58), with another 18.1% describing themselves as moderate or unaffiliated (n = 17), 8.5% identifying with the Republican Party (n = 8), and the remaining participants (11.7%; n = 11) declining to report their political affiliation. Most participants had either a graduate degree (45.7%, n = 43) or had no college degree (42.6%, n = 40), with an additional 10 participants (9.4%) reporting either an associate’s or bachelor’s degree as their highest level of education. One participant declined to report their education. Each survey respondent was asked to report their occupation’s industry. Most participants worked in higher education (44%, n = 41) or construction-related trades (31%, n = 29). An additional four participants (4.3%) reported working in other white-collar occupations, six (6.4%) in other blue-collar ones, and another four (4.3%) were either retired or gave no answer to the industry question. All participants had been members of their union for an average of 16.94 years (SD = 11.56), and the vast majority were full-time workers (84%, n = 79). As for SES, most participants reported being either middle class (57.5%, n = 46) or working class (35.0%, n = 28); fewer participants reported upper (5.0%, n = 4) and poor/underemployed (2.5%, n = 2) standing.

Measures

All bivariate correlations, descriptive statistics, and measure reliabilities are reported in Table 1. Most of the measures used in the present research were previously validated by the studies cited in their descriptions. A few were not formally validated, namely, the single-item measures of union involvement (Fiorito et al., 2014), political orientation (Waytz et al., 2016), and socioeconomic status (Mellor & Golay, 2016), as well as the perceived union support measure (Goeddeke & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2010). However, the sources from which they are taken detailed their creation and intended use to a satisfactory degree for use in the present research.

Union Involvement

Past research measured union involvement in one of two ways. Most research has respondents complete checklists of union activities they have performed (Fiorito et al., 2011; Goeddeke & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2010; Green & Auer, 2013; Kelloway & Barling, 1993; Kelly & Kelly, 1994; Parks et al., 1995; Snape & Redman, 2004; Tetrick et al., 2007). However, other studies use short, subjective measures asking participants to rate their perceptions of past involvement and/or intentions to become involved in the future (Fiorito et al., 2010; Fiorito et al., 2014; Kuruvilla & Fiorito, 1994; Sinclair & Tetrick, 1995). We elected to also include subjective measures for two reasons. First, due to the diversity of occupations we expected, we wanted to include a broad involvement measurement in case the checklist did not capture all of the union activities a worker could have performed. Second, the only prior study to assess perceived behavioral control’s relationship
to union involvement (Fiorito et al., 2014) took this approach, which allowed this study to confirm and extend those initial findings.

**Union Involvement Checklist.** Because of validation across industries, we used the Parks et al. (1995) checklist. Participants indicated their completion of union activities (score 1; noncompletion scored 0) on a 3-factor, 14-item checklist (Parks et al., 1995). Seven of the items assessed administrative involvement (e.g., serving as an elected union official), three items assessed engagement in informal, prounion activities (e.g., helping a new member learn about the union), and four items assessed intermittent, regularly occurring union activities (e.g., ratification of a new collective bargaining agreement). Because the validation of this measure examined sum scores representing each factor rather than a composite involvement score (Parks et al., 1995), we used the same scoring approach. We did not devise specific hypotheses for each factor due to a lack of prior evidence from which to draw on SES and union involvement.

**Subjective Union Involvement.** To assess subjective union involvement, we used two items from Fiorito et al. (2014) focused on perceptions of past union involvement (“Which of the following best describes your level of activity in your union during the past year?”) and future involvement intentions (“How interested would you be in volunteering to help your union in the next year?”). Participants responded on 4-point scales from 1 (not active at all) to 4 (very active) for past involvement and 1 (not interested) to 4 (very interested) for the future intentions. Higher scores indicated greater perceived involvement/interest.

**General Union Attitudes**

Eight items (e.g., “Unions are a positive force in this country”; McShane, 1986) assessed general union attitudes using a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher mean scores represent more positive attitudes toward unions generally.

**Perceived Union Instrumentality**

Ten items (e.g., “How good is your union at getting you better wages?”; Chacko, 1985) assessed perceived union instrumentality using a 4-point Likert-type scale from 1 (not at all good) to 4 (very good).

**Perceived Union Support**

A shortened version of the Perceived Organization Support measure (Eisenberger et al., 1986; shortened version previously validated by Goeddeke & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2010) assessed perceived union support. This measure features six items (e.g., “My union strongly considers my goals and values”) using a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher mean scores indicate greater perceived support from the union.

### TABLE 1

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<th>Measure</th>
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<td>1. General Union Attitudes</td>
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<td>2. Perceived Union Instrumentality</td>
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<td>3. Perceived Union Support</td>
<td>.68*</td>
<td>.80*</td>
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<td>4. Job Satisfaction</td>
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<td>.45*</td>
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<td>5. Perceived Behavioral Control</td>
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<td>6. Socioeconomic Status</td>
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<td>7. Subjective Past Involvement</td>
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<td>.41*</td>
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<td>8. Future Involvement Interest</td>
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<td>.30*</td>
<td>.29*</td>
<td>.36*</td>
<td>.41*</td>
<td>−.44*</td>
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<td>9. Administrative Activities</td>
<td>−.08</td>
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<td>−.06</td>
<td>−.24</td>
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<td>10. Supportive Activities</td>
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<td>.29*</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.33*</td>
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<td>11. Intermittent Activities</td>
<td>.08</td>
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<td>.15</td>
<td>−.06</td>
<td>.24*</td>
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<td>.39*</td>
<td>.65*</td>
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| M  | 4.61 | 3.22 | 4.04 | 4.31 | 3.55 | 3.64 | 2.59 | 2.54 | 2.19 | 2.18 | 2.78 |
| SD | 0.69 | 0.61 | 0.92 | 0.83 | 0.89 | 0.66 | 1.03 | 1.16 | 2.57 | 1.15 | 1.26 |

*Note: Numbers on the diagonal are scale reliabilities.

*p < .05; *p < .01."
**Job Satisfaction**

The Overall Job Satisfaction Scale (Cammann et al., 1983) features three items (e.g., “All in all, I am satisfied with my job”) scored using a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher mean scores indicating greater job satisfaction.

**Perceived Behavioral Control**

A 4-item measure of control appraisal (Parker et al., 2006) with anchors ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) assessed perceived control related to problems in the workplace (example statement: “In my job, most of the problems that I experience are completely ‘out of my hands.’”). All four items were reverse coded such that a higher score indicated more perceived control in the workplace.

**Demographic Information**

The demographic variables included questions about racial and gender identity, age, political orientation (Waytz et al., 2016), education level, industry in which they work, and tenure at the employer and the union. SES was assessed using a single-item, self-report measure (Mellor & Golay, 2016). Participants indicated their current SES as: poor (1), underemployed (2), working class (3), lower middle class, upper middle class (both 4), lower upper class, and upper class (both 5). A higher number indicates higher perceived SES.

**Analysis Approach**

We tested Hypotheses 1–3 using bivariate correlational analyses. Hypotheses 4 and 5 were tested using hierarchical linear regression. SES and the focal attitudinal antecedent (i.e., either general union attitudes, perceived union instrumentality, perceived union support, job satisfaction, or perceived behavioral control) were entered in Step 1, with their interaction term added in Step 2 to predict each measure of union involvement (subjective past involvement, future involvement interest, and the three union activity checklist factors). Results and discussion focus on significant variance increases due to the addition of the interaction term. Where such increases were found, simple slopes analyses at ± 1 SD determined the nature of the moderation. Due to a limited sample size, we refrained from including control variables in the analyses. Additionally, as we conducted several regression-based tests with numerous predictors, we sought to avoid increases in Type I error by using the Bonferroni correction to adjust alpha. We calculated this correction in two ways: (a) based on the overall number of regression predictors and interaction terms (eight; adjusted \( p = .007 \)), and (b) based on the total number of regression models analyzed (20; adjusted \( p = .003 \)). As such, to take the most conservative approach, we only interpreted regression models as significant when \( p < .003 \).

Although the final \( n \) of the sample was 94, missing data resulted in smaller ns in analyses of SES (\( n = 80 \)). For variables in which less than 5% of responses were missing, missing data were replaced using the series mean per procedures recommended by Tabachnick and Fidell (2013). The same approach was taken for one item in the perceived union instrumentality scale (“How good is your union at making your job more interesting?”) although 12% of the data was missing. Because this was the only scale item with greater than 5% missing data, and reliability was minimally impacted, replacing with the series mean allowed us to maintain consistency with data cleaning procedures used for other scales.

**Results**

**Hypotheses 1–3: Correlation Tests**

Simple correlation analyses partially supported H1a. General union attitudes significantly positively correlated with subjective past involvement, \( r(94) = .21, p = .04 \), future involvement interest, \( r(94) = .28, p = .006 \), and supportive activities, \( r(94) = .23, p = .03 \).

Analyses partially supported H1b. Perceived union instrumentality significantly positively correlated with subjective past involvement, \( r(94) = .45, p < .001 \), future involvement interest, \( r(94) = .28, p = .006 \), and supportive activities, \( r = .23, p = .03 \).

Perceived union support significantly positively correlated with subjective past involvement, \( r(94) = .31, p = .002 \), future involvement interest, \( r(94) = .36, p < .001 \), and supportive activities, \( r(94) = .29, p = .01 \), which partially supports H1c.

H1d was fully supported. Perceived behavioral control significantly positively correlated with subjective past involvement, \( r(94) = .41, p < .001 \), future involvement interest, \( r(94) = .41, p < .001 \), administrative activities, \( r(94) = .22, p = .03 \), supportive activities, \( r(94) = .33, p = .001 \), and intermittent activities, \( r(94) = .24, p = .02 \).

Hypothesis 2 was partially supported. Job satisfaction significantly negatively correlated only with administrative activities, \( r(94) = -.24, p = .02 \).
Support was not found for Hypothesis 3 because, although significant correlations were observed between SES and union participation, they were in the opposite direction of that hypothesized. Higher SES associated with less subjective past involvement, \( r(80) = -.39, p < .001 \), future involvement interest, \( r(80) = -1.44, p < .001 \), and supportive activities, \( r(80) = -.22, p = .05 \).

**Hierarchical Linear Regression Analyses**

As previously specified, our focus for these results is on significant variance increases due to the addition of an interaction term. Interested readers may refer to our online supplementary materials (https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/UGQRS), which contain full model statistics. Due to multicollinearity of perceived union instrumentality and support, \( r(94) = .80 \), Hypothesis 5a was not tested.

**Hypothesis 4**

Significant interactions were found between SES and general union attitudes on the two subjective union involvement measures.

**Subjective Past Involvement.** Results showed main effects for SES, \( b = -.80, t = -4.28, p < .001 \), \( CI_{95\%} [-1.18, -1.43] \), but not general union attitudes, \( b = -.06, t = -2.4, p = .01, CI_{95\%} [-0.53, 0.42] \). However, the significant interaction, \( b = 1.15, t(79) = 2.44, p = .02, CI_{95\%} [0.11, 1.38] \), qualified these effects, \( \Delta R^2 = .06, F(3, 76) = 7.50, p < .001 \). Consistent with our hypothesis, simple slopes analysis found a positive relationship between union attitudes and subjective past involvement among high-SES workers, \( b = .70, t = 2.57, p = .01, CI_{95\%} [0.16, 1.25] \), but a nonsignificant relationship for low-SES ones, \( b = -.81, t = -1.69, p = .10, CI_{95\%} [-1.77, 0.15] \). Figure 1 visually documents the interaction.

**Future involvement interest.** Results showed main effects for SES, \( b = -.97, t = -4.49, p < .001 \), \( CI_{95\%} [-1.49, -1.04] \), but not general union attitudes, \( b = 0.06, t = 2.22, p = .03, CI_{95\%} [-0.49, 0.61] \), on future involvement interest. However, the significant interaction, \( b = 1.08, t(79) = 1.99, p = .05, CI_{95\%} [0.00, 2.16] \), qualified these effects, \( \Delta R^2 = .04, F(3, 76) = 8.78, p < .001 \). Consistent with our hypothesis, simple slopes analysis found a positive relationship between general union attitudes and future involvement interest among high-SES workers, \( b = 0.77, t = 2.45, p = .02, CI_{95\%} [0.15, 1.40] \), but a nonsignificant relationship among low-SES workers, \( b = -.06, t = -1.18, p = .24, CI_{95\%} [-1.76, 0.45] \). Figure 2 visually documents the interaction.

**Hypothesis 5b-d**

No significant interactions between SES and any of the focal antecedents of this hypothesis (i.e., perceived union support, job satisfaction, perceived behavioral control) were observed, which fails to provide support for Hypothesis 5. Although we did observe significant main effects, the focus of these hypothesis tests was specifically on increases in variance explained due to the addition of the interaction term. Therefore, we do not elaborate on these results (see Table 2 for Hypothesis 5’s regression coefficients for models in which significant main effects were observed). For full model statistics, please see the online supplementary material for this study.

**Post-Hoc Power Analyses**

Given a limited sample size for this study, we conducted post-hoc power analyses using G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2007). Power is equal to one minus \( \beta \), the chance of Type II error. Analyses returning a 1 - \( \beta \) of .80 or higher are adequately powered (Cohen, 1988; Royall, 1997). As noted in the
Regression Models for Union Involvement Antecedents and SES (Statistically Significant Models Only)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Outcome Variable</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>CI</th>
<th>ΔR²</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1.21</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2.44</td>
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<td>2.09</td>
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<tr>
<td>Full model: F(3, 76) = 7.50, p &lt; .001, R² = .23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Future Involvement Interest</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>-1.10</td>
<td>-0.37</td>
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</tr>
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<tr>
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<td>0.00</td>
<td>2.16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Full model: F(3, 76) = 8.78, p &lt; .001, R² = .26</td>
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<td>0.06</td>
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<td>-0.87</td>
<td>-0.25</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Subjective Past Involvement</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: SES = socioeconomic status. For all models, df = 79; table continued on the next page.

Discussion

Implications for Theory and Future Research

Our first set of hypotheses sought to confirm relationships between union involvement and several antecedents (i.e., general union attitudes, perceived union instrumentality, perceived union support, job satisfaction, perceived behavioral control); these hypotheses were partially supported. Stronger general union attitudes, perceived instrumentality of the union, perceived union support, and perceived behavioral control all associated powered to detect a medium or larger magnitude effect (effect size estimate = .30 [medium effect per Cohen, 1988], error probability = .05, sample size = 94). The results indicated that the power for our correlation analyses was .84 (lower/upper critical r = ± .20), which exceeds the .80 standard. This result suggests that these analyses achieved adequate power thresholds to detect a significant bivariate relationship of moderate or stronger magnitude.

To determine whether our regression analyses were adequately powered, we conducted two power analyses. The first examined the power concerning the omnibus test, that is to declare an overall regression model significant given a medium or larger effect (effect size estimate = .15 [medium effect per Cohen, 1988], error probability = .05, sample size = 80, number of predictors = 3 [2 independent variables and their interaction term]). The results showed this study’s power as .82, which exceeds the minimum .80 threshold and suggests this work was adequately powered to identify significant model variance deviations from zero of moderate or stronger magnitude. We next examined this study’s power for detecting a significant moderate or stronger increase in variance explained with the addition of the interaction term (effect size estimate = .15 [medium effect per Cohen, 1988], error probability = .05, sample size = 80, number of tested predictors = 2 [the independent variables], total number of predictors = 3 [independent variables plus the interaction term]). These results (power = .87) also suggested that this work was adequately powered to identify a significant increase in variance explained by interaction term. Given the results of these post-hoc power analyses, the present findings appear adequately powered. However, nonsignificant effects should be interpreted with the caveat that smaller effects may be present, which this research was not adequately powered to detect.
with stronger subjective perceptions of past union activity involvement and future involvement interest. Consistent with our prediction, job satisfaction negatively correlated with subjective union involvement and future involvement interest. We observed consistent results when analyzing those variables’ relationship with the more objective checklist measure of union activities.

Interestingly, and confirming Fiorito et al. (2014), perceived behavioral control displayed the strongest relationships to all involvement measures. However, extending that work, the present data failed to identify SES as a moderating influence, suggesting that perceived behavioral control transcends SES and resource access perceptions. At a minimum, this result also suggests that future research examining predictors of union involvement consider statistically controlling for perceived behavioral control. This finding may additionally suggest that future research consider whether union involvement antecedents additively (rather than multiplicatively) contribute to predicting union involvement.

Also of importance, our results were opposite of our predictions concerning the influence of SES on union involvement. Low-SES members reported more current and future involvement interest compared to high-SES individuals. As noted previously, there were two possible predictions concerning union involvement and SES. The first was that low-SES individuals would exhibit more involvement as they also tend to hold more positive general union attitudes (Cornfield & Kim, 1994; Kerrissey & Schofer, 2013; Mellor, 2016; Mellor & Golay, 2016), which, per the exchange-covenant model ( Snape & Redman, 2004), should lead to more union involvement. On the other hand, resource mobilization theory suggests that low-SES individuals who expend less effort toward union activities relative to high-SES individuals unless they perceive immediate benefit or a high level of personal control to influence outcomes (Klandermans, 1984). As other resource-based theories (e.g., Demerouti et al., 2002) suggest that, when resources are limited (such as they are for low-SES workers), effort from discretionary tasks should be reduced, this finding stands in contradiction to predictions originating from that work. As such, typical resource-based theories of motivation may not equally apply to the union setting. However, these results are consistent with Kerrissey and Schofer’s (2013) assertion that unions tend to align themselves with low-SES priorities and modes of thought rather than high-SES ones.

Perhaps our observation that low SES correlates with greater union involvement results from the lack of a strong social safety net in the United States (Shaefer & Edin, 2018). Only one study, relying on a Canadian sample, reported that higher income positively related to greater union involvement (Parks et al., 1995). The disparity between those findings and the present results may be due to societal and political differences between Canada and the United States (e.g., Moon et al., 2000). Within the United States, unions may be one of the only resources for job improvement and other supportive functions available to low-SES individuals, whereas high-SES individuals likely have more alternatives. This finding contributes to the current literature by indicating that union research may not generalize geographically. As such, cross-cultural research examining differences and similarities in the antecedents of union involvement are warranted. Such findings might even be instrumental in improving union participation in the United States by adopting effective or avoiding less effective methods, policies, and practices utilized globally.

Although our expectations of reduced involvement in low-SES workers were errant, we did find support for our prediction that the relationship between union attitudes and union involvement...
would be weaker for low-SES than high-SES participants. Even though this antecedent has been dubbed the most important predictor of union involvement (e.g., Bamberger et al., 1999; Snape & Redman, 2004), our findings suggest that this may only be the case for high-SES workers. In their low-SES counterparts, perceptions of past and future involvement interest were unrelated to general union attitudes. These results also inform the current literature as they suggest that the exchange-covenant model (Snape & Redman, 2004) may only apply to higher-SES workers. Because our results indicate that low-SES workers are more involved with union activities overall, this involvement does not seem to result from perceptions of low-SES strengthening the relationship between general union attitudes and union involvement.

Consistent with resource mobilization theory, general attitudes toward unions do not seem to drive union involvement for low-SES workers as there was no observed relationship between those variables at low-SES levels. Additionally, SES did not moderate the relationship between involvement and either perceived behavioral control or perceived union support. Those latter variables each exhibited significant main effects, suggesting that they uniquely increased union involvement; they just did not interact with SES. Thus, the finding that low-SES participants are more involved with their unions than high-SES participants may be explained by perceived behavioral control or perceived union support. However, this cross-sectional research is not amenable to testing mediated pathways, and thus future experimental or longitudinal work examining the causal pathway(s) between union involvement and associated antecedents is warranted. Such work will help foster understanding of which variables directly link the antecedents to union involvement—information instrumental for facilitating interventions to increase union members’ participation in union activities. The present study also contributed to the current literature by providing foundational information upon which to build that future research.

**Practical Applications**

Based on this work, unions looking to encourage worker involvement in voluntary activities should heed two takeaways. First, regardless of SES, perceived behavioral control was the strongest predictor of involvement in this study. Although only correlational, this result is consistent with longitudinal data gathered by Fioritto et al. (2014) and with work on resource mobilization theory (Klandermans, 1984). Secondly, in this research, general union attitudes related to involvement in high-SES workers to a greater degree than low-SES ones. This result suggests an involvement profile for low-SES members that does not seem to quite fit the dynamic established by past involvement models (e.g., Newton & Shore, 1992; Snape & Redman, 2004). Although low-SES workers like unions more than their high-SES counterparts (Cornfield & Kim, 1994; Kerrissey & Schofer, 2013; Mellor, 2016; Mellor & Golay, 2016) and were found in the present research to be more involved, their involvement seems based more on resource exchange than their attitudes toward unions in general, even though prior models implied that general union attitudes are key. Perhaps these prior models found resource exchange to be a weaker predictor because the high-SES workers comprising most of their samples did not need to prioritize the union’s activities the way low-SES workers do.

For unions attempting to maximize involvement, these results may suggest a dual-pronged approach. For low-SES union members, union leadership may find benefit in attempting to increase perceptions of personal behavioral control (e.g., providing a newsletter identifying how individual members have contributed to the union) or by acting in a manner that will heighten perceptions of union support (e.g., making frequent contact to determine if union members’ needs/concerns are properly addressed). This suggestion is consistent with both past research (e.g., Tetrick et al., 2007) and the results reported here. Yet, to facilitate the participation of high-SES union members, the results of this work suggest that union leadership may benefit from providing materials and information (e.g., brochures concerning why unions are valuable across industries) that could help to improve general union attitudes. Still, future work should replicate these findings before unions tailor involvement-increasing interventions to the socioeconomic makeup of their membership.

**Limitations and Additional Future Directions**

The limited sample size of this study reflects a historically strained relationship between industrial/organizational psychology and organized labor (Zickar, 2004). Nonetheless, this real-world sample provided a diverse pool of workers from which to draw our conclusions. Moreover, post-hoc power analyses suggested that this work had adequate power to detect a medium or larger magnitude effect in the data. This provides some confidence concerning the adequacy of this sample for drawing
conclusions from the reported results. However, null results should be interpreted with caution because this sample was not large enough to provide the statistical power to detect smaller effects. As such, future work should incorporate larger sample sizes to confirm the current findings. The possibility does remain that SES might moderate relationships between some of the antecedents (i.e., perceived behavioral control, perceived union support, job satisfaction) but at a magnitude too small to detect with the reported samples. Future research with larger samples would be useful to confirm or disconfirm that possibility.

The number of regression models run (i.e., 20) is high for a study of this sample size. Yet, such methods are warranted by the lack of prior research on SES’s influence on union involvement. To avoid inflated Type I error probability, we calculated two corrections to critical alpha and adopted the more stringent. This conservative approach provides further confidence that the reported results are not due to repeated testing. The reported relationships demonstrate that even one’s perceived socioeconomic standing may influence their primary union involvement motivators. The results of this research highlight a potential need for the alteration of those models or the creation of different union membership models that account for socioeconomic levels, if not different job classes or industries.

**Conclusion**

Based on recent polling data, public opinion of labor unions is at its most positive levels in around 50 years (Jones, 2019). The current political climate is thus friendlier to unions than at any other time in recent memory. Unions desiring to benefit from this positive sentiment to facilitate increased growth and relevance would be wise to examine the attitudinal antecedents of worker involvement in unpaid, union-based activities, especially given the integral function of these activities to the health of a union (e.g., Tetrick et al., 2007). Our study may contribute to future union growth by highlighting a possible lack of generalizability of the exchange-covenant model of union membership (Snape & Redman, 2004), which holds that general attitudes about unions are the most reliable predictor of worker involvement in labor unions. Although this was indeed the case in high-SES workers, the same could not be said of low-SES ones. Acknowledging these SES-based differences in union involvement and working to fully uncover them in future work will aid the mission of organized labor.

**References**


SES and Labor Union Involvement | McEachern and Budnick

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Peter J. McEachern is now a master’s degree candidate at the Department of Psychology, George Mason University. We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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