



## **Becoming a union leader: the path to local office**

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Although there are many commonly held notions about why and how people become union officers, there is little empirical information about the process of becoming one, particularly at the local level. Much of what is known about local union officers comes from studies done in the 1950's and early 1960's. Although these studies focused on analyzing the functions or operations of local unions, they do provide information on their leadership.<sup>1</sup>

Based on prior research, there has been some preliminary theoretical work on the process of officer selection. However, the results have been used primarily to explain why women are underrepresented in union office, rather than to provide information on who becomes a union officer, and why and how they become one.<sup>2</sup> This paper examines more general hypotheses about the officer selection process suggested by earlier studies.

### **Selecting an officer**

We assume that the decisions of both union members, including officers, and candidates are important in the leadership selection process, and that perceptions of members and candidates are an essential part of the decisionmaking. The significance of member perceptions and candidate self-evaluations in officer selection is that people act upon what they believe to be true, rather than reality itself.<sup>3</sup>

Both members, including officers, and candidates compare candidates' perceived qualifications to requirements of office. If members perceive that a candidate meets the latter, he or she can become an officer. How-

ever, if the candidate is viewed as unqualified, the candidate cannot attain office. Similarly, people do not run for office unless they think of themselves as qualified and acceptable to other members and officers, and believe the rewards of office will meet their needs.

Drawing from earlier research on union leadership, our study was designed to test several hypotheses. Two closely related ones are first, that time as a union member, and particularly that spent as an officer, results in members and candidates seeing a candidate as being sufficiently experienced to hold higher office; and second, that experience in lower office is seen as an important qualification for higher office, and may even be a prerequisite for holding top local positions.

Self-perceptions of readiness for office are likely to be enhanced by time with the union and prior experience in its administration. These will also be affected by indications from members and current officers that they perceive the candidates as qualified for office. Finally, willingness to take office requires that candidates see the rewards of office as meaningful.

### **Methodology used**

The data used to analyze these hypotheses are from a study of the administration and structure of eight large local unions, varying in size from 1,500 to 12,000 members, in three Eastern States. Three of these locals are in the public sector and five are in the private sector. Service, professional, and industrial unions are included. In-depth interviews with each local's top officers (presidents, vice presidents, secretary-treasurers, and executive board members) were included as part of a sophisticated case study. Interviews were conducted by two-person interdisciplinary teams, each consisting of an industrial relations specialist and an organizational behavior specialist. The team approach was used to check interrater reliability and reduce probability of disciplinary-based selective perception. The results provide a rich source of qualitative and quantitative information about union leadership and administration.

### **Who were the respondents?**

Thirty-eight elected union officers were interviewed and placed in one of two categories. The first consists

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primarily of local presidents; however, in two locals an elected manager or director had the major administrative responsibility and was included in this category. It contains a total of 10 officers—8 white men, 1 black man, and 1 white woman.

The second category has 28 people, including vice presidents, secretary-treasurers, and other executive board members. It is made up of 17 whites, 10 blacks, and 1 Hispanic. There are 23 men and 5 women in this group.

### **Prior union administrative experience**

As mentioned earlier, prior union involvement and administrative experience was hypothesized to be a prerequisite for election to top local leadership. Of the presidents responding to the question about number of previous positions, all had held some with the union prior to their current job. Six had held three previous positions; three had held two; and none had held fewer than two. The mean number of positions held beforehand was 2.66.

The respondents in the vice president category had somewhat less experience, but their responses followed a similar pattern. Three had three previous positions, eight had had two, 14 had had one, and two officers reported that their current position was their first in union administration. The mean number of prior offices was 1.44.

These responses indicate that union presidents and vice presidents usually have prior union experience before being elected to their current office, and that presidents have somewhat more experience in prior office than do vice presidents.

The respondents' prior union experience shows presidents to have spent an average of 17 years in the local, compared with 15 years for vice presidents. The presidents had spent about 15 years in administrative positions, including their current positions. This indicates that most of the presidents began their path to office relatively soon after joining a union.

The vice presidents had been members of the local an average of 15 years. They had spent an average of 9.3 years as a union officer, and 3.9 years in their current positions. This suggests that although presidents appear to become active in union administration sooner than vice presidents, involvement for both groups actually begins within 5 years of their initial membership.

The first union administrative position for most officers was shop steward (6 of 9 presidents and 22 of 27 vice presidents). Most officers who did not start as steward began with less responsible positions, such as that of trustee. In only a few cases did they have as their first position an office more responsible than shop steward. Generally, these officers had been charter

members of the local, and had begun in executive board or similar positions.

In six instances, officers had begun their union careers in other locals, which subsequently merged with their current organizations, and continued in administration after the mergers. None showed a pattern of changing locals in a quest for higher administrative office.

Most officers interviewed had progressed steadily to positions of increased responsibility in the union (all presidents and 22 of 28 vice presidents). Practically none had breaks in their careers as union officers. Many reasons could be suggested for this finding; however, a pattern appears clear. People who achieve the highest elected positions in union office begin their careers early in their union tenure at entry level positions (most often shop steward) and usually have uninterrupted careers as they progress to more responsible positions. One of the implications of this finding is that when there are election challenges to incumbent leaders, they do not come from members outside the leadership hierarchy but from people already in the established network. This reinforces the idea that experience is a major variable influencing how potential candidates for office are perceived by themselves and others. It is also consistent with the explanation for the paucity of women in union office, which suggests that interrupted work careers inhibit advancement to other positions.<sup>4</sup>

### **Member and officer perceptions**

One of the assumptions mentioned earlier in describing the selection of union officers is that perceptions of officers, members, and candidates are an important part of the decisionmaking process. Participants' responses as to why they became union officers are supportive of this idea. Five of the respondents in the president category were asked either by officers or union members to run for office. Similarly, 20 of 26 respondents in the vice president category reported originally running for office at the urging of either officers or members. This is consistent with the hypothesis that members and candidates both must see a candidate's qualifications for office as congruent with the demands of office. It also suggests that an important element influencing candidates' self-evaluations is the communication to them of the positive perceptions of members or officers.

### **Candidates' self-perceptions**

In addition to the encouraging feedback from officers and other members, the union officials interviewed initially had positive self-perceptions of their ability to handle the responsibilities of union office. Eight of ten presidents indicated that they originally ran for office because they thought they had something to contribute

to the union. Eighteen of twenty-six vice presidents also gave this reason. Their responses included comments such as, "I can deal with people," "I thought I could do a good job," and "I was as good as anyone else."

### Rewards of office

Another factor assumed to influence the decision to become an officer is the candidate's perception of the rewards of office. Sayles and Strauss have identified six general rewards of union office: a sense of achievement or self-fulfillment, an outlet for aggression, an intellectual outlet, relief from monotonous jobs, opportunity to gain prestige of status, and a social outlet.<sup>5</sup> The officers interviewed identified as most important three of these rewards, which are closely related: self-fulfillment, intellectual outlet, and relief from monotonous jobs. Many officers, 31 of 37, saw union office as an opportunity for self-fulfillment or growth that could not be gotten from their jobs. Typical responses were, "I wanted to do something more than ring a bell everyday," "I wanted control over my own destiny," and "I wanted to do something meaningful."

In contrast, the other rewards of office were mentioned much less frequently. Only three officers indicated prestige as a reason for being a union officer; five gave desire for power as a motivating factor; and none mentioned either desire for an outlet for aggression or social opportunities.

Thus, the interviews show the importance of personal growth and fulfillment in causing people to want to hold office. The form that fulfillment takes varies according to individuals, as indicated by such statements

as, "I like the freedom it brings me," to, "I wanted to show that black people were people, too." However, the significance of this growth is a theme that was apparent in nearly every interview.

Commitment to unionization, while not really a reward of office, was another common theme. Thirty of thirty-seven officers gave it as a reason for either entering or continuing to hold union office. Although this indicates idealism, the commitment was often expressed in very practical terms. A typical comment was, "Because of the way management is here, we needed a good union." However, belief in unionism, as well as desire for personal growth, was important in the decision to be a union officer.

ALTHOUGH THIS PAPER is based on a limited number of observations, the officers interviewed come from a variety of occupations and their responses show consistency. The pattern indicates that people who eventually become union officers become active in union administration early in their tenure with the union. Once having become active, officers remained involved in administration. They progressed up the administrative hierarchy, reaching top level office only after experience in other positions. In general, they are people who believe unions have a meaningful function to perform in our society, and see themselves as benefiting from the opportunity for personal growth provided by holding office. Important motivators encouraging them to be active are: urging by members and officers, self-perceptions, the desire for personal growth, and a commitment to unionization. □

### — FOOTNOTES —

<sup>1</sup> Leonard R. Sayles and George Strauss, *The Local Union* (New York, Harcourt, Brace and World, 1953); Jack Barbash, *Labor's Grass Roots* (New York, Harper & Row Publishers, 1961); and Raymond Miles and J. B. Ritchie, "Leadership Attitudes among Union Officials," *Industrial Relations*, October 1968, pp. 108-17.

<sup>2</sup> Karen S. Koziara and David A. Pierson, "Barriers to Women Becoming Union Leaders," *Industrial Relations Research Association 33rd*

*Annual Proceedings*, 1980, pp. 48-54.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Fritz Heider, *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations* (New York, John Wiley & Sons, 1958), pp. 20-78.

<sup>4</sup> Alice H. Cook, "Women and American Trade Unions," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, January 1968, pp. 123-32.

<sup>5</sup> Sayles and Strauss, *The Local Union*, pp. 64-65.