

Comments on “Narrow Gauge Politics: Railway Labor, Parties, Race, and the State” - Daniel Schlozman

Daniel,

This is a fascinating story with rich detail about the interaction of race, unions, and policy. Most of my comments are requesting more of the same to satisfy curiosities you have sparked. The rest of my comments have to do with argument clarity.

From your introduction, I take your argument as follows:

1. La Follette’s 1924 progressive insurgence provided unique conditions that led Rail Unions to engage in mass politics because they (a) had material interests at stake, and (b) no cross-cutting pressures. The material interests are threats to labor’s institutional power and the cross-cutting pressures are racial politics.
2. The Railway Labor Act regime was durable because of a closed iron-triangle-like system with a sub government sustained by a geographically dispersed membership of local elites and a captured agency. Rail unions were uniquely hardened and unified due to heavy federal involvement in earlier strikes. Furthermore, after the failure of the La Follette labor coalition, they abandon the broad labor coalition’s efforts to re-make political economy and negotiated directly with the roads—Congress rubber-stamping an agreement made out of union’s and road’s private interests (this last bit comes more from page 16-18, than the introduction).
3. Rail unions would have been targeted and weakened by Taft-Hartley had they not been racially exclusionary and thus unassociated with the TWUA.

The bulk of the paper seems to focus on the second argument, especially the historically-contingent nature of these uniquely-stable relationships. The period of federal control during WWI and shortly after seems critical to connecting the first and second arguments and may deserve more attention in the introduction. In general, I am curious to hear more about the third argument. How exactly did the law enforce white supremacy? How did union constitutions (page 32)? Why is it relevant that policy reified craft-based hierarchies among rail workers? Page 15 seems to present a broader version of your third argument—that the labor policy regime for rail works differs because it formed before labor and race merged in American politics.

### **Specific notes:**

On the bottom of page 8 and top of 9, you say that “The state cultivated conservative unionism” via a distinctive legal regime—is this legal regime referring to the Railway Labor Act or the heavy handed strike-breaking authorized under the commerce clause? I was confused by this subsection and am not sure exactly how this leads to conservative unionism. Several times, I was confused about the extent to which rail unions were conservative, radical, or divided between the two (e.g. page 26).

Your discussion of policy feedback effects and the importance of the historical sequence of labor organizing and policy on page 11 is very interesting, but I am not clear on how it relates to the arguments in the introduction, which seem more static. It seems most related to your second argument—essentially how the regime developed. This suggests an expansion on the argument as introduced that it is not just about the nature of the support for the system, but how it developed. I would suggest framing the second argument in more historical-institutionalist terms from the beginning since so much of the paper is about the historically-contingent nature of this arrangement.

On the top of page 12, you note that without rules against discrimination, McAdoo’s orders had the effect of pushing African-Americans out of jobs—what is the mechanism here. Why were they able to hold those jobs before the orders and what about the new regime enabled whites to push them out? Similar to my note above, this observation might expanding your third argument. It is not simply that unions were exclusionary and this allowed them to escape Taft-Hartley, but that previous government decisions (rooted in their federal scope and early history of organizing?) made them that way. You also note that if the Plumb Plan had succeeded, they would have had to admit black workers. Is this really “ironic” or just reflecting that material interest was more important than racial bias (or even driving racial bias?).

I would be interested to hear more about the logic behind the unions desire for governmental and popular control rather than simply labor protections. Did they think it would advantage them in negotiations, make protections more permanent, or reduce costly competition among unions? Why did the operating brotherhoods have less invested in the Plumb Plan (page 14)?

McAdoo’s role in the Democratic Party seems key to understanding the union allegiances with him versus La Follette, but the discussion of page 14 gives an

unfulfilling fast of these political tensions.

I am not clear on what is bizarre about the situation describe on page 18.

Did the gap in time between the RLA and the 1934 amendments have any significant effects—I am not clear what the comparison of the original and amended RLA on pages 21-23 is doing for the argument.

On the bottom of page 24, you conclude that “the railway labor subgovernment proved stronger than the most divisive fault lines in national politics.” I took your argument to be different—that railway labor politics avoided racial politics (as you say on 26 “Cocooned inside the Railway Labor Act”).

**Style notes:**

The flow of the introduction could be improved.

The injunction (injunctions?) is mentioned several times in the introduction and at the bottom of page 12 without explanation until later in the paper. In general, the role of injunctions is alluded to but not described. There are several other references in the paper that I hoped to understand. For example, on page 14 you mention the Teapot Dome. Conversely, I wonder if some names, titles, and details could be footnoted and the text could focus more on their political role and relevance to the arguments.

Best,  
Devin