



WORKSHOP  
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## The Political Strategy of Unions: Strikes during U.S. Presidential Elections

André Frank  
(Universität Hamburg)

### Abstract

Political science research suggests that strikes can mobilize and politicize voters, raising the possibility that unions strategically escalate strikes during electoral campaigns. Yet using a difference-in-differences design, I first show that strike incidence in the weeks preceding presidential election day in the United States is systematically lower in election years than in comparable weeks of non-election, non-midterm years. This contradicts the common view of unions as disruptive actors who escalate conflict before elections. Motivated by this puzzle, I examine how U.S. strike activity responds to changing electoral expectations within presidential election cycles between 2004 and 2020. Using weekly strike incidence as the outcome and polling shocks as political signals, I find that pro-Democratic poll shocks increase strike activity when the race and election day is close, but have significant pacifying effects when the election is distant. The results indicate that unions strategically adjust strike activity in line with shifting electoral prospects in ways to mobilize momentum that are more complex than suggested by the aggregate election-cycle comparison alone.