Policy Change, Race, and Employment Tenure in the NFL

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In sport, organizational fields are often defined as industry exchange fields (Zietsma et al., 2017) as teams comprising a given league are structured similarly while directly competing for human resources and ultimately, performance outcomes (Juravich & Mills, 2017). Here, the manner by which individual organizations respond to macro-level policy changes (i.e., exogenous shocks) can influence subsequent decision making related to human resources (Hoffman & Ocasio, 2001). As the impact of policy change on labor market diversity is a topic of substantial interest in the sport management literature, we examine race as a driver of head coach employment tenure in the National Football League (NFL) as a consequence of the Rooney Rule. Initiated in 2003, the Rooney Rule required franchises to interview at least one minority candidate for any vacant head coaching position. Extant research is mixed with respect to whether the Rooney Rule has increased minority hiring (Solow et al., 2010; DuBois, 2015). We extend the investigation to employment tenure.

Our data set is comprised of all permanent NFL head coaching hires from 1985 to 2017 (208 observations). We estimate employment spell length using ordinary least squares. Our dependent variable is the number of regular season games coached by a head coach during a single employment spell. We log this value to avoid violating the assumption of normally distributed residuals. We also specify robust standard errors.

Right-hand side performance variables include the regular season winning percentage of the head coach during his tenure and an indicator identifying whether the head coach was fired or resigned. Employment variables capture the previous experience possessed by the head coach when entering the employment spell. We account for the number of years of experience as a head coach, coordinator, and assistant at the NFL and collegiate levels. Personal characteristics include age, race, quality of educational background, degree of experience as a player and quality of performance as a player at the NFL level. Team characteristics include the normalized player payroll for the franchise over the period of the employment spell, franchise market tenure and the short-term winning percentage of the franchise prior to the employment spell. Market characteristics include the median household income and percentage of black residents in the metropolitan statistical area of the franchise. Lastly, an indicator identifying that the Rooney Rule was in place is included.

Results indicate no statistically significant difference in employment tenure between Black and non-Black head coaches. The results suggest winning drives employment length as a one standard deviation increase in spell winning percentage (0.1472) is equivalent to a 149% increase (~ 100 games) in spell duration. We estimate an additional model to test whether poor performing Black coaches are fired sooner than their non-Black counterparts. No statistically significant between-race differences are found. For robustness, we re-estimate all models using a Cox proportional hazards regression and find equivalent results. These findings are in agreement with research investigating head coach employment tenure in college football (Holmes, 2010) and the National Basketball Association (Kahn, 2010).