

Organising the Unorganised: Challenges and Opportunities for Rideshare Drivers' Organisations

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the differences in organisational outcomes among rideshare drivers' organisations in the United States — particularly their varying success in improving working conditions — by examining their internal structures, organisational resources, strategies and obstacles. It further explores how the broader political and economic environment shapes variation in rideshare drivers' working conditions across the United States. While formal organisations have enabled more active collective actions and improved working conditions for drivers, the differences in drivers' conditions across states underscore the critical impact of regulatory frameworks. Additionally, the analysis reveals little variation in organisational structures but highlights how external actors can shape strategic choices, in some cases narrowing organisational agendas.

KEYWORDS

platform workers, rideshare drivers' organisation, United States, organisational structures, regulations

Introduction

Over the last decade, the expansion of the gig economy and digital platforms has created a new category of employment commonly referred to as 'platform work'. Platform workers are individuals whose labour is "provided through, on, or mediated by online platforms in a wide range of sectors, where work can take various forms and is exchanged for payment" (Kilhoffer et al., 2019: 9). Notable examples of such platforms include Uber, TaskRabbit and Amazon Mechanical Turk.

As platform workers navigate precarious working conditions, such as low pay, job insecurity and exclusion from basic labour rights, they increasingly turn to collective action to address these disadvantages (Bessa et al., 2022; Wood et al., 2023). However, the effectiveness of their mobilisation efforts varies widely across regions and sectors (Vandaele, 2021; Umney et al., 2023; Joyce et al., 2023), making it essential to understand the different factors that may drive this variation.

One analytically useful case is the United States, where the conditions of rideshare drivers differ sharply between states despite operating within a shared platform model and a variety of subnational regulatory frameworks, making it possible to examine why some organisations are more successful than others. For example, although drivers in both California and Washington State are classified as independent contractors, those in California remain excluded from most employee-based benefits, while Washington offers considerably stronger protections, including the highest statewide pay floor in the United States, legal safeguards against deactivation as well as

access to paid sick leave, unemployment insurance and family medical leave (Washington State Legislature, 2022).

To understand these differences, this article examines two complementary explanations that can account for them: the internal structures and strategies of driver organisations, and the regulatory environments in which they operate. The first explanation draws on an organisational lens. Organisational theory emphasises that internal features, such as membership models, leadership arrangements, decision-making processes, rule enforcement and systems of monitoring or sanctioning member behaviour, shape an organisation's capacity to sustain collective action and negotiate with companies, thereby enabling improvements in working conditions (Den Hond et al., 2015; Diani, 2013). The second explanation focuses on the regulatory environments that influence rideshare drivers' working conditions and shape the opportunities available for collective action. State-level variation in regulatory approaches, worker classification rules, collective bargaining rights and enforcement capacity creates uneven terrains of possibility for organising. These conditions shape not only how driver organisations operate, but also which strategies are viable and what outcomes are achievable (Tarrow, 2022; Della Porta et al., 2022).

This article asks how internal organisational dynamics and institutional and regulatory contexts interact to shape variation in mobilisation outcomes among rideshare drivers' organisations. By bringing these two perspectives together, it examines why some organisations are more successful than others in improving working conditions. In doing so, the study contributes to a growing body of literature on how platform workers mobilise (Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020; Atzeni and Cini, 2023; Chesta et al., 2019). It seeks to determine whether new forms of work are giving rise to new forms of organising, and under what conditions these efforts are most likely to succeed. The article proceeds as follows: it begins with a review of the literature, then presents the data and methods, followed by an analysis of organisational dynamics and regulatory contexts, and concludes with a discussion.

Literature Review

In this article, the platform workers' movement — a labour movement focused on organising workers to improve their conditions, rights and status — will be analysed from the perspective of social movement theory, an approach shown to be particularly useful for understanding workplace organising (Tapia et al., 2018). Empirical research shows that platform workers' working conditions vary substantially across jurisdictions, including differences in legal classification, access to social protection, minimum pay standards, algorithmic management practices and the scope for collective representation (International Labour Organization, 2025). The differences can be observed even within the same country, as the example of the United States shows (Louzado-Feliciano et al., 2022). To explain these variations, the article draws on social movement theory, which emphasises the central role of organisational and institutional factors in shaping mobilisation efforts (McAdam and Scott, 2005).

Platform workers' organisations

Organisations serve as key actors in social movements, mobilising resources, providing training, sustaining movements during periods of low activity and representing participants in negotiations (Zald and McCarthy, 1987; McAdam and Scott, 2005). Moreover, these organisations often act as the public face of social movements (Della Porta et al., 2022).

Classic organisational sociology, particularly the Weber-Michels model, posits that social movement organisations risk bureaucratisation over time, shifting towards more conservative goals and prioritising their survival over transformative change (Michels, 1962). In response, Den Hond et al. (2015) call for a nuanced view of movement organisations as partial organisations that may vary in their degree of formalisation but remain crucial for political action. A partial organisation refers to a collective actor that lacks one or more of the defining elements of a formal organisation — such as membership, hierarchy, rules, monitoring or sanctions — yet still coordinates collective action (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2019). Den Hond et al. (2015) argue that different combinations of organisational elements can both create problems and resolve them, making organisations either beneficial or detrimental to mobilisation.

Organising platform workers remains difficult due to a combination of structural and institutional barriers, including low wages, weak union presence, limited numbers of organised workers, employer hostility, scarce funding and highly fragmented work environments shaped by technological mediation and individualised tasks (Wood et al., 2023; Chesta et al., 2019). A defining challenge is the organisation of work itself: platforms position themselves not as employers but as intermediaries connecting workers to clients, thereby distancing themselves from employer responsibilities (Woodcock, 2021). Without a shared workplace, platform workers rarely encounter one another. This challenge is particularly visible in web-based platforms (such as crowd work and freelance work), where tasks are performed online, but it is also a persistent issue in location-based platforms (including rideshare, delivery and domestic work), where work is carried out individually in cars, on bicycles or in other isolated settings (International Labour Organization, 2025). As a result, workers often lack opportunities to discuss common problems and struggle to develop collective identities (Vandaele, 2021). Platforms tend to classify workers as independent contractors and promote individualised performance metrics, leaving workers responsible for all economic risks (Joyce et al., 2023). Another significant barrier to organising platform workers is the internal heterogeneity of the workforce, including differences in socio-economic backgrounds and divergent self-perceptions regarding whether they are independent contractors or their subcontracted employees (Rizzo, 2025).

In this situation, organisations play a crucial role in connecting fragmented workers, helping to articulate their demands and facilitating collective action (Tarrow, 2022; Bessa et al., 2022). Different forms of worker organisations have emerged within the platform economy, ranging from traditional and new unions (alt-unions or indie unions¹) to grassroots organisations. Mainstream unions tend to thrive in countries with legal frameworks that support collective bargaining (Cini et al., 2022). Alt-unions and self-organisation groups are common in countries without strong union positions (Joyce et al., 2023; Atzeni and Cini, 2023). These groups are typically small and have limited resources (Vandaele, 2021). They prioritise legal actions and are often organised geographically rather than by the workplace (Joyce et al., 2023).

Regulations and the platform labour movement

Regulations significantly shape the strategies, effectiveness and scope of social movement organisations by providing the legal framework within which these organisations operate (Cini et al., 2022; Dasgupta et al., 2025). Labour regulations — such as employment protection laws,

¹ Alternative unions or independent unions are labour organisations that operate autonomously (without affiliation to larger national or international bodies) and typically represent workers in precarious and atypical forms of employment (Joyce et al., 2023).

minimum wage statutes and collective bargaining rights — establish the institutional foundations that either empower or constrain workers' collective action (Botero et al., 2003; Cameron and Rahman, 2022). In contexts with strong or clearly defined regulations, labour organisations have more formal avenues to negotiate working conditions, contest unfair practices and secure institutional recognition (Thelen, 2018; Tucker, 2017). By contrast, weak or ambiguous regulatory environments limit workers' access to formal protections, contribute to employer hostility and undermine the legitimacy of organising efforts (Dudley, 2017; Dubal, 2017).

Regulatory variation also shapes the strategies of social movement organisations. In highly regulated environments, organisations often channel their efforts into legal negotiations, compliance strategies and institutional advocacy (Dasgupta et al., 2025; Seidl, 2022; Cameron and Rahman, 2022). Conversely, in contexts with fewer protections, labour groups may rely more heavily on disruptive tactics such as strikes, protests and public campaigns to exert pressure (Botero et al., 2003; Karanović et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2023). Employers also respond strategically; for example, Amazon avoids bargaining with unions except where legally required (Kassem, 2022).

Within the platform economy specifically, regulatory environments exert an especially strong influence on worker mobilisation (Wood et al., 2023; Tucker, 2017). The emergence of platform companies was accompanied by a systematic disruption of existing labour and employment regulations, justified by the claim that platforms are merely technological intermediaries rather than employers and therefore should be exempt from traditional regulatory frameworks (Thelen, 2018; Dudley et al., 2017; Tucker, 2017). This framing continues to be used by platform companies to contest and disrupt subsequent attempts to introduce new regulations (Dasgupta et al., 2025).

Local regulators were unprepared for this model and responded unevenly, creating significant cross-jurisdictional differences in how platform work is governed and, consequently, in how workers are able to contest platform power (Dubal, 2017; Seidl, 2022). Research shows that strong regulatory frameworks provide clearer mechanisms for challenging platform conduct, including unfair labour practices, whereas weaker frameworks amplify platform dominance and constrain workers' capacity to organise (Karanović et al., 2021; Dasgupta et al., 2025).

Overall, the literature shows that platform workers' ability to organise depends both on how their organisations are structured and on the regulatory context they operate in. Existing research often treats organisational dynamics and regulatory environments separately, leaving a gap in understanding how they shape each other. This article addresses that gap by examining how organisational structures and state-level regulations jointly influence what rideshare driver organisations in the United States are able to achieve.

Data and Methods

The focus of this article on rideshare drivers is deliberate for several reasons. First, rideshare drivers constitute a distinct segment of the platform workforce, operating within a specific industry and facing unique challenges related to algorithmic control, employment classification and working conditions (Kilhoffer et al., 2019). Second, Uber, one of the most prominent global platform companies, has attracted substantial public, political and academic scrutiny (Thelen, 2018). Third, the United States hosts one of the largest platform labour markets, and its rideshare sector has seen rising mobilisation and visibility. Among the largest global economies, 37 percent of platform companies are based in the United States (Stauffer, 2025). According to the Leeds Index of Platform Labour Protest (n.d.), there have been 273 instances of protest activity by platform workers in the United States since 2017, more than 75 percent of which involved rideshare drivers.

To examine how organisational dynamics and regulatory environments shape collective action among rideshare drivers, this study uses a multi-method qualitative design that integrates interviews, content analysis, regulatory analysis and media review. Combining these sources allows for triangulation between organisational self-representations, leadership perspectives, regulatory contexts and public portrayals of mobilisation, thereby strengthening the analysis of variation in organisational outcomes.

The core empirical material consists of ten semi-structured elite interviews² conducted with leaders of rideshare driver organisations across the United States. Because the study focuses on internal structures and decision-making processes, elite interviews were the most appropriate method. Earlier interviews with rank-and-file members (from the broader research project of which this article is part) showed that many members were not fully aware of organisational structures, resources or strategic choices. Speaking directly with leaders was therefore essential for obtaining accurate information about internal dynamics.

The number of interviews was necessarily limited by the size of the population. During the research, 32 rideshare driver organisations were identified through a public presence on websites, social media accounts or documented media coverage. Of these, 12 showed no recent activity, resulting in a final population of 20 active organisations. The organisations included in this study represent a diverse set of organisational forms across multiple states, encompassing both union-affiliated and independent groups, city-level and state-level organisations and organisations with contrasting visions for the future of the industry and different approaches to mobilising drivers. The research also ensured the inclusion of organisations from states that have recently experienced major legal and political conflicts over platform regulation, such as California, New York, Illinois and Washington.

The interviews were conducted via Zoom between Fall 2023 and Spring 2025, with each interview lasting between one and one and a half hours. Interviewees discussed organisational structures, resources, strategies, relationships with platforms and interactions with established labour unions, including the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (the Machinist Union) and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters.

Interview data were complemented by a content analysis of the official websites, social media accounts and public communications of all known rideshare driver organisations in the United States. This analysis provided insight into how organisations publicly frame their goals, campaigns and identities, and allowed for systematic comparison between organisations beyond the interview sample.

To capture the institutional context in which organisations operate, the study also examines major federal, state and municipal regulations affecting rideshare drivers. This regulatory analysis situates organisational strategies within broader legal and political environments and helps explain cross-state variation in mobilisation opportunities and constraints.

Finally, media analysis was used to assess how rideshare driver mobilisation is publicly represented. A purposive sample of 100 newspaper articles covering protest activity by two prominent organisations (Rideshare Drivers United and the New York Taxi Workers Alliance) in 2019–2022 was compiled using targeted Google searches. Sentiment analysis of the articles reveals that media portrayals of protest actions are generally positive, with 2,657 negative words and 3,385 positive words, and an average valence score of 0.5546. Additionally, text similarity analysis using

² Elite interviews — also known as expert interviews or interviews with influential individuals — offer insight into decision-making processes that shape organisational and policy outcomes (Niu, 2024).

cosine similarity indicates a value of 0.75, suggesting that the media cover the protest actions of both organisations in a highly similar manner³. This analysis provides contextual insight into the public visibility and framing of rideshare driver mobilisation.

While the interview sample is necessarily limited due to the size of the organisational population and availability of respondents, the multi-method case study approach enables rich, contextual analysis of organisational mechanisms, strategic behaviour and regulatory constraints shaping collective action among rideshare drivers.

Results

Organisations

When Uber first started operations in 2012, working conditions for drivers were relatively good. However, as the company grew and gained market dominance, it began reducing pay, increasing fees and terminating drivers more readily. This shift compelled drivers to mobilise and form organisations around 2014–2015 (Interviews). Early organising efforts emerged through online communities that facilitated information exchange, grievance sharing and the development of collective identity—helping drivers to overcome isolation and loneliness (Maffie, 2020; Cini et al., 2022; Maccarrone and Tassinari, 2022; Atzeni and Cini, 2023). Such groups were identified across all 50 US states.

These digital networks later became the foundation for formal driver organisations and coordinated protest actions. As one interviewee described: “They’re both helpful, but the formal groups are more [helpful] for advocacy and fighting for drivers’ rights” (Interview 16). Figure 1 presents a map of organisations and registered protests.

Figure 1. Map of rideshare drivers’ organisations in the United States.



Note: On the map, highlighted states indicate where registered protests of platform workers have occurred since 2017 (based on the information from the Leeds Index of Platform Labour Protest (n.d.)). Dots indicate the states where rideshare drivers’ organisations were identified.

³ Before the analysis, the author removed stop words, punctuation and infrequent words from the text data, and applied stemming and lowercasing.

Organising rideshare drivers presents several significant challenges. The individualised and isolated nature of the work, along with the classification of drivers as independent contractors, limits opportunities for collective bargaining. This problem is exacerbated by general hostility towards unions in the United States and the geographic dispersion of drivers, who are often encouraged not to interact. As one driver noted: “The only relationship that we have is with our phone” (Interview 6). Only about 20 percent of drivers work full-time for rideshare platforms (Atske, 2021), while many part-time drivers do it to supplement their income, combine rideshare work with other jobs or operate across multiple platforms, leading to a narrow membership base. Platforms further hinder organising by creating company-backed worker associations, using unclear termination practices and viewing drivers as “expendable, replaceable, disposable” (Interview 3). Cultural and language barriers, as well as fears of losing job flexibility, also present obstacles. “They have the freedom to exploit your flexibility as a worker, but you can’t work whenever you want to work; you have to work when there’s work available” (Interview 3). Finally, poor working conditions force drivers to work longer hours for less pay or to leave the industry quickly, making organising efforts even more challenging (Interviews).

Rideshare drivers’ organisations in the United States follow the territorial principle of organisation and limit their activity to one state, with one exception (Independent Drivers Guild operates in New Jersey, New York, Illinois, Connecticut and Florida). Organisations initially began their activities in major cities like Los Angeles and Seattle before expanding statewide. These groups primarily consist of rideshare drivers, though they sometimes include delivery workers and taxi drivers (for example, New York Taxi Workers Alliance and Gig Workers Rising). The study found that self-organised communities are the primary form of organisation among rideshare drivers in the United States, with no significant efforts to form traditional unions. However, some organisations have developed strong connections with established unions (for example, Drivers Union and Independent Drivers Guild), influencing organisational strategies and access to resources. The repertoire of actions — protests, lobbying, information campaigns and driver support — shows that rideshare drivers’ organisations resemble other platform workers’ organisations and traditional labour movements in their strategies (Atzeni and Cini, 2023; Della Porta et al., 2022).

The presence of more formalised organisations was accompanied with more active contentious actions and improvements in the conditions of rideshare drivers. To better understand how organisations operate and explain state-level differences, the analysis focussed on five elements of organisations: membership, hierarchy, rules, monitoring and sanctions; as well as the resources available to organisations and their operating environments. The results are summarised in Table 1.

Organisational analysis reveals a striking similarity in the internal structures of rideshare drivers’ organisations across the United States. All organisations function as partial organisations, characterised by limited formalisation and a small core of active participants. Membership is generally open and inclusive, often treating all drivers as members by default. Recruitment and engagement rely heavily on face-to-face outreach supplemented by follow-up communication. Leadership structures typically consist of a board or small leadership group supported by a limited number of paid staff or active volunteers, concentrating decision-making authority within a relatively small group. Formal rules are minimal; general ethical norms exist, but explicit monitoring mechanisms and sanctions are rare and usually applied only in exceptional cases. Across cases, organisations face similar resource constraints, relying primarily on foundation grants, limited membership dues and occasional support from external actors. Finally, they operate within broadly

supportive environments marked by positive media coverage, strong ties to community networks and reliance on sympathetic political allies.

Table 1. Organisational analysis of the rideshare drivers' organisations in the United States

Dimension	Characteristics	Illustrative Evidence
Membership	Combination of two formats: (1) open, inclusive membership with all drivers considered members by default; and (2) small core of dues-paying members with some privileges	"I think it's a really super radical idea that, if you are a driver, you belong here" (Interview 6)
Recruitment and Engagement	Heavy reliance on personal outreach at airport lots, downtown areas and event venues combined with follow-up through texts, emails and calls	"Our strongest tool is having word-of-mouth, boots-on-the-ground, relationship building, in person" (Interview 1)
Leadership and Hierarchy	At the top there is typically a Board of Directors, with various committees or departments beneath it. These departments are usually managed by paid staff members who are either elected or hired for their positions. The decisions are usually made by the leaders, staff and active members, or members who pay dues. Overall, there are limited number of people in charge	"They have to have a procedure about who is in and who is out of that committee, as well as voting procedures to ensure that they operate democratically" (Interview 1)
Rules	Minimal formal rules; general ethical norms; sometimes explicit anti-platform affiliation policies	"You don't have all those rules that should apply to you because you are a member... It's America, there are no rules" (Interview 2)
Monitoring and Sanctions	No formal monitoring; sanctions virtually nonexistent; exclusion only in extreme cases where there is clear evidence of rule violations	"Some small, petty issues, we usually take care of that, through drivers to drivers, because we have peer-to-peer connection with the drivers" (Interview 7)
Resources	Limited funding: (1) grants from foundations (the most common source of resources); (2) membership dues (very limited); (3) platform; (4) state; and (5) support from unions	"That's [membership dues] the only money that we can get that comes with no strings attached" (Interview 5)
Environment	Generally positive media coverage ⁴ ; reliance on immigrant and ethnic community networks; heavy reliance on supportive political actors	"To be honest with you, this organisation would not be what it is without the community" (Interview 2)

⁴ See the data and method section.

The research revealed a consistent pattern in the internal structure of rideshare drivers' organisations, identifying all of them as partial organisations. These groups combine selected formal organisational elements (membership, hierarchy, rules) while lacking others (monitoring, sanctions) (Den Hond et al., 2015). Differences across organisations are most evident in the demands they advance and the coalitions they build, which in turn affect the resources they can mobilise within particular regulatory environments, as discussed in the following sections.

Divergent organisational demands

The main issues rideshare drivers' organisations advocate for — low pay, deactivation, limited communication between the platform and the workers as well as a lack of social benefits — are common challenges for platform workers (Wood et al., 2023; Bessa et al., 2022; Chesta et al, 2019; Della Porta et al., 2022). Additional concerns include safety and access to adequate restroom facilities. As one of the interviewees described: “In case of emergency, Uber was nowhere to be found, because it was just an app” (Interview 7).

Taken together, these concerns translate into a set of shared goals pursued by rideshare drivers' organisations: higher pay, protection against arbitrary deactivation, access to social benefits, improved safety conditions and greater accountability and communication from platforms. While there is broad consensus around these objectives, disagreement and tension emerge over how they should be pursued. The two main demands are: (1) providing rideshare drivers with collective bargaining rights — essentially reclassifying them as employees with the right to form a union; or (2) retaining independent contractor status with additional regulations for minimum pay, safety, protection from unlawful deactivation and some benefits (such as insurance).

Platform companies strongly oppose any move towards employment rights, insisting maintaining drivers' classification as independent contractors. “It's the hill they [corporations] are dying on. They want no employment rights, no rights at all” (Interview 6). Among workers and organisations, however, views diverge. Many drivers value the independence and flexibility associated with contractor status, especially the ability to work for multiple companies and control their schedules. As a result, they often oppose reclassification, despite acknowledging the drawbacks, such as lack of healthcare or unemployment benefits (Dasgupta et al., 2025). Some rideshare organisations use this argument to support strategies focussed on preserving contractor status while fighting for separate, contractor-compatible benefits. As one study participant explained,

“There was an agreement not to fight over the label. Workers needed protections, and they needed benefits, and they needed pay floors, and they needed the ability to remain independent contractors; they needed that” (Interview 4).

Other organisations prioritise winning full employment rights, arguing that only employee status and collective bargaining can provide durable protections — especially given platforms' ongoing efforts to weaken or override existing regulations. As one of the organisers expressed: “There is no simple legislative solution, as there's no magic bill” (Interview 8). However, this approach can also reduce flexibility and restrict the number of drivers, which many view negatively because it limits schedule autonomy and access to work, mirroring outcomes observed in the traditional taxi industry (Tucker, 2017). At the same time, there is a shared understanding that, as a result, drivers are trapped in a “state of limbo,” with lawmakers offering neither full protection nor clarity, thereby creating uncertainty that platforms exploit (Interview 7).

Alliances among rideshare drivers' organisations

Another important factor is the coalitions that rideshare drivers' organisations build. Cooperation across organisations is uneven: while many groups coordinate actions, share legal strategies and support one another's initiatives, competition is common in states where multiple organisations operate, often resulting in conflicting narratives and legislative approaches. As one driver explained,

“There's another organisation out here, I don't want to badmouth, but they've tried their best, but there's potential for a very bad deal to be made here for the drivers. [...] We are going to have a strategic response to that, whether that is to introduce our own legislation at a city level or to go straight at a state level here, [...] or do some sort of campaign against the potential bad deal” (Interview 4).

The key contradiction across organisations arises from the different strategies they pursue (reclassification or contractor-compatible benefits). In addition, there has been a rise in platform-backed driver organisations which, often in partnership with established unions, advocate for maintaining independent contractor status while implementing targeted regulations on specific aspects of the work (for example, the Drivers Union and Teamsters Local 117 in Washington State and the Independent Drivers Guild and Machinists Union in New York and Chicago). These organisations also act as intermediaries between drivers and platforms, taking on functions that the companies either cannot or do not want to perform, such as handling grievances or addressing arbitrary deactivations. As one interviewee explained, “That's what gave birth to IDG [Independent Drivers Guild], because we became that grievance centre for the drivers of Uber and Lyft that were deactivated” (Interview 4). These organisations either face strong competition from alternative driver groups, as seen in New York (New York Taxi Workers Alliance) and Chicago (Chicago Gig Alliance), or encounter little resistance in places with no strong alternative, such as Washington State.

While this study examines organisational membership structures, decision-making rules and accountability mechanisms across rideshare drivers' organisations within the United States, the results show only minor variation among them. This uniformity suggests that organisational form is not the key explanation of differences in working conditions among rideshare drivers. Instead, meaningful variation emerges in the demands that organisations pursue and in their alliances with platforms and unions — differences shaped by the regulatory environment in each state.

Regulations

In the United States, the ridesharing industry is regulated separately from the traditional taxi industry, although it borrows many of the same principles. Most regulations are implemented at the municipal level and vary widely depending on local conditions. Ridesharing platforms are classified as Transportation Network Companies (TNCs), and two broad regulatory approaches have emerged: direct and indirect. Regulatory measures typically address company license fees, driver license fees, mandatory checks (such as background check, vehicle inspection) and targeted limitations (like caps on the number of drivers).

In direct regulatory structures, cities or states establish and enforce these rules themselves, resulting in clearer oversight and greater accountability. In indirect structures, much of the regulatory authority is delegated to the TNCs, allowing platforms like Uber and Lyft to enforce their own standards. This arrangement generally creates a more favourable environment for

platforms by enabling low barriers to market entry — including limited company and driver licence fees, minimal mandatory background and vehicle checks conducted internally and the absence of binding restrictions on the number of drivers or rides — while providing weaker protections for drivers (Seidl, 2022; Karanović et al., 2021; Tzur, 2019).

Cities that employ direct regulations — such as Chicago, Houston, Miami, New York City and Seattle — tend to exhibit stronger mutual dependence between platforms and drivers because local authorities can enforce stricter standards (including caps on the number of drivers or requirements for their registration) and hold platforms accountable. Limiting the number of drivers is crucial as it reduces oversupply, stabilises earnings and strengthens workers' bargaining positions. By contrast, in indirectly regulated cities (including Boston, Dallas, Los Angeles, Phoenix, San Diego, San Francisco, and Washington, DC), weak enforcement allows a much larger pool of drivers to enter the industry with ease, increasing competition, depressing earnings and enabling platforms to maintain greater control while facing few consequences for non-compliance (Karanović et al., 2021; Seidl, 2022; Tzur, 2019).

These regulatory disparities shape not only drivers' experiences but also the organisational capacities of worker groups. Among the 32 organisations examined in this study, those operating in states with direct regulatory frameworks, such as Seattle's Drivers Union, are able to leverage local legislative support and secure platform compliance more effectively. Meanwhile, organisations in indirectly regulated localities, such as Rideshare Drivers United in California, must navigate weaker regulatory protections, intensified market competition and limited institutional support. As one organiser explained, even when cities attempt to introduce stronger standards — such as Los Angeles' minimum wage for drivers — municipal governments often lack the infrastructure or regulatory capacity to enforce them effectively (Interview 6).

This regulatory variation raises two questions: how were these regulations implemented, and what can be done about them? Rideshare platforms portray themselves as technology companies rather than transportation providers and classify their drivers as 'partners', a framing that allows them to avoid many of the regulatory obligations that apply to traditional vehicle-for-hire companies. By presenting themselves as disruptive innovators, these companies have taken advantage of outdated regulatory frameworks, bypassed conventional oversight mechanisms and appealed directly to consumer demands (Seidl, 2022; Thelen, 2018). Once they achieved a critical mass of drivers and riders, this strategy granted them significant political leverage, making it more difficult for regulators to impose meaningful constraints (Dudley et al., 2017). While these strategies contributed to widespread regulatory change, cities with more restrictive pre-existing medallion systems⁵ — and thus more concentrated interest groups — were better able to impose direct regulatory frameworks, whereas cities with minimal prior restrictions were more likely to adopt indirect regulatory models (Tzur, 2019).

The implementation and impact of these regulatory approaches are examined through two cases: California and Washington, which were chosen because they represent contrasting regulatory approaches to rideshare work, have been central sites of regulatory experimentation and conflict, and have produced regulatory models that have subsequently been adopted or referenced by other jurisdictions.

California's introduction of indirect regulation for TNCs began in 2013, when the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) legalised TNCs despite protests and lawsuits from taxi

⁵ Medallion systems are regulatory frameworks that restrict taxi market entry by issuing a limited number of licences ("medallions"), often at significant cost, thereby controlling competition and supply.

companies and mounting economic insecurity among taxi workers. In launching the rule-making process, the CPUC emphasised public safety and innovation, excluding worker security from its goals while framing TNCs as desirable technological innovators. The CPUC required only the companies, not individual drivers, to obtain permits; drivers were exempt from registration and commercial licensing; the number of rides and vehicles remained unregulated; and only minimal safety regulations were implemented, with compliance responsibility largely shifted onto the companies themselves. The same approach had long been enforced in the taxicab industry in the state. In 2016, phase II of the TNC regulations imposed some requirements on drivers (such as vehicle inspections and fare-splitting practices) but did not restrict the companies (Dubal, 2017).

In 2020, California voters approved Proposition 22, a multimillion-dollar ballot campaign backed by rideshare platforms that exempted app-based transportation and delivery companies from Assembly Bill 5 (AB5) — the 2019 law that would have classified most rideshare drivers as employees. Proposition 22 allowed drivers to remain independent contractors under a separate system of limited benefits (Legislative Analyst's Office, 2020). However, the long-term effects remain to be seen. In October 2025, California's Governor signed Assembly Bill 1340 (AB 1340) establishing the Transportation Network Company Drivers Labour Relations Act, granting rideshare drivers in California the right to organise, bargain collectively and engage in concerted activity while retaining independent contractor status under Proposition 22 (California Legislative Information, 2025).

In Washington State, the earliest significant regulatory steps occurred in Seattle, where the rapid expansion of Uber and Lyft around 2012–2013 prompted concerns about safety, insurance and competition with the taxi industry. In 2014, following months of negotiation, Seattle enacted one of the first municipal ordinances regulating TNCs, requiring background checks for drivers, vehicle inspections, commercial insurance coverage and limits on platform operations. These measures soon became a model for other municipalities across the state (Leisy, 2019). Washington subsequently shifted to a comprehensive statewide regulatory system. In 2022, the Washington State Senate passed House Bill 2076, a landmark piece of legislation negotiated between the Washington State Labour Council (the statewide federation of labour unions in Washington), the Teamsters-affiliated Drivers Union, and Uber and Lyft (Sáenz-Leandro and Fernández-Ardèvol, 2024).

The law established the strongest statewide labour standards for TNC drivers in the United States at the time, including a regulated minimum pay standard tied to time and distance, mandated paid sick leave, extended workers' compensation coverage through the state system and introduced protections against unfair deactivation through the establishment of a Driver Resource Centre to administer appeals. Importantly, the law confirmed drivers' status as independent contractors while simultaneously granting a set of enhanced labour protections (Washington State Legislature, 2022). In the upcoming years, Uber repeatedly sought to weaken, block or overturn these regulations (Sáenz-Leandro and Fernández-Ardèvol, 2024).

These two cases demonstrate how rideshare drivers' organisations adopt divergent strategies depending on the regulatory environment. In indirectly regulated localities, attempts to resist rideshare companies often appear nearly impossible — whether organisations push for reclassification or for contractor-compatible benefits — because platforms wield substantial power and local governments show little willingness to regulate them. This dynamic is particularly pronounced in California, home to the headquarters of most major rideshare platforms, further reinforcing companies' political and economic influence.

In directly regulated localities, rideshare companies tend to comply with implemented regulations, even as they continue to lobby to weaken or overturn them. Whereas platforms previously provided little or no support in areas such as deactivation appeals and grievance handling, they now cooperate with selected unions and affiliated driver organisations to outsource these functions, often in exchange for resources and commitments not to pursue reclassification as employees. In these contexts, two distinct organising patterns emerge: either a single strong driver organisation supported by the platform and backed by an existing union dominates the landscape (Washington), or multiple competing organisations coexist — sometimes divided over questions of cooperation with the platform and driver reclassification (New York, Illinois, Minnesota, Massachusetts).

Within these fragmented and contested organising environments, some organisations have adopted a third set of strategies aimed at making platform companies “feel some pain” (Interview 8), such as demanding access to data on earnings, working conditions and the algorithms that structure drivers’ work. Many organisations also recognised the limits of local, resource-poor partial organisations and emphasise building community support and broader alliances. There is a growing push to move beyond the narrow debates over reclassification towards wider campaigns targeting platform business models — characterised by labour intermediation, algorithmic management, data asymmetries and the externalisation of costs and risks onto workers — and promote universal principles of dignified work (Interviews).

Taken together, these findings underscore that, while regulatory environments exert a powerful influence, regulations themselves are neither fixed nor immune to political contestation. Platform companies continuously fight to weaken or overturn constraints. The analysis also highlights a core tension within the movement: drivers overwhelmingly value flexibility, which they associate with independent contractor status, yet they also seek stronger protections and a meaningful seat at the bargaining table — conditions more commonly associated with employee status, though not uniformly enjoyed by all employees in the United States. The central challenge moving forward is to imagine regulatory and organisational models that reconcile these competing needs.

Discussion and Conclusions

This article examined why rideshare drivers experience different working conditions across the United States, despite operating within a shared platform model and a variety of subnational regulatory frameworks. Drawing on interviews, organisational analysis and regulatory comparison, the study shows that rideshare driver organisations exhibit highly similar internal structures across states but experience markedly different outcomes due to variation in state and municipal regulatory environments. Organisational form alone cannot explain these differences; instead, regulatory regimes shape the strategies, alliances and leverage available to driver organisations, ultimately influencing working conditions.

Platform work is defined by worker dispersion, lack of shared workplaces, high turnover, precarious status and limited resources. These constraints shape how organisations can form and operate. As the analysis shows, rideshare driver organisations across the United States are partial organisations that adopt highly similar internal structures: open and inclusive membership, decentralised volunteer leadership, minimal formal rules, limited monitoring or sanctioning capacity and a reliance on personal outreach, digital communication and external funding or union alliances. Ultimately, this study underscores that new forms of work do not produce new forms of

organisation; rather, they produce new constraints within which workers' organisations must operate. Internal organisational structure, therefore, cannot account for the substantial differences in driver conditions between states. Instead, state-level regulatory environments emerge as the primary driver of variation.

Rideshare driver organisations must navigate divergent regulatory regimes. In directly regulated cities, such as Seattle, Chicago and New York City, stronger public oversight — including driver registration requirements, pay floors and caps on the number of drivers — creates a context in which platforms must cooperate with regulators, unions and driver groups. This alignment provides organisations with greater political influence, more stable resources and stronger leverage in negotiations, while also securing tangible benefits for drivers. In indirectly regulated cities, such as Los Angeles, San Diego and San Francisco, regulatory authority is delegated largely to the platforms themselves. This produces significantly weaker enforcement, allowing platforms to control the supply of drivers and the terms of work, while leaving driver organisations under-resourced and politically constrained.

The findings also reveal deeper tensions within the movement. Directly regulated cities create conditions that encourage closer cooperation between rideshare driver organisations and external actors, such as unions and platforms themselves, shaping strategic agendas in ways that do not always align with the visions of other driver organisations. At the core of these tensions are unresolved debates: reclassification versus contractor-compatible protections, flexibility versus bargaining power and collaboration with institutions versus organisational autonomy. The dominant discourse centres on whether to accept limited platform-backed benefits in exchange for preserving independent contractor status and flexibility, or to pursue full employment rights and collective bargaining — an approach that currently lacks broad support among many organisations, drivers, policymakers and platform management.

At the same time, while regulations are highly influential, they are not fixed; they remain sites of constant contestation. Platforms continually seek to weaken, bypass or overturn regulatory constraints, while driver organisations must use their limited capacities strategically to preserve and expand protections. Future research should examine how these organisational capacities can be scaled up, institutionalised and coordinated across states, particularly as platform work continues to expand and regulatory debates intensify.

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