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Union Membership Statistics in 24 Countries

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Union Membership Statistics in 24 Countries

Abstract
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Keywords
union, membership, countries, unionization, employment, trade, labor, data, salary, density, wage, rate

Disciplines
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Union membership statistics in 24 countries

An analysis of "adjusted" union membership data in 24 countries yields past and present union density rates; the data provide explanatory factors for the differences and trends in unionization.

In 1991, Monthly Labor Review published an overview of union membership statistics in 12 countries, presenting broad trends in unionization from 1955 to 1990 and raising various critical issues concerning the comparability of the data.1 In this article, the analysis is extended to a wider set of 24 developed countries and to recent years. Unlike the 1991 article, only “adjusted” membership data are presented, satisfying minimum comparability criteria and used as a basis for calculating union density rates, defined as union membership as a proportion of wage and salary earners in employment. Like the previous article, this one starts with a discussion of comparability issues—related to the use of sources, definitions, data coverage, reporting errors, special groups outside employment, and the selection of the employment base for calculating density rates. Next, the main findings for 1970, 1980, and 1990–2003 regarding union membership and density are presented and evaluated. The final part discusses some explanatory factors for the differences and trends in unionization, and confronts union membership statistics with data on bargaining coverage, measuring the proportion of employees covered by labor contracts negotiated by one or more labor union(s); election results of union candidates in employee works councils; union representation in advisory, consulting, and legislative councils; and the standing of labor unions and union leaders in public opinion.3 Although the union density rate captures a major aspect of union bargaining power—it is probably more difficult to replace striking workers in the short run when most of the firm’s or industry’s workers are unionized—as a full measure of “what unions do” it is inadequate. For instance, the organization and coordination of collective bargaining over employment conditions, probably the main activity of labor unions everywhere, varies a great deal even in developed economies. Estimating the effects that labor unions have on economic performance and distribution of income

Use and comparability

Union membership, relative to the potential of those eligible to join a labor union, is the most commonly used “summary measure” for evaluating the strength of trade unions. If defined and measured in a comparable way, it describes how the position of unions changes over time and differs across countries, industries or social groups. If large variations or swings in union density rates are observed, then there have been major changes in the legal-political, social, or economic environment of labor unions. In this sense, the union density statistic provides a useful comparative indicator in industrial relations research, as was claimed by George Bain and Bob Price in their seminal work on union growth.2

It does not tell, of course, the whole story. Other relevant indicators of “union presence” include the following: bargaining coverage—that is, the share of workers covered by labor contracts negotiated by one or more labor union(s); election results of union candidates in employee works councils; union representation in advisory, consulting, and legislative councils; and the standing of labor unions and union leaders in public opinion.3 Although the union density rate captures a major aspect of union bargaining power—it is probably more difficult to replace striking workers in the short run when most of the firm’s or industry’s workers are unionized—as a full measure of “what unions do” it is inadequate. For instance, the organization and coordination of collective bargaining over employment conditions, probably the main activity of labor unions everywhere, varies a great deal even in developed economies. Estimating the effects that labor unions have on economic performance and distribution of income...
requires a great deal of knowledge about union structure and
government, bargaining practice and collective action among
employers, the aims of unions, legal rules, and public policy.³
Whereas union density is closer to measuring potential union
bargaining pressure, the other measures, especially bargain-
ing coverage, are closer to measuring the effectiveness of
unions in providing and defending minimum standards of
income and employment protection in labor markets. Be-
tween the two measures there are considerable differences,
as will be shown in the final section.

In this article, great care is taken to assure minimum com-
parability of the membership data. However, even when high
comparability standards of counting union members are met,
“membership” of a labor union may not mean the same thing
in different countries. Obviously, membership can involve
variable degrees of personal commitment, sacrifice, social
pressure, and coercion, and it may come with various collect-
ive and individual benefits. The often-cited example is
France, where union membership is sometimes taken to mean
active engagement in the union as “lay representative” and
“militant.” Elsewhere, but also according to the rulebooks of
French unions, membership implies no other obligation than
the monthly payment of dues, usually with little effort, through
automatic withdrawals, possibly in direct transfer (“check
off”) from the wage check by the employer. Other activities,
including the willingness to support the union in industrial
action, are voluntary.

In the new democracies—which previously belonged to
the Communist bloc (here represented by the Czech and Slo-
vak Republics, Hungary, and Poland)—membership was
hardly a free choice, and it does not surprise that the high
membership numbers before 1989 proved unsustainable after
the transition to democracy.⁴ Compulsory membership upon
taking the job has been common in some occupations (artists,
printers, dockworkers) and among manufacturing workers in
some countries, like Britain, Australia, and New Zealand. But
these practices have been made illegal or unenforceable in
the 1980s and 1990s, and in all countries in this comparison
the freedom of association includes the right “not to join.”

Similarly, labor unions vary in the services rendered to their
members. In most countries, union-negotiated contracts are
applied erga omnes and non-members gain the same wage
increases, reduction in working hours, holiday entitlements,
and benefits as members do. This obviously creates a consid-
erable temptation to take a “free ride” as the benefits of col-
lective action can be obtained without sharing in the costs.⁵
For example, in the Netherlands as many as 70 percent of all
employees and more than half of all nonmembers approve of
unions and judge the activities of unions as “necessary” and
“beneficial.”⁶ Some labor unions have been effective in offer-
ing “selective benefits,” for instance through unemployment
insurance, assistance with job search, or help with adminis-
trative issues such as tax forms or sickness benefit claims.
Other unions, on the other hand, offer no tangible individual
benefits except a moral or ideological sense of belonging.
Comparative research in Europe has shown that density rates
are 20 to 30 percentage points higher if unions, rather than
the state, assess unemployment insurance claims even where
the insurance itself is fully subsidized and nonmembers have
legally the same entitlements as members.⁷ It has been noted,
and is shown below, that in Europe many members, after re-
tiring from the labor market, retain their membership in the
union, usually on the basis of very low or no financial con-
tributions. In addition to a continued sense of belonging and the
possibility to meet old friends and colleagues, unions may
offer assistance with various administrative chores or help
manage occupational and disability pension claims. The num-
ber of these members who are no longer “active” in the labor
market for paid work has increased in all European trade
unions, in part as a consequence of the practice of early re-
tirement before the compulsory pension age of 65 or 67 years,
as well as the ageing of union membership. Self-evidently, in
cross-national comparisons of union density rates, members
without an active status in the labor market must be taken
out.⁸

Comparability issues

In this section, specific comparability issues are discussed—
related to the use of sources, definitions, data coverage, re-
porting errors, special membership groups outside the labor
force, and the selection of the employment base for calculat-
ing density rates.

Sources. As was explained in the 1991 article, union mem-
bership data can be derived from two types of sources: house-
hold surveys and administrative data obtained from the
unions. Currently, survey data based on household surveys
are available on an annual basis in the United States, Canada,
Australia, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Finland, and the
Netherlands—and on a nonannual basis in Norway and the
Republic of Ireland.

In the United States, data for 1973–81 come from the May
the CPS Outgoing Rotation Group Earnings Files of the Bu-
93 there are data on union membership based on the Cana-
dian Labor Market Activity Survey, and from 1997 Statistics
Canada included a question on union membership in the La-
bor Force Survey (LFS). The first series is not strictly compa-
rable, because it includes membership in all jobs whereas it is
common in LFS (household) surveys to consider only one
membership per person. As proposed by Chang and Sorrentino in their 1991 article, the series has been adjusted to the first-job ratio, using OECD data derived from the Canadian LFS. In Australia, information about union membership and various characteristics of members and nonmembers comes from the August LFS since 1986. Similar surveys were previously conducted in November 1976 and during the March-May 1982 period. In the United Kingdom, an annual question on trade union membership was introduced into the August LFS in 1989, and an annual series is available from 1995 (without Northern Ireland, from 1992). In Sweden and the Netherlands, the LFS includes questions about union membership since 1988 and 1992 respectively, presented as annual averages. In Finland, data on union membership can be derived from the annual Income Distribution Survey (IDS) conducted by Statistics Finland since 1991. In addition, in the case of Norway, special surveys on union membership conducted as part of the LFS are available for the second quarter of 1995 and 1998. Based on a special module on union membership contained in the Quarterly National Household Survey of 2004 and the Labor Force Surveys of 1994–97, data released by the Central Statistical Office of the Republic of Ireland allows an authoritative estimate of recent trends. Moreover, representative employee surveys on union membership and various characteristics of members and nonmembers outside the structure of the LFS are available in France for 1996–2003, for the Republic of Ireland in 2003, and for the Netherlands in 1992–93.

Membership data based on administrative sources or files reported by the unions come in different forms. In some countries, the National Statistical Bureaus have conducted an annual survey of union organizations and their membership beginning as early as the 19th century. Such series exist or existed in the United States (discontinued after 1980), Canada, Australia (discontinued after 1996), Japan, Korea, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden. In the United Kingdom, Ireland, and New Zealand, the official register is or has been the basis of these statistics. The British data are available from the annual report of the Certification Officer and published by the Department of Trade and Industry in conjunction with the Office for National Statistics. The Irish data are not published and come from two sources, the Registrar of Friendly Societies for Irish-based unions operating in the Republic and Northern Ireland, and the U.K. register for U.K.-based unions operating in the Republic. When the Employment Contracts Act of 1991 ended the practice of union registration in New Zealand, it not only removed the distinct legal status of trade unions but it also brought to an end the official collection of data on trade union membership. In the absence of official data, the Industrial Relations Center at Victoria University of Wellington began to undertake voluntary surveys of trade unions in December 1991. These surveys continue to the current date and have been used here. The new Employment Relations Act 2000 reinstated the obligation for labor unions to submit an annual return of members to the Registrar of Unions, and the return to official collection of data on union membership in New Zealand began in 2001.

For all other countries, the data on union membership are obtained from union confederations, in some cases published in national statistical yearbooks (Germany, Switzerland), the annual report of the Chamber of Labor (Austria), or the annual report of union research centers (Italy). In the case of Belgium, France, and Spain, and in the four Central and Eastern countries, information is “pieced together” from various sources, including annual reports or statements of union confederations, independent unions, Web sites, financial reports, tax office declarations (in the case of France), and occasional surveys.

While each of the aforementioned sources has its particular problems and errors (see below), household surveys have the clear advantage of allowing individual-level analysis of union membership characteristics and the calculation of detailed union density rates—for instance, by sex, race, employment status, industrial branch, enterprise size, educational attainment, level of earnings, or other characteristics. Data obtained from recorded administrative sources are at a more aggregate level, and probably more vulnerable to distortion. However, when studying membership developments in relation to union type, size, inter-union competition, the position of peak federations, union politics, or union ideology, one must rely on administrative data.

Definitions. What is a labor union and who counts as a union member? For comparative statistics, reasonably consistent definitions are needed. Following the definition of the Australian Bureau of Statistics, a labor union may be defined as “an organization, consisting predominantly of employees, the principal activities of which include the negotiation of pay and conditions of employment for its members” or, slightly different, as “an organization which consists wholly or mainly of workers ... and whose principle purposes includes the regulation of relations between workers and employers or employer’s associations.” A union member is a person who self-defines that he or she belongs to a labor union, employee or staff organization (in the case of household surveys), or a person who pays his or her dues and is recognized as a member by a union organization (in the case of administrative data).

These definitions include management staff unions and professional associations, but exclude associations that do not (seek to) regulate employment relations with employers. However, collective bargaining, albeit the principle method
of regulation of employment relations, is not a defining characteristic. Unions may further members’ interests through assistance in individual bargaining, representation of members in legal courts or consultation with employers, and through social and political action.

Unions are worker or employee organizations, even though some of them include members who work on their own account. This is common among professional associations that combine salaried staff and self-employed members (for example, medical doctors, engineers, architects, artists, journalists, and so forth). In recent times, following the trend toward “market mediated employment relations,” contracting out and freelance work—for instance, in trades like building and construction, hairdressing, nursing, business and household services—the boundary between dependent employment and self-employment is blurring. In many European countries, confederations have set up new sections or unions, and adjusted their rulebooks to widen their recruitment basis to “economically dependent workers,” (that is, workers who are formally self-employed but usually depend on a single employer for their income). This phenomenon is still relatively small-scale but growing (see table 1).

Statistical coverage. Both sampling and nonsampling errors may affect statistical coverage of union membership in household surveys. Questions may be differently phrased and surveys may suffer from nonresponse in general or, specifically, with regard to the “union question.” Due to the wording of the question, surveys, unlike administrative data, could count a member of a staff association that was not recognized, identified, or defined as a labor union.

The main problem of administrative data is varying statistical coverage: the identification of small and unregistered unions, administrative arrears, and the misrepresentation of paying membership. The problem of varying coverage is especially worrying in the case of data that is only obtained from main confederations and labor unions. But even in the case of an official registrar, some unions may have chosen not to register or declare their membership, although this problem is probably negligible in the democratic countries represented here. In the case of U.K. and Irish registration data, the main problem is that union members working outside the country are also counted. If uncorrected, this leads to distorted density statistics. Another general problem, common to all administrative data, is that persons who are members of two unions will be recorded twice, whereas they would be identified only once in household surveys. This problem is probably small, however, as few people will hold two (costly) memberships.

In the course of time, the coverage of unions and membership by national statistical offices has broadened, and over time more professional and staff associations have been included in the aggregate statistics. In historical statistics such artifacts may misrepresent union membership growth, but in the 1970-to-present period the problem is fairly small. However, across countries, coverage of the usually independent or unaffiliated staff and professional associations differs between a very comprehensive coverage in Scandinavia, Finland, the United Kingdom, Ireland, and the Netherlands, to less than complete coverage in Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Belgium, France, Spain, and Italy. These differences in coverage, however, may reflect more widespread unionization in Northern Europe, where managers and professional groups like artists, doctors, architects, lawyers, church ministers, or soccer players have formed their own unions and employee associations. Possibly, some of these groups are in miscellaneous or general organizations in Austria, Germany, Belgium, France, or Italy.

In Germany, Belgium, and Austria the size of independent unionism, outside the main confederations, is believed to be small or negligible. The size of “autonomous” unions outside the two (Spain), three (Italy), or five (France) main union confederations is significant, but reliable data are hard to come by. In Spain, the phenomenon is associated with regional independence or separatism—in France and Italy, with political rivalries and loyalties. In the case of Spain and France, in addition to data published by these organizations, the size of these independent unions may be estimated from their share in the vote in works council elections. On this basis, we estimate an 18-percent membership share for independent unions in Spain and a 24-percent share in France. If this method is applied to Italy, the three main confederations represent between 90 and 95 percent of all members in the country. Unfortunately, membership claims of independent unions in Italy are absurdly large and wholly uncontrollable. In this case, only the membership data of the three main confederations are presented, even though this may underestimate the true size of union membership in Italy, especially in the public sector, by as much as 10 percentage points.

Reporting errors. Union membership data are inevitably based on self-reporting: by individual workers or employers in the case of household surveys, and by union administrators in the case of recorded data. The results may be inaccurate because of sampling and nonsampling errors; nonresponse and memory failure in the case of surveys; and because of outdated record, financial interests or deliberate misrepresentation in the case of administrative data. With computerized files, now used by most unions, the difficulty of keeping files up to date may have become smaller, but the problem of misrepresentation for reasons of prestige, recognition claims, or political gain is still present, especially in countries with rival unionisms and without some external checking or recording.
of files. Thus, in France, Poland, and Hungary, estimates based on as many independent sources as possible have to be provided. In the case of the Netherlands, Italy, Switzerland, and Spain, administrative membership data may be inaccurate or incorporate membership in arrears with payment, but they are not deliberately misrepresented. In the case of Belgium, each of the three union confederations tends to inflate its membership statistics with the same amount, currently estimated at 13 percent.26 Another source of error consists in double counting, the reporting of nonpaying members or “supporters” outside the labor force (see table 1).

Special groups and membership adjusted to employed wage and salary earners. Historically, union movements in Europe, often in alliance with Social-Democratic or Christian Parties, have tried to achieve “comprehensive” or “inclusive” representation, extending beyond wage earners in employment. Many European unions allow or often actively seek the retention of those members who retire from the labor market (pensioners, early retirement, fully disabled workers), the self-employed, full-time students and apprentices, workers becoming unemployed or first-time job-seekers, persons in voluntary (unpaid) work, and spouses or women’s groups.27

As shown in table 1, a sizeable share of the reported membership of European unions is outside the employed dependent labor force, the denominator usually applied when calculating union density rates. The average proportion of members who have retired from the labor market is 17.2 percent of total membership, varying from 4.5 percent in Spain to as much as 48.0 percent in Italy. Inflated membership figures and counting nonpaying adherents as full members is a factor mainly in France and Belgium. Fairly large numbers of unemployed members are observed where one would expect—that is, where unions are directly involved in the management of unemployment funds (Belgium) or provide such funds themselves (Denmark, Finland, and Sweden).28 Elsewhere the share of unemployed workers in union membership is very small or negligible. The proportion of self-employed workers is also fairly small, though rising in Finland (associated with the membership of full-time students)29 and the United Kingdom (where self-employment in services and construction has risen more than elsewhere in Europe). In Italy, where the main confederations used to organize tenant farmers, the share of the self-employed in total membership has decreased. In Norway, the professional associations include a significant number of self-employed members. (In Denmark, Sweden, and the Netherlands, they are not included in the statistics reported by the national statistical bureaus.)

In the 14 countries shown in table 1, the total adjustment on account of these “special groups” amounts, on average, to 24.2 percent—with a large variation across countries. Taking these members out from the total count, “adjusted” membership sta-

<p>| Table 1. Union membership in 14 countries, total and adjusted membership |
|-----------------------------|------------------|-----------------|---------------------|-----------------|----------------------|</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>In percent of reported membership</th>
<th>Nonfinancial membership</th>
<th>Retired from labor market</th>
<th>Unemployed</th>
<th>Self-employed and students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>'18.2</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>33.0</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>'19.8</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>'8.0</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>53.1</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>48.0</td>
<td>.7</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>'19.8</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>'24.0</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>'10.0</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td></td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


1 Includes unemployed and disabled workers.
2 Of which, 6.1 percent are students.
Statistics are obtained and can be compared with the data obtained from surveys, usually reporting the estimated membership of wage and salary earners in their main job. Differences between the two series may still occur on account of varying reporting dates throughout the year, varying definitions of the dependent labor force, and the exclusion of certain occupations from the survey.

Base for union density rate statistics. Union density expresses the rate of “actual” to “potential” membership, usually as a percentage. For any one union, potential membership is given by eligibility criteria, usually defined in the union rulebook or constitution. Practices vary massively across unions, occupations, industries, and countries, and they have changed in the course of time, usually widening the definition of those eligible for membership. In some but not all countries, the law excludes particular categories (for instance, the military and security staff). Following the “eligibility” criterion would render the comparison of numbers impractical, as was recognized by Chang and Sorrentino in their 1991 article in this journal. It is for this reason, in line with their article and the OECD database, to use the size of their 1991 article in this journal. It is for this reason, in line with their article and the OECD database, to use the size of their 1991 article in this journal.

Comparable statistics

This overview presents adjusted data on union membership and union density for 1970, 1980, and 1990–2003 in 24 developed economies belonging to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). In addition, a series has been calculated for the European Union defined by its size as of May 2004, before the recent enlargement with eight member states from the former Communist bloc and two small island states in the Mediterranean. The data and statistics presented in table 2 (pages 43–44) are, to the largest extent possible, the net of total members who are unemployed, self-employed, full-students, pensioned or disabled, or not part of the labor market.

### Table 2. Union membership in 24 countries and the European Union, adjusted data, 1970–2003, in thousands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>Canada</th>
<th>Australia</th>
<th>New Zealand</th>
<th>Japan</th>
<th>Republic of Korea</th>
<th>European Union</th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th>France</th>
<th>Italy</th>
<th>United Kingdom</th>
<th>Ireland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1970 .....</td>
<td>18,086.8</td>
<td>2,211.0</td>
<td>2,512.7</td>
<td>11,605.0</td>
<td>473.3</td>
<td>33,939.5</td>
<td>6,965.6</td>
<td>3,458.0</td>
<td>4,736.2</td>
<td>7,189.0</td>
<td>11,652.3</td>
<td>381.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980 .....</td>
<td>17,717.4</td>
<td>3,543.3</td>
<td>2,567.6</td>
<td>12,369.0</td>
<td>948.1</td>
<td>43,663.6</td>
<td>8,153.6</td>
<td>3,282.0</td>
<td>7,189.0</td>
<td>11,652.3</td>
<td>381.7</td>
<td>381.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990 .....</td>
<td>16,739.8</td>
<td>3,897.6</td>
<td>2,659.6</td>
<td>12,265.0</td>
<td>1,932.4</td>
<td>39,261.6</td>
<td>8,013.8</td>
<td>1,968.0</td>
<td>5,872.4</td>
<td>8,952.3</td>
<td>441.5</td>
<td>441.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991 .....</td>
<td>16,568.4</td>
<td>514.3</td>
<td>2,139.7</td>
<td>12,397.0</td>
<td>1,886.9</td>
<td>43,093.0</td>
<td>11,969.4</td>
<td>1,935.0</td>
<td>5,913.3</td>
<td>8,626.5</td>
<td>441.1</td>
<td>441.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992 .....</td>
<td>16,390.3</td>
<td>438.2</td>
<td>2,541.0</td>
<td>12,541.0</td>
<td>1,803.4</td>
<td>41,707.8</td>
<td>11,083.1</td>
<td>1,940.0</td>
<td>5,906.1</td>
<td>8,142.9</td>
<td>437.9</td>
<td>437.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993 .....</td>
<td>16,598.1</td>
<td>3,768.0</td>
<td>2,376.9</td>
<td>12,663.0</td>
<td>1,734.6</td>
<td>40,084.7</td>
<td>10,264.9</td>
<td>1,870.0</td>
<td>5,661.0</td>
<td>7,831.3</td>
<td>428.6</td>
<td>428.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994 .....</td>
<td>16,740.3</td>
<td>2,283.4</td>
<td>375.9</td>
<td>12,699.0</td>
<td>1,667.4</td>
<td>38,742.2</td>
<td>9,705.9</td>
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Table 2. Union Membership in 24 countries and the European Union, adjusted data, 1970–2003, in thousands

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<th>Belgium</th>
<th>Spain</th>
<th>Switzerland</th>
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</table>

Absolute change

1970–1980  | 503.8  | 713.5  | 254.3  | 496.7   | 87.3     | 419.9  | —     | 92.7       | 88.1    | —       | —              | —               | —      |
1980–1990  | 194.6  | 221.2  | 96.2   | 151.0   | −169.4   | −4.9   | 163.4 | −32.4      | −68.9   | —       | —              | —               | —      |
1990–2003  | −31.8  | −275.7 | 75.0   | −450.0  | 227.4    | 204.2  | 1,003.4| −177.6     | −223.6  | −1,210.0  | −924.8          | −1920.0         | —      |
1970–2003  | 666.6  | 659.0  | 425.5  | 602.8   | 145.3    | 619.2  | 1,166.8| −117.2     | −204.4  | —       | —              | —               | —      |

Percent change

1970–1980  | 60.8   | 30.7   | 37.2   | 44.8    | 6.1      | 34.1   | 12.2  | 6.5        | —       | —       | —              | —               | —      |
1980–1990  | 14.6   | 7.3    | 10.3   | 9.4     | −1.2     | 0      | 15.9  | −3.8       | −4.8    | —       | —              | —               | —      |
1990–2003  | −2.1   | −8.5   | 7.3    | 6.2     | −16.9    | −12.4  | 84.1  | −21.7      | −16.3   | −65.1    | −46.2           | −39.1          | −56.1  |
1970–2003  | 80.5   | 28.3   | 62.3   | 54.4    | 10.2     | 50.3   | 113.3 | −15.4      | −15.1   | —       | —              | —               | —      |

Union density. These statistics provide a much better comparison when measured against the size of the employed wage and salary earners. Table 3 presents the union density rates. Now the picture becomes more sobering for labor unions. In fact, union density rates in 2002 or 2003 are lower than in 1970 in all but four small European economies (Finland, Sweden, Denmark, and Belgium). These four happen to be the only ones in which unions are involved in the administration and execution of un-

### Table 3. Union density in 24 countries and the European Union, adjusted data, 1970–2003, in percent

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<th>Canada</th>
<th>Australia</th>
<th>New Zealand</th>
<th>Japan</th>
<th>Republic of Korea</th>
<th>European Union</th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th>France</th>
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**Absolute change**

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</tbody>
</table>

employment insurance. Also, each decade became progressively worse from the perspective of union organizing (except in Spain where the unions, after a difficult start after the fall of the Franco dictatorship, managed to acquire organizing rights and succeeded to build a reasonably loyal membership base among permanent workers in large firms). Thus, even in countries in which unions made strong membership gains in the 1990s, as was the case in Ireland or the Netherlands, the rapid employment growth caused the union share in wage and salary employment to fall. Elsewhere in Europe—for instance, in Germany, France, or Austria—union density fell in spite of extremely slow employment growth.

The density statistics in table 3 show a very large degree of variation—from very low rates in the United States, Korea, France, Poland, and Spain to very high rates in Finland, Sweden, and Denmark, closely followed by Belgium and Norway. Union density is twice as high in the European Union as in the United States, but trends are similarly downward and may be expected to converge somewhat when current membership trends in the largest European economy (Germany) and the largest of the new Member States in Central and Eastern Europe (Poland) continue. Also, current levels of unionization in Australia, New Zealand, Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland—with just more than one-fifth of the employed wage-earning population joining a union—tend toward the lower end of the spectrum. It may be that union decline has “bottomed out” in France or Britain, or that there will be reversals in union fortunes in the near future, but to make any such prediction, a reasonably accurate idea about what caused the current decline and variation in union organizing is needed.

Some explanations and further data. Explaining the variations and differences in union membership and density is beyond the scope of this article, which has its focus on evaluating the state of comparative statistics on the subject. However, some explanations, aided by some analytical data, may be mentioned here. The combination of a general downward trend or a general trend reversal occurring in recent decades, and the observation of cross-national divergence, shown by the data in table 3, suggests that structural, cyclical, and institutional factors are at work. A common trend reversal suggests similar structural forces and economic and/or political cycles with roughly similar timing and impacts. Persistent and increasing cross-national differences are prima facia evidence that unions and union membership must be seen in the context of institutions specific to national labor markets.

Table 4 presents data on union density for specific groups or categories of employees. In the case of the United States, Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Norway, these disaggregated statistics are derived from surveys; for Finland, France, Spain, Austria, Germany, and Japan, they are based on adjusted administrative records.

One striking finding is that in a number of countries the female unionization rate is equal with (Canada, the United Kingdom, Ireland) or even higher (Sweden, Norway, Finland) than the male unionization rate. The rapid advance of female union

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Survey data</th>
<th>Administrative data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total ..........</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>30.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men ............</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>30.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women ..........</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>30.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16–24 ..........</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time ......</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>32.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time ......</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard ......</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual .........</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private .......</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>17.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public ........</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>72.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing ..</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>30.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coverage ......</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>32.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: 1997; 22002; 3 1994; 416–29 years; 5private services only; 6including mining and construction.
membership and density, combined with the fall in male unionization, is probably the “biggest and most profound transformation in union membership” and not only in Canada. It probably reflects the greater attachment of women to the market for paid labor, as shown in rising participation rates and longer tenure; the higher female share in public services (in Europe); and the adoption of equal opportunity policies. In the German-speaking countries and the Netherlands, female membership is still relatively low, though it is rising there as well. One factor is the rise of part-time jobs, mostly held by women. Interestingly, the gap in unionization between part-time and full-time employees is narrowing in some countries in Northern Europe—most strongly in those wherein a part-time job is both widely diffused and “normalized” in the sense of being covered by the same rights, benefits, and employment conditions that apply to full-time workers. This is increasingly the case in, for instance, Norway, Sweden, and the Netherlands; whereas in the United Kingdom or the United States, or Japan, part-time jobs are more often flexible and less covered by union contracts.

A rather universal research finding is the decline of union density among the young. This is observed even in the Scandinavian countries. Whether this represents a lower demand for unionization among the young, is a cohort or age effect, or reflects the increased use of part-time and flexible employment contracts and lower pay rates for those that enter the labor market is hard to say and requires further study. The lower unionization rate among those that hold casual or temporary jobs is also a general finding across countries and may reflect the greater difficulty of union organizing (“union supply”) and/or a lower attachment to the labor market, and possibly a lower “demand” for union representation.

The decline in unionization is concentrated very strongly in the market or private sector of the economy, with rates of unionization in the public or government sector remaining very high in most countries. Depending on the size of the public sector—which is usually much larger in Europe (including the new transitional economies) than in, for instance, the United States—this has been an important resource for labor unions and federations. Union rates in manufacturing, although often above average (and always above rates calculated for private services, without the public sector), have decreased in many countries, in particular the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Ireland, the Netherlands, France, and in recent years, Germany. But unionization in manufacturing, together with public-sector unions, still constitute the vertebrate of today’s labor unions and federations in terms of bargaining power and wage setting—especially where there is pattern bargaining or if wage setting is coordinated nationally across industries (as is still the case in many if not most European economies, with the exception of the United Kingdom and all but few of the new member states of the European Union).

These differences are reflected in the coverage rates—that is, the share of employed wage and salary earners whose terms of employment are affected by collective agreements negotiated between unions and employers. Bargaining coverage is only slightly above union membership in the United States, Canada, or—with a wider margin—the United Kingdom. This reflects the fact that bargaining is mostly organized on a decentralized basis, as company bargaining. The union-negotiated contract applies only to union members and some nonunionized employees in the same bargaining unit (possibly with the right to opt out of membership). Multi-employer bargaining and public policies extending the negotiated contract to nonorganized firms guarantees very high coverage rates in most European countries, far in excess of union density rates. It is likely that such contracts are less detailed—and that in countries such as Spain or France, with low unionization rates outside large firms and the public sector, employers have much leeway to disregard the letter if not the spirit of the contract. On the other hand, research in a country like the Netherlands has shown that general application and extension of contracts still have the support of a large majority of employers. These factors tend to lower the opposition of employers against unions, as all share the same costs inflicted by unions (as well as benefits from union cooperation).

In conclusion, it can be argued that sharper international competition (“globalization”), the rise of service employment, slower growth—or even decline of government employment (“privatization”), much higher (long-term) unemployment rates (especially in Europe), the increased use of flexible employment contracts, also the lower inflation rates and the control of inflation by means of tighter monetary policies—have limited union power and union recruitment. However, these influences are mediated by labor market institutions, legal rules, and politics. Most cross-national comparative and longitudinal studies on the subject find that such institutional factors as union-administered unemployment funds, the accepted presence of unions in the workplace, coordinated nationwide bargaining, and consultation correlate positively with union density—because it provides direct incentives for membership, underpins the “social custom” of membership in the workplace, and lowers employer opposition.

Notes


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Union Membership

1 For Western Europe, data on these indicators have been presented in Lars Calmfors, Alison Booth, Michael Burda, Daniele Checchi, Robin Naylor, and Jelle Visser, “The Role of Collective Bargaining in Europe,” pp. 1–156 in T. Boeri, A. Brugiavini and L. Calmfors, eds., The Role of the Unions in the Twenty-First Century (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001).


3 See, for instance, the collection of studies in Steve Crowley and David Ost, eds., Workers After Workers’ States (Lonan, MD, Rowman and Littlefield, 2001).


5 According to a national survey, reported and analyzed in Bert Klandermans and Jelle Visser, De vakbeweging na de welvaartsstaat (Assen, van Gorcum, 1995).


8 There were no union questions in the 1982 CPS.

9 In 2004, the series has been revised and no longer allocate people who did not report their union status on a pro-rata basis. Thus, figures for previous years are lower than was previously reported. Heidi Grainger and Heather Holt, “Trade Union Membership 2004,” (London, Dept. of Trade and Industry, April 2005).


14 Bert Klandermans and Jelle Visser, De vakbeweging na de welvaartsstaat (Assen, van Gorcum, 1995).

15 This data is unpublished and sorting out trade union membership in Irish- and British-based unions in the Republic has been a laborious task. See Ebbinghaus and Visser, The Societies of Europe ..., chapters 9 and 17. Fortunately, since 1990 the Irish Congress of Trade Unions has published separate membership statistics for its British- and Irish-based affiliates operating in the Republic and Northern Ireland, covering about 97 percent of total membership in the Republic.

16 Robyn May, Pat Walsh, Raymond Harbridge, and Glen Thickett, Unions and Union Membership in New Zealand: Annual Review for 2002, Working Paper (Wellington, New Zealand, Victoria University’s Industrial Relations Centre). Albeit provided on a voluntary basis, this survey appears to have a very high compliance rate.

17 See the New Zealand Department of Labour Web site, on the Internet at www.ers.dol.gov.nz-union-registration.


20 From the special survey, reported by Lipset and Katchanovski, it appears that in the United States, against a background of union decline, union density among professionals has doubled from 9 to 19 percent in the four decades since the late 1950s with large advances among teachers, nurses, physicians, psychologists, social workers, librarians, and speech therapists. Seymour Martin Lipset and Ivan Katchanovski, “White-Collar and Professionals – their attitude and behavior towards unions II,” (Research Paper, George Mason University, Washington, DC, 1999).

21 In the case of Germany, in addition to the membership statistics on the German Confederation of Trade Unions and the Civil Servant’s Federation published in the Statistical Yearbook of the Federal Statistical Office, data on the smaller organizations (a Christian union confederation, a federation of manager unions, of medical, court, and military staff, and various occupational unions) have been obtained from the Institut der deutsche Wirtschaft (w) in Düsseldorf. In the case of Switzerland, in addition to data included in the Statistical Yearbook, we rely on the extensive survey of organizations by Robert Fluder of the University of Zürich, reported in Bernhard Ebbinghaus and Jelle Visser, The Societies of Europe ..., chapter 16. In the case of Belgium, a small federation of manager unions (with an estimated 2 percent of total membership) has been left out. In Austria, there seem to be no independent unions or at least not recognized ones.

22 In fact, it is often argued that rather than the (not always verifiable) membership claims, voting in these elections (usually with a high turnout) establishes the credibility and representation legitimacy of Spanish and French unions. This argument must of course be seen against the very low membership and density figures in both countries.

23 For an overview of independent unions in Italy, see Bernhard Ebbinghaus and Jelle Visser, The Societies of Europe ..., chapter 10.

24 Patrick Pasture and Jo Mampuys, In de ban van het getal: Ledenanalyse van het ACV 1900–1990 (Louvain, Acco); and chapter 4 in Bernhard Ebbinghaus and Jelle Visser, The Societies of Europe ..., chapter 16.

25 The latter applies to the Netherlands, but the Central Bureau of Statistics published aggregate data on union membership without such “secondary” affiliations of, for instance, spouses and women outside the labor force.

26 In each of these countries, an estimated 80 percent of the unemployed are unionized, although this percentage has declined somewhat in

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recent years in Denmark, Sweden, and Finland, following the availability and increased take-up of nonunion-related unemployment insurance.

29 In the case of Finland, use has been made of a special survey, carried out by the Ministry of Labor in 1989, 1994, and 2002, on the membership of students, pensioners, the self-employed, and the unemployed.

30 This is the case in, for example, Italy, Spain, Poland, and the United Kingdom.


32 In some countries—for instance, the Netherlands, Sweden, or Norway—this means that military staff, often with extremely high unionization rates, are to be taken off the membership count.

33 Using these data rather than the national figures may cause a small difference in the published figures by national sources, on account of different reference dates. For instance, the union density figures for the United States published by BLS tend to be .1 or .2 of a percentage point higher than those presented in table 3. In the case of the United Kingdom, using the OECD averages causes a drop of more than 1 percentage point in the union density figures; I have therefore decided to use the August LFS figures used by the Department of Trade and Industry.

34 Of four OECD members (Greece, Mexico, Portugal, Turkey) we have only rough estimates of union membership, and we have decided not to include the two smaller ones (Iceland and Luxembourg) in this comparison. Estimates and data on these countries can be found in the OECD data set on the Internet at www.oecd.org.

35 The U.S. figures combine those of Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom (estimates for Greece and Portugal, and data for Luxembourg included).

36 Unfortunately, the LFS data for Finland are not currently available in any detailed form, and the statistics in table 2 are based on adjusted administrative data.

37 Bernhard Ebbinghaus and Jelle Visser, “When Institutions Matter …”, Bruce Western, Between Class and Market …


40 Cited in European Commission, Industrial Relations in Europe 2004, chapter 1.