

Political representativeness affects trade union membership, influence

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A country's political system—whether it favors cooperation and multiparty coalitions or devolves into fiefdoms rife with competitive

fragmentation—can positively or negatively affect trade union membership and influence, according to a new paper co-written by a University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign expert who studies the intersection of labor unions and politics.

Increased political representativeness, measured by the presence of lower electoral "disproportionality," augurs well for a country's individual trade [union](#) membership, coverage and influence. But a greater number of warring political factions is associated with a weakened collective voice and watered-down support for [trade unions](#), said J. Ryan Lamare, a professor of labor and employment relations at Illinois.

The research, co-written by John W. Budd of the University of Minnesota, points to a broader relationship between the state, [political systems](#) and industrial relations than was previously known, Lamare said.

"Typically, the overarching goal of labor unions and trade organizations is to grow membership, serve their members' interests and advocate for policies that benefit the working class no matter the political landscape," he said. "Labor organizations need to realize that rather than simply trying to increase membership, they might want to take a closer look at advocating for [electoral reform](#) that increases political cooperation."

In the paper, the researchers used multiple datasets to test the relationship between political systems and union membership, coverage and influence across more than 25 European countries. The scholars studied three channels through which a political system can shape unionization in the workplace independent of political ideology: incentives for inclusionary governance, legislative body composition and policy enactment.

They found that electoral disproportionality negatively affected union

membership, coverage and influence, according to the paper.

"This means that unions may specifically benefit from certain types of representative electoral systems—namely, that more proportional systems can create attitudinal spillovers that result in higher levels of union membership and influence," Lamare said. "Our findings also point to at least some support of the conclusion that political systems that have multiparty coalitions, which typically require bargaining in order to form governments and enact policies, spill over into workplaces that also support systems like collective bargaining."

The results also indicate that as the effective number of political parties in an electoral system increases, union membership, coverage and influence decrease.

"This outcome is consistent with the idea that greater numbers of parties produce competitive fragmentation within a political system," Lamare said. "Just as is the case for political democracy, then, it appears that the optimal political system for fostering stronger collective voice is one that achieves high levels of representativeness while avoiding excessive competitive fragmentation."

The research also has implications for labor unions and electoral politics in the U.S., Lamare said.

"Although our data come from Europe, the findings can be applied to the current political landscape in the U.S., especially at the state and local levels," he said.

While the main focus of the 2020 election cycle was on national-level leadership changes, several important down-ballot initiatives called for electoral system reforms, Lamare said.

"Moving away from a strict majoritarian system by using ranked-choice voting was on the ballot in two states"—Alaska and Massachusetts—"and five cities in 2020," he said. "But there's little indication that labor groups made these initiatives centerpieces of their 2020 down-ballot electoral strategies.

"Our results suggest that in these states, unions might have prioritized putting more resources into trying to help pass these reforms as a way of growing their influence over the coming years, rather than focusing most of their energy on supporting one particular candidate or ideology over another."

The paper was published in the *British Journal of Industrial Relations*.

More information: John W. Budd et al. The Importance of Political Systems for Trade Union Membership, Coverage and Influence: Theory and Comparative Evidence, *British Journal of Industrial Relations* (2020). [DOI: 10.1111/bjir.12575](https://doi.org/10.1111/bjir.12575)

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