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When Institutions Matter

Union Growth and Decline in Western Europe, 1950–1995

Bernhard Ebbinghaus and Jelle Visser

During the early post-war period, Western trade-union movements grew in membership and achieved an institutionalized role in industrial relations and politics. However, during the last decades, many trade unions have seen their membership decline as they came increasingly under pressure due to social, economic, and political changes. This article reviews the main structural, cyclical, and institutional factors explaining union growth and decline. Concentrating on Western Europe, the empirical analysis compares cross-national union density data for 13 countries over the first period (1950–1975) and for 16 countries over the second, 'crisis' period (1975–1995). The quantitative correlation and regression analysis indicates that structural and cyclical factors fail to explain the level and changes in unionization across Western Europe, while institutional variables fare better. In a second, qualitative comparative analysis, the authors stress the need to explain cross-national differences in the level or trend of unionization by a set of institutional arrangements: the access of unions to representation in the workplace; the availability of a selective incentive in the form of a union-administered unemployment scheme; recognition of employers through nationwide and sectoral corporatist institutions; and closed-shop arrangements for forced membership. Such institutional configurations support membership recruitment and membership retention, and define the conditions for the strategic choice of trade unions in responding to structural social-economic, political, and cultural changes.

Introduction

In a more highly competitive industrial world where the technology is potentially nearly identical, where physical resources are distributed in world-wide markets, and where industrialism has left much the same imprint on many societies, what once may have seemed like small differences may have big results' (Kerr, 1983). For the doyen of American modernization theory, industrial relations are one of these small differences that bear large consequences. Instead of convergence, European industrial relations display 'persistent diversity' (Crouch, 1993). While trade unions face globally similar economic pressures and social changes, they respond in different ways (Boyer, 1995). National patterns of unionization have diverged across Europe since the

early 1970s. Although many union movements became weaker, some were capable of maintaining their membership levels (Visser, 1991).

A study of the patterns of unionization – of the success and failure of trade-union movements to mobilize and organize workers – is important for many reasons. Membership is a prime measure of the power base of interest organizations and an indicator of workers' capacity for collective action (Korpi, 1983; Shorter and Tilly, 1974). Union density – membership as a proportion of all wage and salary earners – is the most readily available indicator for measuring the strength of a union movement in a given industry or country (Visser, 1992). Over time it offers a picture of the changes in power relations between unions and employers, and of the direction in which labour relations are moving.

Across countries and industries it is a first, though incomplete, measure of relative strength, to be completed by other measures such as centralization, political unity, organizational concentration, access to government, legal protection, and patterns of worker militancy (Visser, 1992). Union density is commonly used by employers and governments as a yardstick for judging claims of representation, and by economists as a measure of the impact of trade unions on labour markets and national politics (Freeman, 1994; Hartog and Theeuwes, 1993; Przeworski and Sprague, 1986). Moreover, union membership tends to correlate with workplace democracy. Workers in unionized workplaces receive more information from their employers and have more opportunities to influence their working lives than workers in non-unionized workplaces (Freeman and Medoff, 1984; Millward *et al.*, 1992).

Ever since the rise of the union movement, conflicting theories of union growth and decline have been proposed. We distinguish three approaches: cyclical, structural, and configurational (or institutional) explanations. The cyclical approach was most prominently advanced by John R. Commons and his associates in the *History of Labor in the United States* (1918). They saw a regular pattern of 'ups and downs' in the union movement that followed the alternations of economic prosperity and depression. Thereafter, business cycle theory has been applied in innumerable studies that have used ever more sophisticated methods and also included economic factors and political variables (for an overview see Fiorito and Greer, 1982). The structural approach assumes that union growth and decline reflect long-term changes in the economy, society, and politics. In this view, union decline results from changing class structures, new modes of production, flexible labour markets, or a spread of individualist social values. Union growth trajectories are expected to resemble more closely a long-term 'parabola' of growth and decline than fluctuating economic and political cycles. Union movements grew in the first, ascending phase with the rise of large industrial conglomerates, the institutionalization of collective employment relations, and the expansion of social citizenship rights. In the descending phase, with the coming of 'post-industrial' society (Bell, 1973), the previous trend became reversed.

Cyclical and structural approaches both share similar shortcomings, not to speak of the contradicting predictions they offer. They cannot explain cross-national diversity across Western industrial societies, since both theories tend to ignore national characteristics. Usually, when econometric models are applied to national cases, it is assumed that modern capitalist economies are affected in similar ways. Remaining observable differences are then dealt with by the *ad hoc* introduction of additional variables or time lags (see, for instance, Bain and Elsheikh, 1976). Structural explanations hold that national differences become less pronounced with 'modernization', though the path and speed of convergence may vary across countries (Kerr *et al.*, 1960). The observed divergence in patterns of industrial relations, union organization, and industrial conflict is interpreted as an exception to convergence rather than as a challenge to the assumption of a universalistic logic (Kaelble, 1987; Kerr, 1983).

In contrast to cyclical and structural approaches, configurational approaches emphasize cross-national variation and historical contingency. In this article we highlight the importance of institutional configurations in mediating the impact of cyclical and structural changes. Even if all industrial relations systems were under similar global pressures, we would expect different national responses given the variations in social institutions. When 'diverse systems encounter common challenges, the consequence is more likely to be a revised diversity than a convergence' (Crouch, 1996: 358). In our view, institutional differences 'structure the alternatives'; they set the constraints and options for corporate actors like trade-union organizations, firms, or employers' associations in choosing their responses. Since the nation-state can still be considered the most tenacious institutional domain within which collective action and public policy-making takes place (Scharpf, 1991), we concentrate on cross-national variations.

Cross-National Divergence in Unionization Patterns

Post-war union development in Western Europe has been shaped by the 'institutionalization' of class

conflict in modern capitalist societies (Dahrendorf, 1959). In most of Western Europe, trade unions became mature mass organizations and gained organizational stability through recognition by the state and employers (Briefs, 1952). Once the post-war reconstruction problems were overcome, most welfare states steered towards 'full employment' and enjoyed during the first two post-war decades economic growth and stability, from which trade unions also profited. In contrast to the inter-war years, union membership in Western Europe oscillated around a general trend without large up and downs (Visser, 1986). The main exceptions were Italy and France, where unions reached high membership levels at the end of World War II due to political mobilization, but declined after the fall of the post-war Left-Centre coalitions and the revival of sharp inter-union rivalry during the Cold War. Until the mid-1970s, trade unions in Spain, Portugal and during many years in Greece, were politically suppressed and are thus excluded from our analysis of the first period.

In the post-war period, social scientists predicted a bleak future for Western unions due to the growth of non-industrial employment and the unions' inability to recruit members outside their past strongholds – the male blue-collar industrial working class. Collective organization seemed an unattractive choice for most white-collar employees; therefore trade unionism had grown to its limits with increasing tertiarization (Bain, 1970; Sturmthal, 1966). Unionization also proved to be difficult among female employees, especially when they held unstable or part-time jobs (Cook *et al.*, 1984). However, with the 'resurgence of class conflict' (Crouch and Pizzorno, 1978), the wave of social protest and worker militancy in the late 1960s, unions began to make new inroads into these previously ill-organized social groups, especially in the expanding public service sector where white-collar, female, and often part-time employment became widespread. In most European democracies union movements gained from this new mobilization wave. The Finnish and Italian unions enjoyed spectacular post-1968 growth after partially successful attempts to reunite the politically fragmented union movements, though 'unity of action' remained without such success in France. The years until the late 1970s were prosperous for the

Scandinavian, German, British, Irish, Belgian, and Dutch unions.

The 1980s undid most of the gains of the previous decade. In 1990 overall union density in Western Europe stood at 34 per cent (weighted average), compared to 40 per cent a decade earlier. This decline is mainly due to changes in the larger countries. Scandinavian unions, in particular in Sweden, Finland and Denmark, continued to grow, albeit at a slower pace. Norwegian unions made small gains and Belgian unions maintained their position; Dutch and Irish unions made big losses in the 1980s but recovered somewhat in the 1990s. Austrian and Swiss union membership rates continued their downward path, slowly but surely. Among the larger European countries, West Germany presented a model of union stability until unification in 1989. By the end of the 1980s union density had slipped 3 or 4 points from its peak of 37 per cent in 1981. Unification with the former GDR boosted aggregate membership with its rate of 45 per cent, but massive losses have brought union density back to 32 per cent in 1993 (41 per cent in the East and 29 per cent in the West).

The sharpest fall in unionization took place in Britain. Since 1979 British unions have lost over 5 million members and union density fell from 51 per cent in 1979 to 33 per cent in 1995, the largest and longest decline in this century. In France aggregate membership was cut by half and union density fell from just over 20 per cent in the late 1970s to below 10 per cent in the 1990s. The three major Italian federations maintained their membership levels of the 1970s but only due to retired workers (now 45 per cent of all members). Union density peaked at 49 per cent in 1980, but fell to 39 per cent in 1995.¹ Spanish unions were unable to maintain mass mobilization during the transition to democracy following Franco's death. Union density fell to 10 per cent in the early 1980s but in the 1990s the tide turned and density was around 20 per cent in 1995 (Jordana, 1996; van de Meer, 1997). Portuguese unions have been unable to keep the high membership levels which were produced under 'compulsory' affiliation during the Salazar dictatorship. Cerdeira (1997) indicates that union density in the mid-1990s might have stood at 30 per cent, 14 percentage points less than in the mid-1980s; another assessment confirms the decline and

Table 1. *Union 'growth' and 'decline' periods and the development of union density in Western Europe, 1950–1995*

Trajectory	Period of 'growth' (1950–1975)	Period of 'decline' (1975–1995)
Growth (> 10%)	Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Ireland, Britain, Belgium	Sweden, Finland, Denmark
Stagnation (+10%––10%)	Austria, West Germany, Netherlands	Norway, Belgium, (West) Germany
Decline (< –10%)	Switzerland	Britain, France, Italy, Ireland, Austria, Germany, Netherlands, Switzerland, Greece
Waves	Finland, France, Italy	Portugal, Spain

estimates a density rate of around 25 per cent (Stolaroff, 1997). According to Kritsantonis (1997), Greek unions have lost a quarter of their membership since 1989, when density was estimated at around 30 per cent. Current union density is 25 per cent or lower.

Looking at the overall trends (Table 1), one can detect different trajectories. Few union movements stand out by showing continuous growth: Swedish, Finish, and Danish unions enjoy this feat. Norwegian and Belgian unions grew in the first period, but more or less stagnated in the second. In Ireland, and in particular in Britain, there was a sharp turnaround in fortunes between the two periods. In continental Europe – Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland – unions have suffered long-term stagnation and decline. Unions in the Southern group have displayed a wave-like pattern in Italy and France in the first, and in Portugal and Spain in the second period. In none of the five Southern European countries have unions been able to defend the level of union organization of the mid-1970s. Thus we can detect at least four trajectories contributing to divergence in unionization trends during the second half of the twentieth century: (1) continuous growth; (2) long-term stagnation; (3) waves; and (4) a turnaround followed by long-term decline. A look at these trajectories should convince students of unionization that the important phenomena to be explained are not short-term (year-to-year) fluctuations, which are relatively small and highly susceptible to measurement error, but the long-term trends and cumulative effects of growth and decline.

Main Causes of Union Growth and Decline

Various explanations have been advanced for union growth and decline and for cross-national variations in unionization patterns. They fall, by and large, within one of three approaches: cyclical, structural, and configurational explanations.

Cyclical factors (politico-economic changes)

- the business cycle – the impact of unemployment and inflation on unionization: while high unemployment hampers, price inflation fosters union growth according to neo-classical theory;
- the political cycle – the electoral success of the pro-union left or the anti-union right, and the dominant policies steering the economy: Keynesian vs. neo-liberal macro-economic policies.

Structural factors (social change)

- changes in the social structure – the formation of the working class vs. de-industrialization, the decline of manual workforce, the rise of white-collar and service work, increased female labour-force participation, and the revival of small-sized firms;
- changes in social values – collectivist working-class orientations vs. the individualization of life styles and the diffusion of post-materialist values.

Configurational factors (institutional context)

- the welfare functions of unions – the selective incentives of welfare services by unions vs. their substitution by public schemes or non-union institutions;
- the role of unions at the workplace – the traditional or statutory access and influence of unions (or worker representatives) at the workplace;
- employer strategies – union recognition or opposition by employers, the spread of centralized bargaining vs. recent decentralization due to international competition.

Business Cycles

Unemployment is often seen as a major constraint on union growth and bargaining power. The long-term unemployed usually quit their union, even when unions offer lower subscription rates. According to business-cycle theory, unemployment raises the costs and lowers the benefits of union membership for workers; membership becomes relatively more costly and unions can achieve less. Moreover, unemployment tends to make recruitment more expensive for unions since it raises the capacity of employers to resist union organizing and increases fear among workers to demonstrate solidarity. Since the mid-1970s trade unions have faced a more adverse economic climate in Western Europe – unemployment climbed to higher levels after each recession. On average, the jobless rate in Western Europe doubled from 1970 to 1985, reaching 7.5 per cent and climbing to 11 per cent in 1995, with large cross-national variations. In econometric models – using aggregate unemployment and union density rates – unemployment turns out to be an unstable and rather weak predictor of membership growth or decline (Bain and Elsheikh, 1976; Booth, 1983; Roche and Larragy, 1990). Pedersen (1982) found a positive relationship between rising unemployment and membership growth in inter-war Denmark which he attributed to the role of unions in providing unemployment benefits. Similarly, van den Berg (1995) showed that the impact of unemployment changed with the shift from union- to state-controlled unemployment insurance in the Netherlands around 1940. In cross-sectional studies a positive relationship

between the rise in unemployment and union decline was found (Armingeon, 1988; Visser, 1990), but only for some time periods and after the introduction of institutional variables into the regression models.

Consumer price inflation is expected to increase the inclination towards union membership. Workers are supposed to seek collective defence against decreasing living standards (Davis, 1941; Bain and Elsheikh, 1976). In an inflationary climate new groups of workers, for instance white-collar staff, seek defence in collective associations of their own, or turn to collective bargaining in order to maintain their relative position compared to what better organized workers can obtain (Flanagan *et al.*, 1983). Moreover, in times of high inflation and supine monetary policy, 'employers may be more prepared to concede to worker demands partly because increases in labour costs can be passed on more easily to customers (Bain and Elsheikh, 1976: 62–3).' However, a free-rider problem arises when unorganized workers receive the same wages as union members, as is common under *erga omnes* contracts and multi-employer bargaining in continental Europe (Traxler, 1994). Hence, when wage rises are a quasi-public good which cannot be withheld from non-members (Chaison and Dhavale, 1992), inflation may not help unions to attract members (Richardson, 1978: 103).

We may expect a positive relation between inflation and membership growth in combination with increased inter-group conflict, in which different groups of workers (of different companies, status groups, regions, or industries) engage in a race to keep their relative position, while governments are unable to negotiate wage restraint and unwilling to use a monetary brake. This may explain why inflation was more consistently correlated with union growth in countries with adversarial and pluralistic industrial relations, as in the Anglo-Saxon countries, at least until the victory of monetarism. Studies by Ashenfelter and Pencavel (1969) for the USA, by Bain and Elsheikh (1976) for Great Britain, Australia, and the USA, and by Booth (1983) for the UK found a correlation between price inflation, wage growth, and union membership. *Nota bene* that Bain and Elsheikh (1976) were unable to find a similar correlation for Sweden. Typically, and indicative of their historical contingency, the observations

examined in these time-series analyses ended before the mid-1970s.

Schnabel (1989), who considered the period 1955–1986 in Germany, found a positive association between money wages and union growth, but conceded that the causal direction may run from union growth to wage increases. Roche and Larragy (1990) analysed the period 1940–1986 in the Irish Republic and found, contrary to the Bain–Elsheikh model for Britain, a ‘highly significant’ negative association between price inflation and union growth, and no association with wage increases. A possible explanation is that in the Irish case inflation rarely occurred in times of prosperity or low unemployment. The authors point to the institutional effect of national wage and incomes policies, which tend to lower the annual rates of change of prices and wages but raise the public standing of unions and perhaps increase their attractiveness to some groups of unorganized workers. In contrast to pre-war developments, when sectoral bargaining and national wage policies were exceptional, van den Berg (1995) found only a very small effect of real wage growth on union membership between 1946 and 1993 in the Netherlands. Possible ‘threat’ and ‘credit’ effects on account of inflation or union wage defence are weakened by the use of price escalators and the application of union-negotiated wages to non-union members in the Netherlands; bargaining coverage has risen to 80 per cent in 1995, whereas union membership is less than 30 per cent (Visser, 1998a). Finally, in a cross-sectional study of 16 OECD countries (1970–88), Freeman (1990) found a positive correlation between average price increases and union membership growth, but the explained variance (0.22) was low.

Political Cycles

Carruth and Disney (1988) show that economics alone cannot explain the sharp downturn in British unionization after 1979, though unemployment and strong real wage growth are part of the story – a combination that was not anticipated by Bain and Elsheikh (1976). Monetarism seemed to have changed the underlying dynamic. There were also changes that made union organizing and strike mobilization more difficult. Comparing British and Irish union development in the 1980s, union decline

in Britain was more pronounced and ‘can be attributed to a significant degree to the changing legal context of industrial relations’ (Freeman and Pelletier, 1990: 156). Conversely, British union growth in the 1970s had benefited from union recognition by the Heath and Wilson governments, while inflation remained unchecked (Bain and Price, 1983).

Also outside Britain there was a general shift towards monetarism and neo-liberalism in the 1980s, affecting Right- and Left-dominated governments (the latter in France, Sweden, Austria, and, to a lesser degree, Italy). Socialist and Labour Parties all over Europe have redefined their relations with the unions and tended to distance themselves from the unions in an attempt to attract the middle-class electorate. Yet outside Britain there were hardly any changes in the rules of the game making union organizing or mobilization of workers more difficult (Baglioni and Crouch, 1990; Ferner and Hyman, 1992, 1997; Van Ruysseveldt and Visser, 1996).²

In 1982 the *Wende* from a Social Democratic- to a Christian-Democratic-dominated government in West Germany did not lead to major changes in union or works council legislation. Possibly, the influence of the labour wing within the ruling Christian Democratic party helped to ensure continuity. Moreover, German federalism and sticky institutional arrangements, make sharp U-turns in political or legal conditions unlikely (Katzenstein, 1987). Even the major shock of re-unification did not upset the institutional fabric of German industrial relations (Van Ruysseveldt and Visser, 1996). Similar arguments apply to countries with consociational democracies and/or neo-corporatist industrial relations: Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the Scandinavian countries (Armington, 1994; Crouch, 1993; Katzenstein, 1985; Visser and Hemerijck, 1997). In conclusion, the political cycle does not constitute a universal mono-linear relationship between Left party strength and union growth, but is more complex and contingent, or has changed in recent decades. Not all Left governments encourage unions or provide a union-friendly environment (e.g. Spain after 1982; France after 1988), and not all conservative governments pursue anti-union policies. Some conservative governments (Sweden in 1991 and Italy in 1994 during the short-lived Berlusconi government)

Table 2 *Western Europe: labour-market change and union density, 1970–1992*

	Share in dependent employment			Union density (%)		
	1970	1992	relative +/-	1970	1992	absolute +/-
Total ^a	91,000 ^a	101,000 ^a	11	38	34	–4
Men	66	57	–5	44	37	–7
Women	34	43	41	25	30	5
Industry	49	32	–24	42	40	–2
Transport	7	7	12	68	63	–5
Commerce and finance	12	26	142	18	15	–3
Social/personal services	26	32	44	36	35	–1
Manual	58	40	–24	40	41	1
Non-manual	42	60	60	34	29	–5
Market	78	67	–4	33	25	–8
Collective or public	22	33	66	52	51	–1

^aWage- and salary-earners in employment, in thousands. All figures are based on the weighted sum of ten countries: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, West Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and Great Britain.

Sources: Employment data are from the OECD *Labour Force Statistics*, various years; and from Visser (1989). Union density rates are calculated on the basis of data from the DUES database (Ebbinghaus and Visser, 1999).

may have wanted to imitate Mrs Thatcher's anti-union policies, but found themselves blocked by internal weakness and strong unions; others, faced with less formidable unions (the Netherlands in 1982, or France in 1986), kept their relations with the unions in good order.

Besides direct political and legal changes affecting the opportunities for workers to join unions, employer recognition, and union recruitment efforts, there is a more indirect impact of politics on union activity (Hall, 1986). Neo-corporatist income regulation and Keynesian full employment policies had provided a favourable political economy for union movements in a number of Western European countries until the mid-1970s. Corporatist institutions tended to promote the status of unions and enhance the stability of their organization whatever government was in power. They shielded trade unions against the large and sudden up- or down-swings that occur in open economies by assuring organized labour's role within the system. Indeed, membership fluctuations were significantly smaller in neo-corporatist countries (Visser, 1986). In our comparative analysis, we will therefore not only consider the political cycle as measured by Left government incumbency, but also take account of neo-corporatism as a mediating factor of the relationships between capital and labour.

Changing Social Structure

Modernization theories argue that the transition from an industrial to a service economy erodes the basis for union organization. The major structural changes that in previous decades worked in favour of trade unions – the decline of agriculture and traditional household services; expanding public employment; and increased bureaucratization in industry and services – are now reversed, given current trends of privatization, down-sizing, and outsourcing.

The composition of labour markets has changed dramatically in Western Europe (see Table 2). The entire employment growth was due to increased female participation: women's share among wage earners rose to 43 per cent in 1992 and there are now fewer male wage earners than two decades ago. Decline has hit industry (mining, manufacturing, and construction) and led to a sharp fall in the employment of manual workers, who became a minority in Europe's labour force. In 1970 half of all wage-earners found work in industry; in 1992 industry's share was equal to that of social and personal services. If the strong growth of the past 25 years (144 per cent) continues, commercial and financial services will soon make up for the other third. We observe, finally, that the share of public or

collective (i.e. subsidized) employment (mostly in social and personal services) has risen over the entire period from less than a quarter to one-third. Most of this growth occurred in the 1970s and the expansion of public-sector employment has stopped or has been reversed in the past decade.

Judging by the union density rates presented in Table 2, it appears that employment shifts have had a negative effect on overall union growth. Employment decline reduced the highly organized population, i.e. the male, manual workers in industry, while employment growth has occurred in sectors and among groups where unions were not well-established. The only exception to this rule is the expansion of the public-service sector which, due to its much higher density rate, has boosted union membership, at least until the halt to public-service-sector growth of the 1980s. The last column of Table 2 shows that in the past two decades union decline affected all but one group: women. Hence, we can infer that the changing composition of Europe's labour markets cannot by itself explain union decline. In fact, a shift-share analysis, in which we simulate what might have happened if no change in the composition of the European labour market would have taken place, shows a 1.7-point higher average density rate in 1992 than the actual rate of 33.8. In other words, structural change accounts for about 40 per cent (1.7 of 4.4 percentage points) of the measured decline in union density between 1970 and 1992.

In this comparative analysis we could only use very broadly defined sectors, because the data for separating the (declining) commercial sector from the (booming) business and financial sector were missing. Studies for countries or periods for which a more detailed sectoral classification, at the one-digit ISIC level, was possible, come up with similar estimates (Visser, 1991; Waddington, 1992). However, the analysis is restricted to inter-sectoral employment shifts and does not take into account intra-sectoral changes related to outsourcing, the revival of small firms, and flexible employment relations (Delsen, 1995). In the European Union, 15 per cent of all employees (mainly women) work part-time, and 11 per cent of all employment contracts are atypical. There are pronounced cross-national variations in the degree of part-time and atypical work, partly as a result of union

action and partly resulting from government legislation.³

Data for Britain and the Netherlands show very clearly that union density rates are much lower in small firms, especially among micro-firms of less than 10 workers, among part-time workers, and among workers on flexible (or temporary) contracts (Visser, 1998b). This is due to a combination of the lower availability of an organizing union in workplaces with these characteristics and the lower attractiveness of any union for workers with these characteristics (Sinclair, 1995). Indicators other than membership, such as voting for union candidates in works council elections, participation in strikes, or opinions expressed in surveys all suggest a larger distance, factual and emotional, between unions and workers in unstable employment relations (Klandermans and Visser, 1995; Richards and García de Polavieja, 1997). British and Dutch labour-force sample surveys indicate a strong correlation between union growth and job tenure: the longer people stay in the same firm, the higher their propensity to join a union.

Finally, and possibly related to the 'casualization' of the youth labour market, union membership among young people has fallen sharply over the past two decades (both as a proportion of total union membership and as a proportion of young workers). Overall, union membership is ageing and around 20 per cent of all union members in Western Europe are not gainfully employed. Retired workers make up about half of this group (Visser, 1991).

Even if intra-sectoral change could pick up the 60 per cent fall in union density that is unaccounted for, it does not provide us with a satisfactory explanation about how and why the decline occurred, and when and where it happened. The decline of industrial employment began in many countries before the drop in union membership. Moreover, since structural changes in labour markets are quite similar across countries, they are an unlikely explanation for the observed cross-national divergence in union growth (see Table 1). Furthermore, such an explanation raises an issue of causality. It may well be that the weakening of unions – in for instance Britain, Spain or the Netherlands – explains the sharp rise in employment in small firms or part-time work, which then leads to a further weakening of the base for union organizing (see Richards and

García de Polavieja, 1997). The fact that in some countries – for instance in Spain, Ireland, and the Netherlands – union fortunes appeared to have turned in the 1990s, despite a continuation of the same structural trends, is also unexplained. This, evidently, points to a role for union strategy, a role which is obscured in structuralist (and business-cycle) explanations. To sum up, structural change is a likely suspect in any judgement on union decline, but it is best conceptualized as a background pressure, the true impact of which can only be established in multivariate analysis.

At this point it would be useful to consider changes in social values and expectations of workers towards unions. Such changes, in conjunction with the aforementioned changes in the labour market and the possible diffusion of ‘post-materialist’ values and ‘individualist’ life-styles (Inglehart, 1977; Lipset, 1986), are obvious candidates in an explanation of union decline. Single-country studies, in which workers who entered the labour market 30 years ago are compared with younger age cohorts, lead us to be more prudent on this point (see Klander-mans and Visser, 1995), but the lack of data and comparable indicators across time and countries force us not to pursue this argument here.

The Welfare Role of Unions

Historically, unions have provided many welfare functions through self-help. With the rise of the welfare state these functions have increasingly been replaced by compulsory public schemes (Flora, 1986; de Swaan, 1988). The question arises whether workers still need trade unions when the welfare state provides for minimum wages, social insurance, dismissal rules, co-determination rights, and health and safety at work. Van de Vall (1970) argued that in order to survive, trade unions would have to invent new tasks focusing on individual assistance and conflict insurance in the workplace. In cross-national research, however, there seems to be a positive correlation between social expenditure and union density (Hicks, 1988), though causality may in fact run the other way round: union movements have promoted welfare state growth and profited from its expansion in the past, in particular from redistributive social security, full employment policies, and public-sector growth (Esping-Andersen, 1990).

The expanding welfare state has not always made the older, voluntary arrangements redundant. In some countries, union-led welfare schemes modelled on the ‘Ghent system’ survived, and thus provided workers with a selective incentive to join unions or remain a member when losing their jobs (Griffin *et al.*, 1991; Olsen, 1965; Rothstein, 1992; Western, 1993). State unemployment schemes were made mandatory for workers at a relatively early stage in Britain (1911), Austria (1920), and Germany (1927), and somewhat later in Norway (1938), and the Netherlands (under German occupation in 1940), while the mutual schemes in France and Switzerland never grew to such importance for trade unions (Flora, 1986). Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Greece failed to achieve a comprehensive nation-wide safety-net for the unemployed (Ferrara, 1996). The Ghent system is still operating in Sweden, Denmark, and Finland, but in the Finnish case state subsidies were introduced as late as in the 1960s. In Denmark unemployment funds also cover early the retirement schemes that became widespread during the period of high unemployment (Scheuer, 1992). In Belgium, unemployment insurance became state-controlled after the war but unions still play a role in administering unemployment (and early retirement) benefits and receive state subsidies for their services.⁴ Although union membership is not required by law under the current Ghent systems in Scandinavia or Belgium, many employees perceive a close connection and this may explain why membership grows when unemployment increases. In contrast to other countries, unemployed workers tend to retain their membership in Belgian, Danish, Finnish, and Swedish unions.

The Role of Unions in the Workplace

Access to the workplace has become particularly important for unions with the disappearance of working-class neighbourhoods and the replacement of local dues collection by centralized administrative procedures (Streeck, 1981; Windolf and Haas, 1989). Thus union representation in the workplace has become the only direct means of contact between members and their union (except where unions administer social security or provide insurance). The workplace appears to be the main locus to recruit new members (‘members recruit

members') and offer membership services (grievance handling). Protection and support in the workplace is often cited as the main instrumental reason for workers to join unions. This presupposes that unions are present and visible in the workplace and that they are recognized.

Union access to the workplace may be secured through collective agreements with employers or be based upon legislation. In the Scandinavian countries information and consultation rights are exclusively guaranteed through the union channel and to union members; the basic framework is provided through central agreements between unions and employers which, in the case of manual industrial workers, go back to the turn of the century. A similar system of 'single' or 'union channel' representation is typical in Britain and Ireland, but in both countries actual workplace representation and related information and consultation rights have received less support under the law. Compared to Scandinavia, union workplace representation is less widespread and more susceptible to the ups and downs in the power and prestige of unions, and the militancy of workers.

In Austria, Germany, and belatedly and to a lesser extent in the Netherlands, union access to the workplace developed, if at all, in the context of the legislation on works councils offering a 'second' or 'non-union' based channel for worker representation and consultation in firms. In these countries the works council functions sometimes as a workplace union. Union-dominated councils may help to sustain the organizing efforts of the unions, but non-union dominated councils may instead offer a cheaper alternative to workers who seek representation rather than union membership (Rogers and Streeck, 1995). Statutory rights for unions to elect or appoint union workplace representatives exist in France (since 1968), Italy (1970), and Belgium (1972, formalizing an agreement of 1946). This brings the Belgian and Italian situation close to the Scandinavian one, albeit with a more limited application in Italy. In France the actual coverage of union representation is limited and the competition with other non-union based forms of staff representation and works councils, combined with the competition between unions, has prevented the emergence of effective union workplace representation. In Spain, Portugal, and Greece, recognition rights for unions

and consultation rights for workers have been introduced since the return to democracy in the mid-1970s, but in each of these countries the coverage of these rights is *de facto* limited to large firms and the public sector. As in Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, and France, workers may choose to show their support for unions through their vote for union candidates rather than through the more costly option of formal union membership.

In both mandatory and voluntary systems there are thresholds. As a rule, workplace access is more common in the public sector, in larger firms, and among manual workers in industry, where union presence is oldest, collective bargaining has a long tradition, and is, in the case of sectoral bargaining, often supplemented by company or worksite bargaining which gives union regulation and protection more 'depth' (Clegg, 1976). Small firms are usually exempted from works-council legislation and legislation is less well enforced. In the case of union rights which are obtained through voluntary agreement with employers, actual coverage of these rights varies greatly across countries and industries. Whereas nearly all workers appear to be covered in Sweden, this proportion sinks to 70 per cent or less in Denmark, 50 per cent in Switzerland, and even less in Britain. In Italy, as in the other Southern European countries, the large small-firm sector, which accounts for 30–50 per cent of all employment, is *de facto* excluded from representation rights.⁵

Union Recognition or Opposition by Employers

Today, previously sheltered and regulated markets as well as expansive social policies and institutionalized industrial relations from which unions once profited and gained strength, come increasingly under pressure from low-cost competitors and less regulated regimes. In a study of the USA, Kochan *et al.* (1984) argue that these changes have provoked a strategic realignment of management–union relations. The authors take the anti-union strategy of employers for granted, since it is 'deeply ingrained in American ideology'. In the US case it is also a 'feasible' strategy, given the absence or weakening of legal protection (for instance, against the replacement of strikers), the structure of company

unionism, and the weakness of the unions. This 'strategic choice' approach views the power relations and interdependencies between firms and unions as crucial.

Students of Western European industrial relations have observed that anti-union policies by employers are less forceful, less widespread, and less uninhibited by law or public policy than in the USA (Baglioni and Crouch, 1990; Locke *et al.*, 1995). Since employers in Europe, by and large, compete in the same markets and are subject to similar global pressures as their American colleagues, institutional and political forces must intervene in favour of more co-operative industrial relations. Most European union movements have more institutional and political resources, as well as higher membership levels than labour unions in the USA. In many European countries they are, moreover, embedded in a neo-corporatist system of regulation and representation; they 'share public space' (Crouch, 1993) and are granted nationwide recognition.

It has been argued that in the case of nationwide, multi-employer bargaining individual employers have fewer incentives to de-recognize the unions or frustrate their organizing efforts (Blanchflower and Freeman, 1990); all employers face the same wage costs if they bargain together; and individual employers cannot expect to improve their position from moving to a non-union environment if the collective agreement will be made binding on unorganized employers by public law. This argument applies even more strongly where unions and employers are locked into a 'corporatist' exchange relationship of mutual dependence. On the other hand, we know from the Dutch case that macro-level corporatism may grant unions influence over national policies but deny them access to the workplace. Moreover, by enhancing the institutional security of unions and their leaders, and by establishing a quasi-monopoly of union representation, corporatism intentionally diminishes the need for unions to prove their strength through mobilization and lowers the political and organizational incentives for union recruitment (Visser, 1986). Finally, by turning private agreements into public law and setting standards for members and non-members alike, corporatism tends to exacerbate the 'free-rider' problem in union organizing, for which in some systems a financial compensation to unions as

organizations is offered, making the union less dependent on its membership (see Streeck, 1981).

Data and Research Design

For exploring the variations in unionization patterns and trends from 1950 to 1995, we will undertake separate analyses for two periods: the post-war 'maturation' period (1950–1975) and the subsequent 'crisis' (1975–1995) years. We expect the context, causes and dynamics of the rise and decline in unionization to differ systematically, thus requiring separate modelling and testing for each period. While cross-sectional regression analysis helps detect common trends and causes, we doubt it will be possible to find a general linear explanation for cross-national variation in unionization levels and trends that holds for both time periods. Instead, we expect to find cross-national diversity in unionization patterns as a result of the interaction of different institutional configurations and concurrent cyclical and structural factors. In order to discover these historical contingencies and nation-specific configurations under which unions organize more or less successfully, we will adopt the 'qualitative-comparative analysis' or QCA method (Griffin *et al.*, 1991; Ragin, 1987).

At variance with studies that include all OECD countries, we confine our empirical analysis to Western Europe in order to maximize data comparability and limit diversity by using a similar country design. Our argument that 'institutions matter' is more convincing if demonstrated on a subset of countries which share many characteristics rather than when considering all advanced industrial nations. Our dependent variables are the levels and changes in union density, measured for the beginning and end of each time period (1950–1975 and 1975–1995). As an indicator of unionization we calculated 'net' union density, excluding union members who are not gainfully employed or not seeking employment (pensioners, the self-employed, conscripts, or students). As an indicator of growth or decline, we calculated relative growth rates for each period (see Tables 3a and 3b).

As an indicator of a pro-union political environment we have chosen the index of Left government incumbency, which reflects the

Table 3(a). *Union density and independent variables (Phase I), Western Europe 1950–1975*

Country	Union density (%) 1950	Union density (%) 1975	% growth 1950–1975	Labour relations 1970	Social- Democrat government 1950–1973	Industry % 1970	Public sector % 1970	Unem- ployment % 1950–1974	Inflation % 1950–1973
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
North									
Sweden	66.7	74.5	+11.7	A,B,C	4.1	30.6	31.3	1.8	4.2
Finland	33.6	67.4	+100.6	A,b,c	1.7	33.2	20.1	1.9	6.3
Denmark	53.2	67.4	+26.7	A,B,C	2.8	28.2	34.1	2.8	5.6
Norway	47.9	52.7	+10.0	B,C	3.4	32.1	27.0	0.8	5.0
West									
Ireland	37.3	55.2	+48.0	b,D	0.1	30.0	26.2	5.6	5.9
Great Britain	39.7	48.3	+21.7	b,D	2.5	38.9	29.4	1.6	4.7
Centre									
Belgium	36.9	51.9	+47.0	a,B,C	1.4	39.0	24.0	2.9	3.2
Austria	61.3	56.1	–8.5	b,C	2.2	38.6	38.4	2.8	4.9
Germany	36.4	36.6	+0.5	b,c	0.6	45.0	24.1	2.5	3.4
Switzerland	39.7	32.9	–17.1	c	0.8	41.2	10.5	0.3	3.8
Netherlands	38.0	38.4	1.1	C	0.9	27.9	20.9	1.7	4.9
South									
Italy	45.4	47.2	+4.0	b	0.4	40.0	26.4	4.8	4.5
France	32.5	22.8	–29.8		0.6	34.4	23.6	1.5	5.2

Notes: (1)–(2). Union density of gainfully employed. (3): Growth rate in per cent of union density at beginning of period. (4) Industrial relations (capital letters indicate strong influence, small letters minor impact): A/a = 'Ghent' (union-led) unemployment insurance; B/b = workplace access for unions; C/c = neo-corporatist institutionalization of unions; D/d = 'closed shop' tradition; (5) Government participation of Social-Democratic/Socialist party (index 0–5). (6) Share of industry (ISCO 2–4) in dependent employment. (7) Share of public sector in dependent employment. (8) Average unemployment rate. (9) Average inflation rate (consumer price index).

Sources: (1)–(3): DUES database (Ebbinghaus and Visser, 1999); (5): Merkel, 1993: 88; (6): OECD, *Labour Force Statistics* 1970–90; (7)–(9): Merkel, 1993.

strength and length of Social-Democratic or Labour Party participation in government coalitions (Merkel, 1993).⁶ Following the earlier discussion, we expect the strength of Left Parties to be of particular relevance for the first but not for the second period. For the period 1975–1995, we have operationalized the existence of a 'hostile' or 'friendly' legal-political environment by estimating the impact of labour-market deregulation: the growth of ill-protected atypical or part-time jobs and self-employment outside agriculture. We have also included some of the traditional business-cycle indicators: the average unemployment rate and consumer price inflation over the two periods. Following business-cycle theory, we expect rising unemployment to have a negative and increasing inflation a positive effect on union growth. In order to capture the effect of structural employment shifts, we take the share of industry in 1970 as an indicator of the impact of industrialization and the relative size of the tradi-

tional working-class (phase I), and the decline of industrial employment in the 20 years since 1975 as a yardstick for the degree of de-industrialization and transition towards a post-industrial economy (phase II). In addition, we take the share of the public sector as an indicator of the expansion of the welfare state from which we expect a positive effect on union membership growth during the first period. For the second period, however, we took the share of service employment in 1995 as an indicator of the emergence of a post-industrial society and post-Fordist labour market. Industrialization and welfare-state expansion are expected to promote unionization in phase I, whereas de-industrialization and flexibilization are thought to hamper union growth in phase II.

Finally, we included four indicators of the institutional context of industrial relations:

(A) the existence of union-led unemployment schemes (the Ghent system);

Table 3(b). *Union density and independent variables (Phase II), Western Europe 1975–1995*

Country	Union density (%)		% growth 1975–1995	Labour relations c. 1990	Non-farm independent 1990	Industry change 1975–1995	Part-time % 1995	Unemployment % 1975–1995	Inflation % 1975–1995
	1975	1995							
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
North									
Sweden	74.5	91.1 ^a	+22.3	A,B,C	7.1	–29.3	17.2	3.2	7.7
Finland	67.4	79.3	+17.7	A,B,C	8.8	–23.5	7.4	7.2	7.2
Denmark	67.4	80.1 ^a	+18.8	A,B,C	6.8	–14.0	14.5	7.9	6.2
Norway	52.7	57.7	+9.5	B,C	6.1	–29.7	20.9	3.3	6.8
West									
Ireland	55.2	48.9 ^a	–11.4	b,c,d	12.8	–12.6	15.3	12.9	8.7
Great Britain	48.3	32.9	–31.9		12.4	–32.2	19.9	8.1	8.5
Centre									
Belgium	51.9	51.9	0.0	a,B,C	14.3	–28.8	16.5	9.6	4.9
Austria	56.1	41.2	–26.6	b,C	6.7	–21.5	10.3	3.1	4.1
Germany	36.6	28.9	–21.0	b,c	8.0	–20.7	13.4	6.1	3.4
Switzerland	32.9	22.5 ^a	–31.6	c	(9.0)	–29.4	22.7	1.2	3.3
Netherlands	38.4	25.6	–33.3	b,C	8.1	–35.2	24.7	7.9	3.7
South									
Italy	47.2	39.9 ^a	–15.5	b,c	22.2	–16.6	11.1	9.6	10.5
Portugal	52.4	25.6	–51.1	c	15.9	–0.5	6.8	6.7	16.2
Spain	30.4	18.6	–38.8	b,c	17.5	–21.1	6.2	15.4	10.9
France	22.8	9.1	–60.0		9.1	–30.0	14.1	8.5	6.6
Greece	35.8	24.3	–32.1		27.2	(–20.5)	8.0	6.1	16.9

^a1994.

Notes: (1)–(4) and (8) and (9) see Table 3a; (5) Non-farm independent: share of self-employment in non-agricultural sector (SZ: estimated); (6) Relative decline in share of industry (ISCO 2-4) (GR: 1977–95); (7) Share of part-time workers (< 30 hours) in total employment.

Sources: (1–3): DUES database (Ebbinghaus and Visser, 1999); (5): OECD *Job Study*, 1994 Tab. 6.8; (6): OECD: *Labour Force Statistics* 1970–90; (7)–(9): OECD: *Employment Outlook* 1993–1997; OECD, *Economic Outlook*, December 1995.

- (B) the institutionalized access of unions to the workplace;
- (C) the corporatist inclusion of the unions in national or sector-wide consultation bodies with employers and the state;
- (D) the practices of enforced membership, in particular, the 'closed shop'.

We expect the union-led unemployment schemes to have a positive impact on union growth (Rothstein, 1992; Western, 1993, 1997). Access to the workplace allows unions to improve recruitment chances (Kjellberg, 1983; Hancké, 1993). We have coded this indicator on the basis of our prior discussion, distinguishing between 'single' and 'dual channel' countries, and weighting the strength of union rights with the degree of coverage (see OECD,

1997; Rogers and Streeck, 1995; Traxler, 1994; and Visser, 1993 for the data).

Corporatist arrangements secure nationwide union recognition and create a favourable environment for union stability, but they are unlikely to create incentives for union growth. We have coded as highly corporatist systems the Scandinavian countries (with Finland as a laggard) and the consociational democracies (Austria, Belgium, and the Netherlands), but not Switzerland, which, like Germany, Italy and Ireland, takes a position in between (corporatist exchange has a more limited application and/or duration). Closed-shop practices that used to be common in Great Britain and Ireland help to solve the free-rider problem through coercion and thus provide an additional 'union

security', promoting union membership in core sectors. We have coded the institutional variables according to two overlapping dichotomies, distinguishing for example between strong union workplace representation (B), weak union workplace representation (b), and no representation. The same procedure was followed with respect to Ghent (A or a); corporatism (C or c), and closed-shop arrangements (D or d). This allows us to test for a strong and a weak version of our hypotheses.

Quantitative Comparative Analysis

The correlation matrix of union density and selected indicators for the two time periods produces disappointing results for the cyclical and structural variables. For neither of the two periods do we find a significant cross-national correlation between economic or social structural variables (inflation, employment, industry share, change in industry, self-employment, or part-time employment). The correlation matrix in Table 4a shows that values are much lower for these variables than for the political and institutional indicators. Confirming a major thesis of Korpi (1983), there exists a significant correlation ($r = 0.66$) between the level of organization in 1975 and the participation of Social-Democratic or Labour Parties in post-war governments. Yet the causal relation, if it exists, may cut both ways: union strength promotes the chances of Left government participation, and Left government policies (before the 1980s) may have helped the unions. Also the expansion of the public sector, which is a result of welfare-state politics, clearly works to the advantage of union membership growth in this first period ($r = 0.53$), as Esping-Andersen (1990) and others have argued, but public-sector growth may also be the result of strong unionism and partly of Left governments in power.

Even higher correlation indices are found for two of the four institutional conditions: the existence of union-led unemployment schemes (A) and access of unions to the workplace, either in the strong or the weak version (B/b). Moreover, the high correlation between the level of organization at the beginning and end of the periods under consideration ($r = 0.61$ between union density in 1950 and 1975; $r = 0.93$ between 1975 and 1995) reinforces the claim that

unionization is the result of institutionalization. Successful mobilization in the past is an important *acquis* for the future. The higher the level of organization in 1975, the smaller the decline during the 'crisis' years ($r = 0.81$). Note that this does not hold everywhere: Great Britain, for instance, presents a major exception. Indeed, the level of unionization and institutionalized industrial relations remain two distinct phenomena that need not move in the same direction. It is no coincidence that the exceptions (Britain in the second, Italy in the first period) are found in the countries with no capital 'C', that is, countries where experiments with corporatism were short-lived and unstable as well as largely conditional on the power of left-leaning governments (Regini, 1984).

These *prima facie* impressions, based on the correlation matrix, are confirmed through our second quantitative comparison, in which we apply OLS multivariate regression analysis (see Table 4b). All the business-cycle or structural variables prove to be insignificant. They all 'fall through' the filter of a step-wise regression analysis (using a < 0.15 significance level). The institutional variables, in particular the union-led unemployment schemes (A) and union access to the workplace (B), prove to be more important explanatory factors; they appear in all models and in both periods. The variation in union density at the end of the 'maturation' phase, in 1975, can largely be explained by institutional differences: the level of unionization was highest in countries where union movements had (continued) their own unemployment schemes and had access to the workplace (model 1 in Table 4b).

The explanation can be improved when a further institutional variable, i.e. the existence of corporatism (C), is added. Institutional factors, i.e. the Ghent system, a closed shop, and/or workplace access, explain the cross-national variation in union growth in phase I (models 2, 3, and 4). The best model (4) explains 75 per cent of the variation on the basis of three (significant) variables: Ghent, workplace access, and the 'take-off' level of density. The (small) negative coefficient of the 1950 density rate indicates a small saturation effect: at higher levels of unionization it becomes more difficult to reach those who have not (yet) joined, e.g. employees in small firms, non-manual occupations, or non-standard jobs, or workers with strong ideological

Table 4(a). *Correlation matrix of union density in 1975/1995 and growth rates 1950–1975/1975–1995*

Correlation (Phase I) 1950–1975	Density 1975	Growth rate 1950–1975	Correlation (Phase II) 1975–1995	Density 1995	Growth rate 1975–1995
Ghent system (A)	0.7559	0.5008	Ghent system (A)	0.8446	0.7349
Ghent system (A/a)	0.7110	0.6130	Ghent system (A/a)	0.8202	0.7676
Workplace access (B)	0.5390	0.1485	Workplace access (B)	0.8547	0.8677
Workplace access (B/b)	0.6918	0.5549	Workplace access (B/b)	0.5608	0.6486
Corporatism (C)	0.4371	–0.0553	Corporatism (C)	0.7022	0.6857
Corporatism (C/c)	0.3151	0.1155	Corporatism (C/c)	0.4156	0.4620
Closed shop (D)	0.0492	0.2393	Closed shop (D)	0.0723	0.0677
Social democracy	0.6639	0.0944	Non-farm independent	–0.3769	–0.3357
Industry share	–0.4356	–0.2611	Change in industry	0.0184	–0.0854
Public-sector share	0.5297	–0.0201	Part-time	0.0437	0.1354
Unemployment	0.2329	0.2816	Unemployment	–0.1998	–0.1818
Inflation	0.3288	0.4223	Inflation	–0.1705	–0.2640
Density 1950	0.6099	–0.2120	Density 1975	0.9298	0.8135
Density 1975	–	0.6359	Density 1995	–	0.9512

Table 4(b). *Regression analysis of union density in 1975/1990 and growth rates 1950–1975/1975–1990*

Model	Union density 1975		Growth rates 1950–1975	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Constant	29.1***	–5.68	41.2	48.6*
Ghent system (A)	18.4***			
Ghent system (a/A)		52.2***	44.8**	39.0*
Workplace access (B)				
Workplace access (b/B)	17.7***		33.7*	41.6*
Corporatism (C)	6.9*			
'Closed shop'		40.5*	19.1	
Density 1950		–	–1.5*	–1.7*
Density 1975	–	–	–	–
r ²	0.8940***	0.5618**	0.7782***	0.7461***
Model:	Union density 1995		Growth rates 1975–1995	
	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Constant	26.9***	–9.1	–41.3***	–63.3***
Ghent system (A)	28.7***	12.7**	14.8	
Ghent system (a/A)				
Workplace access (B)	27.9***	16.0***	29.2***	27.4***
Workplace access (b/B)			16.9**	13.7**
Corporatism (C)				
'Closed shop'	20.0**			
Density 1950	–	–	–	–
Density 1975	–	0.9***	–	0.6
r ²	0.8936***	0.9623***	0.8620***	0.8864***

*p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.

Notes: (1)–(4): N = 13, (5)–(8): N = 16; see also Tables 3a and 3b.

convictions against unions. Thus, a high initial level of unionization tends to have a stabilizing effect: it makes decline but also growth less likely (the 'wave-like' unionization patterns in some Southern European countries, and Great Britain, present an exception to this rule).

For the 'crisis' phase we can explain a large part of the variation of union density at the end of the period by the same three institutional variables: union-led unemployment schemes, a closed shop, and union access to the workplace (models 5 and 6). However, the correlation between union density levels at the beginning and end of the period are now so strong that the models that integrate all three institutional factors are no longer significant within the same model (model 6). When we use this 'institutional inertia model', only Ghent and workplace access remain. The overall negative trend of union decline can be detected from the negative (but not significant) coefficient of the constant in these equations. By far the most important factor explaining the variation in union growth or decline during the 'crisis' years appears to be whether or not, and to what degree, unions were recognized and present in the workplace. This is the only institutional factor which remains, in both its strong (B) and weak (b) variants, in our models (7 and 8). This is in line with the findings of Hancké (1993) for a smaller group of seven countries and should not surprise us given the general trend towards company restructuring and decentralization of industrial relations in these years.

A regression analysis of only two points in time or across two time spans can be only the first step in a statistical test of different theoretical explanations. Our analysis is based on a small number of 13 (phase 1) to 16 (phase 2) cases.⁷ Furthermore, these 'snapshot' comparisons mainly apply summary indicators for unionization, economic trends, and structural shifts. Our indicators for industrialization and flexibility, moreover, are relatively crude. Further refinement in these indicators and subdivision into sectors and periods may be the way ahead. A time-series analysis with 'pooled' data is probably also valuable as a method for further exploring and testing the contesting theories of union growth (cf. Janoski and Hicks, 1994), though at this point we have decided to explore another path and take the different institutional configurations and member-

ship trajectories into consideration with the help of qualitative comparative analysis.

Qualitative Comparative Analysis

Our quantitative analysis has shown the importance of institutional factors, but the models assumed a linear and additive causal mechanism, while there might be an interaction effect of particular institutional configurations. We will therefore explore the results of our regression analysis with the help of a configuration analysis. This qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) allows us to go further than the statistical, probabilistic regression models which, due to the small number of cases, can apply only linear additive variable combinations. QCA considers each individual case; that is, each country can be represented as a cluster of interrelated variables and can be analysed as a whole case. QCA models take multi-causal and interactive processes into account. Thus context-dependent variables will be controlled for both their logical consistency and their empirical coincidence. This is of particular importance when we consider historical institutional theories, which do not assume universal linear or cyclical processes but institutional combinations and path-dependent trajectories. The basic rules of this method are the laws of logic or Boolean algebra (Ragin, 1987). For this purpose we must transform our quantitative variables into qualitative variables with binary coding (i.e. true or false).⁸ This comparative method reduces some information on our variable, yet allows us to group countries more by salient characteristics than by marginal quantitative differences which may also reflect measurement errors. Different to statistical analysis, the QCA method takes each case fully into consideration and does not allow any error term or probabilistic causality.

We apply our configuration analysis to the union density rates of 1975 and 1995 (Tables 5a and 6a) and relative changes during phase 1 and phase 2 (Tables 5b and 6b). With some exceptions, the growth patterns follow by and large the ranking of countries by unionization level.⁹ Our previous conclusion that institutional conditions are sufficient to offer a parsimonious explanation of cross-national variation in the level of unionization in Western Europe

Table 5(a). *Configuration analysis (QCA) of union density in Phase I, Western Europe 1950–1975*

Country	Density (%) 1975	Ghent system	Workplace access	Corporatist participation	Closed shop	QCA
High						
Sweden	74.5	A 11	B 11	C 11		A
Finland	67.4	A 11	b 01	c 01		≈
Denmark	67.4	A 11	B 11	C 11		≈
Medium						
Austria	56.1		b 01	C 11		b+C+ [^] A
Norway	52.7		B 11	C 11		≈
Belgium	51.9	a 01	B 11	C 11		≈
Ireland	55.2		b 01		D 1	b+D+ [^] a
Great Britain	48.3		b 01		D 1	
Italy	47.2		b 01			???
Low						
Netherlands	38.4			C 11		[^] b+ [^] a+ [^] D
Germany	36.6		b 01	c 01		???
Switzerland	32.9			c 01		
France	22.8					

Source: see Table 3a.

Table 5(b). *Configuration analysis (QCA) of union growth in Phase I, Western Europe 1950–1975*

Country	Density (%) 1975	Ghent system	Workplace access	Corporatist participation	Closed shop	QCA
Growth						
Finland	+100.6	A 11	b 01	c 01		A
Denmark	+26.7	A 11	B 11	C 11		≈
Sweden	+11.7	A 11	B 11	C 11		≈
Belgium	+47.0	a 01	B 11	C 11		B+C+ [^] A
Norway	+10.0		B 11	C 11		≈
Ireland	+48.0		b 01		D 1	b+D+ [^] a
Great Britain	+21.7		b 01		D 1	
No growth						
Italy	+4.0		b 01			
Netherlands	1.1			C 11		[^] B+ [^] D+ [^] a
Germany	+0.5		b 01	c 01		≈
Austria	−8.5		b 01	C 11		≈
Switzerland	−17.1			c 01		≈
France	−29.8					

Source: see Table 3a.

Notes: [^]: non-existent (00), x: 'weak' (01), X: 'strong' (11), +: boolean 'and', ≈: combination as above, ???: unclear combination (excluded).

is confirmed by the QCA-model. As in the regression analysis, non-institutional variables make no significant contribution to the explanation of variations. Hence, they are dropped from the model and not shown in Tables 5 to 6. The regression analysis has already taught us that the highest level of union organization at the beginning and end of each

period can be explained by institutional factors alone. We did not know, however, which of these institutional factors are necessary and sufficient, and in which combination.

Our first step is to group the countries according to a similar level of unionization; 'high', with two-thirds or more of the workers joining a union;

'medium', with a density rate of between 45 and 65 percent; and 'low' or 'medium to low', with a density rate under 45 per cent. It appears that the existence of union-led unemployment schemes (A) is a necessary condition for a very high level of union density; this is true for both periods (Table 5a and 6a) and confirms the results in recent literature on union growth (Griffin *et al.*, 1991; Rothstein, 1992; Western, 1993, 1997). Without this 'selective incentive' it is impossible for unions to organize 60 per cent and more of all wage and salary earners. The other variables – corporatism and access to the workplace – are also present in the very high unionization group (Sweden, Finland, and Denmark), but they do not necessarily lead to a very high level of union density, as can be shown in the case of Norway, which abandoned the Ghent-system and remained below that mark.

The second group of countries with a moderate to high level of organization in 1975 (about every second worker joined a union) is made up from a rather diverse group: Austria, Norway, Belgium, Austria, Ireland, and Italy. The group falls into two institutional configurations: unions in group one (Austria, Norway, and Belgium) have access to the workplace, be it in a weak version and through a non-union institution in Austria (b), and they are embedded in corporatist relations with the state and with employers (C); in group two (Britain and Ireland) workplace access is combined, not with the macro-level institutionalization of unions through corporatism, but through union security at the workplace, through the 'closed-shop' arrangement.

However, this explanation leaves us with a puzzle: we cannot explain Italy as belonging to the group of countries with a 'medium' rate of unionization; Italy's union density rate should have been lower! In 1975 Italian unions had access to the workplace (since 1970, and most strongly in industry and in the North), but attempts to involve the unions in a corporatist exchange had yet to start (Regini, 1984). It is possible that we underrate the material (insurance-related) or ideological incentives for union membership in Italy. In other words, our QCA exercise suggests either a measurement error (should Italy have a small 'a', a 'c' or a capital 'B?'), or the omission in our (theoretical) model of an as yet undiscovered variable (e.g. ideological mobilization,

union politics, or some other factor), and, hence, the rejection of our hypothesis that workplace access in combination with either (macro-level) corporatism or (micro-level) union security (e.g. closed shop arrangements) are necessary conditions for a medium level of unionization.

The importance of the combination of workplace access and corporatism is brought home by a comparison between the Belgian and the Dutch cases. Both countries have a tradition of corporatism (Van Ruysseveldt and Visser, 1996), however, with respect to the difference in unionization levels and patterns, workplace access has been described as the 'small difference with big consequences' (Mok, 1985). In contrast to Belgium, Dutch unions gave up their claim to organize in the workplace in exchange for involvement in macroeconomic management in the immediate post-war years. When in later years Dutch unions tried to regain access to the workplace, they were too weak and their efforts were too feeble to force employers to make concessions. The location of Germany in the group of countries with relatively low unionization levels presents us with another puzzle. It is generally argued that German unions, especially in industry, have access to the workplace through the works councils (Streeck, 1984), and that this was secured, in particular, after the reform of the works council law in 1972. It may be that in 1975, only three years after the reform, the effect of the reform could not yet be detected.

Turning to the explanation of union growth during the 'maturation' years (1950–1975), we find three configurations (Table 5b). The experiences of Sweden, Finland, and Denmark suggest that a union-led unemployment insurance scheme is a necessary condition for union growth. We do not want to suggest that a Ghent system is sufficient or can be defended in an institutional vacuum: unions in these countries are also embedded in corporatism and have access to the workplace, but unemployment insurance is what distinguishes them from unions in other countries. Union growth without a Ghent system is only possible if unions have access to the workplace and are strongly embedded in corporatism, or where access to the workplace is combined with closed-shop arrangements. If neither of these institutional configurations is available, unions stagnate or decline.

Table 6(a). *Configuration analysis (QCA) of union density in Phase II, Western Europe 1975–1995*

Country	Density (%) 1975	Ghent system	Workplace access	Corporatist participation	Closed shop	QCA
High						
Sweden	91.1	A11	B 11	C 11		A
Denmark	80.1	A 11	B 11	C 11		≈
Finland	79.3	A 11	B 11	C 11		≈
Medium–High						
Norway	57.7		B 11	C 11		B+C+ ^ A
Belgium	51.9	a 01	B 11	C 11		≈
Ireland	48.9		b 01	c 01	d 1	b+c+d
Medium–Low						
Austria	41.2		b 01	C 11		^ B+(^a)+(^d)
Italy	39.9		b 01	c 01		≈
Great Britain	32.9					≈
Germany	28.9		b 01	c 01		≈
Netherlands	25.6		b 01	C 11		≈
Portugal	25.6		c 01			≈
Greece	24.3					≈
Switzerland	22.5			c 01		≈
Spain	18.6		b 01	c 01		≈
France	9.1					

Source: see Table 3b.

Note: see Table 5a.

Changes in the institutional context between the first and the second periods are limited (Table 6b). In Great Britain the ‘closed-shop’ practice was made illegal and lost its significance; in Ireland the practice has become less widespread. Corporatist involvement and workplace access was strengthened in Finland and Italy (though intermittent in the latter case). Our results with respect to the countries with a ‘high’ level of unionization in 1995, and with significant growth during the ‘crisis’ years, reconfirm our finding that a Ghent system is a necessary condition. Without a Ghent system, union levels will stagnate around 50–60 per cent and union growth, if it takes place, will be small. The combination of strong workplace access with corporatism or, where the latter is absent, with a closed shop remains the institutional configuration which sets countries with a medium level of unionization apart. We observe that Austria (with weak workplace access) and Great Britain (which witnessed a weakening of the closed shop) have dropped out of this group. This result is reinforced when we analyse the decline in unionization over the past 20 years (Table 6b). If unions do not run an unemployment insurance sys-

tem, or do not combine workplace unionism with macro-level corporatism, they are unable to maintain the level of unionization achieved in the mid-1970s, before the changes in the economic and political environment began. It appears that not even the continuation of a closed-shop practice (Ireland) or access to the workplace via a ‘second channel’ (Germany), alone or in combination with corporatism (Austria), could stave off decline.

In conclusion, the configuration analysis reconfirms the results of our quantitative analysis with some qualifications, but it does also produce some new insights. We have gained a better understanding of the interaction between different factors and their effects. A union-led unemployment scheme that links membership with selective incentives is a major explanatory factor for the stable and highly organized Scandinavian countries. However, this factor is not sufficient as an explanation for the Belgian and Norwegian unions, which organize about half of all employees. The institutionalization of the union movement in the corporatist structures adds explanatory power. However, only in combination with workplace access does this factor

Table 6(b). *Configuration analysis (QCA) of union growth in Phase II, Western Europe 1975–1995*

Country	Density (%) 1975	Ghent system	Workplace access	Corporatist participation	Closed shop	QCA
High growth						
Sweden	+22.3	A11	B 11	C 11		A
Finland	+17.7	A 11	B 11	C 11		≈
Denmark	+18.8	A 11	B 11	C 11		≈
Stagnation						
Norway	+9.5		B 11	C 11		B+C+ [^] A
Belgium	0.0	a 01	B 11	C 11		≈
Decline						
Ireland	– 11.4		b 01	c 01	d 1	[^] (B+C+a)
Italy	– 15.5		b 01	c 01		≈
Germany	– 21.0		b 01	c 01		≈
Austria	– 26.6		b 01	C 11		≈
Switzerland	– 31.6			c 01		≈
Great Britain	– 31.9					≈
Greece	– 32.1					≈
Netherlands	– 33.3		b 01	C 11		≈
Spain	– 38.8		b 01	c 01		≈
Portugal	– 51.1			c 01		≈
France	– 60.0					

Sources: see Table 3b

Notes: See Table 5a.

contribute to a high and stable level of union organization.

Conclusions

Social phenomena rarely have just one cause. Union decline has multiple causes which tend to be inter-related. Some of these causes are not sufficient in themselves, or may even have an opposite effect in the presence of other factors. This configurational nature of institutions is not always sufficiently taken into account by neoclassical (rational-choice) theories of union growth. Unemployment, for instance, appears to have an opposite effect when union-led unemployment schemes provide a selective incentive for union members. The same holds for works councils with or without union representatives in the firm, or for corporatism with or without workplace unions. Consequently, we should strive for an analysis of the intersection of causes that are present at the same time and place. The QCA method offers a way to at least explore such causal complexity.

Economic, political, and labour-market changes in the period after the Golden Age of Capitalism (1950–73) have taxed the mobilizing capacity of European union movements. In all countries trade unions faced a less friendly climate. Generally, membership growth was lower in this period than in the years up to 1975, and most union movements have suffered a decline since that time. We have argued and found evidence that the institutional context is of crucial importance for the capacity of unions to withstand pressures and come up with adequate responses. We have furthermore identified some of the main institutions which, alone and in combination, are vital for the ‘patrimony’ of unionism in Europe.

Our analysis does not prove that social structural or business-cycle factors are irrelevant. In our view these changes provide the background and environment for unions – social networks of union recruitment and bastions of union power disintegrate; new markets for union services and networks of mobilization do arise in their place. This is a challenge for all union movements (though not to the same degree for all individual unions). They can

be met in different ways, given particular circumstances, different points of departure, and historically contingent power resources. Future research could use more sophisticated analysis to investigate the interaction of cyclical, structural, and configurational factors by using pooled time-series and event-history methods in addition to the QCA method adopted here. Our quantitative and qualitative analysis for two points in time, and for two periods of post-war capitalism, point to the importance of a configurational analysis that takes into account different national institutions for understanding unionization patterns. In each period, unions faced new challenges but within a legacy of institutional contexts reflecting past choices, successes, and failures. These institutional contexts shape the conditions under which collective actors such as unions act. Neither the past nor the future determines their fate, but institutional legacies structure the alternatives for strategic choice given the ongoing changes and new challenges.

Notes

1. The decline was probably less and union density higher (44%) if the membership of the many 'autonomous' unions, which is not well documented, is taken into account (Visser, 1989; Carrieri, 1997).
2. Arguably, in the case of France legal changes in 1982 should have benefited unions, but they appear to have had an opposite effect by exposing the political divisions between the unions and the deficiencies in union services (Goetschy and Rozenblatt, 1992; Segrestin, 1990).
3. The Netherlands is leading in part-time work (36% of all jobs in 1996), followed by Scandinavia and Britain; Spain leads in atypical employment (one-third of all employment contracts in 1995), followed by Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, Britain, and France (around 10%). In Greece, Italy, Ireland, and Portugal, flexible work is more common in the small-firm sector and in agriculture, and more people are self-employed.
4. Similar arrangements may exist in the non-Ghent countries in particular industries. Cases in point are agriculture in Italy or construction in the Netherlands; in these industries union density rates are double the national average. In Italy the placement of workers in the *cassa integrazione*, a system through which laid-off workers retain their employment relation, and have the right to be 'called back' when work is available, has similar incentive effects. Private insurances, like health insurance and supplementary pensions, can serve similar functions. The union provision of such goods is cited as part of the explanation why, for example, in Portuguese banks union density reaches 95%, falling to 20% in retail and even lower in shopping centres or restaurants (Ambrosini, 1995).
5. In the Anglo-Irish tradition, unions have been able to conclude 'closed-shop' agreements with employers which require all workers within a bargaining unit (or workplace) to join the union. This 'union security' expanded in post-war Britain – nearly 25% of employees were thus covered – but in the 1980s the practice was made unenforceable. On the continent, closed shops are exceptional and in some countries even unconstitutional (Visser, 1991).
6. This is a composite indicator in which the presence of the Social Democratic, Left, or Labour Party in the cabinet is scored on a scale from 5 (absolute majority) to 1 (junior participation) for each year and then averaged over the full period. In comparison with the alternative indicator of Walter Korpi (1983), which considers the electoral strength of the parties which make up Left governments, Merkel's measure tends to treat minority governments differently and give more points to Left parties, like Labour in Britain, which govern on their own when they govern.
7. There are also problems of collinearity between our independent variables, in particular between the presence of a Ghent system and workplace representation ($r = 0.6389$ in the first, and 0.7125 in the second period), between workplace representation and corporatism ($r = 0.7201$ in the first, and 0.7645 in the second period), and between Ghent and corporatism ($r = 0.5447$ in the second period). Moreover, given the way they are constructed, the pairs of variables for the strong and weak variants of the Ghent system, workplace representation, and corporatism, are highly correlated among themselves.
8. QCA requires the conversion of interval scales into binary variables. For instance, in the case of workplace access, we have coded the non-dichotomous variables within specified boundaries as 'non-existent' (non b or ^b) 'weak' (b) and 'strong' (B), allowing separate analysis for each model. For example, comparing 'non-existent' (^b) with 'existent' (b/B); or 'non-existent' and 'weak' (^B) with 'strong' (B).
9. The rank-order correlation (Spearman's rho) between the 1975 level of unionization and the growth in unionization in phase I is $r = 0.66$ (significant at the 0.05 level); between the 1995 level and the changes in the previous two decades $r = 0.93$ (significant at the 0.01 level).

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