

**“Class Conflict, Policy Development, and the State:
Explaining the Postwar Divergence of U.S. and Canadian Labour Unions”**

Why, after tracking each other closely from the 1800s through the mid-1960s, did Canadian and U.S. unionization rates diverge so dramatically in the following decades? Indeed, as Figure 1 starkly illustrates, Canadian unionization rates are now more than twice as high as in the U.S. The problem is even more puzzling when we consider that Canadian and U.S. workers share many of the same unions, and work for many of the same employers, which operate in very similar economic environments.

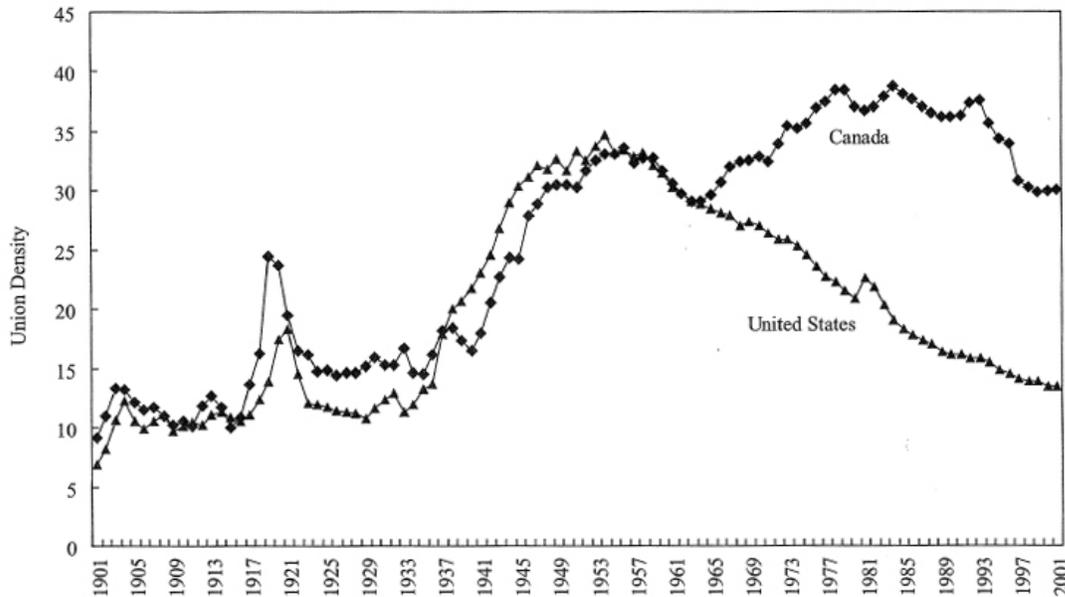


Figure 1: Union density in Canada and the United States, 1901-2001. (Reprinted from Lipset and Meltz 2004, p. 2)

This research project uses this question as a lens through which to examine the complex interplay between institutions, policy formation, and state development. Building on a wide range of scholarship related to politics, organizations and institutions, social movements, and labor, the project deploys a comparative historical approach, making use of archival, legal, and statistical data.

Relation to Previous Scholarship

Prior research on the U.S./Canada unionization divergence has either too narrowly focused on proximate causes without seeking to understand their historical and institutional context, or too broadly identified essential differences in political cultures without specifying mechanisms linking cultural differences with institutional configurations and policy outcomes.

This project addresses these problems by focusing on processes of institutional formation and development in both countries as a means of explaining the divergence, with a special emphasis on *variations in the relative permeability of state institutions* in both cases. The central research hypothesis is that more permeable state institutions in the U.S. allowed labor to have their policy goals incorporated into state policy more easily than their Canadian counterparts, but at the expense of creating a labor policy that was more politically contested and less institutionally stable over time. In contrast, the greater impermeability of Canadian state

institutions led unions to pursue extra-institutional options. While this made it more difficult initially for Canadian unions to achieve their policy goals, once labor's political pressure brought protective labor legislation within the purview of state action, the same institutional impermeability had the effect of shielding Canadian labor's gains, creating a policy regime that was less politically contested and more institutionally stable.

Broader Impacts

Given established links between union strength and outcomes such as welfare policies, political landscapes, and socio-economic inequality, this research into the causes of diverging union strength can deepen our understanding of forces driving a much broader set of social indicators. At a more theoretical/scientific level, this study uses the empirical case of U.S./Canadian unionization divergence to offer important insights into still poorly understood processes of institutional formation and development. Additionally, thanks to labor unions' unique position as organizations that operate both within and outside state institutions, this study allows us to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the complex interplay between state institutions, social mobilization, and government action. Finally, at a methodological level, this study highlights the importance of incorporating temporal analysis as a critical means understanding cross-national institutional differences.