

What We Think We Know, Don't Know, and Need to Know: Survey Research on Unions in Britain and the United States

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Abstract

Unions represent millions of workers despite substantial declines in both Britain and the United States. Their influence, and trends therein, are major concerns to a broad range of social sciences and business-related disciplines, as well as to unions themselves. Data on unions are, however, woefully inadequate for the purpose of assessing the activities and influence of unions as well as their status and prospects. In this paper, we assess what we know and do not know, and offer suggestions for what we need to know and how to get from where we are presently to where we would like to be.

Introduction

In both Britain and the United States, “labor” unions, organizations that represent economic, political, and professional interests of workers (usually employees), have experienced substantial declines in the proportion of the workforce that they formally represent and in their influence in recent years. Despite these declines, unions continue to represent millions of employees, remain the most influential voices for worker and “middle class” interests, and are undertaking serious efforts to adapt their policies and structures to revitalize themselves and to provide more effective voices for changing workforces as well as regaining their previous leverage over employers and governments (Gall 2009; Healy, Heery, Taylor, and Brown 2004). Although these generalizations also apply to many advanced industrial democracies, the parallels between Britain and the United States are particularly striking (cf. Dixon and Fiorito 2009 and Fiorito 2007 with Heery et al. 2003 and Willman and Bryson 2007; also see Gall and Fiorito, in press). Further, the underlying similarities of the British and U.S. economies, cultures, and social systems make comparative analysis across these nations especially promising, as Edelstein and Warner’s (1975) pioneering work showed.

Censuses of business and government organizations are regularly conducted by government agencies, yet no comprehensive ongoing data collection effort in either Britain or the United States focuses on unions. Unaudited financial data collected by governments in both countries for unions are a limited but notable exception, with the studies of U.S. unions being better served here. Survey-based studies of unions in Britain (e.g., Heery et al. 2003) and the United States (e.g., Clark and Gray 1991; Fiorito, Jarley, and Delaney 1995) with regard to specialized topics such as union administration, organizing, and effectiveness are few and far between and generally provide only “snapshots.” Even where they are of a longitudinal nature, they seldom offer more than an extended snapshot. Moreover, they offer tantalizing but *incomplete* insight into *certain* aspects of union functioning and current attempts at union revitalization. For example, little is known about union revitalization efforts through the *modus operandi* of rekindling social movement roots and dynamics.

That said, what we know most from this work is what unions have done and how they have done it. We know rather less about outcomes (in terms of effectiveness) and cause–effect relationships. Data limitations remain a significant obstacle to our understanding of union evolution and prospects for union revitalization.

In this paper, we attempt to outline what we think we know, what we think we do not know, and thus what we think we need to know. Ultimately, most of what we know and need to know comes from or is likely to come from surveys (as opposed to a large tranche of standardized qualitative case studies across a number of unions). Consequently, we give particular attention to surveys of unions or that otherwise provide information on unions. This paper will examine the collective findings of extant research to suggest a research agenda for what we need in order to be able to answer various aspects of important “why” questions. This will be done with a view to identifying best practices.

But First, How Do We Know What We Know?

Indirect Surveys

Numerous surveys provide direct or indirect information on unions. Some of these are regularly conducted, while others are irregular (e.g., “one-shot.”) In the United States, one of the best known indirect surveys is the Current Population Survey (CPS) of adults. (The Decennial Census is another.) The CPS regularly includes “yes/no” union membership questions. This provides the basis for official annual statistics on union membership with numerous breakdowns by occupation, industry, state, gender, earnings, etc. Other examples of indirect information sources include regular or irregular surveys of employers that record union-representation status or union coverage. Another example of a fairly regular individual-focused survey is the General Social Survey. It regularly records membership and often includes a few additional questions on unions, such as assessments of employer–union relations or attitudes toward unions. Gallup and other private polling organizations periodically include questions to individuals about union membership and attitudes. Gallup polls, among others, revealed, for example, a sharp drop in public attitudes toward unions in 2009 (Saad 2009), and Gallup’s overall approval/disapproval of unions question is perhaps the longest-running time-series on public attitudes toward unions, dating back more than 70 years.

In Britain, there are similar examples of indirect annual surveys, such as the British Social Attitude Surveys (BSAS) and the General Household Survey (GHS). The BSAS has been conducted annually since 1983 by the National Centre for Social Research and concerns citizens’ attitudes towards social, economic, political, and moral issues. Within this survey are basic questions about the presence or absence of union membership and union recognition. The GHS is a multi-purpose, continuous survey carried out by the Social Survey Division of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), which collects information on a range of topics from people living in private households. It began in 1971 and has been carried out continuously since then. The main aim of the survey is to collect data on a range of core topics, comprising, *inter alia*, household and family information, housing tenure and household accommodation, employment, education, and health and use of health services. Within the employment area, there is a single question on union membership.

All or nearly all such polls are indirect in the sense that they may have information about union status or attitudes of the entities polled, but they focus on entities other than unions. Importantly from our perspective, in their schema, *all unions are alike*. On rare occasions, the entities are asked to identify their union, and sometimes that information is even made part of the public-access data base (e.g., the 1977 Quality of Employment Survey; Quinn and Staines 1979). Such indirect surveys thus provide a very limited basis for drawing inferences about the status, evolution, or renewal prospects for specific unions. We might know, for example, that some members are active within their unions and some are not. We don’t know whether all the active members are in the same union, or whether activists and apathetic members are uniformly distributed among all unions. While abstract, these are interesting and important questions, but indirect surveys, as typically conducted, are little help.

Certain specialized data sources do provide union identities, although it would be a stretch to refer to these sources as survey based. In particular, the National Labor Relations Board maintains datasets on representation elections and unfair labor practice (ULP) charges, its two main foci, that include union-identifying information for each election and each ULP charge. Unlike most surveys, where the researcher

selects the entities to be questioned, these data arise from entities seeking use of the NLRB's procedures. The same can be said about the (third) statutory union recognition procedure in Britain, which has existed since 2000 but with fewer than 800 applications to date; this provides limited purchase on the issue of union organizing in non-union workplaces. Notably, in the United States, potentially relevant activity may go unreported, if, for example, the wronged party chooses not to file a ULP charge or, say, a union decides to abandon an unpromising organizing campaign prior to filing a petition for election. Again, the same is true in Britain, whereby employer opposition may prevent the union organizing drive from getting to the threshold of membership and worker support required for an application to be accepted.

The Workplace Industrial Relations (now called Workplace Employment Relations) surveys in Britain have collected data from employers, employee representatives, and employees in a representative sample of workplaces since 1980, with five surveys conducted (1980, 1984, 1990, 1998, 2004) and another forthcoming in 2011. Each survey covered several thousand respondents. The surveys are conducted by academics and independent researchers and co-sponsored by the relevant government department; the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS); and bodies such as the Economic and Social Research Council. In mapping workplace employment relations, the surveys cover individual and collective representation at work, union recognition and membership, and dispute resolution, thus giving some standardized but nonetheless limited insight into issues concerning unions and union organization within workplaces. Furthermore, the questions with regard to unions essentially concern mapping the presence or absence of certain practices and institutions so that rudimentary data are generated on the presence or absence of recruitment and organizing within workplaces and what the activities of union workplace representatives are. With the decline in union presence, the extent to which these questions have been maintained within the surveys has declined in recent years, with the "slack" being taken up by questions on non-union mechanisms and management behavior.

Studies of unions in Britain are also furnished to some extent by the Labour Force Survey. Since 1979, around 60,000 households have been surveyed on an annual, biennial, or quarterly basis. The purpose of the Labour Force Survey is to provide information on the labor market that can then be used to develop, manage, evaluate, and report on labor market policies. The questionnaire design, sample selection, and interviewing are carried out by the Social and Vital Statistics Division of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) on behalf of the Statistical Outputs Group of the ONS, a government body. Within the survey, detailed questions on union membership by industry, age, gender, ethnicity, region, occupation, and employment status are included, so that rich but bald data are generated on these in absolute and relative terms (and with some cross-tabulation). An indirect survey in Britain that was of more use was the 2001 Trades Union Congress-commissioned British Workplace Representation and Participation Survey (based on its U.S. sister version), but it was a one-time survey.

Direct Surveys

Like indirect surveys, direct surveys can be regular or "snapshots." Perhaps the best U.S. example of a regular direct survey is the information gathered by the Office of Labor-Management Standards (OLMS) of the Department of Labor. Annual reports required by the Labor-Management Reporting and Disclosure Act of 1959 focus on "certain financial transactions and administrative practices of labor organizations and employers" (<http://www.dol.gov/olms/reggs/statutes/lmrda-act.htm>). Virtually all U.S. unions, from locals to nationals and federations, must report assets, liabilities, income, expenditures, loans, benefits, and membership. Unions also are required to provide copies of their constitutions. The reporting requirements reflect the anti-corruption and pro-internal union democracy thrusts of the act, of course, rather than the wish lists of academics (unfortunately). Development of a web-based access system around 2000 makes these data far more accessible than in earlier times, but a fundamental limitation remains that the broad reporting categories fail to tell much about what researchers might most want to know—for example, how much have different unions spent on organizing or how have organizing strategies differed among unions or changed over time?

In Britain, since 1975, the Certification Office for Trade Unions and Employers' Associations has gathered, through mandatory powers, annual data on unions from all those unions that it awards a "certificate

of independence,” a status which is considered a significant resource for a union to be taken credibly by employers and workers alike. The data cover membership, finances, and political funds but is relatively bald. More particularly, the data on membership is often of questionable value because it is unaudited by an independent body (unlike the data on finances).

Notable (cross- or multi-union) one-shot surveys have been conducted by various researchers over the past 20 or so years (in addition to a plethora of non-standardized one-time and longitudinal union-specific surveys). These surveys typically come from a paradigm viewing unions as organizations, and they focus on constructs thought important in organizational studies and generally developed in the context of employing organizations. These include surveys focused on strategic planning (Stratton and Brown 1989), alternate union strategies (Heery et al. 2003), merger strategies and outcomes (Undy 2008), the impact of legislation on union behavior (Undy et al. 1996), union administration and human resources policies (Clark and Gray 1991), and structures, strategies, innovation, and effectiveness (Delaney, Jarley, and Fiorito 1991, 1996). Often, these researchers have attempted to link outcomes such as organizing success, membership growth, or overall union effectiveness to presumed antecedents such as planning, strategy, structure, or innovation. Although characterized here as “one-shot,” in several instances these surveys were loosely linked to related topics (e.g., Heery et al.’s [2000a, 2000b] studies of organizing projects and the TUC’s Organising Academy’s programs) or to broadly similar surveys (e.g., Clark and Gray 2005 or Fiorito, Jarley, and Delaney 2007), providing a broader basis for contextualization or a limited basis for longitudinal investigation.

Another notable direct information source comes from Weil’s (2005) work on a union strategic choice framework. As part of this effort, Weil posted an online survey (“SCAT” at <http://www.scatsurvey.com>) that offers unions a chance to see how they compare on strategic leverage and organizational capacity, based on their responses to an array of questions. Participants in union leadership education programs in both Britain and the United States have completed the survey, although we admit that we are not yet clear on details regarding intended or actual respondents. Nevertheless, the website has accumulated a substantial amount of data, providing what seems to be potentially a useful reference frame for union participants to see how their unions compare to others on strategic leverage and organizational capacity as derived from union leaders’ responses about their unions. To our knowledge, there has been no published effort as yet to link the SCAT data to union outcomes.

So, What Do We Think We Know?

Various authors have attempted to summarize theories and research findings on unions themselves, their current status, and prospects (Clark 2009; Fiorito and Jarley 2008; Gall 2009; Heery 2003; and Turner, Katz, and Hurd 2001, to name a few). There is far too much to cover to properly address in detail the question of “what we think we know” in the scope of a brief paper. Accordingly, we will address this question in very broad outlines, relying on the adage that it is better to be approximately correct than precisely wrong. In this limited sense, what do we know?

First, we know that Alice Cook was right in her simple but important truism that “no two unions are alike” (1962:327). There is substantial inter-union variance in nearly every measure that has been used to describe unions. More on this and its importance in a moment, but a primary implication is that we are unlikely to learn much about unions, *per se*, from indirect sources that do not identify the unions referenced when entities other than unions report union status or similar variables. Some of these sources, such as the CPS, might be considerably more valuable if union identity was solicited and available in public access files. Inter-union variation in governance and administrative structures, strategies, and so forth should not surprise us. Unlike business organizations, unions typically operate in relatively distinctive industry or occupation environments in which competitive forces that might push for homogeneity are muted.

Second, there is evidence that many inter-union differences in strategy, structure, innovation, and so forth matter for outcomes that unions regard as important. Heery et al. (2003) linked strategies to organizing outcomes in Britain, Maranto and Fiorito (1987) linked various union characteristics to representation election outcomes, and Fiorito, Jarley, and Delaney (1995; 2002) showed that inter-union differences in innovation and centralization appear to influence organizing results, membership growth, and perceived union effectiveness. Many of these results are still fairly tentative, owing to limitations on measurement

quality, causal ambiguities, and being drawn from particular point-in-time samples. These limitations underscore the need to replicate and extend previous research with better measures, samples, and study designs. Nonetheless, these tentative findings involve critical issues for unions, pointing to substantial influences for conceptually important factors that are subject to union control.

Third, we know too that union environments matter. Differences in laws, product market competition, capital mobility, worker attitudes, and employer opposition, among others, are also important. Unions are not solely “victims of circumstances”—environmental factors largely beyond union control are influential and must be considered in trying to assess the latitude and reach of union agency. One implication is that caution is needed in generalizing beyond the particular time and place of previous research. For example, a seemingly impressive union information technology adoption effect on organizing outcomes based on 1990s U.S. data (Fiorito, Jarley, and Delaney 2002) may be unique to its time, although more fundamental forces (e.g., innovation) may be more robust.

What Don't We Know

The preceding brief summary of what we think we know clearly points to some of what we do not know. Conceptual differences across studies and methodological limitations, including the use of differing concepts and measures, lend a tentative nature to many previous findings. There are gaps in what has been studied, and additional issues that have hardly been addressed at all. Consider, for examples, the following.

Union Strategies

Some research appears to confirm that union strategies matter, but measures of union strategy have been crude, often adopted from business contexts. Results are somewhat inconsistent and possibly fragile. This leaves ample room for speculation that researchers have not yet captured what is important about union strategies. Conceptual literature and some case studies have given much attention to the “business unionism” versus “social movement unionism” question (e.g., Turner, Katz, and Hurd 2001), but one would be hard pressed to identify broad-based empirical research that has squarely and persuasively addressed this issue.

Networking

Social networks and the notion of social capital embodied in workplace networks are hot topics in organizational research and recently suggested for adaptation to union contexts (e.g., Jarley 2005). This also relates to the previous point, but it deserves more attention in its own right. More than 20 years ago, Heckscher (1988) stressed that unions are associations trying to act like organizations. In today's parlance, “networks” could easily be substituted for “associations” in that assertion, and one could make some salient points in that argument without great difficulty. Both internal and external network concepts (Jarley 2005; Lévesque and Murray 2010) need consideration. Broadly based empirical research exploring the concept of unions as networks is lagging.

Union “Soul”

This topic overlaps the previous two points but deserves distinct consideration. Budd (2004) used this term to characterize the interplay of union goals and strategy, and, in many ways, this relates to the controversial “organizing model” concept that has received much attention. Will unions rely on paid staff to service members or will unions mobilize volunteer members to empower them and create a “self-servicing” model? There are many potential tangents and debates in this question. What is most striking to us at present, however, is how little broad-based empirical research has addressed what has been one of the most prominent issues within and about unions for roughly 20 years. Is there substantial inter-union variance in organizing model adoption, and is it important for union outcomes?

The Value Proposition

Some might stress (e.g., Masters 1997) that in a fundamentally market-based economy the key question unions face is “Where is the union value-added?” For at least a time in the middle of the 20th century in Britain and the United States, that question seemed to be answered mainly by “the industrial unionism model.” Unions provided valued bargaining and grievance representation services to members, and to some extent employers found that model a somewhat attractive alternative to dealing with individual workers and investments in human resources staffing. Meanwhile, craft unions evolved toward that model, while still attempting to retain control over skills, training, and the provision of a reliable supply of skilled workers. In the latter 20th century, various factors—perhaps most notably, increased product and labor market competition, globalization, and alternative sources of skill training—challenged this model and ultimately challenge unions to consider redefining their “value proposition.” There are calls for unions to reclaim the craft model, becoming more focused on training provision (e.g., trade union learning representatives in Britain), a source of labor quality certification. Freeman (2008) noted that the fastest-growing large “union” (whether it is a union might be questioned) is Working America. Is that the new union niche, offering discount membership and something akin to an “action alert network” to rally consumer and voter mobilization? In Britain, TUC sources note that professional associations—which may be a bit more union-like in Britain than in the United States—are growing (Wilson 2007). Is that also support for a variation of the craft model?

The preceding reflects partial consensus on critical and poorly understood themes that need further attention from those interested in unions. The development of a rigorous and common research agenda could go far toward filling in what we do not know and improving understanding of what we do know.

What We Think We Need to Know, and How We Get There from Here

The preceding discussion of what we think we know and do not know illustrates the need for a comprehensive direct data collection effort. In sum, our knowledge is rather piecemeal, owing to information limitations. A “census of unions” that would provide systematic and comparable data on a broad range of the concepts previously identified could go far toward providing a purchase from which to advance understanding of unions as organizations, networks, and even social movements. Some of the main topic modules should include

- Union identification, demographics, and external structure
- Environmental scanning and strategic planning activity
- Goals, including intended “value proposition(s)”
- Strategies and tactics, including “organizing model” adoption
- Internal structures (organizational—administrative and governance—structure)
- Network attributes (internal and external)
- Union staff, human resource management, and activism issues
- Membership change, organizing, and recruiting
- Innovation
- Organizing projects
- Organizer experience
- Information technology
- Effectiveness
- Respondent identification and demographics

This is quite a wish list, and not without some possible redundancy and omissions, but we think it fairly represents a first approximation of information needed to substantially advance knowledge on unions. Even if this list is accepted, there is considerable work to be done in fleshing it out with specific questions

that offer a reasonable prospect of providing valid and reliable measures. Then comes the “easy” (sarcasm) part: securing responses from knowledgeable union informants. The sorts of questions that these topics imply would best be answered by relatively high-level national union officers and staff who have a broad understanding of their unions’ workings, but obviously some topic areas would be easier or better addressed by specialists (e.g., organizing directors). (One might argue, however, that a better representation of even a national union might come from an aggregation of reports by union leaders and staff throughout the union.) Regional structures and amalgamations through union mergers also pose some specific challenges by placing possibly very different and autonomous divisions under the nominal scope of a single union. These issues and challenges can be at least be doubled, if not quadrupled, by desire to carry this survey out in both Britain and the United States and to make it a standardized survey so that a high level of specification for comparative work could be created.

There are clearly many conceptual and operational challenges posed by a “Census of Unions Project,” and one would be naïve to think that pulling off this “COUP” (pun intended) would be easy or even straightforward on whatever level (British, American, comparative). The issue of what to ask still needs much work, and needs to be at least tentatively resolved before turning more fully to questions of who and how to ask. A collaborative effort is almost certainly required due to the scope and scale of the effort suggested. Dedicated funding such as a grant or contract would help provide the opportunity to focus on a project that will clearly require a focused and sustained effort. Unless we can “dress it up” as an entrepreneurship project, securing funding is likely to be a huge challenge. Unions are often interested but often can offer no financial resources to assist in the conduct of survey.

Securing cooperation of union leaders and staff will likely be the more important and difficult challenge. Preliminary discussions and correspondence with union staff reveal substantial skepticism about the “value proposition” for unions in such projects. Can any of us point to a survey-based, or even more broadly, research-based finding that has clearly been helpful to and valued by unions? (Let us know!) If this “added value” of use rather than just interest for unions cannot be created, then their willingness to help will be limited. Previous experience suggests that endorsements from high-level federation or union officials can do much to boost response rates (Fiorito, Jarley, and Delaney 2007), but as yet we can point to no commitments of this type.

Concluding Remarks

What we hoped to do in this paper was to identify briefly and in fairly general terms what we think we know, don’t know, and need to know about unions in order to advance understanding of unions and their prospects in Britain and the United States. We focused mainly on surveys because they are the likely source of systematic and representative data on a broad-enough sampling of unions to support generalizations. This is not to deny or diminish the contributions that can be made through other methods, including observation, case study, or historical analysis. We readily concede that there are many questions and unresolved issues in our “COUP” proposal. We welcome reactions, suggestions, and comments.

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