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Union Beliefs and Attitudes of Canadian Workers: An Econometric Analysis

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How workers view unions has important implications for the health and vitality of the trade union movement. Workers who perceive unions as instrumental in improving the quality of their working lives are more likely to become union members, support union activities and participate in union affairs (Wheeler and McClendon 1991; Gallagher and Strauss 1991; Fiorito, Gallagher and Greer 1986). Unions' ability to mobilize workers in strikes or political activities to achieve their collective bargaining goals or to secure economic and social reforms depends a great deal on workers' support and solidarity. As one large Canadian union notes in its Statement of Principles, 'unions are voluntary organizations. They can only be effective if workers believe they need unions, and unions truly belong to them' (CAW 1990). "Belief in unions," according to some researchers, "represents a form of 'moral' commitment to the importance of unionism," (Gallagher and Strauss 1991:148). Krahn and Lowe (1984a:150) state that "[there] can be little doubt that the study of union attitudes contributes to a better understanding of patterns of union growth and development, the union joining process and the formulation of trade union policies."

Recent years have seen a proliferation of research on worker attitudes and beliefs and their impacts on certification elections, union commitment and participation. However, most of the literature has been American. With only a few notable exceptions (Krahn and Lowe, 1984a and 1984b; Lowe and Krahn 1988 and 1989; Ponak and Janz 1984; Ponak and Haridas 1979; Verma and Bergeron 1991; Bergeron 1991; McShane 1986; and Richards, Mauser and Holmes 1988; Kumar and Cowan 1989) very little is known about how Canadians view unions and to what extent their attitudes vary by gender, occupation, industry or sector, region, ethnic status, level of income and other demographic and labour market characteristics. In addition, most Canadian studies have been limited in their scope and coverage due to their research design, based on surveys of communities and unions conducted by these researchers themselves. This study attempts to fill in this gap by examining worker perceptions and attitudes towards unions using a national sample survey of Canadians, conducted by a national polling agency.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: 1) to explore the determinants of union beliefs and attitudes of workers in Canada; and 2) to examine if attitudes towards unions differ systematically by gender, that is, whether men and women differ in their union beliefs and their disposition towards joining a union. Three indicators of union beliefs and attitudes are used in the study: 1) union membership status; 2) general belief that "unions are still needed to protect the interests of working people," and 3) instrumentality perception that "workers benefit from the actions of unions."

Data and Measurement

The paper is based on a micro data tape of a quarterly nation-wide telephone survey conducted by the Decima PAI, a national polling organization, in the winter of 1987 to assess public attitudes towards labour unions and related issues. The survey covered a representative national sample of 1,500 Canadians, 18 years of age and older, and employed a multi-stage, systematic, random sampling technique which produces results projected to the entire population within plus or minus 2.6 percentage points 95 times out of 100. The survey asked a number of questions about unions as well as the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of respondents. The survey found, for example, that: 21 per cent of the respondents were union members; 42 per cent belonged to families where at least one or more members of the family had some union affiliation; 69 per cent believed that unions are still needed and 31 per cent expressed the opinion that unions have outlived their usefulness; 67 per cent thought that actions of

unions always or sometimes benefit Canadians while 31 per cent suggested that union actions seldom or never benefit workers. When respondents were classified on the basis of their union status, 82 per cent of those who were union members stated that actions of unions provide significant benefit. In the non-union sample, 56 per cent expressed the opinion that actions of unions do benefit Canadians. These findings indicate that Canadians have a positive view of unions. However, since our primary interest was (1) how workers view unions, and (2) what factors determine particular union beliefs and attitudes, we excluded from the sample (a) those individuals who did not work outside home or were not employed, and (b) those who did not express any opinion on union related questions. The resulting sample consisted of 920 individuals (540 men and 380 women), about 61 per cent of the overall Decima sample.

We estimated three sets of regressions, using logit probability analysis (Adrich and Nelson 1984), to explore what individual characteristics contribute to the probability that a worker will be a union member, and possess favourable union beliefs and attitudes. The first set of regressions was estimated using the full sample of men and women. The second and third set of regressions employed male and female samples. All variables used were in dichotomous form, with a value of one if the respondent had a particular view or characteristic, zero otherwise. Dependent variables included: (1) the union status, whether or not an individual was a union member; (2) the union need, based on individual response to the question whether "unions are still needed to protect the interests of working people" or they have "outlived their usefulness"; and (3) the union benefit, incorporating the alternate worker perception that "workers always/sometimes benefit from the actions of unions" or that "workers never/seldom benefit from union actions." Explanatory variables included: 1) age; 2) sex; 3) education; 4) marital status; 5) income; 6) occupation; 7) full-time/part-time work status; 8) industry; 9) employer size; 10) region; 11) city size; 12) ethnic origin; and 13) union family. Variables (both dependent and independent) used in the study are described in Table 1. Also reported are means or averages of the variables in the full sample and in the male and female samples.

Findings

Table 2 presents the logit probability estimates using the full sample of men and women. The sign (+ or -) of the regression coefficient indicates the direction of the association between explanatory factors and union status and beliefs. The t-ratio with an asterisk shows whether a particular explanatory variable has a statistically significant influence. The estimates provide valuable insights into the three questions under study: What are the determinants of union status? or what demographic and labour market characteristics lead to the likelihood of a worker belonging to a union?; What individual characteristics contribute to positive attitudes towards unions?, that is who believes unions are needed?; and What type of workers believe that union actions benefit workers?

Table 1 –Variable¹ Definitions and Means

Variable	Definition	Sample Mean		
		Full Sample	Male Sample	Female Sample
UMEMBER*	Respondent is a union member	0.29	0.31	0.26
UNEED*	Respondent believes unions are still needed	0.70	0.69	0.71
UBENEFIT*	Respondent believes union always or sometimes provide benefits	0.53	0.61	0.46
UFAMILY	Respondent comes from a union family	0.46	0.46	0.46
SEX	Respondent is a male	0.59	100.0	0.00
AGE 35-44**	Respondent is 35 to 44 years of age	0.28	0.30	0.26
AGE 45 OR MORE**	Respondent is 45 years and over	0.22	0.21	0.32
EDUCATION	Respondent has post-secondary education	0.51	0.49	0.54
MARITAL STATUS	Respondent is married	0.63	0.66	0.59
REGION	Respondent lives in Quebec or Ontario	0.48	0.48	0.47
ETHNIC ORIGIN	Respondent is of British origin	0.53	0.51	0.56
CITY SIZE	Respondent lives in a metropolitan area ²	0.60	0.60	0.61
INDUSTRY	Respondent is a public sector employee	0.32	0.28	0.38
FULL-TIME	Respondent works full-time	0.79	0.85	0.69
INCOME	Respondent's annual family income is \$30,000 or more	0.62	0.62	0.62
EMPLOYER SIZE	Respondent is employed by a large employer ³	0.36	0.37	0.35
OCCUPATION	Respondent is a white-collar ⁴ employee	0.74	0.64	0.89
Number of Observations ⁵		920	540	380

* Dependent variables.

** Reference for age variables is workers less than 35 years of age.

1. All variables are dichotomous with a value of 0 and 1. Variable definitions refer to those with a value of 1.

2. Cities with population of 100,000 or more.

3. Employers with 300 or more employees.

4. Includes those engaged in professional, technical, supervisory, managerial, clerical and sales occupations.

5. Includes employed workers and those who expressed an opinion on their union status and beliefs.

Table 2 - Logit Probability Estimates of the Determinants of Union Membership Status and Union Beliefs

Explanatory Variables	UMEMBER		UNEED		UBENEFIT	
	Coefficient	t-ratio	Coefficient	t-ratio	Coefficient	t-ratio
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
UFAMILY	-	-	0.97	5.92*	0.77	5.05*
Sex	0.15	0.85	-0.18	-1.10	-0.31	-1.95*
Age: 35-44	0.39	1.97*	-0.13	-0.71	0.11	0.60
Age: 45 & Up	0.67	3.18*	0.42	1.98*	0.24	1.23
Education	-0.02	-0.10	0.21	1.25	0.31	1.93*
Marital Status	0.01	0.07	0.06	0.36	0.25	1.55**
Region	0.27	1.52*	0.23	1.40**	0.26	1.69*
Ethnic Origin	-0.04	-0.23	-0.32	-2.10*	-0.20	-1.34**
City Size	0.05	0.26	0.56	0.33	-0.41	-2.50*
Industry	2.23	11.01*	0.58	3.02*	0.67	3.71*
Full-Time	0.61	2.75*	-0.01	-0.08	-0.01	-0.03
Income	-0.08	-0.43	-0.31	-1.86*	0.15	0.95
Employer Size	0.56	2.96*	0.03	0.19	0.36	2.30*
Occupation	-1.31	-6.09*	-0.45	-2.20*	-0.45	-2.38*
Constant	-1.97	-5.83*	0.77	2.50'	0.16	0.55
Likelihood Ratio	194.27		85.40		89.22	
Per cent of Right Predictions	0.74		0.71		0.66	
Maddala R-Square	0.19		0.09		0.09	

* Statistically significant at 5 percent level.

** Statistically significant at 10 percent level.

Who Are Union Members?

Columns (2) and (3) in Table 2 include logit probability regression estimates and their t-ratio statistics of the determinants of union status. The estimates show the type of workers who are more likely to be union members. The estimates suggest that age, full-time work status, employer size, industry, occupation, and province of residence are key factors influencing union status. The regression results show that older workers (35-44 years old and those 45 and up) are more prone to be union members than those under 35 years. Public sector employees are more likely to be union members than the private sector workers. Employees working in large firms (with 300 workers or more) have a greater likelihood of unionization than those in small firms. Full-time employment and blue-collar occupation are a positive contributor to union status; part-time and white-collar workers are less likely to be union members than full-time and blue-collar workers. Workers living in Central Canada (Ontario and Quebec) are more likely to be in unions than workers in other provinces. Regression estimates reveal that gender of an individual, marital status, educational achievement, ethnic origin, family income, and city size have no influence on probability of being a union member.

Who Believes Unions Are Needed?

Columns 4 and 5 show logit probability regression estimates of the determinants of union beliefs. The coefficient estimates suggest that: (a) if an individual comes from a union family, he or she is more likely to believe in the usefulness of unions; (b) an older person is more likely to believe in the need for unions than the younger or middle age individual; (c) workers who are not of British origin are more likely to believe in the role of unions in protecting workers than those from the British Isles; (d) public sector workers, blue-collar employees, and low income earners (earning less than \$30,000) are more likely to perceive the need for unions than workers in private sector, white-collar occupations and in high income brackets; and (e) workers in Quebec and Ontario have a more positive view of unions than workers in other provinces of Canada. Regression analysis clearly shows that the gender of a person has no influence on workers' union beliefs, nor does the educational level, marital status, full-time attachment, and the size of the employer.

Who Believes Actions of Unions Benefit Workers?

Columns 6 and 7 present empirical estimates of union instrumentality view of workers. The estimates suggest that workers who believe that actions of unions always or sometimes benefit workers come from a union family, are married, have a post-secondary education, are of non-British origin, employed in the public sector, work in blue-collar occupations, live in small cities and Central Canada, and work for large employers. Regression estimates further show that women have a stronger instrumentality perception of unions than men. Estimates reveal that age, income, and full-time status of a worker have no independent effect on union instrumentality perception.

Gender Differences in Union Status Attitudes and Beliefs

Table 3 includes logit probability regression estimates of the determinants of union status, beliefs and union instrumentality perceptions of men and women separately. Columns 2-3 include coefficients of union member regression, and columns 4-5 and 6-7 show coefficients of union need and union benefit regressions respectively. Estimates reveal that factors shaping women's attitudes towards unions may be different from those for men. For example, our results suggest that older women are more likely to be union members than younger women; age has no influence on men's probability to be a union member. Women of non-British origin are more likely to be in unions than women of British origin; ethnic origin has no effect on men's union status. Men working in large firms, and living in Central Canada have a higher probability to unionize than male workers in small firms and in Western and Maritime Provinces, region and employer size have no effect on women's propensity to unionize. Union status of either men or women is not affected by educational level, marital status, geographical location, and income. However, our results show that public sector employment, white-collar and full-time work have similar effects on probability to unionize of both men and women.

Logit probability regressions of union need and union instrumentality perceptions reveal that highly educated women are more likely to consider unions useful or their actions beneficial than women with less than post-secondary education; male attitudes towards unions are not affected by their education level. Similarly, women of non-British origin and earning low incomes have more positive attitudes towards union need (but not of union instrumentality) than women of British origin and in high income brackets. On the other hand, blue-collar men are more likely to have favourable attitudes towards unions than white-collar men; occupation has no effect on women's attitudes and union beliefs. Our results reveal that belonging to a union family has the strongest positive impact on union beliefs and instrumentality perceptions of both men and women.

Table 3 - Logit Probability of Determinants of Union Status and Beliefs by Gender

Coefficients (and t-statistics in parentheses)						
Explanatory Variable	UMEMBER		UNEEDED		UBENEFIT	
	M	F	M	F	M	F
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
UFAMILY	-	-	0.93	0.98	0.82	0.68
	-	-	(4.35)*	(3.75)*	(4.13)*	(2.77)*
Age 35-44	0.20	0.69	-0.02	-0.21	0.17	0.07
	(0.79)	(2.07)*	(0.08)	(-0.72)	(0.73)	(0.25)
Age 45 and up	0.23	0.32	0.41	0.47	-0.02	0.63
	(0.81)	(3.90)*	(1.48)**	(1.40)**	(-0.09)	(2.00)*
Education	-0.23	0.23	0.04	0.43	0.05	0.63
	(-0.94)	(0.76)	(0.19)	(1.63)**	(0.24)	(2.50)*
Marital Status	0.31	-0.29	-0.11	0.25	0.15	0.41
	(1.22)	(-0.94)	(-0.46)	(0.92)	(0.68)	(1.61)**
City Size	0.25	-0.18	0.21	-0.15	-0.14	-0.84
	(1.13)	(-0.59)	(1.01)	(-0.54)	(-0.70)	(-3.03)*
Region	0.50	-0.14	0.24	0.23	0.19	0.42
	(2.20)*	(-0.46)	(1.15)	(0.85)	(0.95)	(1.67)**
Employer Size	0.89	-0.11	0.24	-0.27	0.41	0.29
	(3.76)*	(-0.31)	(1.11)	(-1.03)	(2.01)*	(1.10)
Industry	2.32	2.11	0.69	0.39	0.79	0.46
	(8.61)*	(6.4)*	(2.66)*	(1.35)**	(3.21)*	(1.66)**
Ethnic Origin	0.22	-0.59	-0.19	-0.53	-0.25	-0.16
	(1.05)	(-2.05)*	(-0.96)	(-2.11)*	(-1.32)**	(-0.70)
Full-Time	0.44	0.75	-0.05	0.03	-0.02	0.05
	(1.31)*	(2.27)*	(-0.15)	(0.12)	(-0.05)	(0.21)
Income	-0.02	-0.13	-0.15	-0.56	0.28	0.04
	(-0.09)	(-0.44)	(-0.68)	(-2.10)*	(1.32)**	(0.16)
Occupation	-1.23	-1.48	-0.45	-0.44	-0.45	-0.30
	(-4.71)*	(-3.42)*	(-1.91)*	(-0.98)	(-1.99)*	(-0.75)
Constant	-2.24	-1.23	0.41	1.11	-0.15	0.05
	(-5.33)*	(-2.07)*	(1.15)	(1.88)*	(-0.45)	(0.08)
Likelihood Ratio	115.2	102.5	50.0	43.1	55.4	43.0
Percent of Right Predictions	0.73	0.79	0.70	0.72	0.66	0.69
Maddala R-Square	0.20	0.24	0.08	0.11	0.10	0.11

Note: Figures in parenthesis are t-ratios of the regression coefficients.

* Statistically significant at the 5 per cent level.

** Statistically significant at the 10 per cent level.

Conclusions and Implications

The evidence presented in this paper indicates that demographic and labour market characteristics of workers have a significant influence on their union status, beliefs and instrumentality perceptions. Our empirical study, based on a micro data tape of a nation-wide sample survey of Canadians, conducted by Decima in the winter of 1987, clearly shows that, generally speaking, age, ethnicity, sector of employment and the size of the employer, occupation, and region are key determinants of union affiliation, worker beliefs in the importance of unionism and union instrumentality perceptions. Specifically, older workers and blue-collar, public sector and full-time employees are more likely to be union members than the younger workers, white-collar employees, part-time workers and those employed in the private sector. Similarly, workers in Central Canada and those employed in large firms have a greater likelihood to be in unions than workers in Western and Maritime Provinces and those employed in small firms. Gender, marital status, education level and income do not appear to have any significant independent influence on worker probability to unionize. The results are in general accord with previous Canadian and American research (Kumar and Cowan 1989; Fiorito, Gallagher and Greer 1986; Fiorito and Greer 1986; and Antos, Chander and Mellow 1980).

Similar demographic and labour market characteristics also determine and influence worker instrumentality perceptions and beliefs. We focused on two measures of worker perceptions and beliefs: (1) positive belief that "unions are still needed to protect the interests of working people" compared to the negative opinion that unions have outlived their usefulness; and (2) the instrumentality perception that "workers always/sometimes benefit from the actions of unions" as opposed to the view that "unions never/seldom benefit workers." Since specific and general union beliefs and attitudes tend to be inter-correlated (Deshpande and Fiorito 1989; Fiorito 1987; Fiorito, Gallagher and Greer 1986; McShane 1986), the two measures chosen in this paper provide valuable insights into determinants of workers' union beliefs and perceptions. The results of our econometric analysis show that while some factors (e.g. occupation, sector of employment, region, and to some extent, age) that determine union status also influence worker attitudes and beliefs, union instrumentality and role perceptions are also affected by various other characteristics of an individual. For example, ethnic origin of a worker has an important influence on positive union beliefs, but has no bearing on whether or not he or she is likely to be a union member. Specifically, workers who are of non-British origin are more likely to believe that unions are needed and union actions benefit working people than those of British origin. On the other hand, while full-time workers are more likely to be union members than part-time workers, worker attitudes and beliefs in unions are similar among both part-time and full-time workers. Gender is another example. While women are as likely to be members of unions as men, they are more likely to believe in union instrumentality than men. Results of our study further suggest that there are marked differences between men and women's union beliefs and perceptions for similar demographic and labour market groups. Our conclusions are similar to the findings of various American and Canadian studies in this area (Krahn and Lowe 1984a and 1984b; Ponak and Janz 1984; Fiorito, Gallagher and Greer 1986; Fiorito and Greer 1986; Deshpande and Fiorito 1989; and Fiorito 1987).

The gap between the union status and the union beliefs and instrumentality perceptions of workers in particular demographic and labour market groups noted in our study have significant implications for unions' policies, in particular their strategy for organizing the unorganized and for worker commitment towards unions. Based on our findings, unions are more likely to succeed in gaining membership in the public sector, large firms, full-time workforce, blue-collar occupations, Central Canada and among older workers. Unions will have problems organizing young workers, white-collar employees in the private sector and in Western and Maritime provinces. Therefore, unions could effectively target the following groups for broader support of their activities and actions: (a) women, particularly of non-British origin, earning low incomes, and in older age groups; (b) men working in large businesses, and in non-white-collar occupations; and (c) workers, both men and women, in union families where one or more members of the family have some union attachment, employed in public sector, and residing in Central Canada. Results of our study support the need for pro-active union policies on pay and employment equity and work and family issues to enhance workers' instrumentality perceptions and positive union beliefs.

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