

Labor Union Mergers and Union Democracy, 1900-2005

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Abstract

Although labor union leaders purport to maintain democratic unions, in practice, prioritization of internal democracy varies by union. Scholars generally agree that democratic union constitutional clauses serve as key mechanisms for promoting internal union democracy, but due to lack of data they have under-examined how democracy changes over time within unions. This study uses original data to examine how democracy has changed over time and how organizational practices—specifically mergers between unions—affect democratic clauses in unions' constitutions. Applying organizational theory to union settings, I argue that mergers create conditions of *uncertainty* about the political future of the union. Who will lead the new union and to what extent will the new members change the union's course? To minimize this uncertainty, the dominant union in the merger often alters their constitution to limit the new members' ability to create major change. I use original archival materials to document the change in constitutional rights before and after mergers, from 1900-2005. Results suggest that key democratic principals (e.g. local union autonomy) decreased over the century, particularly at the time of merger. After mergers, constitutions hold fewer democratic provisions than before mergers. This erosion of rights occurs most strongly at the local union level, resulting in the loss of locals' autonomy. In addition, rights decrease most in mergers that involve unions of similar size or from different federation affiliations. I conclude with a discussion on how the wave of union mergers in the late 20th century has impacted union democracy and its implications for organized labor.

INTRODUCTION

This research examines how mergers between labor unions affect union democracy. Democracy is a central concern of labor scholars. As working-class organizations, unions often purport to be democracies in which members' input influences unions' leaders and policies. Scholars note that this is not always the case (Michels 1916; Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 2003) and that the absence of democratic provisions may negatively impact unions (Lichtenstein 2002; Levi, Olson, Agnone, and Kelly 2009). Indeed, commenting on the 50-year decline of unions, Lichtenstein (2002) identifies democracy as a necessary ingredient for the revitalization of unions. Moreover, democracy is an important ideological concept

for unions. As collectives of workers aimed at providing voice to workers, unions have strong incentives to ensure that workers have voice within their unions.

Prior research on union democracy focuses on the characteristics that make unions democratic (Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 2003; Levi et al. 2009; Lipset 1956; Edelstein and Warner 1976). While this research has identified useful mechanisms that facilitate democracy, it treats union democracy as static: unions are either democratic or they are not. This treatment partially stems from the nature of the existing data on democracy. Since no dataset measures union democracy by union over time, prior studies have tended to use case studies to tease out why democracy level differs among unions. Though many prior studies conceptualize union democracy as static, some labor scholars suggest that democracy, in general, may have declined over time (Lichtenstein 2002). This study uses newly collected data on over 330 union constitutions to examine how democracy has changed and what factors have facilitated change.

I examine an understudied, yet critical, driver of democracy: mergers between unions. Mergers, as I show below, are a common occurrence between unions. However, their impact on fundamental union issues (such as democracy), has been neglected. By using newly collected data, this study highlights how common organizational practices, such as mergers, can create conditions that erode democracy. During mergers, both unions' constitutions are re-negotiated and, in the process, democratic clauses may be rewritten. I enlist concepts from organizational theory to explain how the uncertainty inherent in mergers influences how leaders negotiate constitutions. I argue that leaders attempt to minimize political upheaval by restricting certain democratic practices when unions merge.

To examine how mergers impact union democracy, I collected extensive archival data on all mergers between 1900 and 2005. I coded union constitutions before and after mergers, resulting in data on over 330 union constitutions. This scope of data allows for an analysis that considers broad trends in democracy. To conclude, I discuss how diminishing democracy matters for unions, union members, and theory.

THEORY

Union Democracy

The topic of union democracy has animated decades of research in labor studies. Democracy in unions is important for two reasons. First, democracy is a core ideological principal of unions. In the United States, workers have little input into their working conditions, methods, or pay. Unionization responds to this lack of voice at work as workers mobilize their right to influence work processes. Unions, then, are living examples of workers' ability to organize and speak for themselves making democratic principles like members' input into leadership and policies fundamental values of many unionists.

Second, scholars have identified democracy as facilitating the strength of unions. For instance, one empirical study of unions in the 1940's shows that more democratic unions won better contracts (Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 2003) and another credits Longshoremen's long-term success to their democratic practices (Levi et al 2009). The link between union democracy and the strength of the labor movement is particularly important today. Union density has steadily declined since 1955, when the two dominant federations merged. Many factors have contributed to this decline, including a prolonged employer offensive against unions, the shift away from manufacturing jobs, and unions'

turn towards a “business” model (see Goldfield 1989 for overview). Still, scholars note that democratic practices within unions could help to revitalize the struggling labor movement (Levi et al. 2009; Lichtenstein 2002). Commenting on the iterative relationship between democracy and participation, labor historian Lichtenstein writes: “democracy is at the center of the union rebuilding process” (2002: XX). He contends that democratic practices encourage members’ participation, and that participation, in turn, strengthens the union.

Despite the importance of democracy, data limitations mean that little research exists on change in democracy over time and the mechanisms facilitating change. Understanding these broad trends requires information on hundreds of unions for over a century. Lacking these data, past research has favored case studies, focusing on identifying factors that make unions democratic. Early research stressed the importance of “procedural” democracy, or rules around voting (i.e., one member, one vote) (Lipset et al. 1956; Edelstein and Warner 1979). However, scholars were quick to note that even when democratic procedures exist, unions may still stray toward oligarchy (Stratton 1989; Michels 1911)). More recent research focuses on participatory democracy, the rules that allow members to be active in unions and members’ knowledge and use of those rules. In other words, to be democratic, unions not only need to have fair systems for elections (i.e., procedural democracy), but also provide mechanisms that permit participation and input into everyday union affairs. A key conclusion from this literature is that participatory democracy is institutionalized in union constitutions (Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 2003; Levi et al. 2009). Levi et al. (2009:5) argue that the most democratic constitutions provide for “rank and file control to ensure leadership accountability and empower participation.” For example, a highly democratic union would not just have a constitutional clause ensuring

that members may vote for officers, it would also guarantee that members are able to vote on contracts and strikes.

Prior research also finds that local autonomy is important for union democracy. Unions have multiple organizational levels (see Figure 1). Local autonomy is critical for democratic unions (Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 2003; Levi et al. 2009) because union democracy requires that there be opposing sides, or factions, which are likely to be housed in various local unions. Internal factions mean that leadership and policies are contested, and elected officials may be held accountable (Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 2003; Lipset 1956). However, the relative autonomy of locals vis-à-vis the national union varies by union and over time, and as I argue below, may be affected through the merger process.

Local autonomy is particularly important because it is a pathway to structurally ensuring democracy. National union leadership often comes from leaders of large locals. Managing large locals gives leaders the experience necessary for national office, but even more importantly, large locals provide a voting bloc to propel leaders to the national stage. Locals provide an institutional base with resources and the members behind it for new leaders. Locals, then, hold a dual role within the larger union structure: they are the backbone of the national union, yet, at the same time, they are a constant source of threat. National unions work to make the local unions stay on message, to adopt similar goals to the national union, and to have a dynamic local leadership and rank and file – but not so dynamic that they will take over the national union. Thus, prior research has found two main features of democratic unions: members' ability to participate in union affairs and local union autonomy. These democratic principles are institutionalized in union constitutions.

Figure 1. Union Structure

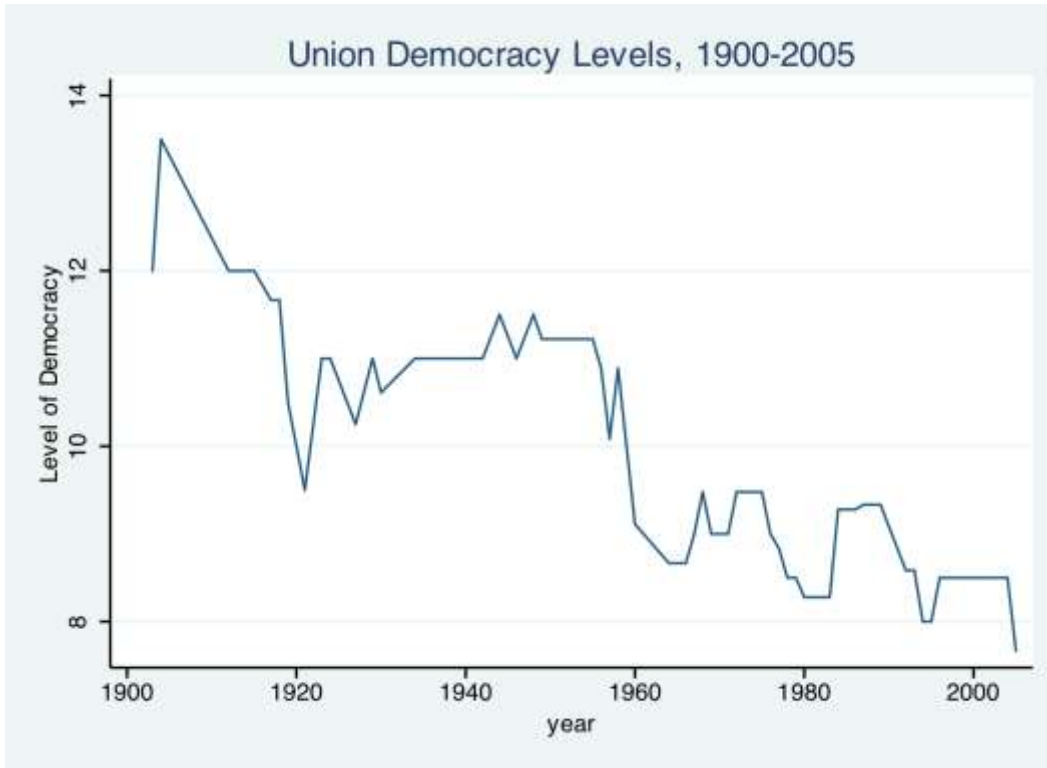


Partially due to lack of data on democracy, the existing research on union democracy treats democracy as relatively static: unions are either democratic or they are not (Stratton 1989; Lipset 1956; Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 2003; Levi et al. 2009). Indeed, union democracy often is static. Unions vary dramatically in their degree of democracy; some unions are known for high levels of democracy, while others are not (Lipset et al. 1956, Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 2003). However, within unions, change in union democracy is slow. Democracy is embedded in the founding union's constitution and constitutions are difficult to change. For most unions, constitutions only change at conventions (every few years) by a two-thirds majority vote, after being vetted through officials. In addition, democracy is embedded within the culture of unions, which is also slow to change. Overall, while constitutions certainly change over time in response to internal issues (i.e., new leaders) or external issues (i.e., the rise of Communism), change is relatively slow to occur. At the same time, anecdotal evidence from scholars and the rise of rank-and file reformers for democracy suggests that democracy may have decreased over

time. Labor scholars lament the loss of democracy (Lichtenstein 2002; Stratton 1989) and numerous groups fighting for union democracy have emerged in the last 40 years, including groups within major unions, like the Teamsters and the United Auto Workers. However, since no data exists over time, these accounts paint a picture of democracy decline but do not empirically examine it. Using data that I collected for this research, I created an index of constitutional clauses to explore the change in democracy over time, described in detail in the data section. Using this data, figure 2 supports previous claims that certain aspects of democracy in unions have eroded.

Figure 2.¹

¹ See Data section for data used in this graph. The data is based on 338 union constitutions, coded from unions that merged (before and after merger) and smoothed over 9 years. While the sample is not perfect (unions were coded only before and after merger), it provides a guide to how democracy may have declined and is the best data available. Subsequent discussion unpacks how the data was collected and its implications.



This graph presents a puzzle: how could democracy decline over time if democracy is relatively stable within unions? Mergers provide an answer to this puzzle. Mergers have been common among labor unions and they require that one, or both, unions change their constitution.

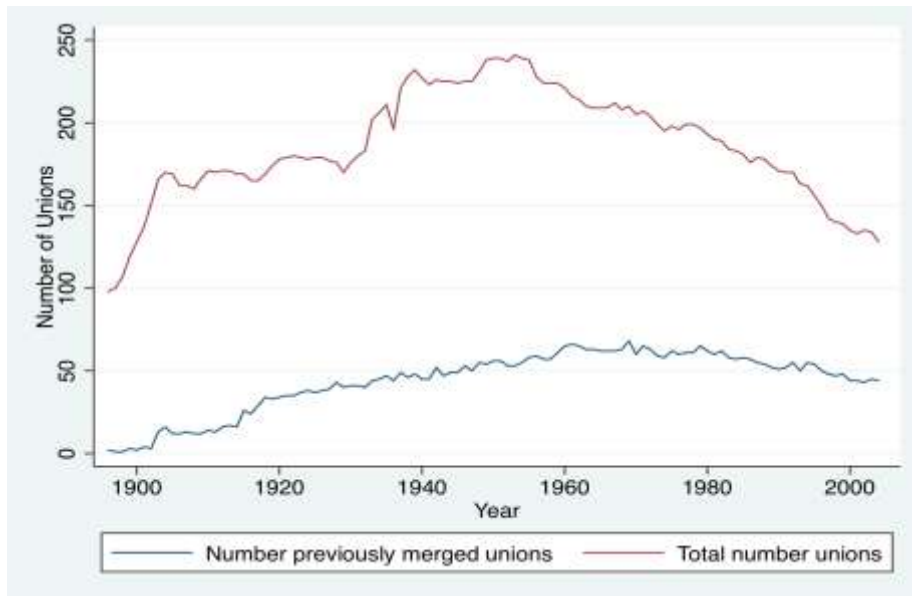
Mergers: Critical Moments for Union Democracy

Mergers have dramatically reshaped the labor movement over the last century. Between 1900 and 2005, about 450 national unions have existed and 225 mergers have occurred between major national unions.² These mergers involved over 340 individual

² I count national unions as unions that have collective bargaining in more than one state.

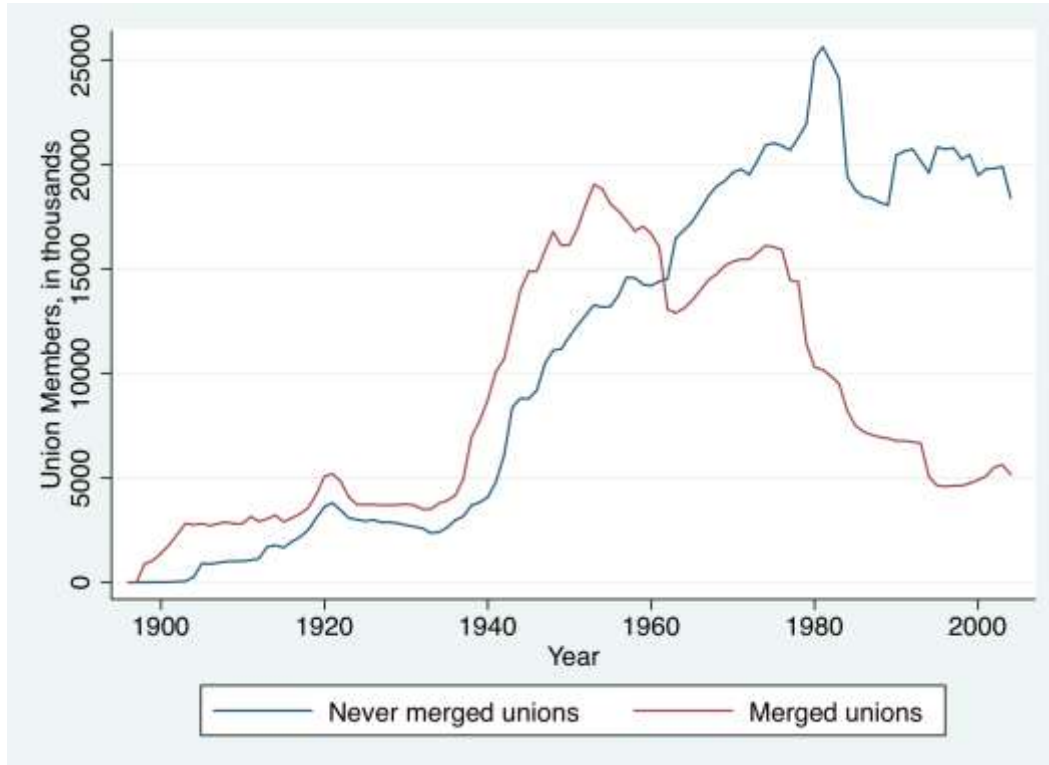
unions, with some unions merging multiple times. Today, around 120 unions exist and about half of them have merged at least once. Figure 3 illustrates the proportion of unions that have merged. The top line is the number of unions that exist in that year, while the bottom line is the number of those unions that have experiences at least one merger. By the end of the 20th century, about half of all unions had merged.

Figure 3: Total number of unions in existence and number that have merged, 1900-2005.



However, the unions that have merged represent the vast majority of union members; the larger unions merged and in doing so, became bigger. Figure 4 shows that the merged unions have twice the amount of members than unions that have never merged. In Figure 4, the blue line represents the total membership for unions that have merged, and the red line is the membership total for unions that have never merged. Most of the unions that have never merged are small, independent unions and several large craft unions (i.e., the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers).

Figure 4. Total membership for merged unions and union that never merged, 1900-2005.



Mergers are key to understanding changes in democracy. As discussed above, unions rarely change their constitutions under normal circumstances. Mergers, however, force at least one union, if not both, to change constitutional provisions. Through negotiation, the merging partners agree to a new constitution that both parties adopt. Thus, the merger process is a critical moment of change for union democracy.

Most research on mergers focuses on firms rather than unions. Organizational theorists argue that mergers impact firms by creating substantial uncertainty that managers try to limit by pushing for structural changes. Williamson (1975) contends that when companies diversify, they face increased uncertainty internal to their organizations. Who, companies wonder, will make the decisions when structure changes due to mergers?

Williamson (1981) shows that when faced with such uncertainties, companies adopt structures that simplify and clarify lines of authority.

While mergers between firms clarify organizational power relations, mergers between unions have a distinctly political twist. Unlike firms, unions are democratic organizations in which voting may change leadership and policy. I argue that two processes can occur during mergers, which I call *political competition* and *political subordination*. Combined, these two processes have resulted in an overall decrease in union democracy. These processes depend on several factors, most importantly the relative size of the unions. Union size is extremely important for unions, because it is a marker of their finances and it reflects their voting in the merged union. Each merger involves unions that have different sizes. I call the larger union the “dominant” union and the smaller union(s) I call subordinate unions.

Political Competition

Political competition occurs between unions that are close in size; I refer to these as amalgamations (Chaison 1986). In general, mergers realign power structures for both unions. When unions merge, they typically retain their own locals, which form voting blocs. Since each member has a vote and these votes cluster by locals, mergers have the potential to upset the existing power structure of the dominant union. This tension is amplified when unions are close in size. If the subordinate union is relatively close in size to the dominant union, then the subordinate union may be able to make major changes in the new union. For example, it may align with locals in the dominant union to vote in its own officers or change language in the constitution. As the larger union, the dominant union has more

power in merger negotiations and has a strong interest in establishing rules that ensure its continued control.

In amalgamations, the merged union retains organizational power bases attached to the old unions. Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin (2003) argue that in the CIO era, amalgamations allowed each amalgamating union to preserve autonomous centers of power within the new union. These centers of power enabled real political competition, which increased the chances for union democracy. Lipset et al. (1956) find similar processes between amalgamations and democracy with the typographical union. Thus, both sets of scholars argue that amalgamations may increase centers of power (and thereby the ability for contested elections, which are key to the type of democracy described by Dahl 1961). However, union leaders are aware of these power centers, and, as I argue below, work to limit the extent that competing factions exercise power.

Literature on state constitutions helps to illustrate how changing populations of voters affect democracy.³ When states' populations shift due to immigration or emigration, policy makers become concerned about the future political climate. To ensure that newer factions do not supplant the dominant coalition, policy makers attempt to write their policies into the state's constitution (Press and Verburg 1979:161). Similarly, states that have one party tend to have high levels of intra-party factions (similar to unions) and somewhat unstable conditions (Key 1949: 303-305). One way to institutionalize the dominant group's policies in the face of factionalism is to write provisions into the constitution (Nice 1988). These examples of state constitutions illustrate the way that

³ In many ways union structure is analogous to state structure: Federal=national; state=regional; cities=locals; citizens=members. While the similarities of these federated structures are useful for conceptualizing some problems, I do not draw the comparison out since the U.S. government does not merge as national unions do.

factions may use constitutions as a response to changing or uncertain political environments.

Like states, I expect dominant unions to try to reduce the chance for future political shifts by limiting rights in the constitution. For example, one way that unions attempt to secure their internal political future is by adding an “emergency clause”, which enables the executive officers to assume unilateral power under certain conditions. Or, unions might add the right to trustee locals, meaning that the national is able to freeze the locals’ finances, eject the elected local officers, and insert national union (non-elected) staff. These provisions reduce uncertainty: if the national union does not agree with a local union, it has options to strip it of its resources and leaders. *In a sentence, mergers between equal sized unions create potential shifts in power, and in response to this change, union leaders tend to enact constitutional changes that restrict certain types of democratic practices.*

Which types of democratic practices are most vulnerable during mergers? I pay particular attention to local autonomy, which is crucial to union democracy (Levi et al. 2009). Locals with high levels of autonomy have constitutionally stipulated rights to keep their elected officers, manage their own finances, call their own strikes, and vote on inter-local mergers; nationals cannot freeze locals’ assets without trial or remove their officers. Locals are the building block for national-level power. In other words, any threat to the national union likely comes from large locals. Since mergers, particularly between similar sized unions, are filled with political uncertainty, I expect mergers to restrict the rights of locals.

Political Subordination

Political competition occurs when unions are relatively equal in size. This results in a decrease in democracy for *both* unions, particularly around local autonomy. Political subordination, on the other hand, occurs when unions are very asymmetric in size. This type of merger is called absorption. In absorptions, the subordinate union has little negotiation power in a merger due to its size. When unions are asymmetric in size, the subordinate union surrenders most of its constitutional clauses, and agrees to adopt the larger union's constitution.

Democracy in unions has also changed through the absorption process. For historical and organizational reasons, smaller unions in the U.S. have tended to be more democratic. Historically, many of the left leaning CIO affiliated unions were highly democratic but small. When the two federations (the AFL and the CIO) merged in 1955, many mergers between national unions occurred, with the left leaning CIO unions being in the subordinate position. Organizationally, size and merger history have helped to keep smaller unions more democratic. Organizational scholars have asked whether size affects centralized control in firms. Empirical work based on firms shows that as organizations grow, their decision-making becomes more decentralized (Pugh, et al., 1969). However, democratic organizations do not have the same tendency; instead, they score higher on levels of centralization (Pugh, et al. 1969; Donaldson and Warner 1974). Since unions are democratic organizations, it is likely that larger unions will be more centralized at the national level, i.e. the executive officers and executive boards have more control over the direction of the union without direct member input less local autonomy. In addition, I argue that as unions merge over time, they become less democratic.

Subordinate unions adopt most of the dominant union's constitution in absorptions. Since subordinate unions have been more democratic, democracy is systematically lost through mergers. Overall, I argue that the biggest loss of democracy will occur for the subordinate union in the merger.

Counter Example

Above, I argue that mergers create conditions of political uncertainty, which union leaders often react to by restricting certain types of democratic rights. However, it is important to note that mergers do not necessarily lead to undemocratic practices. For example, the left leaning Fur Workers Union and Leather Workers Union merged in 1939. Though the Fur Workers were larger, they extended full rights to the incoming Leather locals, resulting in high levels of democracy at all levels. The merger of unions like the Fur and Leather Workers suggests that while mergers may often result in decreased democracy, they do not always. Fear of the future can create conditions in which leaders opt for the less democratic path. However, leaders' choices at the time of merger may decrease *or* increase democracy with mergers. For example, left leaning unions in the CIO were highly committed to democratic practices (Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 2003). The leaders of these unions would likely be cautious not to restrict democracy when merging. This research aims to illustrate that democracy is not stagnant. Rather, leaders' choices, particularly around the time of mergers, can greatly shape the relationship between the rank and file and the national union.

Other Considerations: Past Merger Experience, Affiliation, Age, and Time Trends

In addition to the discussion above, I briefly consider four factors that may also influence how mergers affect democracy: affiliation, past merger experience, age, and time trends.

The federation that each union belongs to, or their “affiliation”, also affects the change in democracy. Mergers occur between federations or within federations. Even within federations, unions vary widely in their levels of democracy. However, unions within federations tend to be more similar than unions between federations. In addition, unions within federations know each other: they attend the same conferences, leaders sit on the same committees, and they may have worked together on campaigns. These interactions may serve to increase their level of trust and to provide unions some idea of how their merger partner will behave. In other words, within-federation mergers limit the degree of uncertainty. Thus, I expect larger changes in democracy when unions that were previously in different federations merge. Most unions that merged were either affiliated with the AFL (or the AFL-CIO after 1955), the CIO, or were unaffiliated (independents).

Past merger experience may also affect changes in internal democracy. Unions that have merged many times (i.e., dominant unions) may experience a “ceiling” effect. In other words, in the first rounds of mergers, uncertainty is high and leaders are apt to negotiate constitutions that restrict democracy; but at some point the constitutions becomes stripped down so much that future mergers don’t alter the level of democracy.

Similar to past merger experience, age at the time of merger likely plays a role in union democracy. Older unions—particularly those that have not merged before—likely allow for more autonomy in local's rights. When modern unions began to form in the late 1880's, they were often an amalgamation of local unions that banded together to form a

national entity. These locals expected to have a fair degree of autonomy, and their constitutions reflected this.

Finally, I consider the role of time. It may be that unions mimic each other's constitutions. If a few large unions start to restrict democracy, other unions may follow suit, using mergers as a time to change their constitutions. If this is the mechanism, then uncertainty doesn't drive the restriction of democracy- mimicking does (i.e., institutional isomorphism). This would suggest that over time, all constitutions become less democratic. While I can't directly control for this (I would need democracy score for all unions overtime, not just at merger points), archival materials document union leaders' conversation around mergers, suggesting that uncertainty does matter.

To sum up, mergers are critical moments when unions' constitution change. Unions that are similar in size experience political competition as leaders of the dominant union aim to remain in control after the merger. To retain power, they alter the constitution to make change harder to achieve. In this situation, the resulting constitution is less democratic than either of the two original constitutions. Rights constrict primarily at the local level where power shifts occur. Political subordination occurs for smaller unions when merging unions differ greatly in size. For historical and organizational reasons, smaller unions have more democratic constitutions. When they merge, they adopt the larger unions' constitution, thereby becoming less democratic. Overall, mergers help to explain how union democracy has declined over time.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Data and Sampling

This research draws on extensive data on union constitutions from 1900-2005 collected at archives. I coded each union's constitution immediately before and after every merger between 1900 and 2005 during which 225 mergers occurred.

What do I count as a union? For the population of unions, I use a dataset on unions compiled by Stepan-Norris and Southworth (2011). They count an organization to be a union if it bargains collectively and has contracts in two or more states. Note that this definition excludes small independent unions that represent workers at only one company. Many of the small independent unions were "company" unions, meaning that they had very low levels of democracy.

Each merger has three data points: the two union constitutions before the merger, and the constitution post merger. Unpublished or missing constitutions prevented me from coding the entire population of 225 mergers. I visited the major union archives to locate constitutions: Kheel Archives, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY; Catholic University Archives, Washington DC; Wisconsin Historical Society, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI; Department of Labor Library, Washington DC; and the George Meany Archives, Silver Spring, MD. In addition, I located constitutions in a microfilm set compiled by Bernard Naas (1977). I included constitutions that were within seven years of the merger date. After thoroughly searching, I successfully coded 334 constitutions, which is approximately half of the total constitutions in the population.

A critical component of this research is to ensure that the sample is representative. Five areas are particularly important for representativeness: merger position (subordinate/dominant), year of merger, size of each union, affiliation of each union, and type of merger (within federation or between federation). Overall, the sample is

representative in most aspects, but it has fewer subordinate unions that are independent (i.e., not affiliated with a federation); however, the lack of small independents likely provides a strong test for the research. Because subordinates and independents tended to have higher democracy⁴, missing them in the sample makes for a conservative test. In addition, since these unions made up a very small percentage of overall union membership, they fail to capture the experience of most union members. Further, the sample has more constitutions from the second half of the century, see Appendix B, which is not surprising given the historical nature of this project. Since I thoroughly combed all of the major archives, if the constitution exists in a public repository, I have coded it. Thus, this is the best data that exists at this time. Nevertheless, I interpret results cautiously.

Index

I constructed an index of rights based on the presence or absence of specific constitutional clauses, described in Appendix A. I loosely base the index on two sets of prior work, Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin (2003) and Levi et al. (2009). The index includes 15 measures of constitutional democracy, ranging from whether members have the right to vote on contracts to whether an international union has the right to force local unions to merge. Each clause is coded as 1 if it is present in the constitution and 0 if it is not. Then, the measures are added to create an index. High democracy unions have the highest scores and low democracy unions have low scores. The scores ranged from 3 to 15, with 8.7 as the mean.

Annual Count

⁴ Independent unions tended to have higher levels of democracy because they accounted for many of the unions that left (or were expelled) from federations for being Communist dominated.

The constitution data was collected in the convention year closest to merger. To examine general trends over time, I pooled yearly data (averaged across unions) of the 334 constitutions and then averaged the democracy level by year. I was unable to locate any constitutions for 15 of the years in the sample range. For these years, I averaged the democracy level from before and after the missing year. This yearly dataset is based of unions that participated in a merger and does not include unions that never merged. However, half of the sample measures union constitutions *before* they merge, thus capturing unions pre-merger. Since merged unions account for the majority of union members and most labor unions, this measure is a rough proxy for trends in democracy over time.

My measurements of union democracy rely on coding constitutions. Other measures of democracy would have been useful but were not available like the percent of union members that turn out for votes, strikes, or other actions. Indeed, much work on union democracy does not occur because of the lack of systematic data by union over time. While this project has time varying data, it was only collected before and after mergers, and excludes unions that never merged. This limited data provides an overview of democratic trends and the role of mergers, but cannot delve deeply into the fluctuations of democracy over time. Future research would benefit from data at additional time points.

Methods

I use OLS regressions to examine changes in democracy. The unit of analysis and dependent variables change for each regression. The first analysis (Table 1) examines average democracy level over time. The unit is year and covers 1900-2005. The dependent variable is overall democracy score. This analysis is unique in that it describes

the time trend in democracy level. Table 3 uses the merger as the unit of analysis. The dependent variable is change in democracy level. This analysis examines how merger position (dominant or subordinate) affects the amount of change in democracy. Table 4 examines how characteristics of the union affect democracy levels among dominant unions. Again, the unit of analysis is merger and the dependent variable is change in democracy. The independent variables are as follows:

Size:⁵ the relative size of the unions (proportion).

Within-federation merger: Dummy variable coded as 1 if the merger was between unions from the same federation.

Local Democracy: The level of local autonomy of the dominant union prior to merger.

Prior number of mergers: Number of times the dominant union has previously merged.

Age: Years the dominant union has existed.

RESULTS

Has democracy changed over time? Findings based on yearly democracy levels suggest that it does. I examine trends in democracy over time by using yearly democracy levels. Table 1 presents an OLS regression that models the overall level of democracy. Model 1 includes only a year variable, which is negative and significant. Like Figure 2, this finding suggests that democracy has decreased over time. Of course, “democracy” is difficult to measure. As discussed above, I measure it by coding a range of constitutional clauses, with a total of 15 indicators. When the index is disaggregated, certain “types” of democracy decrease more over time. Disaggregation is beyond the scope of this paper;

⁵ The size variable comes from Stepan-Norris and Southworth’s (2011) dataset, which uses a variety of sources to record union membership size.

rather I am interested in the structural events (i.e., mergers) that affect *when* democracy changes. Model 2 explores how mergers may impact democracy overtime by including a measure of the proportion of unions that have merged, by year. When this measure is included, the yearly effect disappears. However, since the percent of unions that have never merged is highly correlated with time (more unions have merged as the century progressed), this finding should be interpreted with caution. Nevertheless, these models suggest that democracy has decreased overtime and that mergers, perhaps, have contributed to the decrease. The next analyses assess the role of mergers and democracy.

Table 1 Here

Table 2 reports mean democracy for unions before and after merger. Higher means represent more democratic clauses in the constitutions. Before mergers, subordinate unions tend to be more democratic than dominant unions. This difference is because subordinate unions tend to be independent, former CIO unions, or have not previously merged. After mergers, democracy decreases for both unions, through t-tests indicate that only the subordinate-final difference is significant. Subordinate and dominant unions before merger have a mean democracy of 9.88 and 9.24 respectively, while the post merger constitution has a mean of 9.11.

Table 2 Here

Table 3 examines how mergers affect dominant and subordinate unions' democracy. Recall, t-tests in Table 2 reported that democracy decreased the most for subordinate unions. Table 3 assesses the extent of this drop in democracy, controlling for other factors by aggregating all of the possible combinations of mergers (pairings between dominant-

final and subordinate-final), for a total sample of 161. I include two control variables that represent characteristics of the merger: relative size and within-federation merger. Since some of these pairings overlap (for about 25% of the sample I had coded the dominant, subordinate, and final union constitutions for the same merger), I cluster the cases to maximize unique cases. The model reports that when mergers occur, subordinate unions experience a significantly greater decrease in constitutional rights than dominant unions.

Table 3 Here

The above tables suggest that democracy has decreased over time and that subordinate unions have borne the brunt of that decrease. How have dominant unions' democracy levels changed with mergers? Dominant unions play an important role in the modern union movement. Many of these unions grew substantially through mergers and together they boast a large proportion of total union members. Dominant unions, as Table 3 shows, do not decline in democracy as much as subordinate unions. Table 4 examines the conditions under which dominant unions do decrease in democracy levels by examining only pairings between the dominant and final unions. By only including dominant unions, this analysis examines which factors make the larger union restrict its democracy. Three variables of interest are included: initial degree of local autonomy, the relative size of the merger partners, and whether the merger was between unions in the same federation. Each of these factors impacts subsequent change in democracy. The initial level of local democracy has a significant and negative impact on the subsequent change in overall democracy. In other words, dominant unions with high levels of local democracy were more likely to have a larger overall decrease in total democracy after participating in a merger. Unions with highly democratic clauses for local unions were most likely to

experience a large drop in democracy. Relative size of the unions is also negative and marginally significant. This suggests that when a dominant union merges with a union close to its size, it is more likely to pursue a more restrictive constitution. Dominant unions that absorb small unions do not seek such a restriction. Again, this dynamic occurs because mergers between unions that are close in size mean that the future status (officers, constitutions, culture) is more uncertain. Mergers that occur within federations have a positive impact on democracy. Since unions from the same federation often work together, they have less uncertainty than unions from different federations.⁶

Table 4 Here

Two controls are included in Table 4: the number of prior mergers the dominant union has undergone and age at the time of merger. Since mergers generally correspond to a decrease in democracy, unions that have merged multiple times have fewer opportunities to restrict rights (because they may have done so in earlier mergers resulting in a floor effect). The coefficient is positive, but not significant. Age at time of merger is also controlled. Since unions rarely make dramatic changes to their constitutions (except when merging), older unions likely have constitutional clauses that allow for more autonomy, especially at the local level. They change these clauses when they merge. The coefficient for age is negative and significant. This suggests that older unions are more likely to decrease in democracy when they merge than younger unions.

To summarize, I find that democracy is not static. As prior works have hinted, democracy has decreased over time. This research examines the impact of mergers on

⁶ Table 4 examines only dominant unions. Separate analyses examined subordinate unions, but results were less significant. I believe this is because many subordinate unions adopt some or all of the dominant union's constitution, meaning that their change in democracy is a function of the democracy of their merger partner.

democracy. I find that democracy decreases after mergers and that this effect is largest for the subordinate union in the merger.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Mergers help to explain why and how unions have lost some of the key constitutional clauses that protect rank and file control of unions. Mergers subject long-standing constitutions to negotiations and create substantial uncertainty about the future of the merged organization. These characteristics of mergers make them key sites for the erosion of democratic rights. This research finds that subordinate unions are especially likely to decrease in democracy when they merge while dominant unions experience less of a decrease. However, dominant unions do decrease in democracy in several circumstances: when the dominant union begins with a high level of local autonomy, when the merger occurs between unions of similar size, or when the merger is between unions that were affiliated with different federations. The greater the local democracy, the more likely the merged union decreases its overall level of democracy. Locals are affected the most because they pose the largest threat to newly merged unions. Locals are the base from which union leaders emerge and voting blocs form. When unions that are relatively close in membership size merge, it is possible for the subordinate union's locals to challenge the national leadership. To prevent this, dominant unions fight to restrict local autonomy. This dynamic is further exacerbated when the merger occurs between unions from different federations. These unions often have contentious histories and are disinclined to allow the smaller union input into the new union.

Indeed, democracy changes over time. Prior work has suggested that union democracy has declined, but has not empirically tested it or explained mechanisms for the decline. This research illustrates how mergers have been an important factor in declining democracy. By focusing on the role of mergers, this research attends to the way that structural change can inform important aspects of organizational life, like the ability of the rank-and-file to meaningfully participate in unions. While counter-examples demonstrate that mergers need not result in less democracy, political uncertainty creates conditions that make restrictions in democracy a likely outcome. This imagery allows us to understand how union leaders, many of whom are deeply committed to the principals of democracy, may still act to restrict democracy. This restriction is an unintended consequence of attempts to manage uncertainty.

This research also highlights the importance of local union autonomy. Local autonomy is an important factor in maintaining democratic unions (Levi et al. 2009; Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 2003). Dominant unions with high levels of local autonomy tend to lose those rights when they merge. This loss of autonomy has major implications for the voice of members because it restricts the way that members may collectively act together. For example, at an individual level, members may have free speech (the ability to question union policies, for example). However, free speech becomes less meaningful if at the organizational level locals can be trusteeed (elected officers removed and funds frozen by the national) for any cause. Members may have free speech, but their ability to act it out at a local level can be curtailed by leaders further up the hierarchy.

This local dynamic has garnered national media attention in recent years and illustrates the way that mergers have changed locals' rights and have been used as a tool to

change power dynamics within unions. Massive internal battles have taken place in some of the largest unions in recent years over the question of locals' rights versus nationals' rights. For instance, one of the largest unions, the Service Employees Industrial Union (SEIU) took over ("trusteed") one of its biggest locals, which was heralded for its rank and file militancy, democracy, and success in winning contracts. While SEIU leadership claimed the trusteeship aimed to curtail local-level corruption, local leaders and members argued that the trusteeship was political: the local disagreed with national policies. SEIU first tried to force the local to merge. While local mergers can certainly be for benign reasons (i.e., changing technologies or membership numbers), this example illustrates the way that mergers can also be used to realign power structures within unions.

How does this research inform the literature on the decline in union density? Union density peaked in 1955 at around 35% of all workers and has declined to approximately 12% in 2010. In the vast literature theorizing about this decline, many accounts point to factors external to the labor movement like the aggressive employer offensive and the shift away from traditional union jobs in manufacturing (Goldfield 1989). Scholars have also noted that some of the decline could be alleviated by changes in the ways that unions organize themselves like increasing organizing activities like house calls and relying less on "business" union models which treat unions as insurance agents (Bronfrenbrenner 1996). In a similar vein, scholars have identified democracy as important to union strength (Levi et al. 2009; Lichtenstein 2002). If democracy shapes union vibrancy and the rebuilding of the labor movement (Lichtenstein 2002), then a decline in democracy could partially account for the drop in union density over the last decades. Mergers have become increasingly common among labor unions. Attending to constitutional changes after

mergers is one way to ensure that members keep a voice in union policies. Maintaining these democratic practices could help unions to maintain members in the long run. In other words, one reason that unions merge is to maintain their power vis-à-vis employers; yet, through the merger process, unions often neglect the rights of members and locals, which is key to union strength. By attempting to combat external challenges, then, unions often diminish their internal rights, which have consequences for their future strength.

It is difficult to untangle the relationship between mergers and the decline in union density: do unions shrink and then merge, or do they merge, lose some degree of democracy, and then lose members? It is likely that these dynamics coexist. Numerous examples demonstrate that some unions have shrunk dramatically and then sought a merger partner. On the other hand, some unions have merged frequently and not grown subsequently. For example, the merger of the two major federations in 1955, the AFL and the CIO, preceded a wave of national union mergers. *After* this consolidation, union density began to drop. Perhaps union density was going to decline regardless of union policies. Alternatively, this research suggests that the way that unions altered their constitutions after merger impacted crucial aspects of democracy, which scholars believe to be key to union strength. It is likely that both dynamics co-exist. Some unions lose members and merge. Yet, unions may also merge, and as a consequence of changes in policies, end up losing members. While it is difficult to untangle the substantive impact of these dynamics, this study is able to show that democracy does decrease after merger.

What might these findings suggest for organization theory and organizations beyond labor unions? Much of the organization theory has been built around findings from firms. A major finding from this literature is that firms work to limit uncertainty. They

employ a variety of techniques to manage uncertainty, from changing organizational form to buying competitor companies (see Scott 2000). This research illustrates that uncertainty plays a role in democratic organizations as well. In addition, it suggests that uncertainty has important consequences for the organization's members, in this case, rank-and-file union members, and perhaps the growth of the organization. In sum, mergers illuminate how organizational processes may result in unanticipated- and often unwanted- consequences, like the erosion of union democracy.

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Table 1. OLS. Effect of time and mergers on yearly democracy level

| | Model 1 | Model 2 |
|-----------------------|------------|----------|
| year | -0.0464*** | 0.0424 |
| | (0.00633) | (0.0285) |
| % unions never merged | | 23.76** |
| | | (7.444) |
| Constant | 100.9*** | -89.72 |
| | (12.37) | (60.87) |
| Observations | 103 | 102 |
| R-squared | 0.347 | 0.402 |

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.10

Table 2. Mean levels of democracy, before and after merger.

| Position | Mean level of democracy |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------|
| Subordinate unions | 9.88 |
| Dominant unions | 9.24 |
| Final (merged) unions | 9.11 |

Table 3. OLS Regression. The effect of subordinate unions on change in democracy (total index)

| | Total Index |
|-------------------|-------------|
| Subordinate Union | -0.917* |
| | 0.422 |
| Relative Size | 0.532 |
| | 0.459 |

| | |
|--------------------------|--------|
| Within Federation Merger | 0.0062 |
| | 0.506 |
| Constant | -0.456 |
| | 0.448 |
| Observations | 161 |
| R-squared | 0.037 |

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.10

Table 4. OLS Regression. The effect of local autonomy on subsequent change in democracy, for dominant unions

| | Change in Democracy |
|--------------------------|---------------------|
| Degree of Local Autonomy | -0.361* |
| | 0.14 |
| Relative Size | -0.726+ |
| | 0.411 |
| Within Federation Merger | 0.689+ |
| | 0.353 |
| <i>Controls</i> | |
| # of Prior Mergers | 0.0725 |
| | 0.0841 |
| Age at Time of Merger | -0.0140* |
| | 0.00632 |
| Constant | 1.718* |
| | 0.746 |
| Observations | 88 |
| R-squared | 0.192 |

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.10

Appendix A: Index

Members' Rights (7 points possible)

Political orientation

- 1 Constitution prohibits political discrimination
- 0 Constitution does not prohibit political discrimination

- 1 Constitution does not prohibit Communists or other political parties
- 0 Constitution does prohibit Communists or other political parties

- 1 Constitution does not prohibit "slander" of officers or union
- 0 Constitution does prohibit "slander" of officers or union

Striking

- 1 Strikes must be voted on by membership
- 0 No membership vote needed

Contracts

- 1 Contracts must be voted on by membership
- 0 No membership vote needed

Members' ability to change constitution

- 1 Constitution can be amended through referendum (or convention)
- 0 Constitution can only be changed at convention

Elections

- 1 Members vote on national officers
- 0 Convention delegates vote on national officers

Locals' Rights (total 7 points)

Locals' voice in changing constitutional clauses

- 1 Locals can initiate a constitutional amendment
- 0 Locals cannot initiate a constitutional amendment

Striking

- 1 Locals do not need approval from national to go on strike
- 0 Locals do need approval from national to go on strike

Strike Discipline

- 1 Discipline for unauthorized strike is nothing or minor (no strike benefits)
- 0 Discipline for unauthorized strike is suspension or trusteeship

Trusteeships

- 1 No provision for trusteeship
- 0 Trusteeships are allowed

Trusteeship Timelines and Hearings

- 1 Either no trusteeship, or trusteeship, but has a timeline
- 0 Have a trusteeship but no timeline

Emergency Clause (president can take over local (or really do anything) immediately- no trial first)

- 1 No clause enabling trusteeship or "emergency clause"
- 0 Emergency Clause

Forced Local Mergers

- 1 No provision to force local to merge
- 0 National can force local to merge without a vote

Decision Making at National Level (7 points total)

Executive Board

- 1 Executive Board consists of at least some members (not only officers)
- 0 Executive Board is all officers, or no members required

Officers

- 1 Some provision about officers (usually vice-presidents) being representative of industries or geography
- 0 No provision on representativeness

Staff

- 1 President cannot fire staff without approval from Executive Board
- 0 Staff can be fired at will

Convention Committees

- 1 Constitution stipulates that convention committees be elected or approved by convention
- 0 No provision for election or approval

Convention Frequency (because that is when decisions get made)

- 1 Conventions occur in at least every 4 years
- 0 Conventions occur in 5 or more years, or no regular conventions

Finances

- 1 National cannot dictate dues increase without consent from convention or referendum
- 0 National can dictate dues increase without consent from convention or referendum

Mergers

- 1 No provision stating that president or executive board can implement a national merger without a vote
- 0 Provisions stating that president or executive board can implement a national merger without a vote

Appendix B

Much effort was dedicated to examining the representativeness of the sample. The main strategy was to compare the sample with the population on key aspects. Below I describe how the sample reflects the population for each area.

Merger Position

My strategy is to compare dyads: the dominant union to the final union and the subordinate union to the final union. Below I report all of the potential combinations for comparison, but the most important combinations (the before and after combinations) are bolded. For these important categories, I have roughly 44% and 36% of the population.

| All Union Mergers, 1900-2005 | | |
|---|--------------|-----------------------|
| Type | Number Coded | % of Population (225) |
| All constitutions: subordinate, dominant, & final | 69 | 31% |
| Dominant before & final union | 98 | 44% |
| Subordinate before & final union | 81 | 36% |
| Dominant & subordinate before | 81 | 36% |
| Only final | 117 | 52% |
| Only dominant | 118 | 53% |
| Only subordinate | 99 | 44% |

Year

The table below describes how well the sample represents the entire century of mergers. I have better coverage for the later half of the century, especially for the subordinate unions. Considering this, I will do analyses for the entire century, but then disaggregate to verify that the results are similar in the first and second halves of the century.

| Union Mergers, 1955-2005 | | |
|---|--------------|-----------------------|
| Type | Number Coded | % of Population (131) |
| All constitutions: subordinate, dominant, & final | 60 | 46% |

| | | |
|---|-----------|------------|
| Dominant before & final union | 70 | 53% |
| Subordinate before & final union | 67 | 51% |
| Dominant & subordinate before | 70 | 53% |
| Only final | 80 | 61% |
| Only dominant | 84 | 64% |
| Only subordinate | 81 | 62% |

Size

Next I check that I don't disproportionately code large or small unions. The means below suggest that I have slightly larger unions in my sample. However, the means are fairly close. As estimates of size vary greatly by source and by the way that unions count their members, I am not concerned with the small differences in means.

| | Mean population | Mean Sample |
|--------------------|-----------------|-------------|
| Final | 254000 | 263000 |
| Dominant before | 259000 | 294000 |
| Subordinate before | 17000 | 23000 |

Affiliation- Independents

Unions that are not affiliated with a federation were more difficult to locate. This is because the federation often helps to archive materials (e.g., the AFL-CIO established an archive which holds many AFL-CIO affiliated unions' constitutions, the George Meany Archive). It appears that I have a fairly representative sample for independent dominant unions. However, I had less success in finding independent unions that were the subordinate partner. This is likely because dominant independent unions continued on, whereas subordinate independent unions ceased to exist. Given this, I will use caution when making claims about independent unions. Still, since most unions affiliate with a federation, I am able to speak for the major trends in mergers.

| | Independents in population | Independents in sample |
|--------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|
| Dominant before | 7.5% | 6% |
| Subordinate before | 25% | 7.5% |

Within or between federation

Lastly, I examine if the merger involves unions in the same federation (within) or from different federations or independents (between). The table below shows that the sample has more within mergers and less between mergers than expected. This is because the between mergers include independent unions, which, as I explain above, are more difficult to find.

| | % of population | % of sample |
|---------------------|-----------------|-------------|
| Within federation | 66% | 74% |
| Between federations | 34% | 26% |