REDI@CSU
Regional Economic Development Institute

The State of Colorado Labor Unions: Patterns Across Time and Space

Zachary Schaller and Sarah Thomaz

REDI Report – February 2022
https://redi.colostate.edu/

Among the many twists and turns of the Covid-19 pandemic, one of the more surprising developments has been the increase in labor union activity in the United States. Few economists anticipated such a strong change in labor force participation and the swing toward worker bargaining power that came with it. At the center of this shift—the line of scrimmage, if you will—unions have been working overtime to assert themselves and capture gains for their members. Yet, 2021 was the first time in a long time that unions have enjoyed favorable conditions. The purpose of this report is to contextualize recent developments in light of longer trends and summarize the current state of unionization across Colorado. We present new data on the locational specifics of union activity that highlights differences across the state and how unions might affect economic development in these varied locations.

Figure 1 shows union density (the fraction of workers who are union members) in Colorado from 1964 to 2020. These estimates from unionstats.com and Hirsch, et al. (2001) show a remarkable decline in union prevalence since the 1960s. With the exception of a minor uptick after 2010, Colorado's trend is emblematic of the greater national trend.

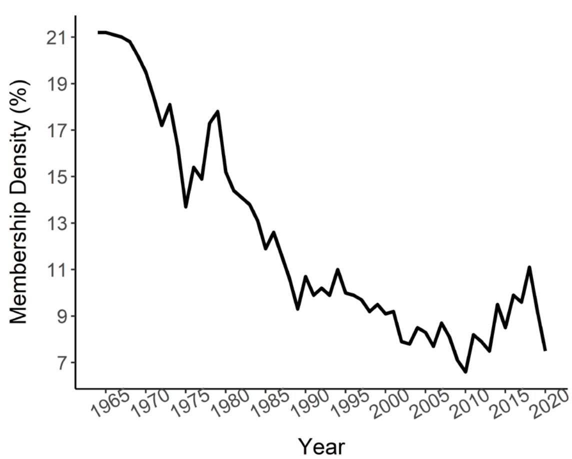


Figure 1: Colorado Union Density

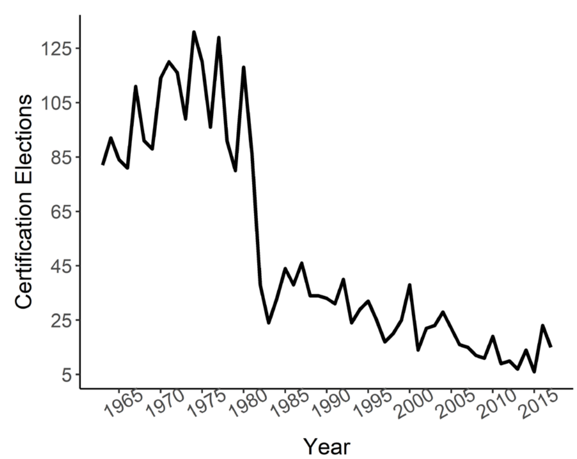
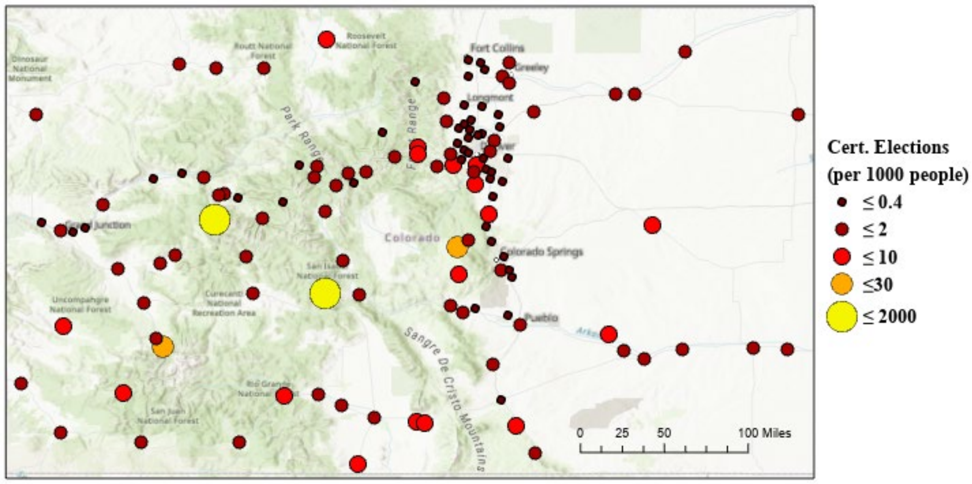
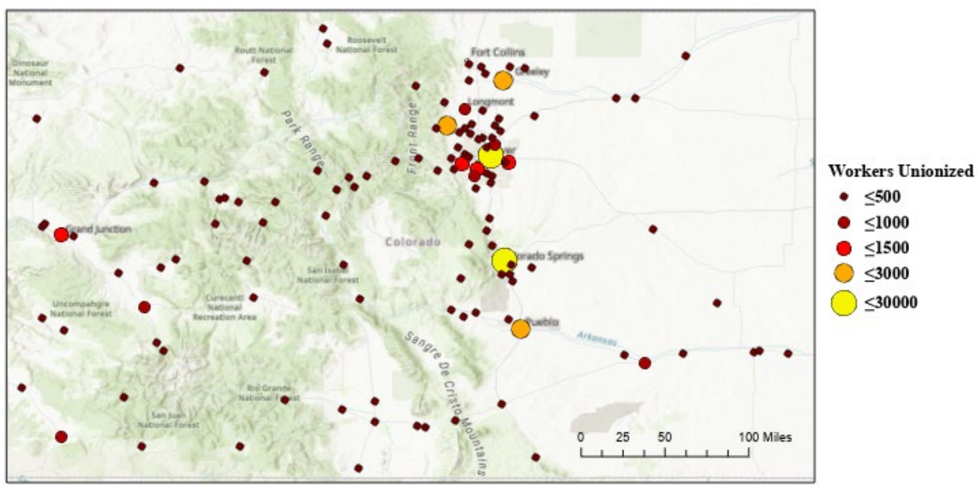


Figure 2: Colorado Union Elections

Unfortunately, it is impossible to break down the locality of membership trends any further since those data are only collected annually at the state level. But, as an alternative union indicator, National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) representation elections provide disaggregation at the city level on a monthly basis. Just like citizens democratically elect representatives to government positions, workers democratically elect whether to have a union and who that union will be. The main difference to government elections is that union elections are not regularly scheduled events that happen every year or every term. Instead, they arise only as needed when requested by enough workers in a given unit (a shop floor, for example). This means that successful union elections capture an important inflow of unionized workers. And since new firms are always being born—by default non-union in the US—there must be a constant flow of elections to maintain union prevalence. Figure 2 shows Colorado has not maintained such a flow; on the contrary, elections declined very steeply in 1980 and have fallen steadily thereafter. Over the period shown, there has been only 2833 certification elections, 114,020 votes cast, and just over 55,000 employees organized. Unions were victorious 58% of the time.

Digging in further, we take advantage of locational information to map union activity and see where unions have organized successfully. The first map shows elections per 1,000 people since 1963 (we divide by population so that results aren't driven by volume). The second map shows where unions won since 1963, weighted by the number of workers in those elections, thus indicating the potential number of new union members.





Naturally, the raw number of workers organized is concentrated along Front Range cities, but the population-weighted map shows that there is substantial union activity across the whole state. Interestingly, we recently discovered that most of this diversity is driven by early decades; the above map is static, and therefore won't capture this phenomenon, but very few elections have occurred outside the I-25 corridor since the 1980s. More work needs to be done to know how this shift has impacted economic circumstances for workers, but there is some reason for concern.

Unions still provide the strongest answer to employer market power. Since rural cities have limited employment options for workers of any given specialty, rural labor markets are likely to be dominated by just a few employers. This situation leads to a lack of job options for workers, potentially causing compensation to stagnate and talent to drain to the Front Range. While many smaller communities may be uneasy about unions, presumably to protect small business owners and attract outside investors, they may be struggling from what is not seen—that is, the economic activity foregone because of declining real wages.