



Trade union membership - Who's leaving while staying with the same employer? Australia 2008-2010

This fact sheet seeks to enhance our understanding of the factors associated with the decision to leave a union, isolated from the event of leaving one's employer¹. Data from the first four waves of the Australia at Work study² was used to investigate the individual level characteristics of those who quit unions whilst staying with the same employer in 2008-2010.

The analysis was performed on individuals who remained with the same employer during at least two consecutive years of the study and were a member of a union in the initial year. The dependent variable of the model was binary, either they "stayed" a union member or they "left". A standard logistic regression model was used to estimate which characteristics are correlated with exit from unions. The independent variables that were investigated comprised of demographic characteristics (such as sex, age, education and household characteristics), firm characteristics (such as sector, tenure, agreement type, form of employment, hours, wage, skill, workplace size and union workplace presence), attitudes (towards union membership and managers) and changes between the pair of years (derived variables indicating changes in; location, hours, wage, skill and union workplace presence). Regional variation was captured via a regional dummy variable, however usual state of residence was not included in the model since preliminary investigation found it wasn't significant in this analysis.

Ultimately, the unweighted data was pooled across the three years 2008-2010 to increase the sample size. Individuals were counted once for each pair of years they stayed a union member and once for each time they left, (including after rejoining), therefore there are at most 3 observations per individual. This resulted in 4,101 observations from 1,798 individuals. Of the 4,101 observations there were 208 instances (5.1%) where a union member left their union membership but remained with the same employer. The year of the observation was included in the model as an independent variable.

¹ Information in this fact sheet is an extract from a research paper by Yarbrough & Yu (forthcoming). The full paper is available from the authors upon request. A summary of research which highlighted the importance of job mobility for leaving a union is available in Fact Sheet No.21.

² The *Australia at Work* study is being conducted by the Workplace Research Centre at the University of Sydney. The project is funded by the Australian Research Council's Linkage Grant scheme and the industry partner is Unions NSW. Further financial support is provided by CFMEU Energy & Mining Division, CFMEU ACT Branch, NSW Nurses' Association, the Police Federation of Australia, the SDA, the CEPU, the QLD Nurses Federation and the Nurses Federation (Victorian Branch). *The study* is a five-year longitudinal telephone survey of people who were aged 16 to 58 years in 2007 and in the Australian labour force in March 2006 (i.e. prior to the implementation of the *Work Choices* legislation on 27 March 2006). New entrants and re-entrants to the labour force after March 2006 were not 'in-scope' for the study. For more information: <http://www.australiaatwork.org.au>

What did we find?

The results vary in significant ways when considering only the cohort whose employer remained the same between consecutive years. Form of employment and job tenure both become significant factors. Other variables retained significance between this analysis and the analysis of union leavers who stayed in employment, but the odds ratios were slightly different. For example in this analysis members with dependent children were 69.9% more likely to leave, whereas when employees who changed employer were included the ratio was only 61.9%.

In Summary:

- Those employed on a **fixed term contract** were more than twice as likely to quit union membership when compared to those in permanent employment.
- Those with **shorter job tenure** were more likely to quit their union membership. For example someone who has been with the same employer in their main job for only 1 year is 32.2% more likely to exit their union than someone who has been with the same employer for 10 years.
- Respondents who **didn't perceive union presence at their workplace** or who changed from a unionised to a non-unionised workplace had increased odds of leaving unions. In this analysis those who lost union presence were 2.6 times more likely to leave than those whose workplace representation stayed the same.
- Those on **individual contracts** were 2.6 times as likely to leave their union membership, compared to those on collective agreements or awards. Members employed in the **private sector** were more likely to leave than those in the public sector.
- In general the **younger** the individual, the more likely they were to leave their union membership. Those whose highest level of **education was below a trade qualification** were more likely to quit their union membership, as were those with **dependent children**. **Singles** were more likely to quit than married people.
- Those who **didn't want to be a member** were associated with a higher likelihood to leave their union membership. Individuals who agreed with the statement that **managers could be "trusted to tell things the way they are"** were 36.2% more likely quit their union membership compared to those who neither agreed nor disagreed.

What do our findings suggest?

When isolating the decision to leave a union from the event of leaving one's employer the results indicate that many of the related factors are linked to firm characteristics, demographics, household situation, union workplace presence and the desire to be a union member. Investment in union organising and recruitment activities, particularly in large workplaces, are likely to have a discernible, positive effect on member retention. Unions could also benefit from engaging more effectively with their members, particularly with young members, those in new jobs and those on fixed term contracts.

The findings also highlight the importance of other research, such as investigating which factors are associated with leaving unions and staying in employment (see the paper and Fact Sheet No.21). Further research into which factors are associated with joining a union could provide a more holistic analysis of the membership transitions into and out of unions.