



The case for tripling union membership

Report • By [Heidi Shierholz](#), [Celine McNicholas](#), [Josh Bivens](#), [Jennifer Sherer](#), [Ben Zipperer](#), and [Margaret Poydock](#) • July 15, 2026

How rebuilding union power would strengthen workers, the economy, and our democracy

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Foreword



Imagine union membership tripling in the United States. It may sound radical—if you’ve forgotten history. In fact, more than 1 in 3 private-sector workers belonged to a union in the 1950s. The results? Wages grew in tandem with the economy. The middle class thrived. Black-white wage gaps shrank. Broadly shared economic growth was a reality, not an aspiration. That’s because when workers have bargaining power, they win better wages, benefits, and working conditions. This report shines a light on what we stand to win if we rebuild union power.

Over the last four decades, big corporations and the billionaires who run them have waged a relentless campaign against unions. And they have largely succeeded in reshaping the U.S. economy. By making it harder and harder for workers to organize and bargain collectively, the rich seized more and more income and wealth, destroying the U.S. middle class. Now the wealth of the richest Americans has exploded: The richest 0.1% own more than five times

the combined wealth of the entire bottom half of the country.

And yet, workers haven’t given up. In 2025, unionization ticked upward. Public approval of unions has reached some of its highest levels in decades, and more than 50 million nonunion workers say they’d join a union tomorrow if they could. That’s because they know what unions deliver. In an economy that has been rigged against working people for decades, unions serve as a counterweight to corporate power—reducing inequality and building the kind of middle class that underpins a strong and inclusive economy.

It will take serious policy change to reverse nearly 50 years of deliberate attacks on working people and their institutions. It will require that politicians stand up to the superrich and corporate interests. It will require that workers continue to build power. But, as this report shows, we have much to gain from stronger unions. An organized and empowered workforce has powerful and far-reaching economic benefits.

Nearly four decades ago, I helped found the Economic Policy Institute because working people needed a voice in the economic debates that shape their lives. This report is exactly the work we envisioned: rigorous research that puts workers at the center of economic policy, and that arms all of us with the facts to fight for them. At a time when our economy is held in relatively few hands, we need this work—and we need unions—more than ever.

Robert Reich

Professor, writer, and former Secretary of Labor

Executive summary

Union membership in the U.S. ticked up in 2025, breaking a decades-long trend of declining unionization. But today's unionization rate doesn't reflect the tens of millions of workers who want a union but can't get one. This report examines what we stand to gain if we triple current union membership to 30%—restoring it to 1950s levels, when union strength delivered rising wages, narrowing racial wage gaps, and a thriving middle class.

Tripling union membership would:

- **Deliver a 14.5% raise for the median worker—amounting to more than \$7,700 annually, or nearly \$270,000 over a 35-year career.** These life-changing increases would benefit union and nonunion workers alike.
- **Shift \$1.2 trillion to workers annually.** This would reverse a third of the increase in inequality experienced since 1979.
- **Significantly narrow racial wage gaps.** Because unions tend to boost wages more for Black and Hispanic workers than for white workers, tripling union membership would close racial wage gaps by more than one-third.
- **Boost the number of people with health insurance.** Since unions increase other forms of compensation, like health insurance benefits, the number of nonelderly people without health insurance would fall by about 25%. Unions further reduce uninsured rates by advocating for increased public benefits like Medicaid.
- **Strengthen communities.** States with high union density invest more in public education, have higher unemployment insurance reciprocity rates, and have all adopted Medicaid expansion.
- **Protect democracy.** Unions boost voter turnout, equip workers with civic skills, and actively defend voting rights. States with high union density have passed far fewer voter restriction bills than low-density states.

Roadmap for tripling union density

Reversing decades of political neglect that has stealthily undermined workers' rights to unions and collective bargaining will require comprehensive reform that weaves together tested approaches with bold new ideas, at both federal and state levels.

Two bills with bipartisan support could help restore collective bargaining

- The **Protecting the Right to Organize Act** would restore private-sector workers' right to organize and bargain collectively. It would streamline the union formation process, establish penalties for labor law violations, override so-called "right-to-work" laws, and ban "captive audience" meetings.
- The **Public Service Freedom to Negotiate Act** would be the first federal law that guarantees all public-sector workers at the federal, state, and local levels the right to organize and collectively bargain.

Two bold new proposals could expand the benefits of collective bargaining and help tackle the affordability crisis

- **Guaranteed annual raises for newly unionized workers.** Legislation providing that newly unionized workers can use arbitration to achieve a first contract (if an employer fails to negotiate in good faith) should set a minimum standard that such contracts include a cost-of-living adjustment (COLA). For the typical worker, a 3% COLA means roughly \$2,000 extra a year.
- **Default collective bargaining when CEO-to-worker pay ratios exceed 100:1.** Declining unionization and the stratospheric rise in CEO pay are deeply connected. Strengthening the bargaining power of workers in severely imbalanced companies would enable them to capture a larger share of the wealth their work creates.

States can remove anti-union laws and protect collective bargaining

Removing so-called “right-to-work” laws and restrictions on public-sector bargaining alone would increase union density nationally from 9.9% to 14.4%. Beyond removing those unionization barriers, states can also:

- Extend collective bargaining rights to workers currently excluded from federal law (in-home child care, home health care, agricultural, and gig workers);
- Protect workers’ right to refuse mandatory, anti-union “captive audience” meetings; and
- Extend unemployment insurance eligibility to workers on strike.

Introduction

In 2025, 14.7 million workers—10% of all wage and salary workers—were union members, an increase from 9.9% in 2024.¹ Though small, the increase marks a departure from prior years' downward trend in union density and coincides with record high public favorability of unions.²

This report examines what the U.S. might look like if union membership were to triple to 30%, restoring it to roughly its 1950s peak. We analyze the economic, social, and democratic impacts of this increase; examine the potential impact on state union density rates if all states were to remove anti-union policies; and offer policy recommendations to expand union membership.

While tripling union membership is an ambitious goal, it is fully consistent with workers' own demand for unions. Recent survey data show that 43% of nonunion workers would vote to unionize if given the opportunity—the equivalent of about 56 million wage and salary workers (Ahlquist, Grumbach, and Kochan 2024; McNicholas, Poydock, and Shierholz 2026). If all these workers unionized, union density would rise from 10% to 48.7%—well above the 30% goal we examine in this paper.

Union decline, wage suppression, and affordability

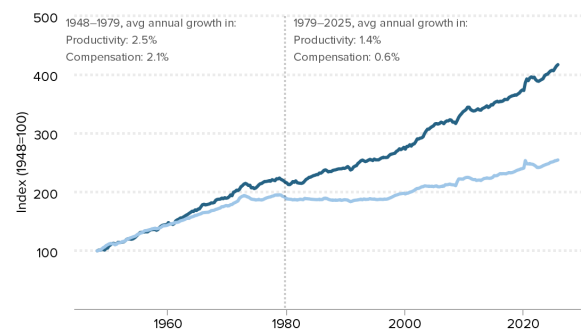
As union membership has declined, workers' wages have been suppressed and inequality has skyrocketed. The gap between typical workers' pay

and economy-wide productivity is at a historic high.³ Since 1979, productivity has grown 2.7 times as much as pay for typical workers (**Figure A**). This divergence reflects both rising wage inequality—high earners experiencing much stronger wage growth than typical workers—and a shrinking share of the economy's income going to workers overall. Between 1979 and 2023, real (inflation-adjusted) earnings for the top 0.1% grew 354% (from \$618,000 to \$2.8 million), while earnings for the bottom 90% of households grew just 44% (from \$30,000 to \$43,000) (EPI 2026a). And workers are now taking home a historically low share of corporate-sector income—meaning shareholders and other capital owners are capturing more than ever before (EPI 2026b).

Figure A

The gap between productivity and a typical worker's compensation has increased dramatically since 1979

Productivity growth and hourly compensation growth, 1948–2025



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Notes: Data are for compensation (wages and benefits) of production/nonsupervisory workers in the private sector and net productivity of the total economy. "Net productivity" is the growth of output of goods and services less depreciation per hour worked.

Source: EPI analysis of unpublished Total Economy Productivity data from Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Labor Productivity and Costs program, wage data from the BLS Current Employment Statistics, BLS Employment Cost Trends, BLS Consumer Price Index, and Bureau of Economic Analysis National Income and Product Accounts.

¹ "Union membership" refers to workers who are full-fledged union members, while "union representation" includes both union members and workers covered by a collective bargaining agreement but not members. The share of workers represented by a union is thus higher than the share of union members. In 2025, for example, 11.2% were represented by a union and 10% were union members.

² In 2025, for the fifth consecutive year in a row, approval of unions reached record high levels last seen in the late 1950s, when union membership was roughly triple what it is now.

³ The productivity-pay gap is a measure of how much income is generated in an average hour of work.

Inequality has grown since 1979 because of intentional policy choices that suppressed wages for typical workers to accelerate income growth at the top. If pay for typical workers had kept pace with productivity over the past nearly five decades, their paychecks today would be more than 40% larger (EPI 2026c). Though affordability pressures are often framed as a problem of high prices, the real problem is this wage shortfall—and reversing that shortfall must be central to any serious affordability agenda. Collective bargaining is the most effective mechanism workers have to raise their wages and secure their fair share of economic growth. Expanding union membership and collective bargaining is central to addressing the affordability squeeze.

“**Collective bargaining is the most effective mechanism workers have to raise their wages.**”

Unions raise wages for all workers

One of the most well-studied benefits of unions is the ability of collective bargaining to raise pay—resulting in a “union wage premium.”⁴ Historically, that premium has fluctuated around 15–20% (EPI 2026d). Unions also reduce inequality by compressing the wage distribution within firms, with the largest benefits

going to workers at the bottom and middle. This is one reason the union wage premium is typically larger for those with less education, and for Black and Hispanic workers relative to white workers (Bivens et al. 2023).

Less appreciated is that unions also boost wages for nonunion workers. Higher wages at unionized firms make those jobs more attractive to nonunion workers, indirectly pressuring nonunion firms to raise wages to keep their workers. Nonunion firms may also raise wages to avoid unionization, especially when union density is already high in the relevant sectors and occupations.

Finally, unions also advocate for progressive changes in the tax and benefit system—indirectly raising *pre-tax* pay for low- and middle-wage workers. This happens in two main ways: First, when taxes on top incomes are higher, corporate executives have less incentive to maximize their own income at the expense of workers’ wages.⁵ Second, more generous social benefits like SNAP and Medicaid increase the bargaining power of lower-paid workers by making them less economically vulnerable and better able to reject low-quality jobs (Bivens 2026).⁶

These “spillover” effects of unions on the nonunion sector are significant and increase when union density is high. Rosenfeld, Denice, and Laird (2016) and Farber et al. (2021) find strong evidence that unions raise the wages of nonunion workers. Consistent with this, Fortin, Lemieux, and Lloyd (2021) estimate that between 1979 and 2017, declining unionization was responsible for 37% of the increase in inequality between the 90th and 50th percentiles of male workers—and *more than half* of that impact occurred because, as unions weakened, nonunion employers faced less pressure to offer higher wages.

⁴ “Union wage premium” refers to the additional wages paid to union members compared with nonunion workers with similar characteristics.

⁵ For example, when the top marginal tax rate was 91%, as it was in the 1950s and early 1960s, executives kept far less of each additional dollar of pay than they do under today’s 37% top rate, which reduced the payoff to pursuing ever-larger compensation packages.

⁶ Relatedly, expanded unemployment benefits during the pandemic boosted workers’ bargaining power and compelled employers to make higher wage offers (Bivens and Banerjee 2023).

Tripling union density would shift \$1.2 trillion a year to working people

Our analysis of the relationship between union density and state median wages finds that for every 10 percentage point difference in union density, real median wages are about 7.2% higher.⁷ If we tripled union density from 10% to 30%, the real median wage for all workers (including both union and nonunion workers) would rise from \$25.67 in 2025 to \$29.39 per hour—a 14.5% increase.⁸ A full-time, full-year worker earning that wage would see annual pay rise by more than \$7,700.

To put this into perspective, consider the substantial growth in the gap between pay and productivity between 1979 and 2025. A full-time, full-year worker at the 2025 median wage was paid about \$53,400 per year—but would have earned about \$76,400 had their pay kept pace with productivity growth (EPI 2026e). Through direct wage increases for union members and unionization’s spillover effects on nonunion workers, tripling union density would close roughly one-third of the productivity-pay gap, increasing annual pay to \$61,100.

To contextualize the gain in another way, consider that the median annual cost of a mortgage in the U.S. is \$18,252. An additional \$7,700 per year would cover more than 40% of that cost.⁹

Perhaps more strikingly, consider that an extra \$7,700 a year adds up to nearly \$270,000 (in today’s dollars) over the course of a 35-year career—a life-changing increase for a working family. Adjusting the USDA’s latest estimate of the cost of raising a child to 2025 dollars yields a current cost of roughly \$317,000 to raise a child from birth through age 17, including food,

housing, transportation, health care, clothing, child care, education, and other expenses (USDA 2017). The additional \$270,000 in career earnings that a typical worker would receive if union density were tripled would cover 85% of that cost.

Or, according to the College Board, the average annual cost of attending a four-year in-state public college, including room and board, is about \$31,000 (Ma, Pender, and Hu 2025). Over four years, that comes to \$124,000 per student—so the additional \$270,000 in career earnings would more than cover the cost of sending two children to college.

Yet another way to show how transformational these effects would be for the U.S. economy and the economic security of typical families: Assuming the 14.5% wage boost we estimate from a tripling of union density applies to the bottom 80% of the U.S. workforce, this would raise these workers’ combined pay each year by \$1.2 trillion.¹⁰

“Tripling union density would reverse one-third of the increase in income inequality since 1979.”

⁷ See appendix for details about our methodology.

⁸ The real median wage is the wage of the person in the middle of the overall wage distribution, including both union and nonunion workers.

⁹ The median monthly cost of a mortgage in the U.S. is \$1,521 according to Census (2025). Over the course of a year, that is \$18,252.

¹⁰ See appendix for details about the calculation of this figure.

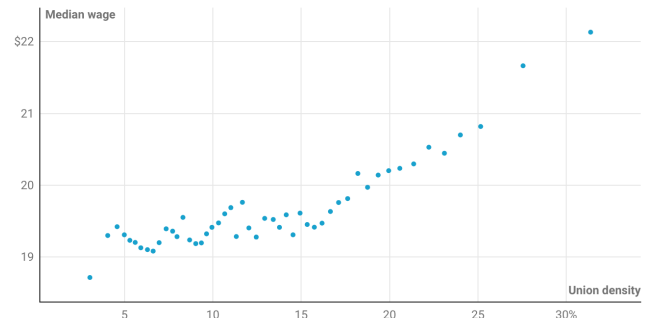
Several useful reference points help illustrate the scale of this \$1.2 trillion increase in workers' annual pay. First, the increase would be nearly three times as large as the \$430 billion U.S. families received in "COVID checks"—and unlike those one-time checks, these gains would be permanent and recurring.¹¹ Second, the \$1.2 trillion that tripling union density would shift to workers slightly exceeds the Pentagon's 2025 budget—a redistribution of income on a scale comparable to the entirety of the U.S. military-industrial complex.¹² Third and most revealingly, this increase would claw back a full third of the increase in income inequality since 1979. Between 1979 and 2022, the share of market income going to the richest 20% of households rose by 12.0 percentage points (with nearly all of that increase—10.1 percentage points—accruing to the richest 1%). A \$1.2 trillion increase in the incomes of the bottom 80% of households would reverse a third of that shift, 4.0 of the 12.0 percentage points.¹³

Our estimates likely underestimate future gains

It's worth noting that while our estimates show large wage gains to workers from tripling union density, they are likely being significantly held down by the fact that union density in the U.S. is starting from such a low level (10%). Our estimates therefore likely understate the wage gains workers will experience once the labor market reaches a higher level of union density. Fortin, Lemieux, and Lloyd (2021) find that the wage payoff to union density is much larger where density is already high, and this shows up clearly in our analysis as well: Below 15% union density, a one percentage point increase in density is associated with just a 0.2% increase in the median wage; above

Figure B. Higher union density leads to larger wage increases

Real median wages on union density, state-annual bins



Source: Analysis of the 1979–2019 EPI CPS ORG extracts (2026). The plot is a binned scatterplot of state-level annual data based on a regression of log real median wage on union density, adjusted for state and year fixed effects and several economic and demographic controls as described in the text.

Source: Economic Policy Institute • Created with Datawrapper

15%, the median wage increases by 0.9%—a wage response more than four times as large (see **Figure B**).¹⁴

The economic intuition behind this 15% threshold is that a minimum scale of unionization is needed for collectively bargained wages to exert a strong influence on pay scales—both union and nonunion—throughout the broader economy. While every additional percentage point of unionization gives another 1% of workers the union pay premium, it has a more limited effect on wage-setting throughout the broader labor market until overall union density reaches around 15%.

Today's typical state has a union density of about 10%, which means the wage gains from each additional percentage point of unionization—while still significant—are muted relative to the gains that occur once union density exceeds 15%. In essence, the policy assault on unions in recent decades has pushed density so low that we need a 50% increase—from 10% to 15% union density—just to start realizing the “normal” gains unions can bring to a high-road economy. Raising density from 10% to 30% would carry the labor market across that 15% threshold

¹¹ In 2020 and 2021, Congress authorized Economic Impact Payments—better known as the “COVID checks.” Those three rounds of payments added roughly \$430 billion to U.S. families' personal income in those years and were widely viewed as an historically ambitious economic intervention. Data on how much these checks added to personal income can be found at Bureau of Economic Analysis (2026c).

¹² Data on federal defense spending in 2025 is from Bureau of Economic Analysis (2026b).

¹³ Data on the income shares by percentile come from CBO (2026), which contains data through 2022. The calculation of how much the \$1.2 trillion gain to wages would reverse the rise in income shares of the top quintile uses data from BEA (2026a).

¹⁴ See appendix for details on how we estimated these wage effects.

and well into the higher-density regime, where each additional percentage point increase in unionization delivers substantially larger gains for the median worker. This is why a transformational policy effort is needed: We must rebuild union density from the depressed levels created by decades of political neglect to the point where the full wage benefits of widespread collective bargaining can be realized.

Unions reduce racial wage gaps

Because unions increase wages for Black and Hispanic workers more than for white workers, unions reduce racial wage gaps. And this dynamic is not new—research shows that the union premium was already higher for Black workers than for white workers by the mid-20th century, meaning that the spread of unionization in that era was one of the country’s greatest forces for racial justice (Farber et al. 2021; Bivens et al. 2023). But with the decline in unionization over the past 45 years, racial wage gaps have widened and are now substantially worse than they were in 1979—damage that restoring union power would more than reverse. In 2025, the median Black or Hispanic worker earned 76.5% of the median white worker wage—a wage gap of 23.5%. Tripling union density would close more than one-third of that gap, reducing it to 14.6%.¹⁵

Unions boost benefits, not just pay

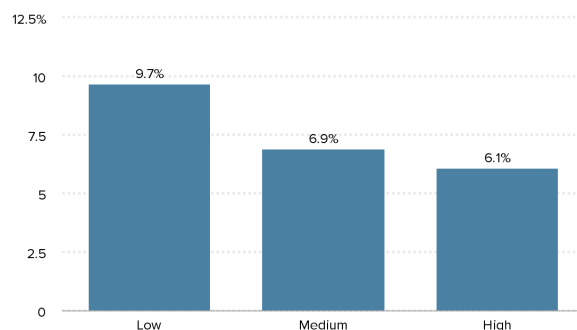
Unions also increase other forms of compensation, like health insurance benefits. In 2025, 95% of union

workers had employer-sponsored health insurance, relative to 71% of nonunion workers. In addition, as discussed later, unions further reduce uninsured rates by advocating for increased public benefits like Medicaid. **Figure C** shows that nonelderly uninsured rates are substantially lower in states with higher union density. To do this analysis, we divided the 50 U.S. states plus the District of Columbia into three equally sized groups based on their current (2023–2025) level of union density.¹⁶ Most low-union-density states have double-digit uninsured rates, but these rates typically fall to the single digits in medium- and high-union-density states. If union density tripled and all states were high-density states, the national nonelderly uninsured rate would fall by about a quarter, from 9.8% to 7.3%.

Figure C

Residents of high-union-density states are more likely to have health insurance

Average uninsured rate in low-, medium-, and high-union-density states, 2024



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Notes: Union density is defined as the share of workers in the state who are members of a union based on the variable “union” from EPI extracts of CPS-ORG microdata.

Sources: EPI analysis of 2023–2025 Current Population Survey Outgoing Rotation Group (CPS-ORG) microdata for all workers ages 16 and older; Caitlin Carter, “Health Insurance Coverage by State: 2023 and 2024,” U.S. Census Bureau, September 2025.

¹⁵ See appendix for details on how we calculated the effects of increasing union density on racial wage gaps.

¹⁶ See Appendix Table 1, which shows how we grouped states into low-, medium-, and high-union-density categories.

Unions benefit communities

Unions don't just improve workers' pay and benefits—they give workers a voice in shaping the social fabric of their communities, lifting standards for union and nonunion workers alike. The data reveal a strong correlation between higher levels of unionization and a range of economic and personal well-being measures. When more workers are in unions, states have more equitable economic and social structures (McNicholas et al. 2025). Meanwhile, states with anti-union policies have lower union density and consistently worse outcomes across these measures.

Economic well-being

We first examine economic well-being—broadly defined as working people having the means to support themselves—using two indicators: the gap between productivity and pay, and unemployment insurance reciprocity rates.

As discussed earlier, there has been a growing gap since 1979 between productivity—the value of the output generated by a worker in the U.S. economy in an hour of work, on average—and typical workers' hourly compensation. Far from accidental, this divergence stems from deliberate policy choices in the U.S. beginning around 1980 that allowed the gains from economic growth to be increasingly captured by the highest earners, shareholders, and other capital owners—rather than being broadly shared across low-, middle-, and high-income households (Shierholz 2024).

The degree to which productivity gains have translated into higher pay for typical workers varies widely across states. **Figure D** shows that in states with smaller declines in unionization since 1979, a larger share of productivity gains translated into higher pay for typical workers. In other words, in places where unions remained stronger, it wasn't just

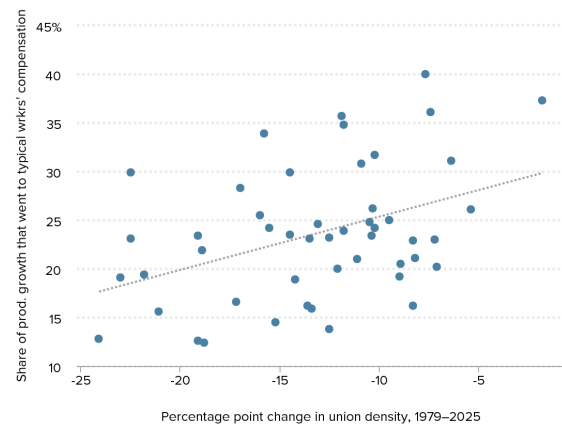
those with high incomes and wealth who benefited from economic growth—working people, both unionized and nonunionized, saw a bigger share of the gains.

Unemployment insurance (UI) reciprocity rates also

Figure D

In states where unions remained stronger, working people saw a bigger share of overall gains from economic growth

Percentage point change in union density vs. share of productivity growth that went to typical workers' compensation, by state, 1979–2025



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Notes: The trendline shows that where unionization declined by 1 percentage point less between 1979 and 2025, the share of productivity growth that went to typical workers' compensation was 0.55 percentage points higher on average. The R-squared is 0.171. For more details on the gap between productivity and pay and how it is calculated, see <https://www.epi.org/productivity-pay-gap/>.

Alaska is removed because productivity and pay both declined over this period, likely due to large compositional changes in jobs.

Source: EPI analysis of 1978–1979 and 2023–2025 Current Population Survey Outgoing Rotation Group (CPS-ORG) data for all workers ages 16 and older; total U.S. economy hours and employment data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS); Office of Productivity and Technology; employment data from the BLS, Current Employment Statistics (CES) survey; wage data from the Current Population Survey, Outgoing Rotation Group (CPS-ORG); consumer price index data from the EPI, State of Working America Data Library; compensation data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA); and state and national GDP and Personal Income data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA), 1978–1979 and 2023–2025.

offer insight into economic well-being. When a worker is laid off and their household income falls, unemployment insurance supports them and their family until they find another job. UI is a joint federal-state program that relies on state UI systems to effectively deliver benefits to unemployed workers. States differ in their rules and approaches under the

federal UI framework, leading to wide variation in the share of unemployed workers receiving UI benefits (the UI reciprocity rate).

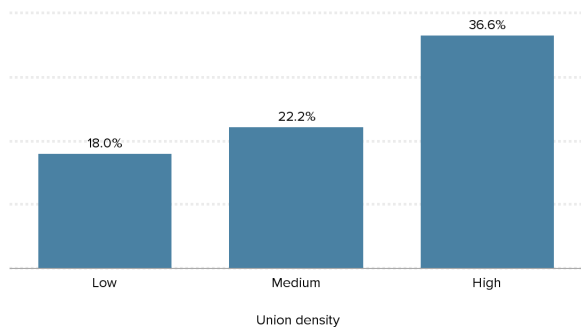
Studies show a strong correlation between higher UI reciprocity rates and high union density (Clegg et al. 2022); **Figure E** illustrates this strong positive relationship. In recent years, the average UI reciprocity rate in high-union-density states was 36%, double the 18% rate in low-union-density states.

Unions fight to increase UI eligibility, ease of access, benefit levels, and benefit duration—to the benefit of all workers, union and nonunion (Hertel-Fernandez and Gould-Werth 2020). The strong correlation between union density and state UI reciprocity rates suggests that expanding unionization by removing anti-union policies would result in higher UI reciprocity rates.

Figure E

Unemployed workers are twice as likely to receive unemployment benefits if they live in high-union-density states than if they live in low-union-density states

Average UI reciprocity rate (2023–2025) in high-, medium-, and low-union-density states



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Notes: The UI reciprocity rate in each state is the share of unemployed workers who are receiving unemployment insurance benefits through the state's regular UI program. We use a simple average of UI reciprocity rates within the high-, medium-, and low-union-density state groupings. Union density is defined as the share of workers in the state who are members of a union based on the variable "union" from EPI extracts of CPS-ORG microdata.

Sources: EPI analysis of 2023–2025 Current Population Survey Outgoing Rotation Group (CPS-ORG) microdata for all workers ages 16 and older; Department of Labor Employment & Training Administration, [Unemployment Insurance Data Chartbook](#).

Personal health and well-being

Next we examine personal health and well-being—which we define as an individual's physical and

mental health—using one indicator, Medicaid expansion.

As we noted earlier, almost all union workers (95%) have access to health insurance, and uninsured rates are lower in high-union-density states. To show how unions influence health care coverage beyond explicitly bargained workplace plans, we examine whether a state has expanded Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act to broaden eligibility. The Medicaid public insurance program provides critical health coverage to families and individuals with low incomes. Research has found that Medicaid expansion has expanded access to health care; improved health outcomes, including fewer premature deaths; lowered uncompensated costs; bolstered financial security; and boosted economic mobility (CBPP 2020). While the Medicaid program has broad federal guidelines, it is administered by states—and a 2012 Supreme Court decision gave them the power to decide on eligibility and expansion. Since 2014, 40 states plus the District of Columbia have adopted Medicaid expansion; 10 states have not (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kansas, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Wisconsin, and Wyoming).

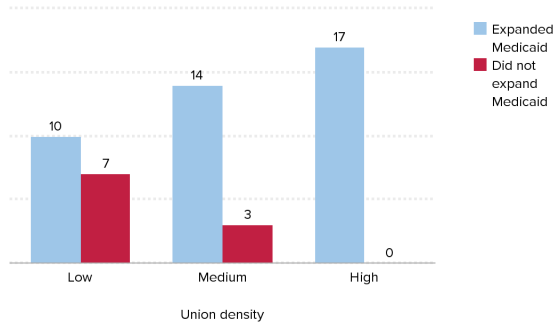
“Almost all union workers have access to health insurance, and uninsured rates are lower in high-union-density states.”

Figure F shows a stark divide between high- and low-union-density states in terms of Medicaid expansion. All 17 high-union-density states have expanded Medicaid. Out of 17 medium-union-density states, 14 have adopted Medicaid expansion (Alabama, Kansas, and Wisconsin are the only medium-union-

Figure F

The 17 highest-union-density states have all adopted the Affordable Care Act's Medicaid expansion

Number of high-, medium-, and low-union-density states that had adopted the Medicaid expansion as of 2026



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Notes: Union density is defined as the share of workers in the state who are members of a union based on the variable "union" from EPI extracts of CPS-ORG microdata.

Sources: EPI analysis of 2023–2025 Current Population Survey Outgoing Rotation Group (CPS-ORG) microdata for all workers ages 16 and older; KFF, "Status of State Medicaid Expansion Decisions," May 21, 2026.

density states that have not adopted expansion). Just 10 out of 17 low-union-density states have adopted Medicaid expansion (Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Wyoming are the low-union-density states that have not adopted expansion).

There is a strong correlation between union density and Medicaid expansion. If states removed anti-union policies and became high-union-density states, they would be joining a group of states in which Medicaid expansion is currently universal, potentially helping to close the Medicaid coverage gap that currently leaves 1.5 million adults uninsured (Zhang 2026).

Spending on public education

Union density also intersects with public education investment. Investment in public education helped make the U.S. the richest country in the world in the 20th century. The benefits of universal education are many—including a more productive workforce, and a more informed and engaged democratic society equipped to think critically. Unions play a key role in negotiating public spending on education. At the school district and state level, education unions advocate for increased funds for schools.

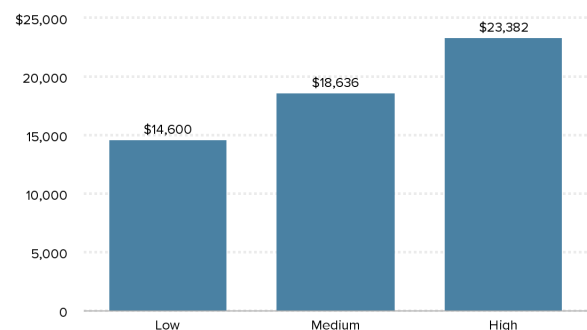
We can measure the relationship between union density and public education investment by looking at states' level of per-pupil spending. Adequate levels of per-pupil spending are crucial to maintaining quality education; low per-pupil spending limits the support students receive toward achieving their learning goals and makes it harder for districts to retain teachers and staff by offering competitive salaries or benefits. Increased per-pupil funding pays off for students. Research has consistently shown that increased funding for schools improves educational attainment, student achievement, and economic outcomes in adulthood (Jackson and Mackevicius 2023). In one study, researchers examined the impact of school finance reforms between 1972 and 2010 and found that a 10% increase in school spending for 12 years leads to increased high school graduation rates, 7% higher wages, and 10% higher family incomes in adulthood for children from districts that saw the spending increase (Jackson, Johnson, and Persico 2016).

Figure G shows that states with higher rates of unionization spend substantially more per pupil on education—demonstrating the impact of union advocacy on education investment and building a more educated society.

Figure G

High-union-density states are more likely to invest in public education

State level per-pupil spending on K–12 public education, 2023–2024



Economic Policy Institute 40

Notes: Union density is defined as the share of workers in the state who are members of a union based on the variable "union" from EPI extracts of CPS-ORG microdata.

Source: Economic Policy Institute. 2026. Current Population Survey Extracts, Version 2026.6.10, <https://microdata.epi.org>; EPI analysis of National Public Education Financial Survey Data, FY2024.

Voting rights and democratic participation

Many states disproportionately disenfranchise people of color (Johnson and Feldman 2020), and the number of voter suppression laws enacted across the country is high and rising. These restrictions threaten democratic participation and the stability of our democracy.

Unions strengthen democracy by encouraging civic engagement and helping workers become informed voters. Unions communicate with their members about issues and candidates to make sure workers have the information they need when they go to the polls. And as democratic institutions where members elect leaders and ratify contracts, unions serve as “schools of democracy,” equipping workers with civic skills that carry over to public life (Andrias and Hertel-Fernandez 2026). More broadly, because many organizations that shape policy represent elite or corporate interests, unions are a countervailing force, bringing working people’s voices into legislative debates and building coalitions that can win against well-resourced opposition.

Research shows that these effects translate into greater political participation. Union members are more likely to vote than the general public, and voter turnout is higher in states with greater unionization (EPI 2021). Conversely, turnout is lower in states with “right-to-work” (RTW) laws, which weaken unions and in turn the civic engagement they foster. Feigenbaum, Hertel-Fernandez, and Williamson (2018) found that RTW laws reduced presidential election turnout by 2%, a substantial effect given the narrow margins that often decide presidential elections.

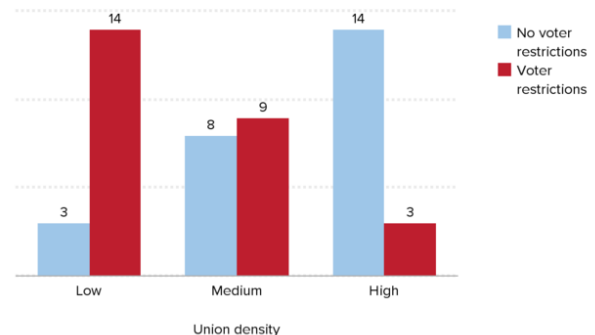
We build on this evidence by examining the relationship between union strength and laws that restrict voting. **Figure H** shows that there is a strong correlation between union density and voter

suppression legislation. A large majority of low- and medium-union-density states passed at least one voter restriction bill between 2023 and 2025, while a large majority of high-union-density states passed none. Among high-union-density states, 14 out of 17 did not pass any voter restrictions during this period, while only eight of the medium-union-density states and three of the low-union-density states can claim this distinction.

Figure H

Voter restriction bills are more likely to pass in low-union-density states than in high-union-density states

Number of high-, medium-, and low-union-density states that have passed restrictive voting laws, 2023–2025



Economic Policy Institute **40**

Notes: Union density is defined as the share of workers in the state who are members of a union based on the variable “union” from EPI extracts of CPS-ORG microdata.

Sources: EPI analysis of 2023–2025 Current Population Survey Outgoing Rotation Group (CPS-ORG) microdata for all workers ages 16 and older; EPI analysis of Brennan Center for Justice analysis of voting rights laws.

These results are consistent with evidence that unions actively defend voting rights. Unions have long mobilized members to oppose voter suppression laws, educated communities about their rights, and turned out to vote despite increasing barriers (Bondy 2025). Unions have also expanded access

to voting: Dean, McCallum, and Grumbach (2023) found that county-level union density was associated with greater access to ballot drop boxes—a highly secure way to increase access to voting—during the 2022 midterm elections. Together, these findings

suggest that stronger unions not only increase voter participation but also help preserve and expand access to the ballot.

How unions protect workers in the age of AI

Employers' increasing use of AI systems has the potential to affect the lives and livelihoods of workers across the country. Without appropriate guardrails, employers' integration of these technologies can erode workers' rights, expose them to discrimination and surveillance, violate their privacy rights, and undermine their economic security. Where policymakers have been slow to act, unions have stepped up to help workers protect themselves against employers' potentially exploitative use of AI.

Through collective bargaining, unions not only negotiate protections to mitigate the harms of AI but also ensure workers have a say in how the technology is deployed in their workplace. Across industries, union contracts are securing enforceable protections for workers, including (AFL-CIO Tech Institute 2026):

- Protections against job displacement and guaranteed training programs to help workers transition to new jobs if their role is impacted by AI;
- Requirements that employers notify workers before introducing technologies and provide them a meaningful opportunity to raise concerns and shape implementation;
- Restrictions on employer surveillance and clear limits on how worker data are collected, shared, and used;
- Provisions ensuring that employment-related decisions like hiring and performance reviews are made with meaningful human oversight and not just left to AI.

Unions also serve as a line of defense for the public because they equip workers to push back against unsafe or untested uses of AI in their communities. This underscores a broader lesson: The most effective AI policies are often not technology-specific policies at all, but policies that strengthen workers' power to unionize and collectively bargain. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to AI protections and, while federal guardrails are necessary to protect all workers, unions are uniquely positioned to ensure that workers can protect themselves and their communities against exploitative uses of AI.

State policy and union density

Increasing union density across all states—including those where anti-union policies have historically suppressed unionization—is essential to strengthening both the economy and democracy, improving all workers’ wages, and expanding access to public goods like health care, retirement, and education.

As the previous section made clear, residents of high- and low-union-density states face starkly different economic and social realities. These wide variations in union density across states—and highly variable economic outcomes—are strongly correlated with variations in state labor policies. For example, the union rights of millions of public-sector, agricultural, and domestic workers (including home health care and in-home child care providers) vary by state because workers in these occupations are excluded from coverage under federal law. And even for private-sector workers whose union rights are covered under federal law, collective bargaining rights are limited by anti-union “right-to-work” laws in many states. Research shows that anti-union state policies result in lower union density. Union density averages 6.2% in states with anti-union RTW laws compared with 15.8% in non-RTW states, and states that limit or prohibit public-sector collective bargaining have lower overall union density than other states (Sherer and Gould 2024; Sherer and Morrissey 2026).

Here, we consider what union density would be if states with certain anti-union laws adopted the policies of states that better protect workers’ rights to unionize and collectively bargain. We consider two policy changes: 1) requiring state and local governments to bargain with public-sector workers who choose to unionize; and 2) repealing so-called “right-to-work” laws that limit collective bargaining rights of private-sector workers. These

are two of many policies that states can adopt to remove barriers to unionization, but we focus on them because of their clearly documented, large-scale impact on large numbers of workers across much of the country. At present, roughly half of U.S. states have RTW laws in effect and do not require public employers to bargain with unionized public employees. Modeling changes to these two policies lets us estimate what would happen to union density if we removed large state-by-state labor policy disparities and created a stable “floor” for collective bargaining for workers across all states. This provides an important starting point for considering how additional, stronger state labor policies might affect union density, worker wages, and democracy.

Public-sector workers face wide disparities in bargaining rights across states

Variations in collective bargaining rights for public-sector workers are rooted in history, notably in Southern states where systemic racism drove the enactment of anti-union policies (Childers 2023; Dixon 2007; Kaufman 2018; Stelzner, Hoyt, and Ramchurn 2019). By the 1980s, most states had enacted public-sector collective bargaining policies, though these statutes varied in strength and coverage (Freeman and Ichniowski 1988). In more recent decades, many states have repealed or harshly limited formerly robust public-sector collective bargaining statutes, while a few states have expanded them. A key distinction is whether state and local government employers have a legal duty to bargain with unionized employees over pay and working conditions, rather than being merely permitted to bargain—or outright banned from doing so.

Sherer and Morrissey (2026) classify state public-sector bargaining rules across five categories of workers: teachers, police officers, firefighters, other local government employees, and other state government employees. States vary widely in which categories they cover and how strongly, and that variation maps closely onto union density. In states with strong, uniform duty-to-bargain rules across all five categories, public-sector union density can be close to 50% or higher, while in states that ban bargaining across most categories, state and local density can fall as low as the single digits. Pay consequences track these differences. Across the country, public-sector employees earn less than their private-sector counterparts with similar experience and education. This public-sector pay gap is smaller when bargaining rights are strong: Sherer and Morrissey (2026) estimate that in states with robust duty-to-bargain rights, public-sector workers earn 14.3% less than private-sector workers; the gap widens to 19.6% in states where bargaining is only permitted, and to 22.5% in states where it is banned.

“Right-to-work” laws weaken union density and suppress wages for all workers

“Right-to-work” laws prohibit unions and employers from negotiating over union security—the contract terms under which workers covered by a union contract either join the union or pay an agency fee covering their share of representation costs. State RTW laws first emerged as part of anti-union industry campaigns to suppress multiracial worker organizing and maintain Jim Crow labor relations in Southern states following the passage of the National Labor Relations Act (Pierce 2017). By making union finances more unpredictable and leaving unions more vulnerable to ongoing employer interference, these laws weaken unions’ stability, suppress union

density, and limit workers’ bargaining power. As a result, RTW laws generate negative outcomes for all workers—with or without a union. States with RTW laws have lower unionization rates and higher income inequality, and workers in RTW states on average have lower wages and benefits (Fortin, Lemieux, and Lloyd 2022). Sherer and Gould (2024) document that workers in RTW states earn 3.2% less than otherwise comparable workers in non-RTW states—about \$1,670 per year for a full-time worker.

There are currently 27 states with RTW laws in place—including Colorado, which is not a traditional RTW state, but whose law has, since 1943, effectively imposed RTW conditions. By barring unionized workers from negotiating over union security unless they first win a second, state-administered election by a 75% supermajority of those voting or 50% plus one of all eligible workers—whichever is higher—Colorado’s anti-union policy has produced RTW-like outcomes, so we group it with RTW states.

Removing state anti-union policies would raise national union density from 9.9% to 14.4%

We estimate that these two policy changes—1) requiring state and local governments to bargain with public-sector workers who choose to unionize, and 2) repealing RTW—would substantially increase unionization in states that currently have more anti-union policies in place, as shown in **Table 1**.¹⁷ In the 24 states without a duty to bargain with public-sector employees, establishing that duty would raise public-sector union density from 16.7% to 46.7%. In the 27 RTW states, repealing RTW would increase private-sector density from 3.4% to 8.8%. Overall, removing these anti-union policies would increase union density in 27 states from 5.4% to 14.3%. Nationally,

¹⁷ For details on the data and methodology used to produce these estimates, see appendix.

¹⁸ For this state-level analysis, we use 2023–2025 averages of union density across states, which is 9.9%, rather than the 10% for 2025 cited earlier in this report.

union density would rise from 9.9% to 14.4%.¹⁸ This is a conservative national estimate reflecting changes in union density only for the 27 states undergoing hypothetical policy changes and not including likely impacts on the 23 states and D.C. where stronger union policies are already in place. These states would likely also see some level of increased union density under this scenario, given that removal of anti-union state policies across the country would strengthen worker bargaining power and union organizing resources in all states.

Table 1

Stronger state union policies would raise wages in 27 states

Estimated impact of raising union density by repealing right-to-work and ensuring public-sector bargaining rights

State	Actual union density	New union density	Wage increases
Alabama	6.8%	15.2%	\$3,100
Arizona	4.0%	13.7%	\$3,600
Arkansas	3.8%	15.6%	\$4,000
Colorado	6.9%	14.8%	\$3,500
Florida	5.0%	13.1%	\$3,000
Georgia	4.5%	14.4%	\$3,700
Idaho	4.5%	15.0%	\$3,800
Indiana	8.4%	14.0%	\$2,000
Iowa	6.8%	14.4%	\$2,700
Kansas	7.2%	10.3%	\$1,100
Kentucky	8.8%	14.7%	\$1,900
Louisiana	4.2%	15.8%	\$3,900
Maryland	11.6%	15.1%	\$1,600
Mississippi	5.5%	16.9%	\$3,700
Nebraska	6.9%	11.3%	\$1,600
North Carolina	2.5%	13.9%	\$4,200
North Dakota	5.7%	16.0%	\$3,900
Oklahoma	6.1%	15.8%	\$3,300
South Carolina	2.6%	14.8%	\$4,300
South Dakota	2.9%	9.4%	\$2,400
Tennessee	5.1%	14.6%	\$3,500
Texas	4.6%	14.0%	\$3,400
Utah	3.9%	14.8%	\$4,000
Virginia	4.9%	15.5%	\$4,500
West Virginia	8.7%	16.4%	\$2,700
Wisconsin	6.8%	14.0%	\$2,800
Wyoming	5.7%	19.2%	\$4,900

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Notes: Analysis of EPI CPS ORG microdata. Union density is assumed to rise by the amount for each state to the levels in the column labeled "New union density." Wage effects are based on a regression using state-level annual data of log median hourly wages on union density, adjusted for state and year-level effects and several economic and demographic controls as described in the text. Wage effects are annualized to full-time, full-year workers by multiplying the hourly wage effect by 2080 hours.

Source: Author's analysis of Current Population Survey Outgoing Rotation Group microdata, EPI Current Population Survey Extracts, Version 2026.5.14, <https://microdata.epi.org>.

Removing state-level anti-union policies would increase median wages by up to \$4,900 a year

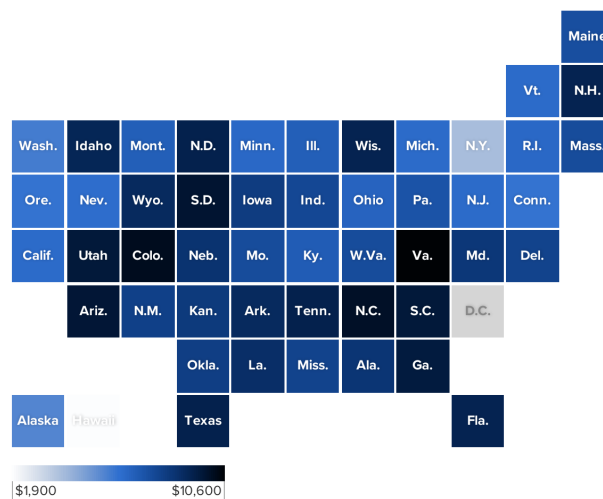
Were the 27 RTW states to increase unionization to estimated levels, overall annualized median wages would rise by \$1,600 to \$4,900 for full-time, full-year workers, depending on the state. **Table 1** shows that if Virginia's density rose from 4.9% to 15.5% because of the removal of state-level anti-union policies, annual pay for full-time, full-year workers at the state median wage would increase by about \$4,500. Removing these anti-union policies in Texas could cause a similar increase in density, raising annual pay by \$3,400.

Of course, were workers in all states able to achieve 30% union density, the effects on median pay would be even larger. These impacts are shown in **Figure I**. The 23 percentage point increase in density in Alabama, for example, would increase annualized median pay there for full-time, full-year workers by about \$8,500.

Figure I

Increasing union density to 30% would raise wages in every state

State median wage increase, annualized, of raising union density to 30%



Notes: Wage effects are based on a regression using state-level annual data of log median hourly wages on union density, adjusted for state and year-level effects and several economic and demographic controls as described in the text. Wage effects are annualized to full-time, full-year workers by multiplying the hourly wage effect by 2080 hours.

Source: Authors' analysis of Current Population Survey Outgoing Rotation Group microdata, EPI Current Population Survey Extracts, Version 2026.5.14, <https://microdata.epi.org>.

Recent state policy changes show that anti-union laws lower union density

Recent “natural experiments” in states that have changed one or both of these labor policies also show the impact on union density. For example, in states that adopted new RTW laws since 2010, union density fell 3.8 percentage points between 2010 and 2023. By comparison, union density declined only 2 percentage points during this same period in non-RTW states (Sherer and Gould 2024).

Wisconsin is an example of a state that both repealed a previous duty to bargain with public employees (in 2011) and enacted a new RTW law (in 2015). Since adopting these anti-union policies, between 2011 and 2024, Wisconsin’s union density has fallen by half, from 14% to 7%. Over this same period, national union density declined just 2 percentage points, from 13% to 11%. With both a RTW law in place and no public-sector duty to bargain, Wisconsin’s union density is plummeting in comparison with national and regional trends (Dresser, Rogers, and Vasquez 2025). Other studies show that Wisconsin’s adoption of anti-labor policies and declining union density have generated a wide array of harmful outcomes for the state’s economy and democracy, including sharp decreases in public education spending, declining worker wages, widening public-sector pay gaps (including stark increases in gender pay gaps for teachers), and declining voter participation (Nack et al. 2019; García and Han 2021; Biasi and Sarsons 2022; Feigenbaum, Hertel-Fernandez, and Williamson 2018).

“Achieving 30% union density in Alabama would raise annual median pay by about \$8,500.”

States have other policy options to enable workers to increase union density

Beyond these two policy changes, states have numerous other opportunities to increase union density by removing obstacles to unionization and ensuring more workers have full rights to collectively bargain (Sherer 2026). A few examples that have not yet been adopted in most states include:

- Creating pathways to collective bargaining for all workers in occupations not currently covered by federal labor law, including in-home child care and home health care workers, agricultural workers, and rideshare or delivery drivers treated as “independent contractors” by digital platform companies;
- Protecting workers’ freedom to refuse mandatory “captive audience” meetings on political or religious topics not related to work duties, including mandatory anti-union meetings employers typically hold when attempting to block workers from unionizing;
- Ensuring workers whose paychecks stop due to a strike or lockout are eligible to apply for unemployment insurance; and
- Establishing or expanding state agency capacities and public labor education programs that ensure workers can easily learn about their union rights.

We do not model the specific impacts of all possible state policy changes in this report. But our conservative, baseline estimate of increases in union density likely to result from removing two of the largest state obstacles to workers’ union rights—RTW laws in 27 states and the lack of a duty to bargain for public employees in 24 states—suggests that combining these changes with additional policy changes would likely lead to additional increases in union density across the country.

Federal policy and union density

Given the clear benefits of tripling union membership, it is critical that policymakers prioritize reforms that enable workers to organize and collectively bargain. It is tempting to search for a policy “silver bullet” to restore the promise of the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), our primary labor law. But the reality is that policymakers must adopt comprehensive labor law reforms to eradicate the effects of decades of political neglect that has steadily undermined the effectiveness of U.S. labor law. As discussed above, these reforms must at a minimum reverse state anti-union policies, via state or ideally federal labor law reforms that end Jim Crow-era occupational exclusions, ensure equal union rights and pathways to collective bargaining for all workers in all states, and eliminate RTW laws.

Labor law reform has passed the House three times with bipartisan support

A consistent narrative maintains that such policy change is impossible, but that narrative relies on the mistaken notions that real reforms require more political power than the labor movement has and that our legislative process prevents labor law reform. It is true that winning policy fights takes significant political capital. But labor law reform must not be seen as solely a labor movement priority. It is central to any attempt to address affordability pressures and economic inequality. And in this moment, such reform is imperative to our democracy. While the Senate filibuster rules do prevent much legislative progress, they are not inevitable dictates but rather agreed-upon rules that, as history shows, can change. It is deeply destructive to our political system to convince

working people that the system simply cannot be expected to serve their interests, which is what this flawed narrative around labor law reform reinforces. To be clear, policies favored by elites benefiting from the unequal status quo are far more likely to become law than even broadly popular ones. But these reforms have the potential to help rebalance this inequality.

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Labor law reform is central to any attempt to address affordability pressures and economic inequality.”

In fact, in the last two decades, legislation to significantly reform labor law has passed the U.S. House of Representatives three times—with bipartisan support each time. Even in the current Congress, legislation aimed at restoring collective bargaining rights has managed to bypass Republican House leadership opposition via parliamentary procedure (discharge petition) and pass with bipartisan support.¹⁹ Of the on average 12,000 bills introduced in a given Congress, labor law reform measures have had more success than roughly 95% of bills—passing a chamber with bipartisan support. Of course, Senate rules around the filibuster requiring 60 votes to proceed on consideration of various measures have

¹⁹ See passage of Protecting America’s Workforce Act and Faster Labor Contracts Act.

been a significant impediment to the Senate passing these reforms. However, since 2013, the Senate has used the “constitutional option” to change its own rules for procedures and has eliminated the 60-vote requirement to proceed on specific debates three times. That could be done here, too.

Record high union approval strengthens the case for labor law reform

Labor unions today have significantly higher public approval ratings than when major labor law reform was last considered, polling more than 20 points higher.²⁰ Since 2021, approval for unions has remained high, with over 68% of people in the U.S. viewing unions favorably (Brenan 2025). This positive view of unions is shared across generations, with majorities of Boomers (59%), Gen X (58%), Millennials (61%), and Gen Z (63%) viewing unions favorably. Young adults (ages 18–35) have the highest favorability rate at 72% (Glass 2025).

Unions are viewed positively across party lines, with both Democrats (90%) and independents (69%) having high favorability rates for unions, and over 40% of Republicans approving of labor unions (Brenan 2025). Some conservative organizations recognize that unions are popular among workers: Research by American Compass (2025) finds that at least 46% of Republicans view unions somewhat favorably, with favorability increasing among young Republicans (60%).

Data from the American National Election Studies show that people in the U.S. favor unions over big business now more than ever—with the average rating for labor unions hitting a new high (60%), while big business hit a low (44%) (Sojourner and Reich 2025). Further, most people in the U.S. say the decline in union density is bad for the country (60%)

and bad for working people (62%). Most young adults (69%), including young Republicans (52%) and young Democrats (82%), view the decline in union density as negative for working people (Van Green 2025).

Three bipartisan bills would pave the way toward restoring collective bargaining rights

As with many popular policies, high public opinion of unions has not translated into the enactment of labor law reform. Even though several bills that would reform aspects of our current labor law are being introduced and even passing with bipartisan support in the U.S. House of Representatives, the Senate has failed to act on the legislation. There are three main bills with bipartisan support that would help reform our current labor law system and each should be passed.²¹

- **The Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act would restore private-sector workers’ right to organize and bargain collectively.** It would streamline the process of forming a union, create a roadmap to reaching a first collective bargaining agreement, establish civil monetary penalties for employers who violate labor law, among other reforms—such as expanding coverage to more workers, overriding state “right-to-work” laws, and banning “captive audience” meetings (McNicholas, Poydock, and Rhinehart 2021). Since its first introduction in 2019, the PRO Act has passed the House of Representatives twice with bipartisan support.
- **The Public Service Freedom to Negotiate Act (PSFNA) would establish public-sector workers’ right to organize and bargain collectively.** This would fill an important gap—there is currently no federal law that guarantees all public-sector workers at the federal, state, and local levels the

²⁰ The last time a major labor law reform was considered was in 2009 with the Employee Free Choice Act.

²¹ The Protecting the Right to Organize Act has two Republican co-sponsors, the Public Service Freedom to Negotiate Act has six Republican co-sponsors, and the Protecting America’s Workforce Act has nine Republican co-sponsors.

right to organize and collectively bargain. As a result, more than half of U.S. states today lack comprehensive collective bargaining laws for state and local public-sector workers (Sherer 2026).

- **The Protecting America’s Workforce Act (PAWA) would reverse President Trump’s executive order that revokes collective bargaining rights for federal workers.** The bill would reestablish collective bargaining rights for more than 1 million federal workers. In December 2025, PAWA passed the House of Representatives by a 231-195 vote.

Beyond passing these important bills, policymakers should also consider additional policies to help workers access collective bargaining and union membership. We propose two concrete policies that complement the labor reforms above. While these two proposals alone will not result in tripling union membership, they could help more workers receive the benefits of collective bargaining, which serves as a corrective to the affordability crunch and the economic inequality that characterizes our economy.

Guaranteed annual raises for workers in first contract arbitration

When workers win a union and begin to collectively bargain with their employer, both parties have an obligation to bargain in “good faith.” However, given that the NLRA lacks meaningful penalties for violations, employers often engage in bad faith bargaining tactics with few consequences. In fact, it is well documented that many union-busting consultants view bargaining as a new phase of union-busting and advise employers to drag out bargaining for as long as possible. The goal is to avoid reaching

a contract for a year or more, hoping that workers will then give up their union through decertification, which is permitted one year after the election. It is no coincidence that workers who have successfully formed a new union spend an average of 465 days bargaining for a first contract before reaching an agreement.

The Faster Labor Contracts Act, which overwhelmingly passed the U.S. House of Representatives last month, would discourage delay and promote good faith bargaining by establishing a mediation and binding arbitration process when employers refuse to bargain in good faith. Beyond guaranteeing workers first contract arbitration, we suggest the adoption of a mandatory cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) for workers whose first contract bargaining ends up in arbitration. This would establish an important guardrail for workers in the arbitration process, given that an arbitrator will ultimately impose a final contract on both parties. This provision would ensure that workers receive at least a COLA each year of their first contract. In other words, by voting for a union, workers would be voting for a guaranteed raise.²²

For the average production, nonsupervisory worker, a 3% COLA would result in almost a \$2,000 increase

Table 2

An automatic cost-of-living adjustment would substantially raise wages

Annual wage increases of a 3% COLA

Overall private sector	\$1,956
Construction	\$2,328
Health care and social assistance	\$2,071
Manufacturing	\$1,813
Retail	\$1,348
Leisure and hospitality	\$1,262

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Notes: Annual pay increases are three percent increases in the average wage of production, non-supervisory workers, annualized by assuming pay at 40 hours per week, 52 weeks per year.

Source: EPI State of Working America Data Library (2026).

²² One way to determine the exact COLA amount is to use nonseasonally adjusted values of the national Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers (CPI-U) published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. These price index values are easily available, less subject to revision, and widely covered in the media. The simplest COLA adjustment would be to use the annual rate of inflation measured as the percent change between the two most recent annual averages of nonseasonally adjusted CPI-U values. See BLS (2023) for other considerations.

in annual earnings for a full-time, full-year worker.²³

Table 2 shows that, while these increases would vary widely by industry because pay varies widely by industry, workers in some of the lowest-paid industries would still see annual pay increases above \$1,000.

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A 3% COLA would result in almost a \$2,000 increase in annual earnings for a full-time, full-year worker.

Default collective bargaining when CEO-to-worker pay ratios exceed 100:1

The outsized and ballooning gap in recent decades between CEO pay and the pay of typical workers is among the clearest signs that the economy’s rules have been rigged to allow the most powerful to claim oversized shares of income growth. This CEO-to-worker pay ratio rose nearly tenfold from 1978 to 2024, as the pay of CEOs rose over 1,000% while the pay of typical workers rose just 26%. The explosion of CEO pay was driven not by CEO’s rising productivity or skills, but by policy changes that boosted both the incentives and the ability of CEOs to raise their own pay.

When a firm’s CEO makes more than 100 times what

the typical worker in their industry makes, effective corporate governance has clearly broken down—which threatens the ability of those outside the C-suite to receive their fair share of the firm’s income. The two main parties competing with executives to claim a share of a firm’s income are the shareholders and the firm’s workers. The best mechanism for ensuring that workers are able to bargain against CEOs and shareholders for their fair share of the income generated by the firm is collective bargaining.

We propose instituting default collective bargaining in any firm that meets or exceeds this 100:1 ratio. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) reporting already requires the annual disclosure of CEO pay (SEC 2007). We propose that these disclosures be reported not only to the SEC but also to the National Labor Relations Board. Comparing those disclosures with Bureau of Labor Statistics data on the pay of a typical worker economy-wide in various industries, the NLRB would determine which corporations meet the default collective bargaining ratio of 100:1.²⁴ The NLRB would then publish a public notice and notify specific corporations and their workers that the default collective bargaining ratio had been met, triggering default collective bargaining at the firm. The NLRB would then direct an election for a bargaining representative to be held within 45 days of the notification.²⁵

Nonsupervisory workers at these firms would then have the opportunity to select a bargaining representative of their choosing—whether a labor organization or other representative. The NLRB would conduct the election for and certify a bargaining representative, after which bargaining would start. For purposes of default collective bargaining, the presumption for the bargaining unit would be a wall-to-wall unit—a model where all nonsupervisory

²³ CBO estimated CPI in 2026 at 2.8%, 2027 at 2.4%, and then 2.3% after—however those estimates were done before the U.S. war in Iran that increased energy prices, so we estimate COLA at 3% for purposes of the proposal. To calculate full-time, full-year worker wages, we used 2025 average production, nonsupervisory wage rates (EPI 2026f).

²⁴ We specifically would recommend calculating the CEO-to-typical-worker pay ratio using the methodology detailed in EPI (2025).

²⁵ In order to appear on the ballot, an individual or organization would have to demonstrate a record of collective bargaining over the preceding three years or obtain 100 signatures or 10% of the workforce, whichever is less.

employees join a single bargaining unit—ensuring comprehensive coverage under the collective bargaining process and resulting contract. This standard would apply absent an employer or employee representative demonstrating extraordinary circumstances.²⁶ The NLRB would then determine the appropriate bargaining unit, the same way the agency already accepts or rejects bargaining unit proposals. We propose that all such questions be resolved within 10 days of the NLRB’s notice of election for bargaining representative. This proposal would not apply to existing bargaining units, but in firms where unions are present, it would apply to any nonunionized nonsupervisory employees, as described below.

A threshold of 100:1 for the CEO-to-typical-worker pay ratio is reasonable and fair. A ratio this high clearly signals a fatal breakdown in the ability of the firm’s workers and shareholders to protect their income claims against executives looking to maximize their own incomes. A ratio this high will not affect most publicly traded companies but will be relevant to a large share of the U.S. workforce.

Comprehensive data on CEO pay are available only for a subset of firms: The Compustat Execucomp database tracks CEO pay for half of publicly owned companies (and most U.S. firms are not publicly owned). For the firms in the Compustat database, under half (41.7%) had a CEO-to-typical-worker pay ratio exceeding 100:1 in 2024. This proposal would provide the 30 million workers employed in firms that have higher ratios—representing about a fifth of total private-sector employment in the United States—with collective bargaining.

It is not a coincidence that the stratospheric rise in CEO pay was accompanied by an acceleration in the downward trend of unionization in the United States. The broader correlation between declining unionization and the rise of inequality is well established, and the highest-quality research documents that this relationship is clearly causal, with the decline of unions leading to a higher share

of income claimed by households at the top of the income distribution (Farber et al. 2021).

To be clear, using a threshold CEO-to-worker pay ratio as a trigger for default collective bargaining will not alone solve the problem of excess CEO pay. We focus on this threshold as a policy trigger because it is a readily available and measurable indicator of the outsized control of executives over the distribution of the firm’s income. In the total absence of collective bargaining or any other strong corporate governance institutions, firm executives will shift income in a zero-sum fashion away from both the workers and the shareholders of a firm. If shareholders manage to assert some influence over CEO pay—e.g., through public pressure campaigns or say-on-pay mandates—one likely outcome will be CEOs looking to suppress the firm’s wages even further to make room for both their own outsized salaries and a return to shareholders that placates them. Only collective bargaining can protect the interests and earnings of workers in firms where executives pocket an outsized share of firms’ incomes.

If collective bargaining became widespread enough throughout the corporate sector, it would likely not only boost workers’ wages but also rein in excess executive pay broadly—actually helping shareholders at the same time. The research on this question is encouraging: Unions and collective bargaining have been found to significantly restrain excess CEO pay (Huang et al. 2017; Nanda, Nishikawa, and Prevost 2025; DiNardo, Hallock, and Pischke 2000). But even if expanded collective bargaining does not tamp down the CEO-to-worker pay ratio beneath our 100:1 threshold, it will at a minimum protect workers’ interests from excess executive power—without foreclosing any policy route shareholders take to restrain excess CEO pay.

Currently, a number of firms with at least some degree of unionization among their workforces have CEO-to-worker pay ratios that exceed 100:1. But this is not an argument against using this threshold as

²⁶ The showing of extraordinary circumstances is referenced in the acute care hospital rule: 29 CFR § 103.30 (1989).

an indicator of dysfunctional corporate governance requiring a strong policy solution. For many of these firms, union coverage among their rank-and-file workforce is far from complete, so this proposal would help fill in glaring gaps. Most of these firms clearly do pay wages that are among the highest in their industries, which signals that the policy of default collective bargaining to protect workers' interests in the face of dysfunctional corporate governance would largely work. Finally, one key empirical driver of high CEO pay is the simple size of the firm: The CEO-to-worker pay ratio rises steeply with the size of the firm, all else equal.²⁷ The firms with CEO-to-worker pay ratios above 100:1 and some degree of unionization among their workforces are large firms; it would take a very strong effect of collective bargaining on CEO pay specifically to have kept pay ratios at these large firms well below average.

In our world with only 10% union density (and less than this in the private sector), it should hardly be

a shock that collective bargaining by itself has not been able to stem what has been an irresistible tide toward high CEO pay. Even large increases in executive pay are not enormous when compared with overall returns to shareholders. Given the strong policy and economic barriers to shareholder activism in restraining CEO pay, it takes truly outrageous pay scales to mobilize enough organized opposition from shareholders. In those firms where it is relatively strong, collective bargaining has protected workers' interests, and that is the primary goal we are looking to achieve with this policy. The fact that in these firms the CEOs have felt free to shift income to themselves at the expense of other stakeholders (like the shareholders of the firm) is not a sign that default collective bargaining is a bad solution for protecting workers' interests—it is only a sign that the problem of excess CEO pay needs to be addressed from other angles as well.

²⁷ This correlation between simple firm size and CEO pay is yet another piece of evidence that CEO pay is not about the skills or acumen of individual CEOs, but is driven by noncompetitive market structures and labor markets for executives.

Tripling union density is what workers want—and it is entirely achievable

Restoring union density to 1950s levels is not a nostalgic pipe dream. Federal and state policymakers have a clear roadmap for tripling union density. While no single reform discussed in this report is a silver bullet for the problems facing the country, taken together they would address one of the worst: the erosion of workers' right to bargain for their fair share of the wealth they produce. These reforms are meaningful steps toward tripling union density, and toward an economy where productivity gains are shared broadly, not captured by corporate elites and the superrich.

The evidence in this report shows what is at stake. Tripling union density would deliver nearly \$270,000

in extra earnings over the median worker's career and shift \$1.2 trillion annually to working people—reversing a third of the rise in inequality since 1979. Rebuilding union power would narrow racial wage gaps by more than a third, and removing state anti-union policies would help dismantle the legacy of Jim Crow-era campaigns aiming to suppress multiracial organizing. States with higher union density deliver better economic and personal well-being outcomes to their residents, and they have healthier democracies with fewer voting restrictions. At a time when the voting rights of all citizens are under attack, rebuilding union power is a democratic imperative.

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Appendix

Methodology

How we measure union density

The Bureau of Labor Statistics provides data on both union membership—workers who are full-fledged union members—and union representation, which includes both union members and workers who are not members but are covered by a collective bargaining agreement. As a result, the share of workers represented by a union is higher than the share of union members. For example, in 2025, 11.2% of workers were represented by a union, but 10% were union members.

In this report, we measure union density as the share of workers who are members of a union. Throughout this report, the terms “union density” and “unionization” refer to those who are members of a union. When measuring union density by state, data are averaged over three years (2023 to 2025) to give a more accurate estimate of state unionization rates and avoid temporary single-year changes due to small sample sizes in some states.

Estimating wage effects of tripling union density

To assess how much higher wages would be after tripling union density, we use state-level annual data on wages and unionization from 1979 to 2019 and

compare median wages with unionization rates across states and over time. Specifically, we regress the state median wage on the state union membership rate, controlling for permanent differences in state characteristics, national annual shocks (like recessions), and annual state characteristics like state unemployment rate, minimum wage level, and education, race, age, gender, broad industry, and managerial shares.

Using state-level data from the Current Population Survey Outgoing Rotation Group for 1979–2019, we regress the log median wage on union density with state and year fixed effects and additional covariates: the log minimum wage, unemployment rate, and shares of those with less than a high school degree and just a high school degree, age group shares, and shares of those who are white, Black, Hispanic, married, and shares of those in the public sector, manufacturing, construction, services, and a managerial occupation. Regressions are weighted by state employment levels averaged over 1979–2019. The coefficient on union membership is 0.724 with a standard error, accounting for clustering at the state level, of 0.191.

To calculate effects of increasing union density on racial wage gaps, we use the same wage regression as before, except where the dependent variable is the state annual racial wage gap.

The calculation yielding the \$1.2 trillion estimate of the annual increase in workers’ pay from tripling

union density is as follows. First, the share of total labor income claimed by the bottom 80% is calculated from data provided by the Congressional Budget Office's (CBO 2026) Distribution of Household Income data (we focus on the bottom 80% because research has generally identified the positive effect of unions on boosting pay as applying mostly to union and nonunion workers in the bottom 80% of the U.S. workforce). In 1979 this share was 60.5%, but by 2019 it had fallen to 50.1%. We use 50% for our calculations. Then we multiply the 14.5% boost to pay stemming from a tripling of union density by this 50% of labor income to get an estimate (7.25%) of how much total labor compensation would rise in the event of a tripling of union density. In the first quarter of 2026, the National Income and Product Accounts (NIPA) Table 2.1 from the Bureau of Economic Analysis (2026a) reports that total labor compensation was \$16.1 trillion. Multiplying this by the 7.25% pay boost from tripling union density yields \$1.16 trillion in higher pay for the bottom 80%. We believe this is the appropriate estimate for approximating how much higher wages would be for most workers if union density tripled. While potential caveats merit consideration, none, in our view, hold much force. For example, the regressions used earlier in the paper use median wages, not median total labor compensation, as the dependent variable. However, a long research literature has highlighted that benefit premiums stemming from unionization are likely even larger than wage premiums (Knepper 2020). To the degree that tripling union density works by giving all workers more leverage and bargaining power in labor markets, it seems clear that some of this leverage will be used to obtain broader and more generous coverage of benefits, not just higher wages. Another objection could be that union effects (both direct and indirect effects) are higher in the middle of the wage distribution than in either the lower or upper parts of the distribution, and hence the full 14.5% wage boost would only apply to (say) the second and middle fifths of workers while workers in the lowest and fourth fifth would see smaller

wage boosts. However, in work that has estimated both the overall average effect of unionization on nonunion wages and the effect by wage percentile, the overall average effect is roughly one-half the effect at the median, a result that would be consistent with applying the 14.5% premium to half of all labor income, as we do (Fortin, Lemieux, and Lloyd 2021). Other research has similarly found that union effects at the median are very close to overall average effects (Baker et al. 2026).

For our analysis of how wage effects differ across union density levels, we use the same regression of log median wages on union density described above, modified to let the slope differ below and above 15% density using a piecewise-linear specification interacting union density with an indicator for density of at least 15%, while retaining the same controls and state and year fixed effects, weighted by state employment. The difference in slopes is statistically significant at the 1% level.

The scatterplot in **Figure B** uses 50 state-year bins to show this nonlinearity directly. The binned scatterplot groups the state-year observations into 50 employment-weighted bins by union density and plots each bin's average real log median wage against its average union density, after partialing out the same controls and state and year fixed effects used in the regression.

State union density groupings

We divided the 50 U.S. states plus the District of Columbia into three equally sized groups based on their current (2023–2025) level of union density.

These groupings are shown in **Appendix Table 1**. We refer to the 17 states with the highest union density as “high-union-density states” (with 11.9%–25.1% union membership rates); the next 17 states (including D.C.) are “medium-union-density states” (6.8%–11.6%); and the remaining 17 are “low-union-density states” (2.5%–6.1%).

Appendix Table 1

Share of workers who are members of a union ranges from 2.5% in North Carolina to 25.1% in Hawaii

Union density of the 50 U.S. states plus D.C., in descending order and grouped into high-, medium-, and low-union-density states

High union density		Medium union density		Low union density	
HI	25.1%	MT	11.6%	OK	6.1%
NY	20.8%	MD	11.6%	ND	5.7%
AK	16.8%	ME	11.4%	WY	5.7%
WA	16.8%	DC	9.7%	MS	5.5%
CT	16.1%	DE	9.2%	TN	5.1%
NJ	15.7%	MO	9.2%	FL	5.0%
OR	15.1%	NH	9.1%	VA	4.9%
CA	14.9%	KY	8.8%	TX	4.6%
RI	14.2%	WV	8.7%	ID	4.5%
VT	13.9%	IN	8.4%	GA	4.5%
MA	13.9%	KS	7.2%	LA	4.2%
MN	13.8%	NM	7.0%	AZ	4.0%
MI	13.0%	NE	6.9%	UT	3.9%
IL	13.0%	CO	6.9%	AR	3.8%
NV	12.5%	IA	6.8%	SD	2.9%
OH	12.1%	AL	6.8%	SC	2.6%
PA	11.9%	WI	6.8%	NC	2.5%

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Notes: Union density is defined as the share of workers in the state who are members of a union based on the variable “union” from EPI extracts of CPS-ORG microdata.

Source: EPI analysis of 2023–2025 Current Population Survey Outgoing Rotation Group (CPS-ORG) microdata for all workers ages 16 and older.

Estimating union density effects of establishing a public-sector duty to bargain and repealing “right-to-work” laws

To estimate the effect of these two policy changes—1) requiring state and local governments to bargain with public-sector workers who choose to unionize, and 2) repealing RTW—we use the CPS Outgoing Rotation Groups for 2023–2025 to compute union density rates in states with stronger union policies (i.e., states with public sector collective bargaining and/or without RTW). We do this separately by industry and major occupation group for the private sector and by level of government (federal, state, and local) for the public sector. We then apply those rates to the workforce of each state that lacks the corresponding policy, holding each state’s industry, occupation, and government-employment mix fixed. Nevada is an exception on the private-sector side: Although Nevada is a RTW state, its private-sector union density is already comparatively high, so we hold its private-sector density at its current level.

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