*Fiscal Facts by Wisconsin Policy Forum*

**Wisconsin’s drop in union membership was nation’s largest**

Since 2000, no state has seen a larger decline in the proportion of all employees who are union members than Wisconsin.

While private-sector union membership in the state has declined for decades, 2011 Wisconsin Act 10 likely contributed to a much steeper decline in public-sector unions in recent years.

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data show nearly all states have seen a decline in the concentration of their workforce that is unionized over the last 20 years, but none more so than Wisconsin.

In 2000, 17.8% of all employed Wisconsinites were members of a union — the 10th-highest concentration in the country. By 2021, that number fell to just 7.9%, putting Wisconsin at 28th among states and below the national average of 10.3%. The 9.9 percentage point drop since 2000 for Wisconsin was the largest nationwide by nearly three percentage points and substantially more than the national drop of 3.1 percentage points.

Forum research finds that a combination of legislation aimed at curtailing public unions’ authority and broader national trends impacting private union membership may help to explain Wisconsin’s drop-off.

As the first state to allow public-sector unions to negotiate contracts in 1959, Wisconsin has long been known as a leader in organized labor trends. Yet the state also has a history of efforts to limit unions’ scope and influence. In 2011, Wisconsin was again at the leading edge of a national trend when state officials repealed most collective bargaining for most state and local workers through Act 10. Union influence also has diminished following the loss of manufacturing jobs in the region, which is a particularly crucial industry in Wisconsin.

Going forward, the strength of union organizing in the state may depend on trends that include labor market conditions. A tight market like the current one tends to strengthen the hand of workers. Still, at least for now, unions in Wisconsin and nationally seem likely to play a more modest role than they did in previous decades.

*This information is provided to Wisconsin Newspaper Association members as a service of the Wisconsin Policy Forum, the state’s leading resource for nonpartisan state and local government research and civic education. Learn more at wispolicyforum.org.*