

[Home](#) » [National](#) » Article

Union ticket no pledge of party loyalty

By Jason Dowling
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NEW research has found that, despite declining union membership in Australia, union members have not become more pro-Labor.

About one-third of union members, who tend to have higher incomes, continue to vote for the Coalition.

Union membership in Australia fell from about half the workforce in the early 1980s to a quarter of the workforce in the early 2000s, according to the report.

The research, by Andrew Leigh from the Australian National University, also found that while more male union members historically tended to vote for the ALP than their female counterparts, the situation had reversed.

In the 2004 federal election, a larger number of female unionists voted Labor (61 per cent) than male unionists (57 per cent).

Dr Leigh's research also found that between 1966 and 1986, union membership fluctuated between 45 per cent and 52 per cent of the workforce, before collapsing in the late 1980s and 1990s.

In 2004, only 23 per cent of the Australian workforce belonged to trade unions.

The Labor Party, which has not won a federal election since 1993, benefits greatly from union membership, according to the research.

A union member is 23 per cent more likely to vote Labor, Dr Leigh found.

If Australia's workforce had remained unionised at early-1980s levels, Labor would probably have won the 1998, 2001 and 2004 federal elections, he concluded.

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