

Trade Union Pluralism, Institutional Coordination and Collective Bargaining: Evidence from Zambia's Public Sector

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ABSTRACT

The liberalisation of trade union registration has expanded freedom of association in many developing countries, yet its implications for collective bargaining and worker representation remain contested. This study investigates the factors driving trade union proliferation in Zambia's public sector and examines their implications for industrial relations. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining survey data from public sector employees (n=68), with semi-structured interviews involving trade union leaders, employers, and labour administrators (n=18). Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative responses were subjected to thematic analysis to triangulate the findings.

It was found that the liberalisation of union registration following the 1997 Industrial and Labour Relations reforms was perceived as the principal driver of union proliferation. However, leadership disputes, personal ambitions, governance deficits, and dissatisfaction with existing representation also emerged as significant contributory factors. The pre-1997 one-union-one-industry model was perceived as having provided stronger collective bargaining, more coherent worker representation, and more effective dispute resolution than the current pluralist framework. The findings further suggest that union proliferation reflects the interaction of legal reform and organisational governance rather than legislative liberalisation alone.

The study contributes to industrial relations theory by proposing the Contributory Institutional Coordination Framework. The emergent framework identifies institutional coordination as the mechanism through which legal reform shapes the relationship between freedom of association and collective bargaining effectiveness. This presents a departure from the assumption that increased organisational choice necessarily strengthens worker representation. Rather, the findings demonstrate that the effectiveness of union pluralism depends on institutional arrangements capable of coordinating representation. Conclusively, labour law reforms should balance constitutional guarantees of freedom of association with governance mechanisms. This helps to sustain coherent and effective systems of collective bargaining.

Keywords: Collective Bargaining, Governance, Institutional, Pluralism, Trade Union, Zambia

INTRODUCTION

Trade unions are fundamental institutions of collective representation (Hyman & Gumbrell-McCormick, 2020; Meardi, 2025). However, there is continuing debate over whether labour movements are strengthened by organisational unity or by pluralism. Studies suggest that freedom of association allows workers to establish and join unions of their choice (Bhuller et al., 2022; Lambert & Webster, 2024). Within this context, there is growing evidence to suggest that extensive union proliferation may undermine collective bargaining by fragmenting representation, increasing inter-union competition, and weakening organisational cohesion (Jäger, Noy, & Schoefer, 2022). Whilst these tensions have received some scholarly attention, there is a dearth of studies

using empirical evidence to explain the institutional conditions under which trade union pluralism strengthens or weakens worker representation remains limited. This dearth of studies is more visible in developing countries.

This study uses Zambia as a context for examining this debate. Before the liberalisation reforms of 1997, Zambia's public sector industrial relations system was organised around a one-union-one-industry model. At that time, a single recognised union represented workers within each sector and negotiated collectively on their behalf. However, union registration was liberalised by The Industrial and Labour Relations (Amendment) Act of 1997. This provided a platform to expand freedom of association while facilitating the emergence of multiple trade unions within the same sectors. Of importance is that these reforms broadened workers' organisational choice. On the contrary, the same reforms raised concerns regarding fragmented bargaining, overlapping representation, leadership disputes, and declining collective bargaining effectiveness (Madimutsa, 2023).

Whilst extant studies have documented the legal reforms underpinning Zambia's transition to trade union pluralism (Musić & Harisch, 2026), they have paid less attention to the interaction between legal liberalisation, organisational governance, and workers' experiences in shaping union proliferation. Hence, there is a gap in knowledge on whether the proliferation of trade unions primarily reflects an expansion of democratic representation or an unintended weakening of collective labour institutions. This gap limits understanding of how labour law reforms influence the effectiveness of collective bargaining in developing-country industrial relations systems.

Drawing from this background, the purpose of this study is to investigate the institutional, organisational, and legal factors driving trade union proliferation in Zambia's public sector and to assess their implications for collective bargaining and worker representation. Therefore, the study is guided by the following research question:

What institutional, organisational, and legal factors have driven trade union proliferation in Zambia's public sector, and how have these factors influenced collective bargaining and worker representation?

A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining survey data from public sector employees ($n=68$) with semi-structured interviews involving trade union leaders, employers, and labour administrators ($n=18$). The intention of integrating multiple stakeholder perspectives was to provide a comprehensive assessment of the drivers and consequences of trade union proliferation.

The findings contribute to industrial relations scholarship in two respects. (1) Empirically, it provides evidence from a developing-country context on the factors underpinning trade union proliferation and its implications for collective bargaining. (2) Theoretically, it advances the Contributory Institutional Coordination Framework (CICF). Here, it is argued that the effects of legal liberalisation are mediated by institutional governance and organisational dynamics. In this vein, the study extends debates on trade union pluralism by demonstrating that the effectiveness of freedom of association depends not only on the right to establish trade unions but also on the institutional capacity to coordinate collective representation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The organisation of trade union representation has long occupied a central place in industrial relations scholarship. A fundamental debate concerns whether workers' interests are best served through unified representation (Hertel-Fernandez, Kimball, & Kochan, 2022) or through pluralist systems permitting multiple unions to compete for membership (Landau *et al.*, 2023). The literature continues to draw attention to classical industrial relations scholars such as Webb & Webb, 1897; and Dunlop, 1958 (Meardi, 2024; Hafiz, 2025). Within this literature, it is argued that collective bargaining derives its effectiveness from organisational solidarity and concentrated bargaining power (Prouska *et al.*, 2023). This suggests that fragmented representation weakens labour's negotiating capacity (Marino & Lucio, 2024). Following from this, scholars are contended that a one-union-one-industry model reduces inter-union rivalry, limits duplication of representation, and provides employers with a clear bargaining counterpart (Ayentimi, Amankwaa, & Burgess, 2025). On the contrary, pluralist scholars draw attention to democratic participation that emanate from multiple unions, as opposed to

the one-union-one-industry model (Mikander & Satokangas, 2024). Here, it is argued that a multi union approach improves organisational accountability and allow workers greater freedom to choose representatives who reflect occupational or sector-specific interests.

However, there is empirical evidence to suggest that the benefits of union pluralism depend largely on institutional context (Dorfman, & Harel, 2023; Jaeck *et al.*, 2024). While multiple unions operate within coordinated bargaining systems, competition need not undermine labour influence. And so too, some scholars share the view that in weakly regulated industrial relations systems, proliferation frequently produces fragmented bargaining structures (Doellgast, & Wagner, 2022). Consequentially, this encourages competing representational claims, and diminished bargaining power. Rather than representing the one-union-one-industry model, and the pluralist model as mutually exclusive, the literature increasingly suggests that the effectiveness of union pluralism depends upon institutions capable of coordinating collective action while preserving freedom of association.

This institutional perspective has become particularly important given increasing labour market liberalisation in many developing countries. For example, during the 1990s, there were reforms promoting freedom of association (Kratou & Laakso, 2022). These expanded opportunities for workers to establish representative organisations and achieved through simplified union registration procedures. Though these reforms strengthened fundamental labour rights, some studies report unintended consequences (Nyarko, Atinga, & Mahama, 2026). For instance, there are reports of rapid increases in the number of registered unions without corresponding growth in membership or bargaining capacity (Webster, 2022). Consequentially, the fragmentation has complicated collective bargaining, increased administrative costs, and weakened labour's ability to negotiate effectively with employers and governments. Studies in this domain unveil the tension between protecting individual associational rights and maintaining effective systems of collective representation (Öker, Kına, & Kuran, 2026).

Prior to 1997, the Zambian public sector industrial relations were characterised by relatively centralised representation under the one-union-one-industry principle. The literature suggests that The Industrial and Labour Relations (Amendment) Act 1997 liberalised union registration (Hepburn, 2019). This was achieved by lowering barriers to organisational formation, fundamentally altering this institutional architecture. For some scholars, these reforms facilitated a substantial increase in the number of trade unions (Madimutsa, & Pretorius, 2021). And yet, explanations for this growth differ. From a legal perspective, proliferation of trade unions is a result of deregulation and expanded freedom of association (Horwitz, & Cooke, 2021). Yet, organisational studies emphasise internal governance failures, leadership conflicts, and declining confidence in established unions (Ayentimi *et al.*, 2025). These competing explanations suggest that legislative reform alone is insufficient to explain union multiplication.

Scholars have drawn attention to organisational governance as a complementary explanation for trade union proliferation (Jäger *et al.*, 2022). For instance, some studies across African labour movements demonstrate that leadership disputes, electoral competition, factionalism, and weak internal democratic institutions frequently result in organisational splits and the establishment of rival unions (Hamann, 2020; Allen, 2023). Studies report of some new unions that emerge from unresolved leadership succession disputes or personal political ambitions (Libebe, & Warikandwa, 2022). This is of concern because the focus should be on reflecting workers' substantive representational needs. The notion of reducing trade union proliferation solely to leadership conflict risks overlooking legitimate worker dissatisfaction with existing unions. It must also be acknowledged that occupational differentiation, perceived failures of representation, and sector-specific professional identities may also generate genuine demand for alternative representative organisations. Consequently, union proliferation should be understood as the product of interacting legal, institutional, organisational, and representational factors rather than any single causal mechanism.

Studies suggest that fragmented union structures for collective bargaining and industrial relations outcomes are problematic (Bean, 2021; Rulashe, & Jam, 2025.). Within this, proliferation of trade unions is often associated with declining bargaining coordination, overlapping representational mandates, increased employer leverage, and more complex dispute resolution processes. For employers, fragmented bargaining provides an opportunity to negotiate separately with competing unions. This weakens labour's collective influence. Nevertheless, some

studies are of the view that this perspective overstates the virtues of monopoly representation and underestimates the capacity of specialised unions to articulate occupational interests overlooked by larger organisations (Callaci, 2023; Cohen, 2024). More importantly, the empirical evidence remains mixed. This is more evident within African public sectors where systematic quantitative analyses remain relatively scarce.

Even though extant studies have documented legislative reforms, organisational fragmentation, and changes in Zambia's labour movement (Hepburn, 2019; Madimutsa, & Pretorius, 2021; McNamara, 2021), there is a dearth of studies that integrate workers' perceptions with those of union leaders, employers, and labour administrators to explain both the drivers and consequences of union proliferation. However, there is evidence of a few studies that examine how legal liberalisation interacts with organisational governance and representational dissatisfaction to shape institutional outcomes. Therefore, studies are needed to address this gap. Hence, there is a need to understand whether union proliferation primarily reflects an expansion of democratic choice or a weakening of collective labour institutions. This study contributes to that debate by providing mixed-method evidence on the institutional, organisational, and legal factors underpinning trade union proliferation in Zambia's public sector. Additionally, the study examines the implications for collective bargaining and worker representation that emanate from a proliferation of these trade unions.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a mixed-methods research design. This was considered appropriate because the research sought both to quantify workers' perceptions of trade union proliferation and to explain the institutional processes underpinning those perceptions. The integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence enabled methodological triangulation.

Study Design

A mixed-methods research design was adopted. This utilised both qualitative and quantitative approaches with the intention of providing a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. Numerical data was generated by the quantitative component, while the qualitative component provided rich, contextual insights into participants' experiences, perceptions and interpretations. The integration of these two datasets facilitated methodological triangulation. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was adopted. Quantitative data were collected and analysed first to identify key patterns and relationships, informing the subsequent qualitative phase. The two datasets were analysed independently and integrated during interpretation to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Study Participants

The study targeted key actors within Zambia's public sector industrial relations system. These included public sector employees, trade union officials, employers' representatives, and labour administrators. Survey data were collected from major public service institutions. On the other hand, qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews. Participants were purposively selected with the intention of targeting those individuals with direct knowledge of labour relations and trade union governance. The inclusion of multiple stakeholder groups enabled the study to capture diverse perspectives on the causes and consequences of trade union proliferation.

Data Collection and Sample Size

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the quantitative data set, providing a profile of the 68 survey respondents included in the study.

Table 1: Characteristics of the respondents (quantitative data set)

Category	Sub-Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
	Male	42	61.8

Category	Sub-Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
	Female	26	38.2
	Total	68	100.0
Age Group	18–25	4	5.9
	26–35	16	23.5
	36–45	28	41.2
	46–55	14	20.6
	56+	6	8.8
	Total	68	100.0
Highest Level of Education	Primary	2	2.9
	Secondary	8	11.8
	Diploma/Certificate	20	29.4
	Bachelor's Degree	26	38.2
	Postgraduate	12	17.6
	Total	68	100.0
Public Sector Institution	Ministry/Government Department	18	26.5
	Local Authority/Municipal Council	10	14.7
	State-Owned Enterprise/Parastatal	8	11.8
	Regulatory Authority/Commission	4	5.9
	Public University/Training Institution	10	14.7
	Public Health Institution/Hospital	8	11.8
	Judiciary Institution	4	5.9
	Security Service Institution	4	5.9
	Constitutional Office	2	2.9
	Total	68	100.0
Union Membership	ZCTU	14	20.6
	FFTUZ	10	14.7
	CSAWUZ	12	17.6
	ZNUT	10	14.7
	ZUFIAW	6	8.8
	NUPPEZ	8	11.8
	Other	4	5.9
	Not a member	4	5.9
	Total	68	100.0

Source: Field Data (2026). N = 68 respondents.

Quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising Likert-scale items measuring respondents' perceptions of the pre-1997 trade union model, the factors contributing to trade union proliferation, and its implications for collective bargaining and worker representation. The questionnaire was developed using constructs adapted from the literature on trade union pluralism, labour law reform, and industrial relations (Sanz de Miguel et al., 2020; Kaufman et al., 2021). This process helped to ensure content validity. The intended sample size was 120, but 68 questionnaires were usable, thereby limiting the sample size to 68 (n=68).

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 18 purposively selected participants. Table 2 summarises the demographic and professional characteristics of the interview participants. An interview guide was used to ensure consistency. Interviews provided contextual explanations for the quantitative findings and enabled participants to elaborate on issues not captured through structured survey items.

Table 2: Characteristics of the participants (qualitative data set)

Category	Sub-Category	Frequency (n)
Designation	Trade Union Leaders	6
	Management Representatives (HR/Admin)	5
	Key Informants (Labour Officers/Academics)	7
	Total	18
Institution	Ministry/Government Department	4
	Trade Union Federation (ZCTU/FFTUZ)	6
	Public University/Training Institution	3
	Ministry of Labour (Labour Office)	3
	Parastatal/State Enterprise	2
	Total	18
Experience	5–10 years in role	4
	11–20 years in role	7
	Over 20 years in role	7
	Total	18

Source: Field Data (2026). N = 18 participants

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and mean scores. This helped to identify patterns in respondents' perceptions of trade union proliferation and its determinants. Likert-scale responses were analysed using a four-point ordinal scale. Here, higher mean scores indicated stronger perceived significance of each factor, and lower mean scores indicated weaker significance.

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis, guided by the principles of analysing qualitative data as outlined by Spiggle (1994). Transcripts were coded inductively to identify recurring themes relating to legal liberalisation, organisational governance, leadership disputes, representational legitimacy, and collective bargaining. The qualitative findings were subsequently integrated with the survey results through triangulation to examine areas of convergence and divergence across data sources. This approach strengthened the explanatory power of the study by linking statistical patterns with lived experiences of the study participants.

Triangulation

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed methodological, data source and participant triangulation. Methodological triangulation involved integrating quantitative survey data from 68 respondents with qualitative interview data from 18 participants, enabling the corroboration and complementary interpretation of findings across methods.

Data source triangulation was achieved by drawing participants from diverse demographic and institutional contexts. Survey respondents represented different genders, age groups, educational levels, public sector institutions and trade union affiliations, ensuring broad coverage of the Zambian public sector. Participant triangulation was further strengthened through interviews with trade union leaders (n = 6), management representatives (n = 5), and key informants (n = 7), who provided policy, managerial and employee perspectives.

The convergence of evidence across multiple methods, participant groups and organisational settings enhanced the robustness of the findings by enabling cross-validation while providing a richer and more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review authority before commencement of the study. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Any identifying information was removed from interview transcripts and survey datasets. Data were securely stored and used exclusively for academic research purposes.

FINDINGS

The empirical findings are organised around two complementary themes. The first theme examines respondents' perceptions of the pre-1997 industrial relations framework. This provides the institutional context within which trade union proliferation has subsequently unfolded. The second theme identifies and ranks the principal drivers of proliferation, and examines the relative importance of legal liberalisation, organisational governance, leadership dynamics, and representational concerns.

Factors Contributing to Trade Union Proliferation in Zambia's Public Sector

Respondents were first asked about their understanding and experience of the pre-1997 industrial relations framework. The intention was to establish whether they possessed sufficient knowledge to compare the former one-union-one-industry model with the post-1997 pluralist system (Table 3). It was found that 70.6% of respondents reported being familiar with the pre-1997 model, providing confidence that subsequent assessments were informed by direct experience or institutional knowledge.

Table 3: Respondents' Understanding of the Pre-1997 Trade Union Model

 Statement	 Strongly Agree	 Agree	 Neutral	 Disagree	 Strongly Disagree
I am familiar with the one-union-one-industry model that existed before 1997	22 (32.4%)	26 (38.2%)	10 (14.7%)	6 (8.8%)	4 (5.9%)
The closed shop arrangement ensured strong collective bargaining	28 (41.2%)	24 (35.3%)	8 (11.8%)	4 (5.9%)	4 (5.9%)
Workers had a unified voice under the old model	30 (44.1%)	20 (29.4%)	6 (8.8%)	8 (11.8%)	4 (5.9%)
The pre-1997 model limited workers' freedom of choice	10 (14.7%)	14 (20.6%)	12 (17.6%)	18 (26.5%)	14 (20.6%)
Dispute resolution was more effective under the old regime	24 (35.3%)	22 (32.4%)	12 (17.6%)	6 (8.8%)	4 (5.9%)

Source: Author's Own Construction

The findings reveal a consistently favourable assessment of key institutional features of the pre-1997 framework. More than three-quarters of respondents (76.5%) agreed that the closed shop arrangement strengthened collective bargaining, while 73.5% considered the previous system to have provided workers with a more unified collective voice. Similarly, 67.7% believed that dispute resolution was more effective under the earlier institutional arrangement. Hence, the data set associates the one-union-one-industry model with greater bargaining coherence and institutional effectiveness.

While 35.3% of respondents agreed that the earlier system limited workers' freedom of choice, a larger proportion (47.1%) disagreed. This divergence suggests that respondents did not perceive collective representation and individual organisational choice as necessarily incompatible. A large proportion of the

respondents regarded the benefits of coordinated representation as outweighing any restrictions associated with monopoly unionism.

These results were reinforced by participant voices from the qualitative data set. Participant voices consistently linked the pre-1997 framework with institutional clarity and bargaining unity, as one union official observed:

"Under the old system, when we had a grievance, we spoke with one voice. The employer knew who to negotiate with. Today, there are so many unions that the employer plays one against the other."

Similarly, a senior labour officer noted:

"The Joint Council system worked efficiently when there was one union per industry. Now, establishing which union has the mandate to negotiate is itself a source of dispute."

While respondents expressed favourable views of the earlier institutional model, they also identified multiple factors underlying the subsequent proliferation of trade unions. The voices from the qualitative data set consistently emphasised that proliferation was not driven by a single cause but by the interaction of legal reform, organisational governance, and leadership dynamics. One employer had this to say:

"Many workers felt that the old unions no longer spoke strongly enough for them, so new unions emerged as an alternative."

A trade union leader similarly remarked:

"The law opened more space for association, but that same openness also encouraged fragmentation."

Another participant distinguished between legitimate and opportunistic organisational formation:

"Some unions were formed to address genuine sector-specific concerns, while others appeared to arise from leadership disagreements."

From both the quantitative and qualitative data sets, there is a shared understanding that trade union proliferation is a multidimensional phenomenon. Legal liberalisation following the 1997 reforms was widely perceived to have created opportunities for new union formation. However, organisational dissatisfaction, leadership conflicts, and internal governance challenges were also identified as important contributory factors. The convergence of evidence across the two data sets demonstrates a shared understanding of proliferation as the product of interacting institutional and organisational processes rather than the consequence of legislative reform alone.

Drivers of Trade Union Proliferation in Zambia's Public Sector

Respondents were asked to assess the significance of a range of factors that may have contributed to trade union proliferation in Zambia's public sector (Table 4). The findings indicate that respondents perceived proliferation as a multidimensional phenomenon driven by the interaction of legal, organisational, and institutional factors rather than by a single cause.

Table 4: Factors Contributing to Trade Union Proliferation in the Public Sector

Factor	Very Significant	Significant	Moderately Significant	Not Significant	Mean Score
Liberalisation of union registration after 1997	32 (47.1%)	22 (32.4%)	8 (11.8%)	6 (8.8%)	3.18
Leadership disputes within existing unions	28 (41.2%)	24 (35.3%)	10 (14.7%)	6 (8.8%)	3.09
Personal ambitions of union leaders	30 (44.1%)	20 (29.4%)	12 (17.6%)	6 (8.8%)	3.09
Dissatisfaction with existing union representation	24 (35.3%)	26 (38.2%)	12 (17.6%)	6 (8.8%)	3.00
Government encouragement of union fragmentation	26 (38.2%)	18 (26.5%)	14 (20.6%)	10 (14.7%)	2.88
Ethnic and regional loyalties	16 (23.5%)	20 (29.4%)	18 (26.5%)	14 (20.6%)	2.56
Professional differentiation among workers	20 (29.4%)	22 (32.4%)	16 (23.5%)	10 (14.7%)	2.76
Influence of political parties	22 (32.4%)	20 (29.4%)	14 (20.6%)	12 (17.6%)	2.76
Inadequate internal union democracy	26 (38.2%)	22 (32.4%)	12 (17.6%)	8 (11.8%)	2.97

Source: Author's Own Construction

Legal liberalisation emerged as the strongest perceived driver of proliferation. Nearly four-fifths of respondents (79.5%) rated the liberalisation of union registration following the 1997 reforms as either a very significant or significant factor, producing the highest mean score (3.18). This suggests that respondents viewed the post-1997 legislative framework as creating favourable conditions for the establishment of new unions. This understanding is reinforced by voices from the qualitative data set, as illustrated by a union leader:

"The law opened more space for association, but that same openness also encouraged fragmentation."

Governance-related factors were ranked highly. Leadership disputes within existing unions (mean = 3.09) and the personal ambitions of union leaders (mean = 3.09) were each identified as significant by 76.5% and 73.5% of respondents, respectively. Qualitative evidence reveals the association of organisational fragmentation with internal leadership competition rather than workers' collective interests, as illustrated by a branch chairperson in the extract below:

"Many of these new unions are formed not because workers need them, but because someone lost an election in the mother union and decided to start their own. It is about positions, not workers' interests."

A second participant similarly noted:

"When someone cannot become General Secretary of the existing union, they simply register a new one and take a few members with them."

From the quantitative data set, respondents recognised that proliferation was not exclusively driven by organisational conflict. For instance, dissatisfaction with existing union representation received a mean score of 3.00, with 73.5% rating it as significant or very significant. And so too, from the qualitative data set, participants indicated that some new unions emerged in response to perceived representational gaps within established organisations. This was more prevalent where occupational groups believed that their sector-specific interests were insufficiently represented, as illustrated by a health sector participant in the extract below:

"We formed our own union because the general union did not understand the specific challenges of health workers. Our conditions of service are unique, and we needed a voice that understood clinical realities."

Institutional governance also featured prominently in respondents' assessments. Inadequate internal union democracy was rated as significant by 70.6% of respondents (mean = 2.97), suggesting that weaknesses in organisational accountability and member participation were perceived as important contributors to fragmentation. Government encouragement of union fragmentation received a mean score of 2.88, with 64.7% of respondents considering it a significant influence.

By comparison, political parties (mean = 2.76), professional differentiation (mean = 2.76), and ethnic or regional loyalties (mean = 2.56) were viewed as secondary drivers. Although these factors were acknowledged by respondents, they were consistently ranked below legal liberalisation, organisational governance, and representational dissatisfaction.

DISCUSSION

Drawing from the findings, trade union proliferation in Zambia's public sector is best explained by the interaction between legal reform and organisational governance. Although the data sets identified the liberalisation of union registration after 1997 as the primary catalyst for proliferation, leadership disputes, personal ambitions, governance deficits, and dissatisfaction with existing representation were also perceived as significant drivers. This challenges legal deterministic explanations by demonstrating that legislative reform created the opportunity for proliferation, while organisational dynamics shaped its extent and character.

The study contributes to ongoing debates on freedom of association and collective bargaining (Callaci, 2023; Dorfman, & Harel, 2023; Ayentimi et al., 2025). This is achieved by showing that expanding the right to establish unions does not necessarily strengthen worker representation. The data sets associated increased union plurality with weaker bargaining power, fragmented representation, and more complex dispute resolution. Drawing from this, it can be said that freedom of association requires complementary institutional arrangements capable of coordinating representation if collective bargaining is to remain effective.

Pluralist industrial relations theory is also refined by the findings. The evidence indicates that organisational diversity alone does not improve representation, and yet, pluralism assumes the legitimacy of multiple interests (Doellgast, & Wagner, 2022). Within this, of importance are institutions that coordinate competing unions. Such institutions are needed for effective collective bargaining. In the absence of such mechanisms, pluralism may generate competition among unions rather than strengthening workers' bargaining power.

The evidence shows that union proliferation reflects both legitimate representational demands and organisational opportunism. For example, some respondents attributed new union formation to sector-specific needs. Part of the data sets unveiled leadership rivalries and personal ambitions. This finding contributes to the literature by demonstrating that not all forms of union fragmentation have the same implications for industrial relations outcomes.

The data sets presented a favourable assessment of the pre-1997 one-union-one-industry model. This challenges the assumption that workers invariably prioritise organisational choice over collective strength. Instead, workers appear to value institutional arrangements that deliver effective bargaining and dispute resolution. In this sense, the findings contribute to comparative industrial relations. This is achieved by arguing that the effectiveness of union pluralism depends less on the number of unions than on the institutional capacity to coordinate collective representation. These findings draw attention to the importance of balancing freedom of association with effective systems of collective bargaining.

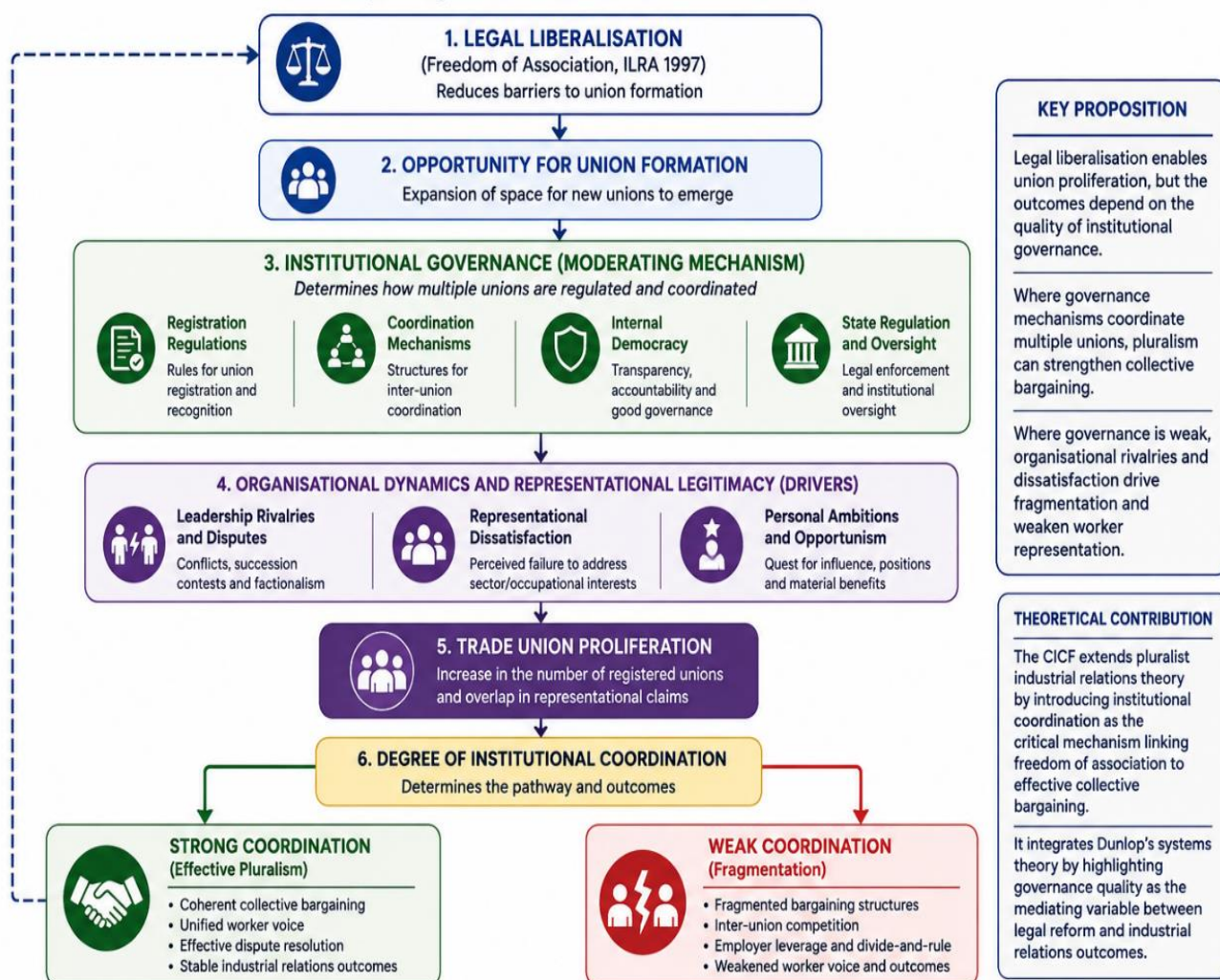
Emergent Institutional Coordination Framework (ICF)

Trade union proliferation is often explained through pluralist theory, and systems theory. From a pluralist theoretical perspective, multiple unions are legitimate expressions of diverse worker interests (Kaufman et al., 2021; Dorfman, & Harel, 2023; Landau et al., 2023). On the other hand, the systems theory emphasises the interaction of labour institutions within their wider legal and political environment (Sanz de Miguel et al., 2020; Bean, 2021; Libebe, & Warikandwa, 2022). However, neither theory adequately explains why similar legal

reforms produce effective union pluralism in some contexts but fragmentation and weakened collective bargaining in others.

Drawing on the findings of this study, an Institutional Coordination Framework (ICF) is proposed, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Institutional Coordination Framework: Trade Union Proliferation and its Outcomes



Source: Author's Own Creation

It is argued that legal liberalisation is a necessary but insufficient condition for trade union proliferation. In this vein, labour legislation should be understood as creating opportunities for organisational formation. However, the consequences of those opportunities depend on the quality of institutional governance. This means that where governance mechanisms are weak, liberalisation interacts with leadership competition, organisational rivalry, and representational dissatisfaction to produce fragmented union structures. Conversely, where institutions are strong and effectively coordinate representation, pluralism can coexist with strong collective bargaining.

The emergent framework identifies five interacting components:

- **Legal liberalisation.** This expands freedom of association by reducing barriers to union formation.
- **Institutional governance.** This regulates how new organisations are coordinated within the industrial relations system.
- **Organisational dynamics.** This includes leadership disputes, personal ambitions, and internal democracy. These shape decisions to establish new unions.

- **Representational legitimacy.** This reflects workers' confidence that existing unions adequately represent their occupational interests.
- **Collective bargaining effectiveness.** This represents the ultimate institutional outcome, expressed through bargaining power, organisational unity, and dispute resolution capacity.

It is hereby proposed that institutional governance moderates the relationship between legal liberalisation and trade union proliferation. Consequently, union proliferation should not be understood as the inevitable consequence of expanded associational rights. Rather, it should be understood as the product of interactions between legal reform, organisational behaviour, and institutional capacity. Hence, the study contributes to academic debates surrounding the proliferation of trade unions (Meardi, 2025; Rulashe, & Jam, 2025). This is done by introducing institutional coordination as the mechanism that reconciles freedom of association with effective collective representation.

The emergent framework extends pluralist industrial relations theory. This is achieved by demonstrating that the effectiveness of union pluralism depends less on the number of unions. Rather, it depends on the institutional arrangements that coordinate their activities. In relation to systems theory, the proposed framework extends this by identifying governance quality as a critical mediating variable linking legal reform to industrial relations outcomes. This presents a deviation from the practice of treating union proliferation as either inherently beneficial or inherently detrimental. This is done by conceptualising union proliferation as contingent upon the institutional capacity to maintain coherent systems of collective bargaining.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the factors driving trade union proliferation in Zambia's public sector and their implications for collective bargaining and worker representation. It emerged that union proliferation cannot be explained solely by the liberalisation of union registration following the 1997 Industrial and Labour Relations reforms. Rather, the evidence from the data sets suggest that proliferation reflects the interaction between permissive legal frameworks, organisational governance deficits, leadership rivalries, and workers' dissatisfaction with existing representation.

Insights from the study contribute to industrial relations scholarship. The findings demonstrate that freedom of association and effective collective bargaining are not inherently complementary. Rather, the effectiveness of union pluralism depends on institutional arrangements that coordinate representation and maintain bargaining coherence. By proposing the Institutional Coordination Framework (ICF), the findings extend pluralist industrial relations and systems theory. This is achieved by identifying institutional coordination as the mechanism through which legal reform influences industrial relations outcomes.

Drawing from the findings, it can be said that the central policy challenge is not whether multiple unions should exist. Rather, the policy challenge should be focused on how labour law and industrial relations institutions can balance associational freedom with effective collective representation. We learn that legal liberalisation, without adequate institutional coordination, may unintentionally weaken rather than strengthen worker voice.

It is recommended that labour law reforms move beyond facilitating union registration towards strengthening institutional mechanisms that coordinate collective bargaining among multiple unions. Further, registration requirements should ensure that newly established unions demonstrate representational necessity and organisational sustainability. This is alongside upholding constitutionally protected freedom of association.

There is also a need for trade union federations to strengthen internal governance systems. This can be achieved by promoting transparent leadership elections, democratic accountability, and effective dispute resolution mechanisms. The intention is to minimise fragmentation arising from leadership conflicts. Equally important is the need for existing unions to improve member engagement and responsiveness to sector-specific concerns. This helps to reduce incentives for organisational splintering.

There is a need to reinforce the tripartite institutions capable of coordinating bargaining across unions within the same sector. This should be done by government, employers, and organised labour. The underlying intention is to reduce inter-union competition, clarify bargaining mandates, and improve the efficiency of collective bargaining and dispute resolution.

Finally, future research is required to examine the long-term effects of the 2026 Representative Body (Registration and Prescribed Forms) (Amendment) Regulations on trade union formation and bargaining outcomes. Researchers should also conduct comparative studies across African jurisdictions. This would further enhance understanding of how different institutional arrangements shape the relationship between freedom of association, union pluralism, and collective bargaining effectiveness.

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