

Meditations in an Emergency: a Regional Analysis of the Relationship Between Union Membership and Minimum Wage in an Age of Labor

Decline

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Introduction

The general consensus amongst labor historians is that the election of Ronald Reagan led to a marked decline in Union Membership that, with a few exceptions, has continued steadily up until the present day. Beginning with the Air Traffic controller strike in 1981, where the Reagan administration fired and permanently replaced striking union controllers, and continuing with Reagan members of the National Right to Work Committee to the National Labor Rights Board, a legal and political climate hostile to union organizing emerged in the U.S.. In my research, my hope was to take popular and agreed upon census data and, by doing specific grouping and analysis of membership data by region, highlight particularities that offer a more complex view of the decline of American Labor.

In addition, I attempted a comparative analysis between changes in union membership and changes in the mean minimum wage throughout these regions, in order to highlight what the private sector had to gain by disempowering union networks.

Methodology

I began by separating out the dataset by region, quartering the country into Southern, Western, New England, and Rust Belt quarters. I plotted the sum of memberships in each collection of states along a line graph, separating the “col” segment by the type of industry in which the union operated, teasing out the differences between industries in the public and private spheres.

I performed much the same method on the dataset pertaining to minimum wage. I then aggregated the two datasets and plotted out a scatter graph meant to show the relationship between union membership and minimum wage.

Results

All regions of the country are marked by a steep decline in the minimum wage across the country, although recovery looks very different across regions, with the West having the steepest difference and the rustbelt looking to be on the precipice of a second decline. The south, with low union membership, experienced a step-ladder decline, while the Industrial Rust Belt took a nose-dive. The western states, especially California, were the few to spike after the 2008 recession. New England saw the benefits of the NAFTA and the Clinton administration. Public Union membership has increased everywhere except the Rust Belt. The greatest correlation between minimum wage and union membership appeared to be in the Western States and New England.

Conclusion

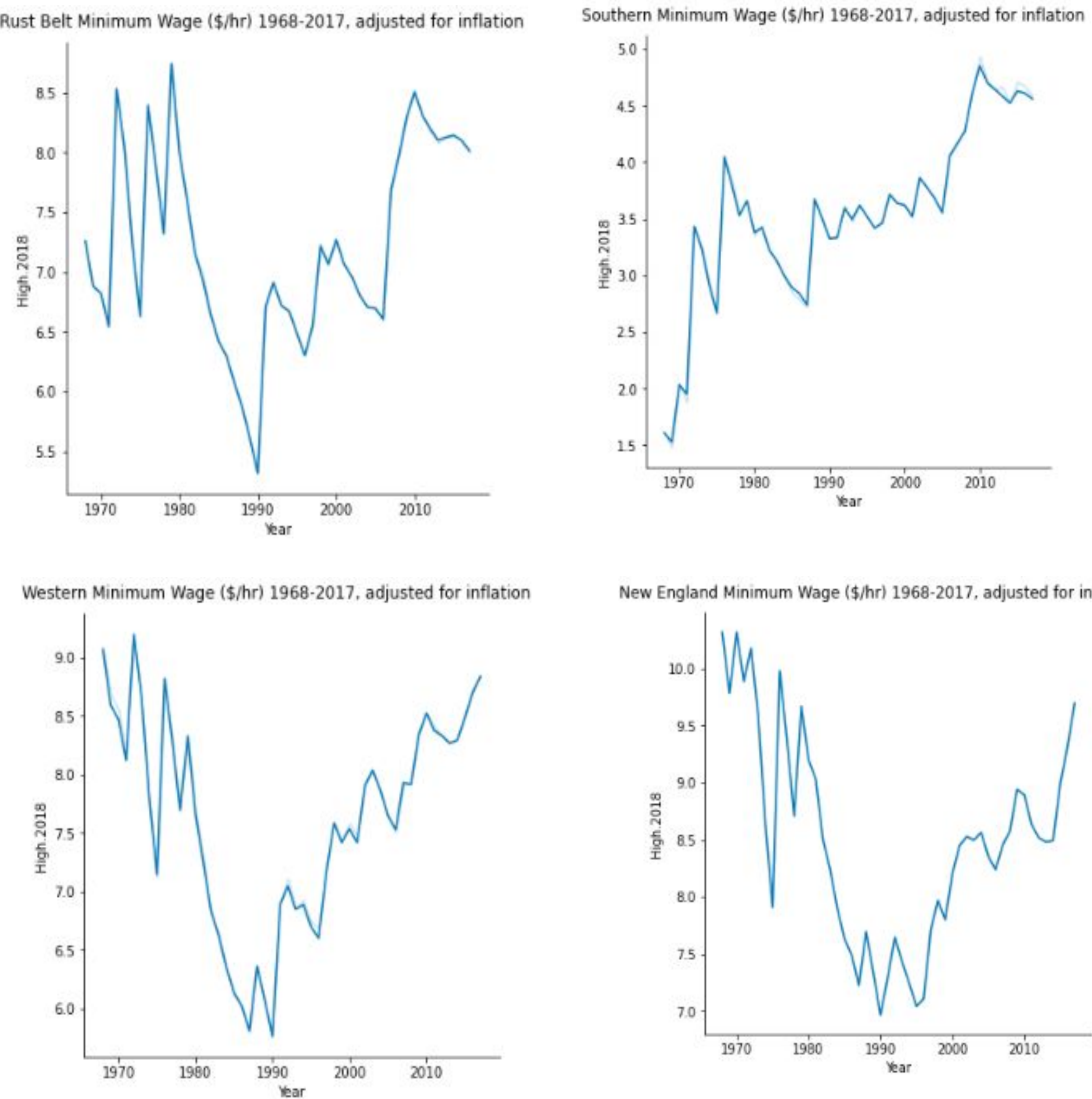
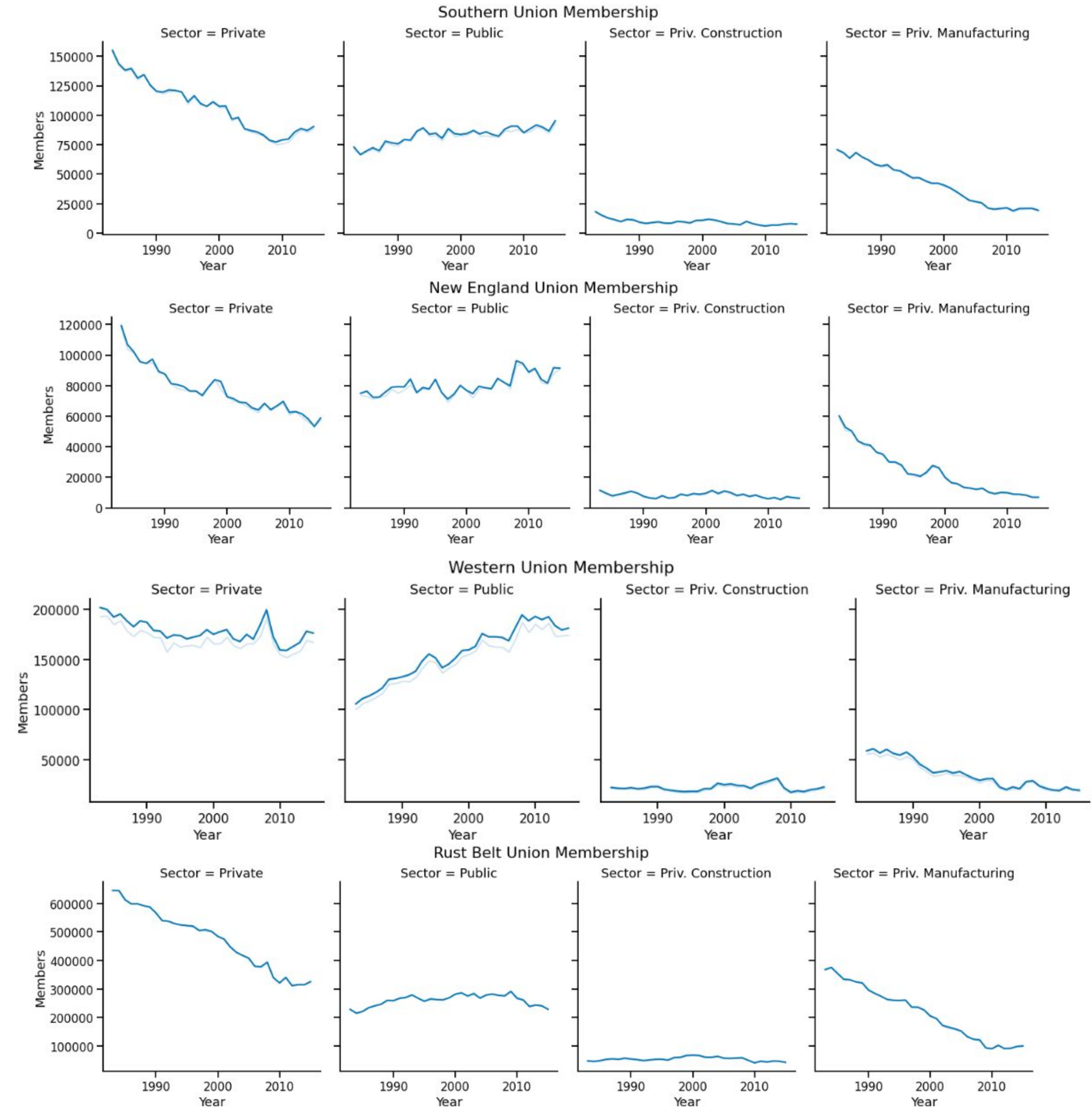
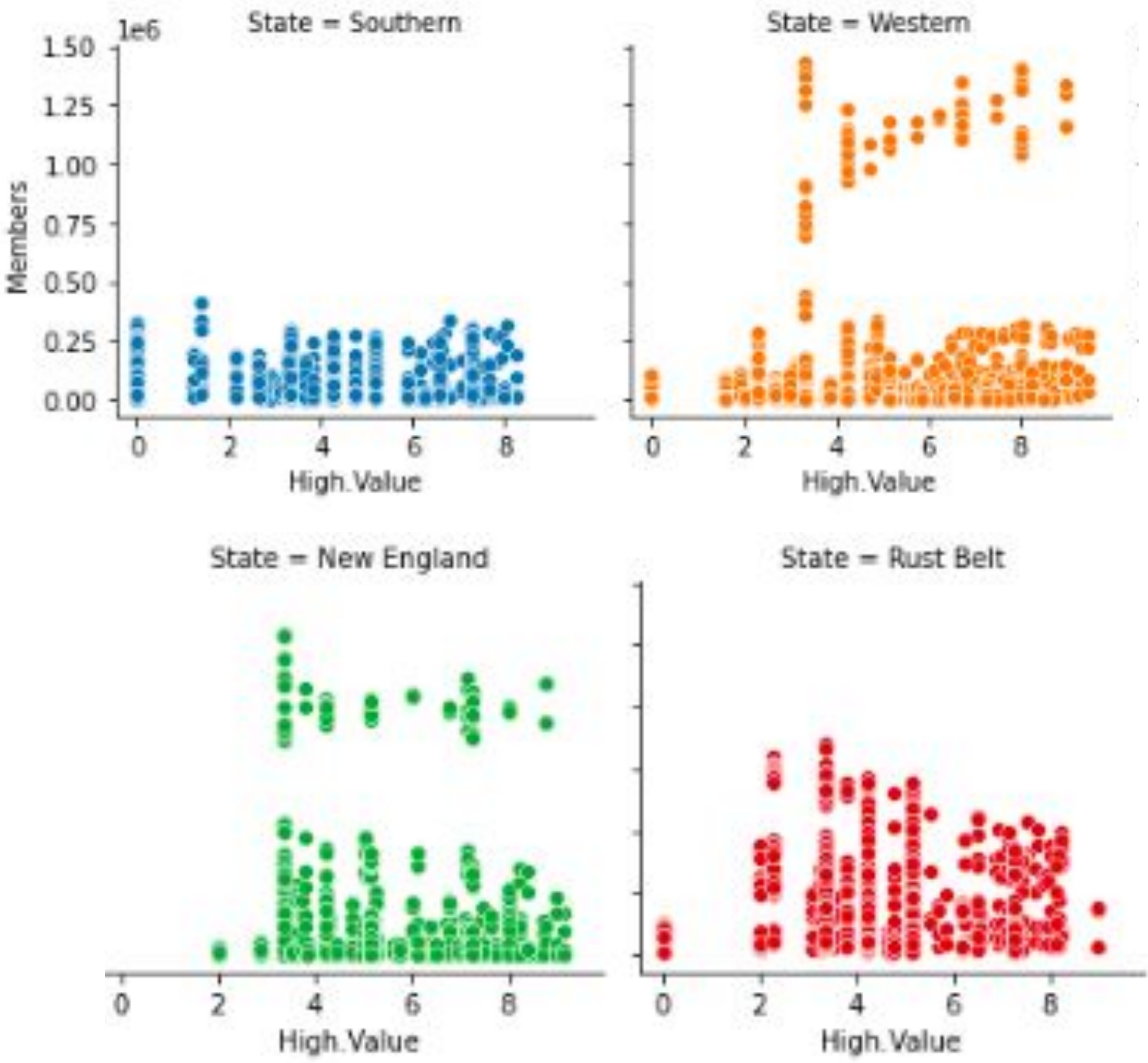
The scatter graph is telling, as those regions that include the wealthiest states with the highest union membership — California and New York — have “floaters” with high correlation between high minimum wage and high membership. The south, which does not have a particularly strong history of labor unions, remains in a zone of low wages and low union membership, while in the Rust Belt, people appear to be earning less, but existing on the same middle plane of membership and wages.

In the beginning of the Reagan administration, the South had an influx of new unions as established organizations, such as United Steelworkers, began to ciphon out of the region. This explains the halting decline in the early years, that later gives way to a steady decline.

The correlation between high union membership and high wages is difficult to miss, however, and the sharp drop in the minimum wage just as unions began to be disenfranchised speaks to how this process benefited private industries, who felt justified in paying their workers a lower wage without a union to protect them.

Citations

- Farber, H.S. and Western, B. (2002), Ronald Reagan and the Politics of Declining Union Organization. British Journal of Industrial Relations, 40: 385-401. <https://doi-org.libproxy.kenyon.edu/10.1111/1467-8543.00240>
- Bennett, Sari. “LABOR ORGANIZING IN THE SOUTH, 1975-1979: THE CASE OF THE INTERNATIONAL BROTHERHOOD OF TEAMSTERS.” Southeastern Geographer, vol. 24, no. 1, 1984, pp. 1–13. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/44370751. Accessed 17 Dec. 2020.
- Ruth Milkman, and Stephanie Luce. “Labor Unions and the Great Recession.” RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences, vol. 3, no. 3, 2017, pp. 145–165. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.7758/rsf.2017.3.3.07. Accessed 17 Dec. 2020.



Materials

For this project, I used Python as my base language, with Seaborn and Pandas as my two libraries. Seaborn is a language used to visualize datasets, and Pandas is a language used to manipulate datasets.

I used two datasets for this project— one a survey of the minimum wage, by state, from 1968 to 2017. Several wages were included each year— the low estimate of minimum wage in that state and the high estimate of minimum wage. The dataset also included wages adjusted to match a 2018-level of inflation. I chose to include the column matched for inflation, in order to get a better (although imperfect) sense of the change in wages. The second dataset is a table of Union Membership and Healthcare coverage. Both sets borrowed from federal data.