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The wind of no change: union effects on partisan preferences and the working-class metamorphosis

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on Germany and the United Kingdom as two most dissimilar cases in terms of labour market and political institutions, the article examines the impact of trade union membership on partisan preferences. Leveraging panel data to control for time-invariant selection effects shows that trade unions exert a small but consistent left-wing influence on wage earners who become affiliated, but they are no longer able to modify the preferences of working-class members. A longitudinal approach reveals that unions mainly attract individuals who already share the unions' political inclinations before joining. The additional shift to the left experienced by already left-leaning new members is consistent with a value congruence mechanism triggered by interactions with even more left-leaning long-term union members. Symmetrically, working-class joiners exhibit less pronounced left-wing inclinations before becoming affiliated, a gap that widens further after they join. These findings imply that unions' political influence and class allegiances have been both eroded and altered by changes in the labour market and political landscape.

KEYWORDS Class; comparative politics; panel data; political parties; trade unions

Recent developments in the labour market and new partisan configurations call into question the ability of trade unions to act as intermediaries that influence the political preferences of their members in favour of mainstream left-wing parties. The 'Third Way' turn of social democracy, the emergence of new political parties, a heterogeneous membership with diverse economic and political interests, and a working class no longer naturally allied to pro-labour parties have made the positive influence of unions on the left-wing preferences of their members increasingly precarious. To what extent does joining a union still increase the likelihood of voting for the main left-wing parties? Are new political forces, in

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particular emerging left-wing and radical right-wing parties, gaining the support of union members?

This article answers such questions by estimating the effect(s) unions have on their members' propensity to support the main left-wing, right-wing, and green parties in Germany and the United Kingdom (UK). In the article, we both consider all wage earners becoming affiliated with unions and single out the peculiarities of the changes in partisan preferences experienced by the working class. We capitalise on the heterogeneity between Germany and the UK by adopting a 'most dissimilar cases' research design. Indeed, the two countries offer interesting heterogeneity in terms of economic and political institutions, in particular with different economic and political roles ascribed to their trade unions. Since our results point to similar relationships between union membership and political preferences in two such different national contexts, we interpret this as strong evidence that the general economic and political changes of recent decades have had a decisive impact on the political role of unions, regardless of country-specific characteristics. At the same time, these two countries provide high-quality representative panel data with the variables necessary for our analyses.

The article's longitudinal approach is at the core of both its theoretical and empirical contributions. Theoretically we leverage a dynamic perspective to understand the role that membership heterogeneity may play in changes in partisan preferences. We provide empirical evidence consistent with the hypothesis that the degree of polarisation and the leeway for additional change characterising the interactions between individuals with divergent political views are crucial factors that influence the direction and importance of changes in political preferences. Methodologically we exploit panel data to provide more reliable estimates than those of the existing cross-sectional literature by showing that time-invariant selection effects represent a serious source of bias that is responsible for an overestimation of the magnitude of union effects. We also illustrate how examining averages of the outcome variables at different moments of the membership trajectory can shed light on the underlying causal mechanisms. These micro-level union effects on partisan preferences are consistent with the presence of macro-level dualisation and skill-biased liberalisation patterns in the labour market (Diessner *et al.* 2022; Rueda 2008).

The empirical findings first show that the differences in partisan preferences between members and non-members are to a large extent related to pre-existing differences tied to unobservable, time-invariant characteristics that cannot be controlled for in the cross-sectional design prevailing in existing research. Despite the smaller magnitude of the effects than usually described, unions still consistently increase the propensity of wage

earners who become affiliated to support mainstream and emerging left-wing parties. However, this influence no longer spills over to working-class members, who either exhibit significantly less pronounced left-wing shifts than the average member or become even more likely to support (radical) right-wing parties. We explain these contrasting effects by focusing on the attitudinal heterogeneity of union members and applying the value congruence mechanism described by Hooghe (2003) to unions. Both patterns can be reconciled with the attitudes exhibited by these workers immediately before they join a union and with the attitudes of the long-term members they interact with after joining. Even before joining, wage earners who are about to become union members show left-wing tendencies, which are then likely to be reinforced by interactions with long-term members who are even more left-wing oriented. In contrast, working-class members show less pronounced left-wing tendencies before joining a union, and, in some cases, they even exhibit radical right-wing tendencies that clash with the left-wing environment they encounter in unions.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. In the second section, we highlight how new developments in the labour market and the political arena affect the influence of unions on the political preferences of their members, illustrate the main mechanism of unions' political influence that we can empirically test, and describe the contextual heterogeneity provided by the two countries we focus on. We then describe the data and our methodological approach, before presenting the results in the fourth section and discussing the empirical findings in the fifth. We conclude by describing the limitations and the avenues the article opens for future research.

Theoretical framework: unions' political sway over a changing membership

The changing relationship between trade unions and social democracy and the working-class metamorphosis

Because of their economic role as custodians of workers' rights, unions are historically close to pro-labour parties. When voters' partisan preferences were still mainly driven by economic considerations, this connection with left-wing political forces was spontaneously embraced by a homogeneous membership of blue-collar workers whose material interests were aligned with the political agenda of such parties. After WWII, in a form of long-term political exchange, the centralised unions guaranteed peaceful collective bargaining and wage moderation while ensuring that their homogeneous membership understood the benefits of voting for

social democratic forces (Howell and Daley 1992). In return, the ruling social democratic coalition pursued policies that accommodated union demands, in particular employment protection and generous welfare benefits.

The long-established link between union members and social democratic parties has been made more precarious by recent developments in the labour market and the political arena. The increasing importance of service sector jobs at the expense of a shrinking industrial workforce and the increasing flexibilisation and liberalisation of employment relations (Baccaro and Howell 2017) have both eroded and transformed union membership. The secular decline in union density has weakened the legitimacy and power of unions as bargaining partners. Besides the diminished proportion of workers affiliated with a union, those who are members have more heterogeneous profiles than in the past (Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick 2010). As such, union members often have diverse economic and cultural preferences.

In order to compensate for their diminished influence as economic actors guaranteed by well-established institutional practices such as corporatist arrangements, several strategies for trade union revitalisation are invoked in the literature (e.g. Ibsen and Tapia 2017). Among them, the most relevant for our purposes is the idea of unions bypassing weakened (corporatist) institutional arrangements by directly engaging in the political (Streeck and Hassel 2003) and public (Rego *et al.* 2016) spheres to try to defend their economic role as negotiation partners. However, their ability to exert political influence is made more difficult by the emergence of new partisan configurations. Increasing heterogeneity in the labour market is matched by growing complexity in the political arena. In a new two-dimensional space, in which both economic interests and cultural preferences play a key role in partisan affiliation (Kriesi 2010), social democracy is challenged in its core electorate by emerging left-wing parties that offer bolder redistributive policies than mainstream social democracy and by radical right-wing parties that appeal to traditional values (Oesch and Rennwald 2018; Rathgeb 2021). Empirical longitudinal evidence shows that the outflow of voters from social democracy is mainly absorbed by emerging left-wing and green parties and, to a lesser extent, mainstream right-wing parties (Abou-Chadi and Wagner 2023; Häusermann *et al.* 2021). Based on cross-sectional data, Arndt and Rennwald (2016) show that this erosion from social democracy to new parties also affects white-collar union members.

This leads us to formulate a first set of hypotheses about the relationship between trade union membership and political preferences. While the new two-dimensional political space includes both economic and cultural dimensions, we suppose that the direction of the influence of trade

unions on the political preferences of their members is still mainly explained by the economic orientation of established and emerging political parties:

> **Hypothesis 1a**: Trade union membership increases the likelihood of supporting the main social democratic and the emerging left-wing parties.

> **Hypothesis 1b**: Trade union membership decreases the likelihood of supporting the main right-wing parties and the radical right-wing parties.

Zooming in on the working class, the category of blue-collar union members has not only shrunk but their interests today are also squeezed between the political offers of antithetical political forces (Oesch and Rennwald 2018): as the least economically advantaged category of workers, they have an affinity with left-wing parties because of these parties' redistributive policies; at the same time, perceived competition from the immigrant labour force as well as a cultural shift that has made them more sensitive to ethnocentric political arguments and traditional values increase their propensity to support radical right-wing parties. Indeed, working-class voters are one of the core constituencies of radical right-wing parties today. The UK has seen the rise of some radical right-wing parties, the UK Independence Party (UKIP) in particular, as has Germany with the Alternative for Germany (AfD).

Abou-Chadi and Wagner (2019) show that unionised manual workers are particularly opposed to the increasingly investment-oriented policy programmes of mainstream left-wing parties. As we describe in the methodological section below, the operationalisation of the working class used in this article differs to some extent from theirs, including both production and service workers. Nevertheless, the working-class voters who support far-right parties appear not, or only marginally, to be recruited from former supporters of social democracy (Abou-Chadi and Wagner 2023; Häusermann *et al.* 2021), but from a specific subset of the working class that is attracted to authoritarian rhetoric (Lipset 1959).

Given their precarious situation, working-class people may see trade unions as a crucial actor that can offer them at least some economic protection and benefits. However, exactly for this reason, if working-class individuals join unions in the hope of having some work-related issues solved and unions are not successful in helping them (Tober 2022), these newcomers may become even less likely to follow the political lead of unions. As a consequence, paradoxically, union membership may further increase those individuals' attraction to populist parties.

The increasing investment-orientated policies of left-wing parties, the appeal of traditional cultural arguments, and the frustrating inability of unions to provide economic protection and benefits to those most in

need therefore make the left-wing influence of trade unions on working-class members more precarious:

Hypothesis 2a: The positive left-wing effects of union membership are less important or even reversed among working-class members.

Hypothesis 2b: The negative right-wing effects of union membership are less important or even reversed among working-class members.

Internal dynamics and heterogeneity: value congruence as causal mechanism?

While the processes described in the previous subsection imply a decrease in the ability of unions to affect the political preferences of their members, the existing cross-sectional literature still consistently confirms that trade union membership is associated with a higher probability of supporting and voting for social democratic parties and candidates (e.g. Arndt and Rennwald 2016). Several mechanisms are cited to account for the positive correlation between trade union membership and left-wing political views. Joining a union is associated with interactions with other members (Ahlquist and Levi 2013), with the arguments of union leaders (Lamare 2016), with participation in internal activities (Ahlquist and Levi 2013), with information sources such as newsletters (Sobieraj and White 2004), and with greater awareness of union involvement in the public sphere (Streeck and Hassel 2003). These experiences give members the opportunity to develop informed political preferences (Kim and Margalit 2017) by revealing the rational basis for supporting left-wing parties. The union environment can also generate the necessary social pressure to vote in favour of certain political forces (Lamare 2016), or even lead to more profound normative changes by making workers feel part of a 'community of fate' and ready to defend not only their own interests but also those of the group of members as a whole (Ahlquist and Levi 2013; Mosimann and Pontusson 2017).

In this article, we are mainly interested in understanding how such effects may be linked to the increasing heterogeneity of union members' profiles. Focusing on the link between union membership and attitudes towards welfare redistribution, Mosimann and Pontusson (2017) argue that the distributive norms associated with unions' wage-bargaining practices have the greatest impact on support for redistribution in environments of members with heterogeneous profiles and where individuals with rational interests against redistribution (i.e. high-wage earners) are affiliated to unions with predominantly low-wage workers. The implicit assumption in this approach is that an individual can develop more encompassing views only if they are confronted with an environment of

heterogeneous political preferences. Generalising this framework, existing research implies that the impact of exposure to heterogeneous interactions on political views is ambiguous. Heterogeneity can both enhance and inhibit political effects and is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for changes in partisan preferences to occur.

On the one hand, too much distance between political views may hinder political effects by reducing the likelihood of members finding the common ground necessary to initiate politically relevant interactions (Ulbig and Funk 1999). Exposure to new political views does not automatically imply their acceptance (Zaller 1991). Political information is not simply received but goes through a process of anticipatory elaboration that determines its acceptability and the likelihood of further elaboration in future discussions. Political views that diverge too strongly may inhibit interaction and such anticipatory elaboration. Individuals with moderate convictions may also not benefit from immersion in an environment in which many individuals hold distant political ideas from their own. Both the presence of ambiguous political views and of cross-cutting pressures from different individuals may lead moderate individuals to refrain from engaging in political conversations that threaten internal social harmony (Mutz 2002a).

On the other hand, contact between dissimilar individuals is the first step to bridging political differences. Being critically challenged by individuals with different views to their own may cause individuals to adjust and refine their political convictions (Huckfeldt *et al.* 2004). Direct interactions may also trigger greater tolerance towards politically distant individuals, leading to interpersonal links that ultimately motivate more encompassing political views (Mutz 2002b). Nevertheless, such balancing between rational, affective, and normative convictions takes place only when the interactions satisfy high deliberative standards (Mutz 2002a).

As a third possibility, Hooghe (2003) describes a value congruence mechanism explaining how even contexts where membership is homogeneous may trigger important political orientation effects. If this perspective is adapted to unions' influence on members' partisan preferences, left-wing shifts may be triggered by the presence of relatively homogeneous members who share the same set of core values. The support for pro-labour parties may be one such salient conviction, which is implied by the very nature of unions. In this context, individuals who already favour left-wing parties, or whose political preferences are at least not incompatible with them, may be most likely to join unions and experience additional positive effects in their evaluation of those parties, as a consequence of interactions with individuals who may be more left-wing oriented than they are.

For these reasons, we assume that value congruence is a crucial mechanism underlying the political effects of union membership postulated in the first two sets of hypotheses:

> **Hypothesis 1c**: Unions attract newcomers who are more left-wing oriented than average. These new members interact with long-term members who are even more left-wing oriented, which increases the newcomers' initial left-wing orientation.

> **Hypothesis 2c:** The opposite pattern is expected for working-class members who are, on average, more right-wing oriented before joining and are therefore not aligned with the union environment they find after joining.

National peculiarities

Our focus on Germany and the UK is motivated on the one hand by pragmatic reasons related to data availability. For both there are nationally representative data with all the variables needed for our analyses and with sufficient statistical power to achieve reliable results for our preferred estimation strategy. On the other, the two countries offer interesting contextual heterogeneity along several dimensions that may be relevant to the relationship between union membership and partisan preferences.

According to an institutional approach such as the varieties of capitalism framework (Hall and Soskice 2001), Germany and the UK are opposite ideal types of capitalist functioning and are associated with clearly distinct economic institutions. First, most relevantly for our purposes, they are characterised by different industrial relations systems that imply a different role for unions (Marsden 2015). As a coordinated market economy, Germany is characterised by a system in which negotiations between employers' organisations and unions tend to be relatively centralised, with bargaining predominantly taking place at industry level. By contrast, in liberal market economies such as the UK, the market is the main mechanism for coordination between economic actors. This means that negotiations between employers' associations and unions take place on a voluntary basis and mainly at the company or workplace level. Both countries are also characterised by distinct skill and training regimes. Germany's competitive advantage is centred around specific skills often strengthened through vocational training, while the UK mainly focuses on general skills obtained through higher education (Durazzi 2019). The protection of core insiders in the manufacturing sector goes hand in hand with a relatively large consumptive welfare state in Germany, while a more minimalist form of welfare protection with social investment policies prevails in the UK (Garritzmann *et al.* 2023). The latter is more in line with the development of a tertiary economy, while the former implies

a certain inertia in moving away from manufacturing as a key sector of the economy (Wren 2013). Beyond inertial institutions, the two countries are associated with distinct dynamic growth models, Germany being an exemplary case of an export-led economy, while the UK is consumption-led (Baccaro and Pontusson 2016).

Nevertheless, both countries have recently undergone some form of liberalisation in their labour markets (Baccaro and Howell 2017). A dualisation pattern implies that unions, no longer able to effectively protect the interests of all workers, pragmatically decide to focus on the interests of a privileged group of workers who work in sectors that are still defensible. This seems to be particularly the case in liberal market economies such as the UK, where market coordination mechanisms do not allow unions much room to manoeuvre, hence prioritising the interests of privileged insiders (Rueda 2008). While dualisation is a general empirical pattern in the Western world, recent research (Diessner *et al.* 2022) nuances this view for Germany by showing that unions did not play an active role in this process. In the skill-biased liberalisation that occurred in Germany, employers forced unions to passively accept the creation of a marginalised category of workers.

The economic institutions mentioned earlier are also tied to specific political institutions. In terms of political systems, the majoritarian, essentially bipartisan system in the UK is one of the elements that enables those liberal institutions, while Germany's proportional multi-party system is closer to a more coordinated form of capitalism (Iversen and Soskice 2015). In particular, these differences in political systems can be traced back to the coordinated vs. uncoordinated industrial relations systems mentioned earlier (Budd and Lamare 2021). In terms of alliances between trade unions and political parties, trade unions have a 'natural' affinity with social democratic parties. Nevertheless, while the Labour Party has been the main political interlocutor for unions in the UK, in a coordinated market economy with (neo-)corporatist arrangements like Germany, unions have always maintained a form of cooperation with both the left-wing and right-wing coalitions in power (Hyman 2001). While the link with social democracy has been more pronounced, the unions and the Christian Democrats in Germany have always maintained open channels of communication and cooperation. Beyond the national level, while Brexit has set the UK on a different, independent path, Germany is still the heartland of the EU project.

More recently, however, while the neoliberal turn best exemplified by the Thatcher and Reagan era made the affinity with social democracy even more obvious from the unions' point of view, the more ambivalent, 'Third Way' position embraced by social democratic political leaders in

Europe (Schröder and Blair in particular) since the nineties challenges their parties' institutional links to unions (Fleckenstein 2012; Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick 2010).

Despite the different economic and political contexts in which German and British trade unions operate, their shared affinity with social democracy, the common liberalisation path, and the recent 'Third Way' shift both have experienced suggest that they should have similar influence on their members' political preferences:

> **Hypothesis 3**: The direction, magnitude, heterogeneity by social class, and the value congruence mechanism of the partisan effects of trade union membership are homogeneous in Germany and the UK.

Data and methodology: longitudinal leverage

Nationally representative panel survey data

The analyses we present below were made possible by two national representative panel surveys: the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) and the British Household Panel Survey/UK Household Longitudinal Study (BHPS/UKHLS).

We rely on all years of data in which our independent and dependent variables of interest are available. We consider the binary union membership status (non-member or member) as the main independent variable. Regarding the dependent variables, we constructed dichotomous variables operationalising the support for the two main left-wing (SPD; Labour Party) and right-wing parties (CDU; Conservative Party). In line with our theoretical framework, we also consider three other parties that could represent alternatives for social democratic supporters. We consider radical (The Left, for Germany only) and green (The Greens; The Green Party) left-wing alternatives, liberal parties (FDP; Liberal Democrats), and radical right-wing (AfD; UKIP)[1] emerging parties. All our outcome variables, which we regard as attitudinal dimensions, are operationalised as binary indicators, where 1 represents the party we are interested in and 0 any other alternative (any other party or no partisan preference). Table A1, Online Appendix A, provides the exact wording of the survey questions.

We also consider a set of standard socio-demographic control variables (gender; age; education level; citizenship/race; region; marital status), working full-time vs. part-time, public vs. private sector, and a set of time fixed effects. All the analyses are subset on the category of wage earners, representing the main pool of potential union members. Descriptive statistics on all variables are available in Tables B1–B6, Online Appendix B.

Observable vs. unobservable heterogeneity: model specification

We exploit panel data both to provide a better estimation of the effect(s) of union membership on partisan preferences and to highlight the extent to which a longitudinal approach improves existing cross-sectional designs. We rely on the following functional form:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta\, M_{it} + C_{it}^{'}\gamma + \nu_i + \mu_{it}, \, for\, i = 1,2,\ldots,N \, and \, t = 1,2,\ldots,T \qquad (1)$$

with the subscripts i and t representing individuals and survey years, respectively; Y_{it} is the dependent variable; α is an intercept term which neither varies between individuals nor over time; β is the coefficient associated with the membership status; M_{it} is the binary membership status, coded as 0 if the respondent is not a union member in a given year and 1 if the respondent is a member; C_{it} is a vector of control variables and γ are the coefficients associated with them; ν_i corresponds to all variables that affect the dependent variable and vary across individuals but not over time; and μ_{it} represents all variables not included in the model that affect the dependent variable and vary across individuals and over time.[2]

We consider three models. In the first, we regress the outcome variable on the membership status by setting the vector of controls as the null vector. If joining a union was independent of an individual's political preferences, the correlation between union membership and the outcome variable would represent the desired causal effect. As this independence assumption is quite strong, the existing cross-sectional literature tackles the potential endogeneity of the union membership variable by including some observed control variables intended to capture the fact that individuals with certain political preferences may be more likely to join unions than others. We do this in the second model by including the set of observed controls described in the previous subsection. Since we expect that the reasons for prospective members joining unions may be unobservable and correlated with their political views, we leverage the availability of panel data by estimating a fixed-effects (FE) model with the controls cited above. In an FE estimation, all unobservable variables varying between individuals but not over time included in the time-invariant error term are controlled for.

Following the expectations of our theoretical framework, we additionally interact the union membership status with a binary social class indicator separating working-class individuals (production and service workers) from other social strata with the class schema developed by Oesch (2006). This classification is well-suited to our purposes as it characterises the working class as a social stratum differentiated from the others by its distinct economic and political interests (Oesch and Rennwald 2018).

Although the dependent variables we focus on are binary, we always employ the ordinary least squares (OLS) estimator and hence rely on a linear probability model (LPM). In a panel data setting, OLS is the only estimator to allow controlling for unobserved heterogeneity while also providing estimates that can be interpreted as average treatment effects (Wooldridge 2010: 619–622).

For each survey participant, all analyses are restricted to the first transition to union membership that we observe when they participate in the survey. In this way, we do not have to make the rather strong and unlikely assumption that the opposite exit transition (from member to non-member) has the exact opposite effect as the entry transition.

Pre-existing convictions: newcomers' and members' average preferences

Besides greater leverage to control for selection effects, a longitudinal approach provides new ways to understand the mechanisms behind the effects of involvement in union dynamics. The perspective we adopt in this article relies on the idea that the distributions of the political views of newcomers and of the individuals they will interact with in a union have a decisive influence on the nature and extent of attitudinal effects that occur. We focus on the average level of the outcome variable for three sets of individuals. First, we compute the average level newcomers exhibit in the outcome variable in the last observed year before joining. Second, we calculate the average attitudinal level of the individuals who are members in the year in which a newcomer joins, who represent the individuals a newcomer interacts with after joining. This group of members is composed of other newcomers and of long-term members. Third, in order to have a control group representing the general population of wage earners, we also compute the average in the dependent variable for all wage earners.

Empirical findings: linking average treatment effects to attitudinal averages

Since we are interested only in a few key parameters, we plot the estimates and averages of interest in two figures rather than presenting full regression tables in the main text. Full regression tables (Tables C1–11) and the numeric values associated with the averages we comment on (Tables D1–2) can be found in the Online Appendices. Along with the estimates, we provide standard errors and exact p-values whenever these are above the 5% threshold. In Figure 1, we plot the estimates of the average treatment effect of union membership on every dependent variable we consider for both countries. For each dependent variable we

provide the estimates of three models (OLS without controls, OLS with controls, FE with controls) in the main sample and the FE estimates related to the interaction term by social class. A 95% confidence interval accompanies each estimate, and the filling gives the level of statistical significance. As far as the interaction term goes, the estimates represent the baseline effect for the working class, while the deviations from it in the remaining social classes are given by lines departing from the upper edge of the estimates' symbol. In Figure 2 we plot the three averages we described in the subsection on pre-existing convictions for each dependent variable in the main sample and by social class.

Starting with the link between union membership and preference for the SPD, the estimates in the main sample exhibit a pattern we find in all dependent variables. The average difference between members and non-members given in the first model (OLS without controls) has a relatively large magnitude and is highly significant (0.14, $p < 0.01$). The differential decreases slightly when observed control variables are added in the second model (OLS with controls) but still remains clearly significant (0.094, $p < 0.01$). The decrease is much more important when we switch to the third model (FE with controls), with a significance level slightly below 5% (0.015, $p < 0.05$). This pattern, with a low reduction in terms of magnitude and significance when observed control variables are added, and a stronger contraction in terms of magnitude and significance when

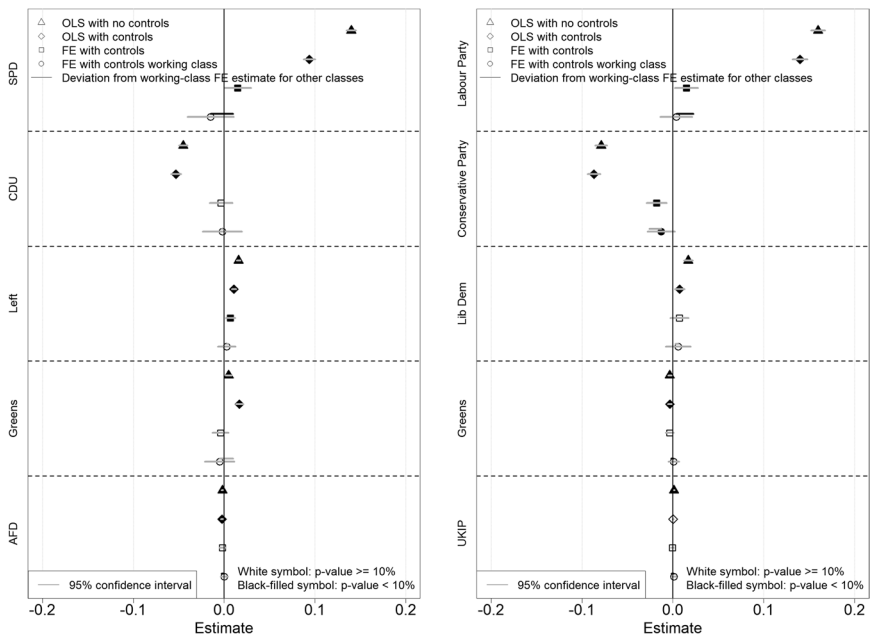


Figure 1. Average treatment effects.

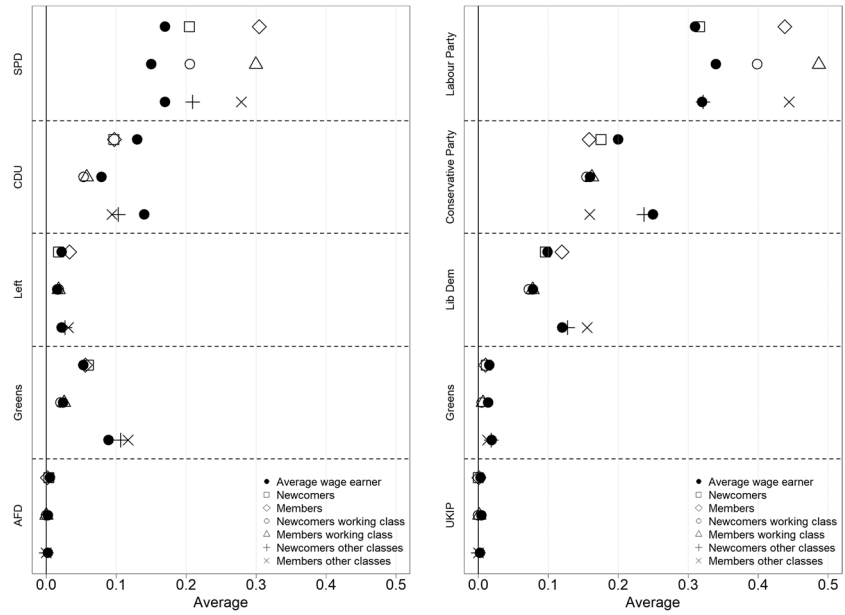


Figure 2. Attitudinal averages for wage earners, newcomers, and members.

the effect of all unobserved heterogeneity between members and non-members is partialled out, appears in all outcome variables.

The pattern is most obvious in the preferences for left-wing parties, since these are supported by most prospective joiners, followed by the main right-wing parties, and finally by the three alternatives to social democracy we consider because of the low proportion of supporters they attract in the general population.

Because the FE estimates are least likely to be affected by endogeneity issues of the union membership variable, we focus on them alone in the remainder of this subsection. These estimates are summarised in Table A2, Online Appendix A. Since the FDP is the only party for which we did not find any significant FE estimates (the lowest p-value is 0.72), its estimates are not shown in the two figures.

To return to the impact of union membership on an SPD preference in Germany, the FE model provides a relatively small estimate, which is below the 5% significance level (0.015, $p < 0.05$). The interaction effect by social class reveals that this influence has the opposite negative (although not significant) direction for working-class members (−0.015, $p = 0.26$), while it is clearly positive and more pronounced among joiners from other social strata (0.025, $p = 0.10$). The averages in Figure 2 shed some light on why there is a stronger effect in the main sample and in social strata other than the working class. Although all newcomers (in the main sample and in both social classes) are more likely than other wage earners

to support the SPD even before joining a union, newcomers from the working class have the lowest proportion of SPD supporters, followed by the main sample and by other social strata. Once they have joined, all three categories of newcomers interact with a pool of members who are more likely to support the SPD than the newcomers were before they joined. Interactions with these individuals have a positive impact on an SPD preference, especially among those categories of individuals (main sample and strata other than the working class) who are more likely to support this type of party to begin with.

Focusing on the UK, we detect a positive and significant influence of union membership on the likelihood of supporting the Labour Party (0.015, $p < 0.05$) in the main sample. The magnitude of this effect is exactly the same as in Germany. The effect is more pronounced outside the working class (deviation from working-class estimate: 0.019, $p = 0.057$). Similarly to the SPD in Germany, union members are the category with the largest proportion of Labour Party supporters. The peculiarity of the UK is that newcomers are not much more likely than other wage earners to support the Labour Party. Despite such specificity, it is once again the strong pro-Labour environment found in unions that leads to an increased likelihood of becoming a Labour supporter.

Focusing on the effect on the likelihood of supporting the CDU, we find that the FE estimate is negative but far from significant (−0.0034, $p = 0.60$). No significant heterogeneous effects are apparent between the two social classes. Figure 2 shows that newcomers in all three of the categories we consider are slightly less likely than other wage earners to support the CDU, even before joining a union. Their propensity to support the CDU is almost equivalent to that of the members they interact with in the unions, which is consistent with the absence of a significant attitudinal change after joining.

UK unions have a greater effect on reducing the tendency to support the Conservative Party in the main sample (−0.018, $p < 0.01$). The effect is visible even among working-class members (−0.013, $p = 0.096$), but it is twice more pronounced within other social strata (deviation from working-class estimate: −0.013, $p = 0.14$). The averages in Figure 2 are consistent with the existence of a pulling mechanism by which members with a low propensity to support the Conservative Party convince newcomers to follow their lead. In fact, while wage earners, newcomers, and members from the working class have a very similar likelihood of supporting the Conservative Party, in the main sample and in a more important way outside the working class, newcomers before joining have a clearly higher likelihood of supporting the Conservatives compared to the members they interact with once they have joined.

Looking at the effects on the propensity to support the two alternative left-wing/liberal parties, we observe similar empirical patterns in both countries. In both cases, a significant positive effect in the main sample is half as large as the effect found for the two mainstream parties (The Left: 0.0070, $p<0.05$; Liberal Democrats: 0.0072, $p=0.16$). In both cases, the averages in Figure 2 are consistent with a mechanism of value congruence. For example, union members are more likely (0.033) than newcomers (0.018) to support The Left and may therefore increase their support for this party once they join unions. In both countries, there is no significant heterogeneity by social class.

The same exercise for The Greens in Germany shows no significant impact in the main sample, but the positive impact on non-working-class members is greater than on working-class members, with a significance level of about 10% (0.015, $p=0.11$). Non-working-class members are again slightly more likely to support this party (0.12) than newcomers (0.11), in line with a potential value congruence mechanism. Looking at The Green Party in the UK, we notice a peculiar negative impact in the main sample (−0.0035, $p = 0.10$), which is even more pronounced outside the working class (deviation from working-class estimate: −0.0076, $p<0.05$). The attitudinal averages show that members in the main sample (0.010 vs. 0.011) and outside the working class (0.013 vs. 0.018) are less likely to favour this party compared to newcomers and may again pull newcomers closer to their thinking.

If we turn our attention to the link between union membership and attachment to the AfD, we find that the FE estimate for the main sample is small and not significant (−0.0019, $p=0.22$). The same holds for working-class members (0.00012, $p=0.91$), while a significantly more important preventive effect against an AfD preference appears among other social classes (−0.0030, $p<0.05$). The estimate is very small (because of the low number of individuals concerned who have an AfD preference) but still significant, signalling the presence of a strongly consistent effect. Because of the low proportion of AfD supporters, Figure 2 is not very informative, with all the averages superposed over each other. The only clear aspect in the proportions in Table D1 is that other wage earners are more likely than newcomers and union members to support the AfD, as there is the same almost null proportion of AfD supporters in the main sample, in the working class, and in other social strata. Therefore, the stronger negative effect visible outside the working class can be attributed to dynamics specific to members from other social strata. Equivalently, this implies that working-class members are immune to this negative effect.

Finally, an affinity with UKIP is not affected by union membership in the main sample (−0.00064, $p=0.43$). A positive (although not significant) effect is revealed among working-class members (0.0013, $p=0.21$) and is

less important for other social strata (−0.0028, $p < 0.05$). In an attempt to make sense of this impact among the working class, we look in Table D2 at the averages, which reveal that newcomers from this class have a lower likelihood of supporting UKIP (0.00) than members (0.0013). The proportion of newcomers who favour this party increases inside unions, with additional newcomers to those who already supported the party before joining also becoming UKIP supporters.

Discussion: diverging predetermined fates

The first implication of the empirical findings described above is a methodological word of caution on using cross-sectional data to make causal claims when the dependent variable is an attitudinal dimension. Our results consistently reveal that self-selection into unions based on individual characteristics is a pervasive phenomenon. Although the act of joining a union is inevitably constrained by labour dynamics that are external to an individual's will, union membership is to a large extent a voluntary act. As such, individuals who have traits that are a better fit with the union environment are more likely to become members. By relying on panel data models that control for all time-invariant heterogeneity between members and non-members, we were able to show that the most important individual traits in the self-selection process are mainly unobservable rather than observable factors. Adding observable control variables to deal with the presence of potential omitted variables is in general not enough to partial out all factors that may bias the link between union membership and partisan preferences. In most cases, the personality traits determining the correlation between certain political views and the propensity to join unions are unobservable and not fully captured by observable variables.

Both the comparison between OLS and FE estimates and the attitudinal averages of prospective members show that the individuals joining unions are in particular more likely than other wage earners to support left-wing parties. As the act of joining is to a large extent an individual decision and unions are seen as environments close to pro-labour parties, it is not surprising that individuals with a left-wing ideology are more likely to become affiliated to unions. Pre-membership political views not only act as an attraction factor but can also inhibit the likelihood of becoming affiliated. There is little propensity to join unions among individuals supporting the main right-wing parties and even less for those who identify with radical right-wing parties. Self-selection is less manifest in our analyses because of the low proportion of joiners that support radical right-wing parties, but it is nevertheless a consistent empirical pattern.

Apart from these methodological considerations, the consistent findings between two most dissimilar cases such as Germany and the UK can be reconciled with common economic and political changes that trade unions have undergone in both countries. Although statistical power issues prevent us from measuring how the political effects of trade unions have changed over time, the average treatment effects we derived can be seen as the final outcomes of such processes. First, the small size of the effects we identified can be considered the consequence of a general liberalisation trend (Baccaro and Howell 2017) that makes contemporary unions unable to provide objective benefits to their members through collective bargaining and, therefore, to be seen by those same members as legitimate actors to listen to when choosing a party. Second, it is also consistent with today's marginal role of unions in a political arena (Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick 2010) that is no longer characterised by the presence of social democratic forces with which they are strongly allied. The push of unions towards mainstream social democracy can therefore no longer be as clear and strong as it was when long-term political exchange was assured (Howell and Daley 1992). At the same time, our analyses show that the political influence of unions is now more diversified and also increases support for new left-wing and/or liberal parties. Third, despite their increased volatility (Gomez 2018), partisan preferences still represent highly symbolic dimensions, crystallised during the pre-adult stage and therefore inertial to change (Hooghe and Wilkenfeld 2008). It is hence not surprising that the effects we detect are not particularly large.

Despite this cautionary tale related to self-selection, the direction of these small effects – union membership still making the average member more likely to feel an affinity with left-wing parties and less likely to favour right-wing political forces (consistent with hypotheses 1a and 1b) – shows that left-wing parties are still the main haven for union hopes because some intrinsic affinities have not yet been fully broken. The magnitude of the average treatment effects we considered to be statistically meaningful ranges between 1.5 and 2.5% for the main left- and right-wing parties, is around half that percentage for new left-wing/liberal parties, and is smaller for radical right-wing parties, which attract only a residual part of the population.

More specifically, unions still have a political influence on the average newcomer's support for the main and emerging left-wing parties. Union membership in Germany increases the likelihood of supporting the SPD and The Left in the main sample and even more so outside the working class. Very similar effects appear in the UK when it comes to the preference for the Labour Party and Liberal Democrats. The effects in both countries are related to the attraction into unions of individuals with a

higher-than-average propensity to support left-wing parties and who, once inside those unions, meet workers who are even more left-wing oriented (consistent with hypothesis 1c). Rather than heterogeneous microcosms of society leading to the creation of bridging social ties and more encompassing political views, unions draw in individuals who already share their main convictions before joining. It is because unions capitalise on pre-existing left-wing inclinations that the additional left-wing shift can take place through a value congruence mechanism driven by interactions with long-term members. Although our results are consistent with such a mechanism, definitive empirical evidence would require information on the actual interaction between newcomers and long-term members. While union membership does not entail active participation in union meetings for most members, the small effects detected require only a small proportion of newcomers to participate in union activities and/or interact with colleagues who are long-term members for value congruence to be a relevant causal mechanism.

In addition to the positive impact on support for social democratic parties, unions' left-wing influence manifests itself in a negative effect on right-wing preferences in the UK regarding support for the Conservative Party (consistent with hypothesis 1b). Such right-wing dissuasion is not observable for the CDU and the two radical right-wing parties (AfD; UKIP) we considered (partly inconsistent with hypothesis 1b). Because of the radical distance between these and social democratic parties, it is plausible that individuals who join unions while supporting such parties are least likely to engage in interactions that may trigger a left-wing shift, and more likely to avoid politics because of the irreconcilable incompatibility between their political views and those of many other members. In addition, the AfD in Germany and UKIP in the UK attract such a small proportion of newcomers that statistical power issues make it difficult to detect significant effects.

While the left-wing influence of unions on the whole set of wage earners is clearly visible, the opposite pattern is observable among working-class union joiners (consistent with hypotheses 2a and 2b). Eight out of eleven dependent variables we focus on are associated with union effects in which the working class either follow a right-wing shift or a less pronounced left-wing change when compared to other social strata. Almost all these effects can be traced back to working-class individuals who are about to join unions being less left-wing or more right-wing oriented to begin with than the members they will interact with or than the newcomers in other social strata. This means that, for many working-class newcomers, the attraction to right-wing political forces already exists before they join a union. After joining, additional working-class individuals

experience right-wing shifts (consistent with hypothesis 2c). Unions are not able to stop this tendency, as it also happens for other social strata.

Rather than a (causal) effect of union membership, these results can be explained by the presence of time-varying omitted variables beyond those we included as controls, which influence both the act of joining and increased right-wing tendencies. Social class has repeatedly been shown to be an important determinant of economic preferences (e.g. Ares 2020). The aversion of manual workers who are union members to the increasingly investment-oriented economic policies of mainstream social democracy (Abou-Chadi and Wagner 2019) is in line with our empirical findings. Although our definition of the working class is broader than the manual workers considered in that research (and statistical power issues prevent us from obtaining reliable estimates based on within-individual variation on manual workers only), manual workers are overrepresented among the working class. In addition, if the cultural shift invoked to make sense of the rise of radical right-wing parties is indeed a relevant normative dimension (Kriesi 2010), many working-class joiners may be highly resistant to left-wing arguments in the opposite direction. Coupled with the ineffective role of unions as economic actors, left-wing political messages coming from union leaders or other members may even have the unintended effect of reinforcing the economic and cultural frustration of the working class, hence increasing their propensity to support radical right-wing parties. These hypotheses need further investigation with data on the reasons motivating working-class individuals to become members and on their experience as members, but it appears that those who join a union have clearly defined political views not easily modified by the general left-wing sway unions have over other social strata.

Overall, despite major differences in terms of the labour market and political institutions in Germany and the UK, the empirical patterns we found in the two countries are very similar (consistent with hypothesis 3). The only exception to this pattern are the green parties. While German unions do not significantly influence preferences for The Greens in the main sample, there is a more positive influence outside the working class. This is consistent with the idea that postmodern values associated with the green agenda are more likely to be shared by highly educated social classes (Kriesi 2010). In the UK, however, we observe a marked decline in support for The Green Party after joining a union, particularly outside the working class. We interpret these heterogeneous effects between the two countries as being related to different strategies of the green parties and different balances with social democracy, with the SPD losing more supporters to The Greens in Germany than the Labour Party to The Green Party in the UK.

Concluding remarks: interactions, between- and within-country heterogeneity

Several aspects allow us to nuance the meaning of the relatively small size of the estimates we analysed. Rather than a switch event, recent research shows that union membership is better conceptualised as a continuous process, gradually unfolding before, during, and potentially even after the membership event (Hadziabdic and Baccaro 2020). This is especially true in European countries, where the act of joining a union is essentially voluntary. Even though they are not part of the union membership phase at the centre of this article, the attitudinal changes that precede union membership and are at the origin of selection effects can also be attributed at least in part to unions. Before joining, newcomers may interact with individuals who are already members and are exposed to the political discourse of unions in the public sphere. Such events are the likely reason behind selection effects and explain why many joiners share unions' political views even before becoming members. In addition, unions may require some time to produce sizeable effects on inertial political convictions such as partisan preferences. Indeed, many of the individuals who heavily influence our average treatment effects have been members for one or two years and not involved in unions long enough for their intimate political ideas to be remoulded. Long-term members, who do not contribute to our average treatment effects because they are unlikely to be observed as switchers, are likely to experience stronger effects. Furthermore, we mixed together passive and active members in order to provide comparable analyses across countries. Active members in the UK (the country for which we can distinguish between passive and active members) experience slightly stronger effects than the members we examined in the article.

Future research should expand this analysis by focusing in more detail on the internal mechanisms that explain such empirical patterns. In this article, because of the leverage provided by a longitudinal approach, we have mainly focused on the distribution of attitudes between newcomers and members to explain attitudinal effects. Our empirical evidence is consistent with the value congruence mechanism, but full confirmation of the actual mechanisms behind attitudinal changes could only be achieved with data on the type, duration, and intensity of interactions and union activities new members are involved in. While such information is not available in the panel surveys we relied on, we hope that our empirical findings will serve as a stimulus for future detailed surveys on the relationship between union members and their unions. It may also be interesting to understand how the empirical patterns we detected may evolve in the future. In particular, our interpretation of the results leads us to

suppose that radical right-wing tendencies among the working class reflect an unstable equilibrium, since they are a sign of dissatisfaction with the responses of the political forces and unions the working class were once naturally allied to. Whether unions and social democratic parties will at some point be able to regain the loyalty of this social stratum, or whether different social strata will follow increasingly diverging political preferences, is an open question.

While the act of joining a union is to a large extent voluntary in the two European countries we considered, a different empirical pattern may appear in contexts in which union membership is often the consequence of labour market arrangements that are independent of an individual's will (Kim and Margalit 2017). In many cases, union membership in North America is determined by majoritarian rules at the workplace compelling all employees to join if more than half of them decide to do so. Such differences may have important implications for the type and extent of partisan effects unions can have on their members. In particular, the transition to union membership in the European context is preceded by an anticipatory socialisation phase, which leads to individuals with political preferences congruent with those of unions becoming more likely to join and limits the additional effects the union membership experience may have (Hadziabdic and Baccaro 2020). By contrast, the constrained form of membership in the US is more likely to deliver more heterogeneous and not a priori self-selected members into unions. On the one hand, unions may have more leeway to modify the political attitudes of unsocialised members; on the other, frictions between joiners' expectations and the union experience may provoke unexpected effects, such as those highlighted in this article for working-class members.

Further, although the most dissimilar cases research design used in this article assumes that common changes in the labour market and political arena in Germany and the UK have crucially affected the trade unions' ability to influence political preferences, definitive evidence of the impact of these general trends would require consideration of additional between-country heterogeneity. To better capture the role of these processes, it would be useful to broaden the country sample to include contexts in which unions have been better able to embed their role in ongoing flexibilisation pressures without experiencing similar 'Third Way' centrist shifts, such as the Nordic countries, the Netherlands, or South Korea (Durazzi *et al.* 2018; Thelen 2012). Switzerland could also be an interesting case to study, as social democrats have not experienced the same centrist movements as in other countries and the Swiss household panel data would allow for similar analyses to ours. Paradoxically, even weak neo-corporatist countries may escape the pattern described above because unions have been forced to rely on active political participation (not guaranteed by the institutional framework in

which they operate) to achieve their goals (Molina 2006). These countries could serve as control cases for the role of liberalisation/dualisation.

Finally, beyond the between-country heterogeneity discussed in this article, it would also be useful to consider within-country union heterogeneity. Existing literature underlines that certain types of unions may be exceptions to the overall trends observed in their countries (e.g. Ahlquist and Levi 2013; Kim and Margalit 2017; Mosimann and Pontusson 2022). It would be interesting to combine the longitudinal approach of this article with data that allow membership of specific unions to be identified, as is the case in these existing qualitative or cross-sectional studies.

Notes

1. Both the AfD and UKIP are either recently founded or have only recently become relevant political parties. Therefore, our analyses for these parties mainly refer to the last 10 years covered by our data.
2. The existing literature points to a potential problem of measurement error when examining the impact of union membership on wages (Card 1996). Since we are interested in the attitudinal effects of union membership, this problem is negligible. Indeed, if an individual declares that they are not a member when in fact they are a member, it makes sense to consider them a non-member as they obviously do not see themselves as part of the union (and vice versa for members). The problem would be entirely different if we were analysing the relationship between union membership and an objective outcome such as a wage premium, which does not depend on the subjective perception of membership.

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