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Working Paper

Turning no tides: Union effects on partisan preferences and the working-class metamorphosis

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Turning No Tides

Union Effects on Partisan Preferences and
the Working-Class Metamorphosis

Sinisa Hadziabdic



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Turning No Tides: Union Effects on Partisan Preferences and the Working-Class Metamorphosis

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Abstract

Relying on panel data for Germany, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States, the paper examines the impact of union membership on partisan preferences. By leveraging panel data to control for time-invariant selection effects, we show that unions exert a small consistent left-wing influence on the average wage earner who becomes affiliated, but they are no longer able to modify the preferences of working-class members. A longitudinal approach reveals that changes in partisan preferences can be linked to members' preexisting predispositions and to the prevalent political views within unions. Unions mainly attract individuals who already share their political inclinations before joining. These preexisting left-wing convictions allow an additional left-wing shift to take place through a value congruence mechanism provoked by interactions with long-term union members who are even more left-wing oriented than the newcomers. Symmetrically, working-class joiners exhibit less pronounced left-wing inclinations before becoming affiliated, a gap that widens further after they join as a consequence of their unmet expectations.

Keywords: class, comparative politics, panel data, political parties, trade unions

Zusammenfassung

Anhand von Paneldaten für Deutschland, die Schweiz, Großbritannien und die USA wird die Auswirkung der Mitgliedschaft in einer Gewerkschaft auf Parteipräferenzen untersucht. Die Kontrolle zeitinvarianter Selektionseffekte stellt heraus, dass Gewerkschaften einen zwar leichten, aber stetigen linkspolitischen Einfluss auf den durchschnittlichen Arbeitnehmer ausüben, der einer Gewerkschaft beitrifft, sie jedoch nicht mehr auf die Präferenzen der Mitglieder der Arbeiterklasse einwirken können. Mit einem longitudinalen Ansatz zeigen wir, dass Veränderungen bei den Parteipräferenzen auf die bereits vorhandenen Neigungen von Mitgliedern und auf die in den Gewerkschaften vorherrschenden politischen Ansichten zurückzuführen sind. Gewerkschaften ziehen vor allem Personen an, die deren politische Gesinnungen bereits teilen. Diese schon bestehenden linken Überzeugungen bewirken einen zusätzlichen Linksruck über einen Mechanismus der Wertekongruenz, der durch Interaktionen mit langjährigen Gewerkschaftsmitgliedern ausgelöst wird, die politisch noch weiter links stehen als jene, die erst vor Kurzem beigetreten sind. Dementsprechend vertreten neue Mitglieder aus der Arbeiterklasse weniger ausgeprägte linke Ansichten, bevor sie einer Gewerkschaft beitreten, und infolge enttäuschter Erwartungen vertiefen sich ihre Überzeugungen, nachdem sie Mitglied geworden sind.

Schlagwörter: Gewerkschaften, Klassen, Paneldaten, politische Parteien, vergleichende Politikwissenschaft

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Turning No Tides: Union Effects on Partisan Preferences and the Working-Class Metamorphosis

1 Disputed indisputable ties: Introduction

The influence of trade unions on the partisan preferences of their members relies nowadays on an unstable equilibrium. Because of their economic role as custodians of workers' rights, unions are historically close to pro-labor parties. This natural connection with left-wing political forces was once spontaneously embraced by a homogeneous membership composed of blue-collar workers whose interests and ideological orientations were aligned with the political agenda of such parties. In a form of long-term political exchange, the centralized 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 benefits.

The long-established link between union members and social democratic parties has been made more precarious by recent developments in the labor market, which have meant the marginalization of a large segment of the workforce, and in the political arena, which have resulted in the marginalization of unions as political partners (e.g., Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick 2010). The increasing importance of service sector jobs at the expense of a shrinking industrial workforce and the increasing flexibilization and liberalization of employment relations (Baccaro and Howell 2017) have both eroded and transformed union membership. The secular decline in union density weakened the legitimacy and the power of unions as bargaining partners. Besides the diminished proportion of workers affiliated with a union, those that are members have more heterogeneous profiles than in the past (e.g., Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick 2010). As such, union members often have diverse economic and political preferences. In order to compensate for their diminished influence as economic actors, unions increasingly engage in the political sphere (e.g., Baccaro, Hamann, and Turner 2003). However, their ability to exert political influence is made more difficult by the appearance of new partisan configurations, in particular the rising importance of populist parties. Despite their radical right orientation, such parties advance arguments that attract sizable parts of a working class that was once unquestionably loyal to unions and to left-wing parties (Oesch and Rennwald 2018).

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In brief, trade unions' positive influence on their members' left-wing preferences is made increasingly precarious by a heterogeneous membership with divergent economic and political interests and a working class that is no longer naturally allied to social democratic parties. To what extent does joining a union still increase the likelihood of voting for the main left-wing parties? Are new political forces, populist parties in particular, gaining the support of union members? This paper answers such questions by estimating the attitudinal effects unions have on their members' propensity to support the main left-wing, right-wing, and populist parties in Germany, Switzerland, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States (US). In the paper, we both consider the point of view of the average wage earner becoming affiliated with unions and single out the peculiarities of the changes in partisan preferences experienced by the working class. The two pairs of countries we consider, Germany and Switzerland, and the UK and US, offer interesting variation in terms of varieties of capitalism (coordinated market economy vs. liberal market economy, Hall and Soskice 2001) or growth models (export-led vs. consumption-led growth, Baccaro and Hadziabdic 2022), types of political systems (multiparty vs. binary system, Budd and Lamare 2021), and the links unions maintain with political parties (Ebbinghaus and Visser 2000). We aim to test whether the general economic and political trends described above affect the relationship between union membership and political preferences in the same way in such different national contexts. At the same time, the four countries provide high-quality representative panel data with the variables necessary for our analyses.

The paper'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 attitudinal changes. We theoretically postulate and empirically confirm that the degree of polarization and the leeway for additional change characterizing the interactions between individuals with divergent political views are the key 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 liberalization, dualization, and skill-biased liberalization patterns in the labor market (Diessner, Durazzi, and Hope 2022).

The empirical findings first show that the differences in partisan preferences between members and nonmembers are to a large extent related to preexisting 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 the average wage earner who becomes affiliated to vote for social democratic 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 by 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 with whom they interact within unions. Even before joining a union, average wage earners who are about to become union members show left-wing tendencies, which are then 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 paper is structured as follows. In the second section, we illustrate the main mechanism we empirically test through which unions can influence the political preferences of their members, highlight how new evolutions in the labor market and in the political arena affect such influence, and underline the contextual variation provided by the four 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 linking the micro-level findings of this paper to macro-level trends in the labor market and describing the avenues it opens for future research.

2 Unions' political sway over a changing membership: Theoretical framework

Internal dynamics and heterogeneity: Value congruence as key causal mechanism?

While the existing literature overwhelmingly indicates that union membership increases the propensity to vote for left-wing political parties, we are 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 toward 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 encompassing 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. Generalizing 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). This is particularly true for symbolic political views, such as partisan loyalties usually associated with strong cleavages in the social space (Sears et al. 1980). 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 (Eveland 2004). 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 2002b).

On the other hand, contact between dissimilar individuals is the first step to bridging political differences (Allport [1954] 1979). Being critically challenged by individuals with different views to their own may lead individuals to adjust and refine their political convictions (Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague 2004). Direct interactions may also trigger greater tolerance toward politically distant individuals, leading to interpersonal links that ultimately motivate more encompassing political views (Mutz 2002a). Nevertheless, such balancing between rational, affective, and normative convictions (Heider [1958] 2013) takes place only when the interactions satisfy high deliberative standards (Habermas [1992] 1998; Mutz 2002b).

As a third possibility, Hooghe (2001, 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-labor parties may be one such salient conviction, which is implied by the very nature of unions. In this context, individuals who already favor 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.

Populist lures: The working-class metamorphosis

In addition to the mechanisms cited above, the classical argument invoked to make sense of union effects on partisan preferences refers to the rise of class consciousness (Marx [1867] 1990; Wright 1996). Joining a union puts workers with structurally congruent interests in contact with each other. Once they have joined, workers become more aware of their common interests and more likely to vote for pro-labor parties. Given the diminished importance of industrial workers and of union density (Baccaro and Howell 2017), this argument has lost its relevance. Members are indeed more heterogeneous than before and often have diverging policy preferences. In other words, it is difficult for unions nowadays to invoke a common class consciousness and common interests in order to influence partisan preferences. In addition to these contradictory interests, the decreased legitimacy of unions as bargaining partners also generates objective difficulties in providing protection and job improvements to workers in precarious work situations (Gumbrell-McCormick 2011).

Further, the people who today belong to the working class have interests that are 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 social democratic parties because of these parties' redistributive policies; at the same time, perceived competition from the immigrant labor force, and a cultural shift that has made them more sensitive to ethnocentric political arguments and traditional values, increase their propensity to support right-wing populist parties. Indeed, one of the main recent changes in partisan loyalties has been the exodus of working-class voters from social democratic to populist parties.

Membership voluntariness and partisan configurations: National peculiarities

Our focus on Germany, Switzerland, the UK, and the US is primarily motivated by pragmatic reasons related to data availability. These are the only countries for which there are nationally representative data with all the variables needed for our analyses. Nevertheless, the four national contexts offer interesting institutional variability affecting both union membership and political preferences.

First, the two pairs of countries we examine, Germany and Switzerland, and the UK and US, are opposite ideal types of capitalist functioning, implying a different role for unions (Hall and Soskice 2001). As coordinated market economies, Germany and Switzerland are characterized by a system of strategic coordination among economic actors. In particular, this means that negotiations between employers' organizations and trade unions tend to be relatively centralized, with bargaining predominantly taking place at industry level (Ebbinghaus and Visser 2000). By contrast, in liberal market economies such as the UK and US, the free market is the main mechanism for coordination be-

tween economic actors. This means that negotiations between employers' associations and trade unions take place on a voluntary basis and mainly at the company or workplace level (Ebbinghaus and Visser 2000).

Regarding union membership, besides the structural differences between industrial relations systems that can affect the amount and type of unions' political activism, the most important aspect to consider for an analysis of the micro-level attitudinal effects of union membership concerns the process leading up to an individual joining a union. In all three European countries we consider, the act of joining a union is voluntary (Ebbinghaus and Visser 2000). Although social pressure and workplace dynamics may make individuals more likely to join, a wage earner can always choose not to. The same is formally true in the US, as closed shops were abolished there in 1947 (Hanson, Jackson, and Miller 1982). Nevertheless, in practice, existing research underlines that the transition into union membership is often the consequence of labor market arrangements that are independent of an individual's will (Ahlquist and Levi 2013; Kerrissey and Schofer 2013; Kim and Margalit 2017). In many cases, union membership 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 nature 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 socialization phase that makes individuals who have political preferences congruent with those of unions more likely to join and that 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.

With a focus on partisan preferences, two main aspects are relevant for our purposes that distinguish the countries we consider. While the UK and the US are essentially characterized by binary partisan systems implying the choice between only two major parties, Germany and Switzerland represent multiparty configurations in which a voter has a relatively large array of political forces to choose from (Budd and Lamare 2021). This suggests that preference switches toward and away from the main left-wing party are easier to observe in the UK and the US, because almost all voters adhere to only two main parties. By contrast, voters in Germany and Switzerland have many more options at their disposal, making it generally more common for voters to switch their preference away from a given party to another party.

Despite the binary system, the UK has seen the rise of some populist parties – the UK Independence Party (UKIP) in particular – as has Germany with Alternative for Germany (AfD) and Switzerland with the Swiss People's Party (SPP). While UKIP and the AfD attract only marginal proportions of voters (Oesch and Rennwald 2018), in recent decades the SPP has become the party with the largest share of voters in Switzerland (Kriesi and Pappas 2016).

Last, although unions have a “natural” affinity to social democratic parties, the form and strength of this link has historically varied across countries. The Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Swiss Socialist Party were created by labor movements, while the Trades Union Congress was founded by the Labour Party (Ebbinghaus and Visser 2000). This explains why social democratic parties and unions in Europe have been interlinked since their origins. While the neoliberal turn best exemplified by the Thatcher and Reagan era has made such an affinity even more obvious from the unions’ point of view, a more ambivalent, “Third Way” position embraced by political leaders in Europe toward trade unions since the nineties challenges their parties’ institutional links to unions (Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick 2010).

3 Longitudinal leverage: Data and methodology

Nationally representative panel survey data

The analyses we present below were made possible by four national representative panel surveys: the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP), the Swiss Household Panel (SHP), the British Household Panel Survey/UK Household Longitudinal Study (BHPS/UKHLS),¹ and the three panel datasets of the General Social Survey (GSS).² 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 (nonmember or member) as the main independent variable for all countries. Regarding the dependent variables, for the three European countries we constructed dichotomous variables operationalizing the support for the main left-wing, right-wing, and populist parties. In the absence of similar binary indicators for the US, we rely on two variables measuring on seven-point modality scales the degree of identification with Republicans vs. Democrats and attachment to a conservative vs. liberal ideology. Table 1 shows the exact wording of the survey questions and details of the survey years.

We also consider a set of standard control variables: gender, age class, education level, citizenship/race (depending on the information available in each survey), region, marital status, and a set of time dummy variables intended to capture the most relevant society-wide trends. 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 Appendix A, Tables A1–4.

-
- 1 The UKHLS study is an extension of the original BHPS survey, which it replaced in 2008. Since the new data are based on a much larger sample and we do not want periods of time with strong disproportions in terms of sample size, we decided to focus only on those individuals taking part in the UKHLS that had also participated in the BHPS survey.
 - 2 The panel data version of the GSS is composed of three three-wave independent panel surveys conducted every two years and starting in 2006, 2008, and 2010.

Table 1 Survey variables and questions

Country	Description	Exact phrasing	Answer modalities (recoded)	Waves
Germany	Union membership status	Are you a member of one of the following organizations or unions? Trade union?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Non-member (0) Member (1) 	1985, 1989, 1993, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015
Germany	Anything else vs. Social Democratic Party (SPD) / Anything else vs. Christian Democratic Union (CDU) / Anything else vs. Alternative for Germany (AfD)	Many people in Germany lean toward one party in the long term, even if they occasionally vote for another party. Do you lean toward a particular party? Toward which party do you lean?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anything else (0) SPD (1) Anything else (0) CDU (1) Anything else (0) AfD (1) 	1984–2018
Switzerland	Union membership status	I will now read out a list of associations and organizations. Could you tell me for each of them whether you are an active member, a passive member, or not a member? Syndicate, employees association	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Non-member (0) Member (passive or active) (1) 	1999–2009, 2011, 2014, 2017
Switzerland	Anything else vs. Socialist Party (SP) / Anything else vs. Swiss People's Party (SPP)	If there was an election for the National Council tomorrow, for which party would you vote?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anything else (0) SP (1) Anything else (0) SPP (1) 	1999–2017
United Kingdom	Union membership status	Are you currently a member of/active in: trade unions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Non-member (0) Member (only member, member and active, or only active) (1) 	1991–1995, 1997, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2011, 2014, 2017
United Kingdom	Anything else vs. Labour Party / Anything else vs. Conservative Party / Anything else vs. UK Independence Party (UKIP)	Generally speaking do you think of yourself as a supporter of any one political party? [If the answer is no] Do you think of yourself as a little closer to one political party than to the others? [If the answer is again no] If there were to be a General Election tomorrow, which political party do you think you would be most likely to support? Which one?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anything else (0) Labour Party (1) Anything else (0) Conservative Party (1) Anything else (0) UKIP (1) 	1991–2017
United States	Union membership status	Do you belong to a labor union?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Non-member (0) Member (1) 	2006, 2008, 2010 2008, 2010, 2012 2010, 2012, 2014
United States	Republican vs. Democrat	Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, Democrat, Independent, or what?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong Republican (0) Not very strong Republican (0.17) Independent, close to Republican (0.33) Independent (neither, no response) (0.5) Independent, close to Democrat (0.67) Not very strong Democrat (0.83) Strong Democrat (1) 	2006, 2008, 2010 2008, 2010, 2012 2010, 2012, 2014
United States	Conservative vs. liberal	We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. I'm going to show you a seven-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal – point 1 – to extremely conservative – point 7. Where would you place yourself on this scale?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extremely conservative (0) Conservative (0.17) Slightly conservative (0.33) Moderate (0.5) Slightly liberal (0.67) Liberal (0.83) Extremely liberal (1) 	2006, 2008, 2010 2008, 2010, 2012 2010, 2012, 2014

Observable vs. unobservable heterogeneity: Model specification

We exploit panel data both to provide a better estimation of the causal effect 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:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta M_{it} + C'_{it}\gamma + v_i + \mu_{it}, \text{ for } i = 1, 2, \dots, N \text{ and } t = 1, 2, \dots, T \quad (1)$$

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 with control variables and γ are the coefficients associated with them; v_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.³

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. This is what we do in the second model we consider by including the set of observed controls described in the previous subsection. Since we expect that the reasons why prospective members join 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.

3 In examining the relationship between union membership and wage premium, previous research that focused only on within-individual variation has mentioned an additional problem of measurement error in the independent variable (Card 1996). Because we consider only attitudinal dimensions as dependent variables, this problem does not apply to the research question examined in this paper. If some individuals are not formally members but have strong ties to unions such that they consider themselves to be members, it makes sense to consider them as members because they are obviously exposed to union dynamics and therefore may experience changes in their attitudes. Conversely, a dues-paying member who does not consider themselves a member is obviously someone who is not affected by union dynamics. In other words, for us to consider the existence of attitudinal effects of union membership, the minimal attitudinal effect we would expect is that an individual is willing to identify as a union member. The problem would be quite different if we were to consider as dependent variables objective outcomes associated with formal union membership, rather than subjective awareness of union membership, such as the wage premium.

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 by using the class schema developed by Oesch (2006a, 2006b). This classification is well-suited to our purposes as it characterizes the working class as a social stratum differentiated from the others on the basis of its distinct economic and political interests (Oesch and Rennwald 2018). In addition, recent studies reveal that the political effects of US unions are heterogeneous across economic sectors (Kim and Margalit 2017; Ahlquist and Levi 2013). Therefore, for the US, we also consider a model in which union membership status interacts with a binary variable opposing sectors exposed to international and immigrant competition (primary sector, secondary sector, and unskilled services) to other sectors.

Although eight out of the ten 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). Despite the usual shortcomings attributed to the LPM, it can be shown to still provide the best linear approximation of the underlying conditional expectation function of a model, even when the underlying functional form is not linear (Angrist and Pischke 2009). In other words, if one is interested only in the estimation of average treatment effects, as we are, the LPM provides a consistent estimation strategy for the parameters of interest as long as the independent variables are not endogenous. In addition, unlike those of nonlinear models, OLS estimates are not dependent on the amount of unexplained variance in a model. As a consequence, it is not possible to compare estimates of nonlinear models obtained from different subpopulations (as we implicitly do when examining interactions by social class and economic sector) and such estimates cannot be interpreted as average marginal effects without additional transformations (Mood 2010). The latter issue is crucial in a panel data setting. In fact, it can be shown that the only nonlinear model to allow controlling for unobserved heterogeneity, the conditional logistic regression, provides estimates that cannot be converted into average treatment effects (Wooldridge 2010, 619–22).

As an FE estimation relies only on variation within individuals, it can suffer from statistical power issues. In addition, we re-estimate this model by social class and by economic sector and also want to compare the results from four independent datasets providing varying levels of statistical power. For these reasons, we do not focus on a strict statistical significance threshold when commenting on our results. Instead, we provide exact p-values for all estimates that do not clear the 5 percent threshold. This strategy allows us to compare estimates with similar magnitudes but with varying statistical significance related to varying levels of statistical power between datasets and subsamples. The suitability of this approach is confirmed by the consistent empirical patterns we detect in the four countries examined.

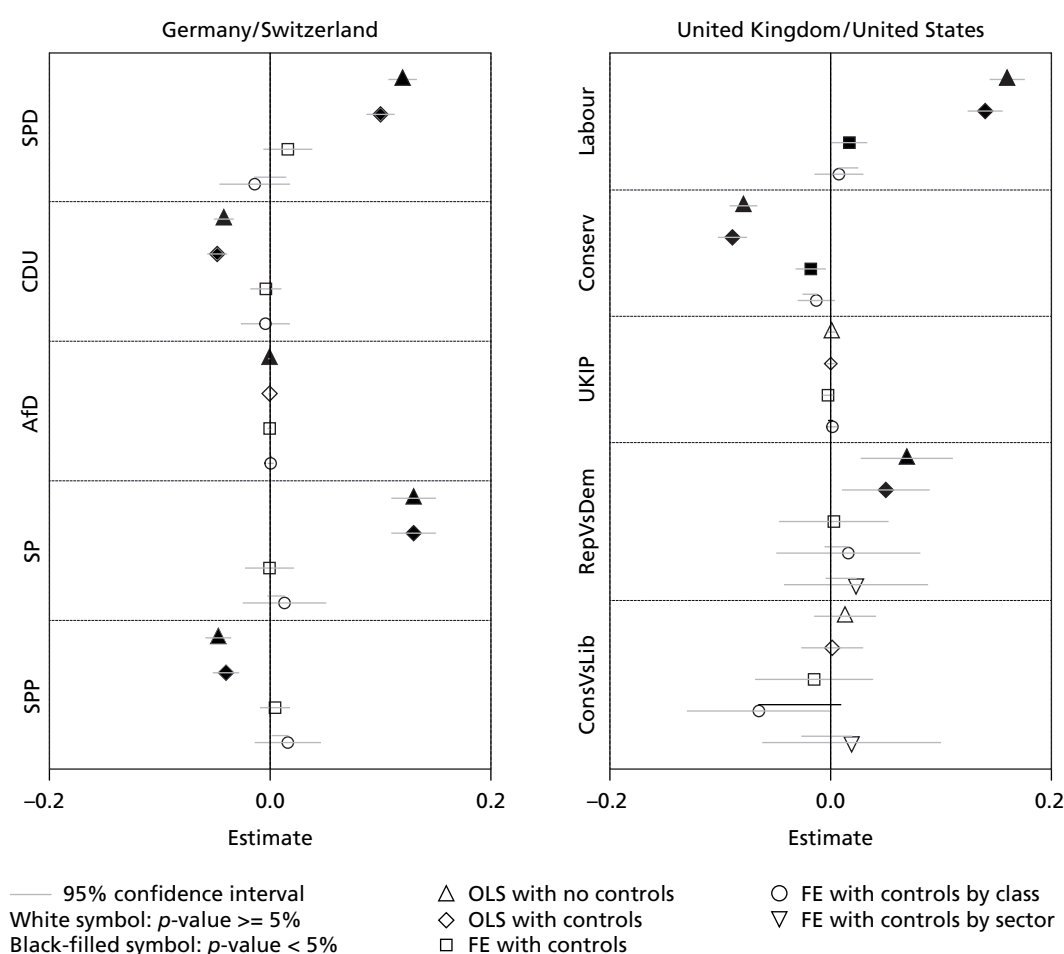
Preexisting convictions: Newcomers' and members' average preferences

Besides giving higher 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 approach we adopt in this paper 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. The proximity of this year to the first observed membership year depends on the data granularity of each dataset. With SHP data, this is almost always the year before joining, two years before joining with BHPS/UKHLS and GSS data, and four or five years before joining with SOEP data (the union membership question is only asked only every four or five years in that particular survey). 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 the average wage earner.

4 Linking average treatment effects to attitudinal averages: Empirical findings

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 (Appendix B) and the numeric values associated with the averages we comment on (Appendix C) 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 percent threshold. In Figure 1, we plot the estimates of the average treatment effect of union membership on every dependent variable we consider for each country. 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 and by economic sector (US only). A 95 percent confidence interval accompanies each estimate, and the filling gives the level of statistical significance. In order to make them comparable with those of all other binary variables, the two dependent variables from the GSS data have been rescaled to a [0,1] interval. As far as the interaction terms go, the estimates represent the baseline effect for the working-class/exposed sector, while the deviations from it in the remaining social classes/sectors are given by lines departing from the upper edge of the estimates' symbol. In Figure 2, we plotted the three averages we described in the subsection on

Figure 1 Average treatment effects

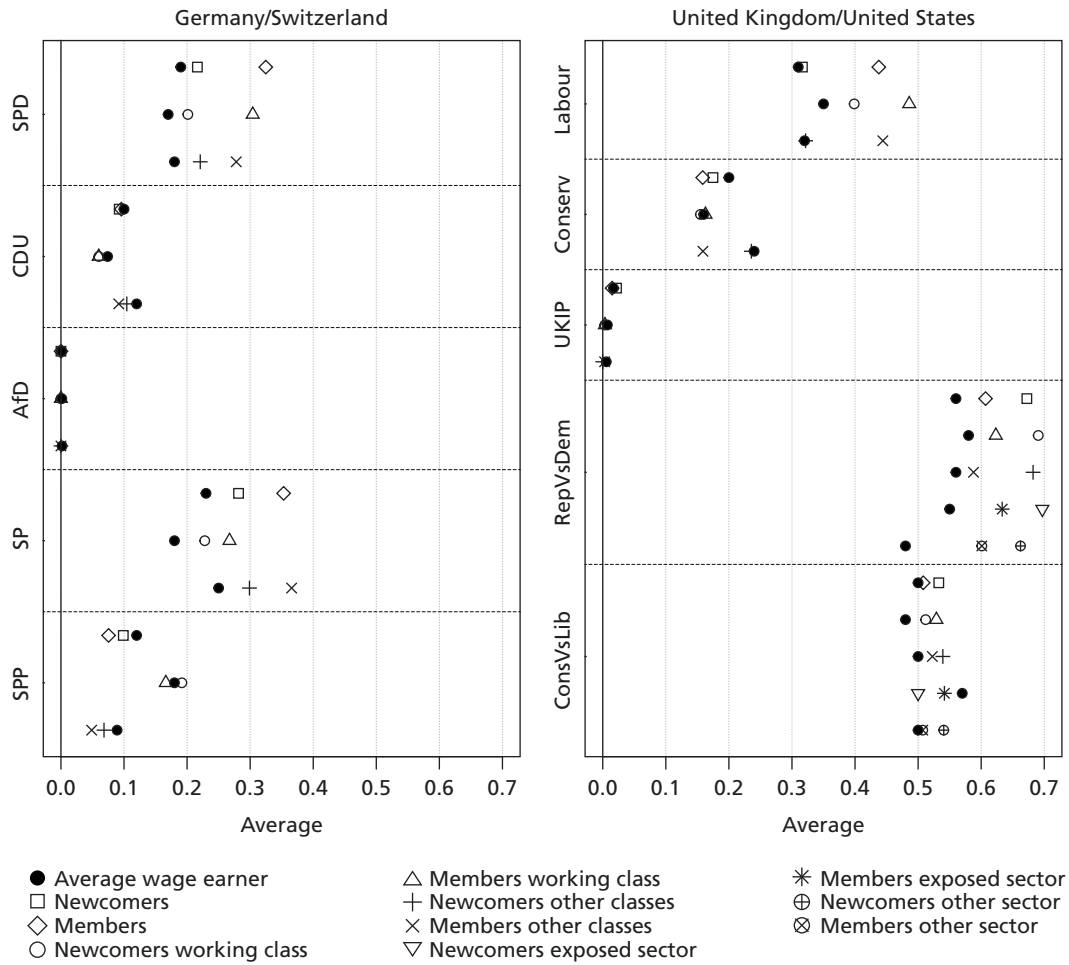


preexisting convictions for each dependent variable in the main sample, by social class and by economic sector (US only).⁴

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 nonmembers given in the first model (OLS without controls) has a relatively large magnitude and is highly significant (0.12, $p < 0.001$). The differential decreases slightly when observed control variables are added in the second model (OLS with controls) but still remains clearly significant (0.10, $p < 0.001$). The decrease is much more important when we switch to the third model (FE with controls), with a significance level slightly above 10 percent (0.016, $p = 0.12$). This pattern, with a low reduction in terms of magnitude and significance when observed control variables

⁴ The averages related to social class/economic sector include only those individuals who, after joining a union, remain in the same social class/economic sector they belonged to before.

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



are added, and a stronger contraction in terms of magnitude and significance when the effect of all unobserved heterogeneity between members and nonmembers is partialled out, appears in all outcome variables.

The pattern is most obvious when focusing on the preferences for left-wing parties, since these are supported by most prospective joiners, followed by the main right-wing parties, and finally by populist parties such as the AfD and UKIP because of the low proportion of voters they attract in the general population. It is also interesting to note that the importance of both observed and unobserved heterogeneity is less apparent in the variables for the US compared to other countries.

Because the FE estimates are those 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 listed in Table 2.

Table 2 Fixed-effects estimates

Country / Dependent variable	Germany	Switzerland	United Kingdom	United States
Main left-wing party	Anything else vs. SPD Main: 0.016, $p=0.12$ Working class: -0.014, $p=0.41$ vs. 0.028, $p=0.13$	Anything else vs. SP Main: -0.00061, $p=0.95$ Working class: 0.013, $p=0.49$ vs. -0.015, $p=0.43$	Anything else vs. Labour Party Main: 0.017, $p<0.05$ Working class: 0.075, $p=0.49$ vs. 0.017, $p=0.14$	Republican vs. Democrat Main: 0.0029, $p=0.91$ Working class: 0.016, $p=0.63$ vs. -0.021, $p=0.58$ Exposed sector: 0.023, $p=0.49$ vs. -0.027, $p=0.45$
Main right-wing party	Anything else vs. CDU Main: -0.0039, $p=0.57$ Working class: -0.0043, $p=0.68$ vs. 0.00015, $p=0.99$	Anything else vs. SPP Main: 0.0044, $p=0.50$ Working class: 0.016, $p=0.27$ vs. -0.014, $p=0.36$	Anything else vs. Conservative Party Main: -0.018, $p<0.01$ Working class: -0.013, $p=0.12$ vs. -0.012, $p=0.23$	Conservative vs. liberal Main: -0.015, $p=0.57$ Working class: -0.065, $p=0.052$ vs. 0.074, $p<0.05$ Exposed sector: 0.019, $p=0.65$ vs. -0.045, $p=0.32$
Main populist party	Anything else vs. AfD Main: -0.00047, $p=0.46$ Working class: 0.00042, $p=0.71$ vs. -0.0033, $p<0.05$	Same as above	Anything else vs. UKIP Main: -0.0024, $p=0.27$ Working class: 0.0016, $p=0.37$ vs. -0.0034, $p=0.085$	Does not apply

To return to the impact of union membership on an SPD preference in Germany, the FE model provides a relatively small estimate, which is however just above the 10 percent significance level (0.016, $p=0.12$). The interaction effect by social class reveals that such an influence is not visible among working-class members (-0.014, $p=0.41$) and is more pronounced among joiners from other social strata (0.028, $p=0.13$). The p -value is only slightly above 10 percent despite the relatively small number of observations it relies on. 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 the average wage earner to support the SPD even before joining a union, newcomers from the working class have the lowest proportion of SPD supporters (20 percent), followed by the main sample (22 percent) and by other social strata (22 percent). Once they have joined, all three categories of newcomers interact with a pool of members that 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) that are more likely to support this type of party to begin with.

Focusing on the effect on the likelihood of supporting the CDU shows that the FE estimate is negative but far from significant (-0.0039, $p=0.57$). 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 the average wage earner to support the CDU, even before joining a union. Their propensity to support the CDU is very similar to that of the members they interact with in the unions, which is consistent with the absence of a significant attitudinal change after joining.

If we turn our attention to the link between union membership and attachment to the AfD, the FE estimate is very small and clearly not significant (-0.00047 , $p=0.46$). The same holds for working-class members (0.00042 , $p=0.71$), while a significantly more important preventive effect against an AfD preference appears among other social classes (-0.0033 , $p<0.05$). The estimate is very small (because of the low number of individuals concerned who have an AfD preference) but still significant, signaling 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 C1 is that the average wage earner is more likely to support the AfD compared to newcomers and union members, 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 of 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.

For Switzerland, the impact on the propensity to vote for the SP is clearly insignificant in the main sample (-0.00061 , $p=0.95$) and shows no significant heterogeneity between social classes. Figure 2 confirms a pattern similar to that related to support for the SPD in Germany. The likelihood of voting for the SP in Switzerland is lowest among average wage earners, followed by newcomers before joining a union, and by members in all three of the categories we consider. It is again apparent that the working class (wage earners, newcomers, or members) are the least likely to vote for the SP. However, a comparison with SPD averages shows that the proportion of newcomers supporting the SP is much closer to that of long-term members than is the case in Germany for the SPD. Therefore, the stronger effect observable in Germany may be explained by the larger proportion of newcomers that have the opportunity to switch to an SPD preference. In Switzerland, a more substantial proportion of newcomers are already SP voters before joining a union.

Looking at the impact on the likelihood of supporting the SPP, there is again no effect in the main sample (0.0044 , $p=0.50$). A clearly bigger positive effect appears among working-class members (0.016 , $p=0.27$). The averages in Figure 2 show that wage earners, newcomers before joining, and members exhibit very similar proportions of SPP voters. The distinctive trait of the working class is that such proportions are clearly higher than in other social strata. Newcomers from the working class are already more likely to vote for the SPP before joining a union, and this propensity increases even more when they enter an environment of members who are more likely than in other social classes to share this partisan preference.

Focusing on the UK,⁵ we detect a positive and significant influence of union membership on the likelihood of supporting the Labour Party (0.017 , $p<0.05$) in the main

5 Similar analyses based only on members of workplace unions show less obvious effects. This signals that those wage earners who become affiliated even when a union is not available at their workplace are probably more active and more prone than the average to experience attitudinal changes.

sample. This effect is more pronounced outside of the working class (deviation from working-class estimate: 0.017, $p=0.14$), although not significantly, in part because of low statistical power. As is also the case for the main left-wing parties in Germany and in Switzerland, 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 the average wage earner to support the Labour Party.⁶ 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.

UK unions are also effective in 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 , $p=0.12$), but it is more pronounced within other social strata (-0.012 , $p=0.23$). 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 of the working class, newcomers before joining have a clearly higher likelihood of supporting the Conservatives compared to the members they interact with once inside unions.

An affinity with UKIP is not affected by union membership in the main sample (-0.0024 , $p=0.27$). A positive effect is revealed among working-class members (0.0016 , $p=0.37$) and is less important for other social strata (-0.0034 , $p=0.085$). In an attempt to make sense of this impact among the working class, the averages in Table C3 reveal that newcomers from this class have a similar likelihood of supporting UKIP (0.33 percent) to members (0.35 percent). The proportion of newcomers who favor this party increases inside unions, with additional newcomers to those who already supported the party before joining also becoming UKIP supporters.

Looking at the US, we see no significant influence of unions when it comes to the preference for Republicans or Democrats (0.0029 , $p=0.91$). No relevant heterogeneity is noticeable between social classes. The exposed sector exhibits a left-wing shift (0.023 , $p=0.49$) that is absent elsewhere (-0.027 , $p=0.45$), even though the statistical significance of this differential is hindered by the low statistical power of the GSS data. Figure 2 shows once again that average wage earners are less left-wing oriented than individuals who are about to join unions, and than union members. However, the peculiarity is that American newcomers are more left-wing oriented than members in all five categories we consider (main sample, working class, other social strata, exposed sector, other sectors). This may explain the absence of an additional effect after joining.

6 However, additional analyses show that union newcomers are clearly more likely to support the Labour Party than are newcomers to any of the numerous other secondary associations included in the BHPS/UKHLS data.

While no significant effect is apparent in the main sample (-0.015 , $p=0.57$), a pronounced conservative shift is observable among working-class joiners (-0.065 , $p=0.052$), with a significant deviation with respect to other social strata (0.074 , $p<0.05$). Newcomers in the exposed sector once again experience a stronger left-wing shift (0.019 , $p=0.65$) than other sectors (-0.045 , $p=0.32$), even though statistical power issues limit the significance of this differential here too. The averages in Figure 2 reveal similar proportions between wage earners, newcomers, and members in all five categories we consider. The conservative shift among working-class joiners can only be linked to a slightly stronger conservative position among them (0.51) compared to the main sample (0.53) and other social strata (0.54).

5 Diverging predetermined fates: Discussion

The first implication of the empirical findings described above is a methodological word of caution regarding the use of 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 labor 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 nonmembers, we were able to show that the individual traits carrying the biggest weight 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 the average wage earner to support mainstream left-wing parties. As the act of joining is to a large extent determined by an individual decision and unions are seen as environments close to pro-labor 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 feel close to populist parties. Self-selection is less manifest in our analyses because of the low proportion of joiners that support such parties, but it is nevertheless a consistent empirical pattern.

Looking at the importance of self-selection across countries, we were led by the existing literature to expect union membership to be a less voluntary act in the US compared to European industrial relations systems. While we confirm that the voluntary character of union membership in Europe is indeed characterized by strong selection effects, we have mixed evidence for the US when looking at our two dependent variables. Self-selection plays an important role in the Republican vs. Democrat identification, although it is less strong than that found for the main left-wing parties in European countries and is only related to unobservable traits. The conservative vs. liberal dichotomy is not fundamentally affected by selection effects. Therefore, we find partial confirmation for the presence of a less voluntary process of union membership in the US, although some of the differences from European countries may also be explained by the use of outcome variables that are not perfectly comparable. In addition, although based only on two multiparty systems (Germany and Switzerland) and two binary party systems (UK and US), our analyses are in line with the hypothesis that it is easier for unions to have more significant left-wing effects when there is only one main left-wing party rather than many partisan alternatives that disperse potential union effects across different available partisan preferences (Budd and Lamare 2021).

Despite this cautionary tale related to self-selection, unions do indeed have relevant effects on partisan preferences. The magnitude of the average treatment effects we considered statistically meaningful (even though not always formally significant) ranges between 1.5 and 3 percent for the main left- and right-wing parties, is smaller for populist parties attracting only a residual part of the population, and reaches higher levels only for the nonbinary variables considered for the US. Despite their increased volatility (Drummond 2006; Gomez 2018), partisan preferences still represent highly symbolic dimensions (Sears et al. 1980), crystallized during the pre-adult stage (King and Merelman 1986) and therefore inertial to change (Hooghe and Wilkenfeld 2008; Sears and Funk 1999). It is hence not surprising that the effects we detect are not particularly large. Despite their relatively low magnitude, the most noticeable aspect of such effects is the presence of strongly consistent patterns across the four countries we examined.

Our empirical findings confirm that unions still have a political influence on the average newcomer's support for the main left-wing parties. Although not always reaching the usual statistical thresholds, union membership in Germany increases the likelihood of supporting the SPD in the main sample and even more so outside of the working class. Similar but stronger effects appear in the UK when it comes to the preference for the Labour Party. The effects in both countries are related to the attraction into unions of individuals with a higher-than-average propensity to vote for left-wing parties and who, once inside, meet workers who are even more left-wing oriented. 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 capitalize on preexisting left-wing

inclinations that the additional left-wing shift can take place through a value congruence mechanism fostered by interactions with long-term members.⁷

Based on a comparison with a multiparty system like Germany, the absence of a similar effect in Switzerland is explained by Swiss newcomers exhibiting a stronger propensity (28 percent) to favor the SP than that seen for the SPD (22 percent) in Germany. Although union members are even more likely than in Germany to support the main social democratic party (35 percent vs. 33 percent), the differential with newcomers (7 percent) is lower than the differential we detect in Germany (11 percent) when comparing newcomers and members. In other words, the leeway newcomers in Switzerland have in becoming closer to members in terms of their SP preference is narrower than what we observe in Germany for the SPD. A very strong selection effect explains the absence of an impact in Switzerland.

Regarding the US, although no meaningful empirical pattern appears in the main sample, we find that the exposed sector exhibits a left-wing shift that is absent elsewhere in both outcome variables we consider. The magnitudes of such effects (0.023 for Republican vs. Democrat; 0.019 for conservative vs. liberal) are comparable with the meaningful effects we detect in other datasets, but with a lower statistical significance, probably because of the low statistical power offered by GSS data. Nevertheless, these results are in line with the conclusions of recent literature on the subject (Kim and Margalit 2017; Ahlquist and Levi 2013).

In addition to the positive impact on the support for social democratic parties, unions' left-wing influence manifests itself through a negative effect on right-wing preferences in the UK regarding support for the Conservative Party. Such right-wing dissuasion is not visible when looking at the CDU and at the three populist parties (AfD, SPP, UKIP) we considered. Because of the radical distance between such parties 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, political avoidance being the most likely option 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 detecting significant effects is hindered by statistical power issues.

While the left-wing influence of unions on the average wage earner is clearly visible, the opposite pattern is observable among working-class joiners. Aside from three variables (support for the CDU in Germany, voting for the SP in Switzerland, Republican vs.

7 An alternative, more specific mechanism that could also explain these partisan shifts relates to the persuasiveness of union leaders (e.g., Lamare 2016). While this could to some extent explain the small left-wing effects we observe, it does not explain the right-wing shift we observe among working-class members. Moreover, our empirical material does not allow us to distinguish between the preferences of members and union leaders, hence making the more general value congruence process we describe the only empirically supported mechanism.

Democrat orientation in the US) where newcomers from the working class are similar to individuals who are already members, seven out of the ten dependent variables we focus on are associated with union effects in which the working class either follows a right-wing shift (negative effect on an SPD preference in Germany, positive effect on an SPP vote in Switzerland, positive effect on support for the UKIP in the UK, a conservative shift in the US), or a less pronounced left-wing change when compared to other social strata (lower preventive impact on support for the AfD in Germany, lower positive/negative effect on a Labour/Conservative Party preference in the UK). Aside from the latter, which appears to be explained by working-class newcomers already being very similar to the members they will interact with compared to other social strata, all other effects can be traced back to individuals from the working class 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 toward right-wing and populist political forces already exists before they join a union. Once inside, additional working-class individuals experience right-wing shifts. This can be seen as a counter-test that confirms the validity of the value congruence mechanism. It implies that individuals who do not fit the value congruence model, that is, those with attitudes that either do not match or do not fully match those of the majority of individuals with whom they interact in a union, should not become attitudinally closer to left-wing members. Value congruence does not indicate whether no effect or an opposite effect should be expected, but the empirical results confirm the latter in this case for working-class members.

This empirical pattern shows that there is an affinity between right-wing parties and the working class that precedes the act of joining a union and is independent of union membership. Unions are not able to stop it, as it happens for other social strata, and this affinity becomes even more pronounced after working-class newcomers have joined the organization. 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. 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), union membership may further increase those individuals' attraction to populist parties. In addition, if the cultural shift invoked to make sense of the rise of populist parties is indeed a relevant normative dimension, working-class joiners may be highly inertial 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 vote for populist parties. These hypotheses need to be further investigated, but it appears that working-class individuals joining unions have clearly defined political views that are not easily modified by the general left-wing sway unions have over other social strata.

If we reconsider the low magnitude of the attitudinal effects we detected, there are several aspects that allow us to nuance the meaning of the relatively small size of the estimates we analyzed. Rather than a switch event, recent research shows that union membership is better conceptualized 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 is essentially voluntary. Even though they are not part of the union membership phase at the center of our paper, the attitudinal changes that precede union membership and that 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 a lot of joiners share unions' political views even before becoming members. In addition, unions may require some time to produce sizable effects on inertial political convictions such as partisan preferences. Indeed, many of the individuals that heavily influence our average treatment effects are members for one or two years and not involved in unions long enough for their intimate political ideas to be remolded. Furthermore, as we already mentioned, we mixed together passive and active members in order to provide comparable analyses across countries. Active members in Switzerland and the UK (the countries for which we can distinguish between passive and active members) experience slightly stronger effects than the members we examined in the paper.

6 Micro-level realizations of macro-level trends: Concluding remarks

In attempting to reconcile these micro-level results with the macro-level patterns described in the introduction, we consider both the magnitude, direction, and heterogeneity of the effects we detected. Apart from the methodological issues discussed above, the small size of the effects we identified is, on the one hand, consistent with a general liberalization trend (Baccaro and Howell 2017) that weakened the ability of unions 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. On the other, it is also consistent with the marginalization of unions in a political arena (Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick 2010) that is no longer characterized by the presence of social democratic forces with which they are strongly allied. Unions' push toward 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). Nevertheless, the direction of these small effects – the average member still being led by unions to become more likely to feel close to left-wing parties and less likely to favor right-wing political forces – shows that social democracy is still the main haven for union hopes because some intrinsic affinities have not yet been fully broken.

However, the heterogeneity of this influence according to social class shows that these intrinsic affinities are no longer seen as such by a considerable part of the working class. The fact that working-class members exhibit above-average right-wing tendencies before joining a union and that these inclinations become even stronger after joining is consistent with both dualization and skill-biased patterns of liberalization. A dualization 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. Working-class workers are consistently described as the outsiders who are left behind in this process. This seems to be particularly the case in liberal market economies such as the UK and the US, where market coordination mechanisms do not allow unions much room to maneuver, hence prioritizing the interests of privileged insiders (Rueda 2008). While dualization seems to be a general empirical pattern in the Western world, recent research (Diessner, Durazzi, and Hope 2022) nuances this view for Germany. In describing the process that led Germany to transition to the knowledge economy, Diessner, Durazzi, and Hope show that liberalization was accompanied by technological change. The creation of privileged groups of highly skilled workers across sectors and the weakening of traditional complementarities between specific skills within sectors were mainly driven by employers, who brought about a skill-biased liberalization that shifted the burden of flexible labor arrangements to the least skilled segments of the labor market. Despite a relatively centralized and coordinated collective bargaining system, German unions resisted this development in many cases but were ultimately forced to passively accept the creation of a marginalized category of workers in which the working class is grossly overrepresented. Regardless of the active or passive role that unions have played in this process, however, the effects on the party preferences of outsiders appear to be very similar.

Future research should expand this analysis by focusing in more detail on the internal mechanisms that explain such empirical patterns. In this paper, we have mainly focused on the distribution of attitudes between newcomers and members to explain attitudinal effects because of the leverage provided by a longitudinal approach. A full understanding of what lies behind general value congruence mechanisms should be coupled with an analysis of the types of interactions and union activities that are most conducive to political effects. Such information is not available in the panel surveys we relied on. It may also be interesting to reproduce similar analyses on other voluntary associations and 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 populist 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 was once naturally allied to. Whether unions and social democratic parties will be able at some point to regain the loyalty of this social stratum, or whether different social strata will follow increasingly diverging political preferences, is an open question.

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