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## Article

# Varieties of trade union protest

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## Abstract

The article examines varieties of trade union protest across industrial relations regimes, using protest event data for 27 European countries between 2000 and 2021. We present a large-n analysis of how the level and ‘movement character’ of union protest covaries with the strength and institutional settings of union movements across regimes. We show that unions remain important protest actors and that union protest in the public sphere notably outweighs workplace-related strikes. Furthermore, we find an inverse relationship between union institutionalization and the ‘movement character’ of union protest: While strong union movements in highly institutionalized regimes display a strike-heavy repertoire, weaker union movements in contexts of low institutionalization rely heavily on protest actions beyond the workplace strike. With these findings, we provide a novel empirical assessment of what unions do in the protest arena and how institutional settings can be conducive to strike-heavy versus protest-heavy union tactics.

**Key words:** trade unions, social movements, industrial relations, strikes, civil society, Europe

## 1. Introduction

Trade unions have largely departed from their social movement origins and have become insiders throughout the 20th century: They have been recognized as negotiating partners by both government and business, granted rights and privileges in wage bargaining and gained influence in social policymaking (Streeck and Hassel, 2003; Hyman, 2015). However, this development has not progressed to the same extent across European democracies. Hyman (2001, p. 2) identifies three trade union ideologies ranging between the poles of market, class and society: (a) ‘Business unionism’, where unions act primarily as interest groups and are mainly concerned with labour market issues and collective bargaining; (b) unions as ‘schools of war’ and agents of class conflict, where protest via extra-institutional channels is the primary mode of action; and lastly (c) ‘social partnership’, where unions act as economically stabilizing forces in society and advocate for social justice more generally. While none

of these ideologies exist today in their ideal-typical form, trade unions across Europe can be found on this spectrum, balancing negotiation and militancy, as well as workers' interests and broader societal issues.

This balancing act between interest group and social movement actor in trade unions' repertoires has been neglected by the social movement and industrial relations literatures. Industrial relations scholars place a strong focus on declining strike levels and largely disregard unions' protest repertoire beyond the workplace strike (Kelly, 2015a). While individual case studies have begun to examine whether other forms of union protest might be displacing workplace strikes in Sweden (Jansson and Uba, 2023) and in the UK (Gall and Kirk, 2018), Jansson and Uba (2023) note that 'the literature lacks a systematic investigation of unions' broader protest repertoire' (p. 256). The social movement literature, on the other hand, has mainly focused on union activities *beyond* the classical strike, including literature on social movement unionism as a strategy of union revitalization (Grote and Wagemann, 2018; Chesta *et al.*, 2019; Pilati and Perra, 2020, 2022; Portos and Della Porta, 2020), case studies on union movements in individual countries (Chesta *et al.*, 2019; Pilati and Perra, 2020, 2022) and in particular moments in time, such as the austerity protests in the wake of the Great Recession (Portos and Della Porta, 2020).

In this article, we want to shed a new light on unions as protest actors by uniting the industrial relations and social movement perspectives: We ask how union movements balance workplace strikes and protest beyond the workplace, and how this varies with the strength of union movements and institutional settings across industrial relations regimes. We believe that by *jointly* considering workplace strikes and protest beyond the workplace as integral parts of the union protest repertoire, we can learn under what circumstances unions primarily target employers and challenge working conditions (workplace strikes), and when they challenge the political and public realm (protest beyond the workplace). This adds a new dimension to the debate on declining strike rates by empirically contrasting strikes with all other union activities in the protest arena (e.g. Gall and Kirk, 2018; Jansson and Uba, 2023). By showing how the structural and historical setting of the industrial relations regimes affects unions' repertoires in positions of strength versus weakness, we contribute to ongoing debates on when and under what circumstances unions mobilize more generally (Korpi and Shalev, 1979; Brandl and Traxler, 2010; Baccaro *et al.*, 2003; Lindvall, 2013) and when they resort to movement tactics more specifically (Della Porta, 2006; Fairbrother, 2008).

We set out to describe (a) how often unions engage in protest activities relative to other actors in the protest arena (level of union protest), (b) to what extent unions engage in classical strikes versus union protest beyond the workplace (what we call the *movement character* of union protest) and (c) how the level and movement character of union protest vary with the strength of the union movement and their institutional settings across industrial relations regimes. We do so by drawing on a large-n dataset of protest events for 27 European countries and the years 2000–2021, coded based on English-language newswires. We make an empirical contribution by introducing a novel indicator of *unions' movement character*, which sets in relation classical strikes and other union protest beyond the workplace.

We rely on the industrial relations regimes proposed by Visser (2009) and Ebbinghaus and Visser (1997) as our main analytical lens and distinguish between corporatist, social partnership, state-centred, liberal and the heterogenous transitional regimes (from here

on: Central and Eastern European (CEE) regimes). Combining these regimes with theories on union mobilization (power-resource hypothesis and institutional-access hypothesis), we formulate expectations as to how present unions are in the protest arena (levels of union protest) and the extent to which they engage in protest *beyond* strike at the workplace (movement character of union protest) across the different regimes.

Overall, we find that unions are part of, on average, a third of all protest events across the regimes examined. Notably, for all but one industrial relations regime, workplace-related strikes make up a minority of all union mobilization in the protest arena. While we find little variation across industrial relations regimes when it comes to the relative presence of unions in the protest arena, the regimes do play a significant role in explaining the varying movement character of union protest. We find that while the most powerful unions in the corporatist regimes are least likely to resort to protest action beyond the workplace, the structurally weakest unions of the CEE regimes display the strongest movement character. By contrast, our results demonstrate a surprisingly strong convergence between the social partnership, liberal and state-centred regimes, which all display intermediate levels of movement character. We therefore present initial evidence that the movement character of union protest is inversely related to the strength of the union movement and its institutional access: in other words, stronger union movements with high institutional access rely more heavily on strikes over other forms of protest, whereas weaker union movements in contexts of low institutional access primarily mobilize outside of the workplace.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1 Trade unions as protest actors: uniting perspectives from social movement and industrial relations literature

The role of trade unions as protest actors has received little attention in both the social movement and industrial relations literature. With the emergence of new social movements and the demise of the ‘social question’, trade unions have increasingly disappeared from social movement research. Only recently, in the wake of the Great Recession, have social movement scholars rediscovered trade unions as protest actors: The role of unions in anti-austerity protests since the onset of the global financial crisis has led to a call to re-embed unions in social movement research (e.g. [Chesta et al., 2019](#); [Pilati and Perra, 2020, 2022](#); [Portos and Della Porta, 2020](#)). Overall, these case studies observe more and more labor mobilization from positions of structural weakness and with a reorientation towards movement tactics ([Portos and Della Porta, 2020](#)). [Chesta et al. \(2019\)](#) describe worker mobilization in the precarious gig economy, [Pilati and Perra \(2020\)](#) show that union mobilization was especially successful where unions maintained alliances with social movement actors, and [Pilati and Perra \(2022\)](#) point to the fragmentation of labor interests in the streets between traditional unions, non-working groups and precarious workers.

The industrial relations literature on the other hand has a narrower, almost exclusive focus on strikes and union mobilization at the workplace ([Kelly, 2015a](#); [Jansson and Uba, 2023](#)). This branch of research documents a continuous decline in strike action since the 1980s ([Piazza, 2005](#); [Gall and Allsop, 2007](#); [Kelly et al., 2013](#); [Kelly, 2015b](#)). However, over the same period, the number of general strikes directed at governments has remained stable and even increased in certain countries ([Gall and Allsop, 2007](#), pp. 62–65; [Kelly et al., 2013](#)). This has led [Kelly \(2015a,b\)](#) to suggest that ‘the collapse in strike activity [...]

may significantly understate the continuing ability of unions to mobilize members and citizens in anti-government protests and campaigns' (p. 538, also see Hamann *et al.*, 2013). There is thus reason to believe that protest in the streets beyond routine strikes remains an important—if not increasing—part of the contemporary repertoire of trade union mobilization. This so-called displacement theory has been examined in two case studies on Sweden (Jansson and Uba, 2023) and the UK (Gall and Kirk, 2018), which both find that, on the whole, the decline in strikes does not seem to be compensated by a rise in other forms of union protest (Gall and Kirk, 2018; Jansson and Uba, 2023).

In this article, we set out to present a novel perspective on trade unions as protest actors by taking a large-n comparative perspective on union protest activities and painting a differentiated picture of union protest beyond workplace strikes. In doing so, we answer the call of social movement scholars to re-embed unions in the protest arena and to examine union protest not just in moments of economic crisis (Portos and Della Porta, 2020). We also seek to extend the perspective of industrial relations scholars to the realm of union protest beyond the workplace strike (Kelly *et al.*, 2013; Jansson and Uba, 2023) and by asking how industrial relations settings affect unions' protest repertoires.

## 2.2 The movement character of union protest: balancing strikes versus other union protest

Trade unions have various channels and modes of action to choose from (Baccaro *et al.*, 2003; Silver, 2003; Pilati and Perra, 2020). From the perspective of unions as interest groups, Streeck and Hassel (2003, p. 344) attribute three main institutional channels of influence for trade unions—preferential party linkages (historically mainly with leftist parties), quasi-state institutions that concede varying levels of social policy influence to unions, and tripartite councils. In some cases, unions have even launched their own candidates in elections or mobilized in direct democratic campaigns (e.g. in Switzerland) (Ebbinghaus and Visser, 2000, p. 6).

However, when these institutional channels fail, strikes are unions' classical form of action. Unions are the only protest actors with the powerful leverage of commanding work stoppages (Ebbinghaus and Visser, 2000, p. 14). At the same time, unions' action repertoire in the extra-institutional realm goes far beyond the classical strike. Trade unions are traditionally present in the protest arena, regularly mobilizing for broader societal issues beyond just labour interests: Amongst others, unions took to the streets in the name of international peace and abortion rights, against the war in Iraq in the early 2000s, and, most recently, played an important role in the anti-austerity movements in the wake of the global financial crisis (e.g. Streeck and Hassel, 2003; Accornero and Ramos Pinto, 2015; Della Porta, 2015; Peterson *et al.*, 2015; Hunger and Lorenzini, 2020).

The literature on social movement unionism also emphasizes that unions' anti-institutional struggle includes engaging for broader societal issues and beyond one's immediate constituency (Baccaro *et al.*, 2003; Dörre, 2008; Fairbrother, 2008). Fairbrother (2008) suggests that the four distinguishing elements of social movement unionism are (a) encompassing grassroots mobilization, (b) building alliances with other societal actors, (c) embracing broader emancipatory claims and transformative societal visions and (d) sponsoring collective action *beyond strikes or mobilization at the workplace* (p. 214).

Focusing in particular on this last element of social movement unionism, we want to draw a conceptual distinction between workplace strikes on the one hand, and other forms

of union protest on the other hand. We suggest that a central dividing line between strikes and other forms of union protest lies in whether unions *primarily address employers*—in the form of workplace strikes—or whether they *also address the state and the public*, through protest action beyond the workplace on public economic, political and other societal issues. While workplace strikes are the primary action form to address grievances with employers, demonstrations and other protest forms beyond the workplace may be better suited to gain the attention of elected decision-makers and the general public, especially when demands are related to broader economic or societal issues (Brandl and Traxler, 2010; Peterson *et al.*, 2012).

We thus propose to define the extent to which unions maintain a ‘movement character’ in terms of protest forms and issues that go beyond ‘classical’ strikes at the workplace. In our analysis, we therefore distinguish between workplace strikes on the one hand versus union actions *beyond* the workplace (such as general strikes, demonstrations, blockades or symbolic protest forms) on the other hand. To what extent unions engage in strike versus other protest forms reveals whether unions primarily focus on conflicts with employers (strike-heavy) or on conflicts with government, society and the economy at large (protest-heavy). In the following, we discuss how this balance may depend on the institutional structures that unions are embedded in.

### 2.3 Theories of union mobilization: when do unions mobilize for strike and other forms of protest?

While research discussing the factors that determine the occurrence and overtime decline of workplace strikes is extensive, there is very little work when it comes to explaining other forms of union mobilization. Exceptions are for example Brandl and Traxler (2010), who have written about factors determining the occurrence of strike and lockouts as well as Lindvall (2013) and Kelly *et al.* (2013) who have examined factors determining political strike. We therefore draw on theories that explains workplace and political strike and hypothesize how they might travel to union protest more generally.

As Kelly (2015a) writes, the factors that lead to strikes can be grouped into economic, political and institutional factors. Here, we focus on institutional factors, because we are interested in cross-country patterns rather than changes over time. From an institutional perspective, how frequently unions move into the protest arena is affected by their associational power on the one hand (power-resource hypothesis) and their access to institutions on the other hand (access hypothesis) (Brandl and Traxler, 2010). Associational power in the form of union membership (union density) is thought to provide unions with the basic capacities and resources for mobilization (Shalev, 1992; Piazza, 2005; Lindvall, 2013; Kelly, 2015a; Yang and Kwon, 2019). In contrast, institutional access and corporatist institutions more generally are thought to *reduce* the likelihood for protest and increase the chances that labour conflicts are resolved by negotiation (Korpi and Shalev, 1979; Brandl and Traxler, 2010). This can materialize in terms of high bargaining levels or structures that provide unions with access to institutions or influence in the policymaking process such as tripartite councils. Limited institutional and political access should therefore make unions more likely to take it to the streets (Della Porta, 2006; Gall and Allsop, 2007).

There is mixed evidence in support of these broad mechanisms: Brandl and Traxler (2010) find evidence that union density relative to business power has a mobilizing effect. For political strikes, Kelly *et al.* (2013) find union density to be less relevant in predicting

political strikes than unions' inclusion in policymaking. Moreover, union density does not necessarily have a linear relationship with union mobilization. Rather, several studies propose and find a non-monotonic relationship: Tsebelis and Lange (1995) theoretically introduce and empirically demonstrate a curvilinear relationship between union density and strike levels. Piazza (2005) also finds a non-monotonic relationship between union density and strike levels. Lastly, Lindvall (2013) is able to extend these findings to the occurrence of political strikes. His argument for a curvilinear relationship is essentially a synthesis of the power-resource and access-hypotheses: Both in the case of very powerful unions that can gain concessions from employers or governments by the mere threat of strikes (and therefore do not need to resort to militancy), as well as in the case of weak union movements that are not in a position to mobilize because of a lack of resources and members, political or economic strikes are unlikely. As a result, union movements of medium associational power should be most likely to resort to political strikes, given that the negotiating situation is dominated by uncertainty about the other sides' bargaining power (Tsebelis and Lange, 1995; Lindvall, 2013). We would expect that the curvilinear argument should apply not only to the frequency of economic and political strikes, but also to the level of union protest overall. We would therefore expect that both very strong and very weak union movements should have the lowest presence in the protest arena, while union movements of intermediate power should mobilize most frequently.

However, would we also expect this interplay between resources and institutional access when it comes to the *movement character* of union protest? It is important to note that this indicator captures not the *level*, but the *composition* of union protest: in other words, the balance between engaging in strikes versus other forms of protest in the streets. We argue that while the level of union protest is very much related to a combination of resources and institutional access, the *composition* of union protest should not necessarily be related to union resources. It is not a question of how many protests a union can stage, but whether it focuses on a strike-heavy or a protest-heavy repertoire. Returning to the arguments about power resources and institutional access, we expect the degree of institutional access to play the central role for the composition (movement character) of union protests.

We argue that precisely because they lack access to the institutional channels necessary to address their grievances, weaker union movements may need to engage in non-strike mobilization and movement-oriented actions to expand their membership and develop cross-sectoral solidarity. By contrast, if unions are safely embedded in an industrial setting that provides them with sufficient institutional access, such as access to policymaking, high bargaining power and coverage, the incentive to resort to broad mobilization or militancy should be strongly reduced. We therefore expect to find the lowest movement character (strike-heavy repertoire) in settings in which unions are strongly institutionally embedded, while we expect a high display of movement character (protest-heavy repertoire) in settings which offer low institutional access, forcing unions to the streets instead of the negotiating table.

## 2.4 Varieties of union protest across industrial relations regimes

Now that we have discussed the institutional factors that shape union mobilization, we introduce the industrial relations regimes and formulate expectations for the level and movement character of union protest in each. We opt for a regime perspective because the industrial relations regimes bundle several variables of institutional union settings, but also

because they capture a certain historical path dependency of union movements, which we deem highly relevant for understanding unions' protest behavior. For the same reasons, the social movement literature often examines protest patterns from a regional perspective (e.g. Borbáth and Gessler, 2020; Kriesi *et al.*, 2020a).

Capturing different settings of union density, bargaining levels and institutional access, Visser (2009) based on Ebbinghaus and Visser (1997) suggests five industrial relations regimes: organized corporatism (Scandinavia/Northern Europe); social partnership regimes (Continental Europe); state-centred regimes (Southern Europe including France); liberal regimes (Anglo-Saxon countries); and the CEE regimes (Central-Eastern Europe). Combining the industrial relations typology with the power-resource and institutional-access hypotheses, we can formulate expectations as to (a) the level and (b) the movement character of union protest.

The regimes can roughly be placed on a scale ranging from high to low levels of union movement strength. While the organized corporatism of the Scandinavian countries champions the highest levels of union density, bargaining levels and institutional access to this day, the heterogeneous regimes of Central and Eastern Europe can be placed on the low end of this scale. The social partnership, state-centred and liberal regimes lie in between these two extremes, where the social partnership countries share more similarities with organized corporatism than the latter regimes.

Starting with our expectations for the *level of union protest*, we expect a curvilinear protest pattern where both very strong and very weak union movements display low levels of union protest, while union movements of intermediate strength should be most likely to engage in protest. We would therefore expect that the high levels of institutional access, higher union densities and a strong cooperative relationship with employers should encourage relative labour quiescence in the corporatist and social partnership regimes. The state-centred and liberal regimes, by contrast, are characterized by respectively lower union density (particularly in the liberal regimes) and less institutional access (such as sectoral to company-level bargaining or lower bargaining coverage), making conflictual labour relations more likely. Especially in southern Europe's state-centred regimes, trade unions have, despite low membership numbers, 'shown a tremendous capacity to mobilize people in strikes and protests well beyond the ranks of their own membership', a prime example being France, with very low union density but very high bargaining coverage (Kelly, 2015b, p. 538). Lastly, union movements in the heterogeneous regimes of Central and Eastern Europe score very low in terms of all of these indicators, with bargaining practices described as 'acquiescent' (Visser, 2009, p. 49). Given the structural weakness of unions in the CEE regimes, we therefore expect unions' presence in the CEE protest arena to be especially low.

Moving on to our expectations on the *movement character of union protest*, we expect the decision to engage in protest actions beyond the workplace to be linked mainly to a lack of institutional access, as argued in Section 2.3. Here, we would hypothesize that stronger union movements with more institutional access are less likely to resort to movement tactics than unions in weaker industrial relations settings with less institutional access. In Northern Europe, and under organized corporatism we observe the strongest institutional access of all the industrial relations regimes: In that context, unions almost fully rely on the political process to reach their ends (Streeck and Hassel, 2003, p. 345), to the extent that they are sometimes referred to as 'labour market parties' (Hyman, 2001). This level of institutional access should render movement-oriented protest forms far less necessary.



**Table 1** Expectations: level and movement character of union protest by regimes

	Organized corporatism (North)	Social partnership (West)	State-centred (South)	Liberal (Anglo-Saxon)	CEE (Central and Eastern)
Level of union protests	Low	Low	High	High	Low
Movement character of union protests	Low	Medium	Medium	Medium	High

However, with decreasing institutional access, which can manifest in terms of lower bargaining levels, the absence of tripartite councils or involvement in policymaking, we expect to see an increasing share of protest actions beyond the workplace strike. We therefore expect to see a higher movement character in the social partnership, state-centred and liberal regimes compared to organized corporatism. Lastly, institutional access is lowest in the CEE regimes, leading us to expect that they invest primarily in union protest beyond the workplace. This expectation is also in line with scholarship on unions' protest repertoire in the CEE regimes: Since the end of communist rule, unions have primarily organized against the state not against capital (Ost, 2002) and have continued to display tactics oriented towards social movement unionism (Varga, 2015; Dolenec *et al.*, 2021).

Table 1 summarizes our expectations with regard to the level and the movement character of union protest across the different regimes.

### 3. Data and methodology

We now turn to our empirical material and strategy of data analysis. One of the principal reasons why the industrial relations literature tends to focus on workplace strikes is the lack of publicly available datasets that collect data on union protest action *beyond* the strike (Kelly, 2015a). Further, official national strike statistics suffer from serious shortcomings when analysed in a comparative manner: between countries, measures of industrial action often differ in their definition and sources (Brandl and Traxler, 2010; Kelly, 2015a).

In this article, we rely on an updated version of the recently published PolDem Protest Dataset, covering a total of 30 European countries based on the coding of 10 English language newswires (Kriesi *et al.*, 2020b; Lorenzini *et al.*, 2022). Our updated version of the dataset allows us to cover the years from 2000 to 2021. The underlying method, protest event analysis (PEA), has been one of the main approaches in the study of longitudinal and cross-sectional evolution of protest (Hutter, 2014). While protest event data has its own shortcomings, it has the major advantage of allowing us to set strikes and other protest events in relation, given that they are drawn from the same data source and systematically collected in the same manner. We further expand on our decision to use PEA vis-à-vis official strike statistics in Supplementary Appendix D and present a comparison of the two data types.

In our dataset, union sponsorship of a protest event includes instances when unions (co-)organize, take part in and/or call for participation in a protest event. We adopt this broad understanding of sponsorship because, as Rucht (1998, p. 41) highlighted some time ago,

more fine-grained information on the specific role of different protest organizers are beyond the scope of a media-based PEA. To ensure that our dataset reflects the union landscapes of the respective regimes, we coded the mobilizing trade union organization for a subset of the dataset. In [Supplementary Appendix E](#), we show that our data consists of a diverse number of trade unions and includes the largest federations that are most representative of the industrial politics in each region. Therefore, we are confident that our results generalize to the level of industrial relations in each regime and are not driven by marginal unions that are barely present in terms of membership rate but disproportionately mobilize in protest.

To examine the level and the composition of union protest, we focus on 27 European countries. The three countries that are dropped include Iceland, Malta and Luxembourg. Each of them registered less than a total of 100 protest events in the PolDem dataset between 2000 and 2021, with very few union sponsored events (IS: 1/77 MT: 3/67, LU: 6/41). Any inferences drawn for these three countries on the role of unions from our data would be highly uncertain. This leaves us with a total of 25 711 protest events with an organizational sponsor, involving around 102 million participants. Of these, 6638 protest events have union sponsorship, mobilizing around 38.5 million recorded participants. The dataset includes information on the date, the size, the action form (demonstration, petition, strike, violence and blockade), the organizer (parties, unions, occupational social groups and other organizations) and the claim (private economic, public economic, culturally libertarian/conservative and political), of the protest events. Private versus public economic issues were coded separately, where the former describes conflicts with employers, and the latter captures protest events directed at economic policies such as welfare, budget policies and labour regulation. Culturally liberal protests focus on promoting human rights, women's rights and opposition to racism. Culturally conservative protests oppose progressive proposals and may include xenophobic or anti-immigration demands. Political protests specifically target the political system and its performance, such as corruption, electoral reform and democratic representation. The coding scheme is discussed in further detail by [Kriesi et al. \(2020a\)](#).

This fine-grained information on forms and issues of protest events allows us to propose an indicator measuring the movement character of union protest. To do so, we rely on a combination of action forms and issues. As previously discussed, we distinguish between workplace strikes (which we define as the combination of private economic issues together with the action form of a strike) versus other union-sponsored protest events, involving a broader range of protest forms (e.g. political/general strikes, demonstrations, blockades and violent actions) and issues (e.g. private economic, public economic, cultural or political issues). The operationalization captures the divide of union protest at the workplace versus protest in the streets, providing an empirical approximation of the movement character of union protest. As with any quantitative and comparative indicator, this one may be oversimplifying in certain respects, but we believe that describing the relative composition of unions' protest repertoire can further our understanding of the extent to which unions across different regimes maintain a movement character.

We start our analysis descriptively with the level and movement character of union protest across regimes. We then conduct a regression analysis of the two dependent variables to assess how the industrial relations regimes affect (a) the level of union protest and (b) unions' movement character. Both dependent variables are dichotomous measures, where the first indicates the presence of at least one trade union among the protest sponsors

(1 = union involvement in a protest event; 0 = all other protest events), and the second indicates the extent that unions engage in the protest arena on issues and action forms other than workplace strikes (1 = all non-standard union protest beyond the workplace; 0 = workplace strikes). We rely on a cross-classified two-level model with random intercept, where individual protest events are nested in country\*year contexts, nested in countries (for a review of this design, see [Fairbrother, 2014](#)). With these regressions, we test whether the regime typology holds when accounting for intra-regional heterogeneity and the effect of contextual factors.

We follow [Kriesi \*et al.\* \(2020a\)](#) and control for three central variables which may affect union mobilization irrespective of the industrial relations setting: namely, unemployment rates, overtime fluctuations in the ideological stance of government cabinets and the Eurozone crisis. First, unions are more likely to resort to strike in times of low rather than high unemployment ([Brandl and Traxler, 2010](#)). To account for this, we add a measure of quarterly harmonized unemployment rates, measured as a percentage of the total labour force, from the OECD, complemented with Eurostat values. Second, unions are thought to be less likely to resort to confrontative action when an ‘allied’ social democratic or other left-wing party is in power compared to a conservative government ([Korpi and Shalev, 1979](#)). Therefore, we control for the left-right orientation of government cabinets over time, measured by the mean of government parties’ left-right position, weighted by their vote share. We calculate this based on the ParlGov data ([Döring and Manow, 2022](#)). Third, the Eurozone crisis was a moment where unions took to the streets, irrespective of high unemployment levels, taking a stance against austerity policies and explicitly addressing policymakers and governments ([Accornero and Ramos Pinto, 2015](#); [Hunger and Lorenzini, 2020](#)). In our periodization of the crisis years, we follow [Kriesi \*et al.\* \(2020a, p. 78\)](#), and distinguish the pre-crisis period, from the shock period (between Bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers in September 2008, and the end of 2009), the Eurozone crisis (starting with the beginning of the troubles in Greece in February 2010, until the so-called Refugee Crisis in 2015), and the post-crisis years.

We also control for event-level variables. For the first dependent variable (level of union protest) we include controls for protest issues, protest forms and alliances with other protest actors. We do not include these variables for the second dependent variable (movement character of union protest) since the dependent variable itself already combines protest issues and forms. Lastly, we control for the number of participants. All continuous variables (participation rate, cabinet left-right position and unemployment) have been re-scaled to ease the interpretation of the effect sizes and the convergence of our multilevel models. They range between 0 and 1.

Finally, we run three robustness tests. First, to further ensure the robustness of our findings to the Eurozone crisis, we run a split-sample analysis of our regressions, for the pre-crisis and crisis years ([Supplementary Appendix B1](#)). Second, we further test the robustness of our regime argument by replicating the analyses using institutional union variables instead of the industrial relations regimes ([Supplementary Appendix Tables B2 and B3](#)). The latter provides a direct test for the access and the resource-power arguments we have previously reviewed. For this, we merged the protest event dataset with the dataset on Institutional Characteristics of Trade Unions, Wage Setting, State Intervention and Social Pacts ([Visser, 2016](#)). We rely on five indicators to characterize the institutional context in which unions protest: the bargaining level (5 points), the presence of a tripartite council

(3 points), routine involvement in policy making (3 points), the effective number of unions (continuous) and union density (continuous). We employ bargaining level and union density as indicators of union power, the effective number of unions indicates the fragmentation of the union landscape, while routine involvement and the presence of a tripartite council serve as measures of unions' access to policy making and political actors (please see [Supplementary Appendix C](#) for a variable table). While our protest event data spans the time period 2000–2021, the dataset on industrial relations variables only reaches until 2018, which is why we can only perform our robustness tests for the time period of 2000–2018. Third, we run a two-way fixed-effects model, controlling for both observed and unobserved heterogeneity across regimes and over time, with standard errors clustered by regimes and years ([Supplementary Appendix Tables B3 and B4](#)).

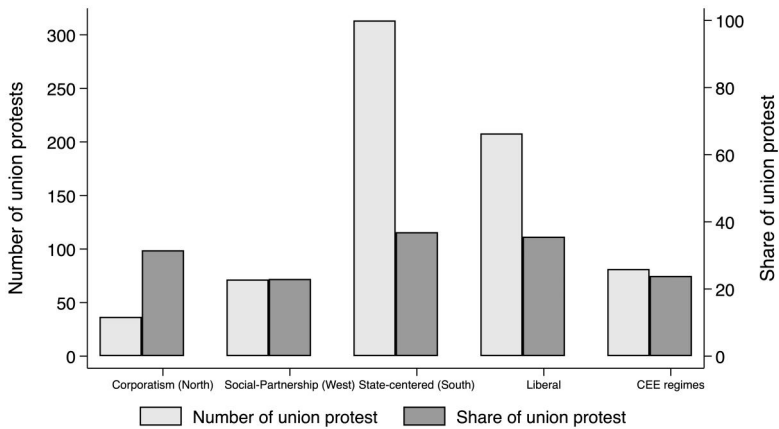
#### 4. Empirical results

Since, we are interested both in the *level* as well as in the *movement character* of union protest and how it depends on the institutional settings across industrial relations regimes, we will first examine each independently before presenting a typology of union protest that combines the two aspects.

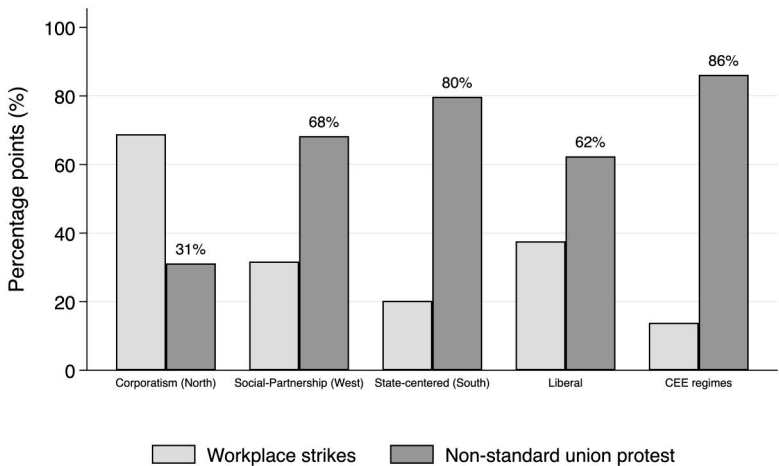
Ordered from strongest to weakest union regime, [Figure 1](#) depicts the *level* of union protest as well as the relative presence of unions in the respective protest arenas. The absolute level is the sum of union protest events between 2000 and 2021 by region, divided by the number of countries. The relative share of union protest is the percentage of union protest events compared to all protest events in each region. In line with our expectations, the absolute number of union protests roughly follows the curvilinear pattern suggested by [Lindvall \(2013\)](#): union regimes with intermediate power are most likely to be characterized by high levels of protest, while the weakest and the strongest union settings are both less prone to show high levels of union-sponsored protest mobilization. However, the share of union protest is surprisingly similar across regimes, ranging between 23% and 36%, suggesting that unions' presence in the protest arena is mostly in tune with the overall protest mobilization level in the respective regimes.

Next, we examine the extent that unions maintain a *movement character*. As stated before, we suggest an indicator juxtaposing workplace strikes with all other protest activity that trade unions undertake to describe the *movement character* of union protest. The distributions in [Figure 2](#) are partially in line with our expectations. All regimes except the corporatist regime cross the threshold of 50%: This means that in these regimes, only a minority of the union protest repertoire consists of workplace strikes; instead, unions mobilize more often through other action forms and/or issues. While the corporatist regimes fit our expectations of a very low movement character, the state-centred and CEE regimes display the strongest movement character (with a share above 80%), suggesting a strong focus on street protests over workplace strikes. As expected, the social partnership and liberal regimes occupy the middle field.

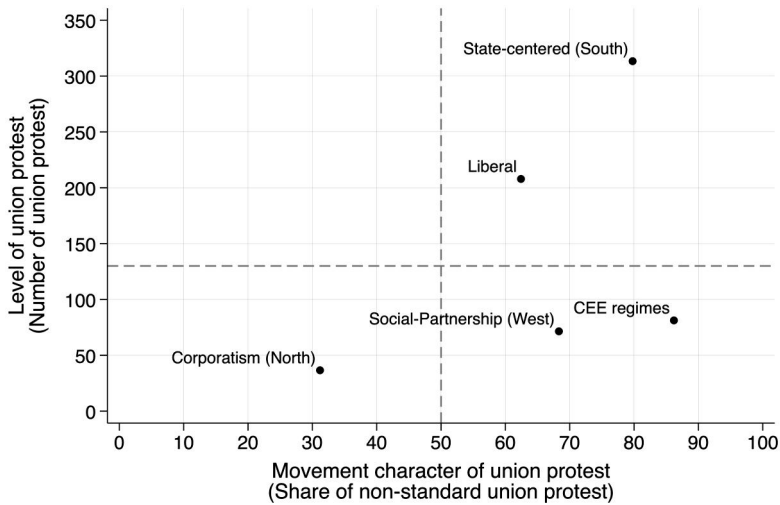
Next, we combine the two dimensions (levels and movement character) to derive a typology of union protest. Starting from the bottom-left quadrant in [Figure 3](#) and going counter-clockwise, we find that the five regimes place themselves in three quadrants: The corporatist regimes (Q1) with an environment of low union protest and low movement character; the social-partnership and CEE regimes (Q2) with low protest levels and



**Figure 1** Absolute numbers versus share of union protest by region (2000–2021).  
*Note:* Figure 1 shows the absolute number of union protest (left y-axis) next to the percentage share of union protest (right y-axis) out of the total number of protest events in each union regime. The values are calculated by averaging over all countries in each regime. We present the country-level values in [Supplementary Appendix Figure A1](#).



**Figure 2** Movement character of unions by regime.  
*Note:* Figure 2 shows the ‘movement character’ of union protest by union regime, setting two categories of union protest in relation. We distinguish between classical workplace strikes on the one hand, versus non-standard union protest (all other protest forms and issues) on the other hand. The ratio of workplace strikes versus non-standard union protest is what we refer to as the movement character of union protest. The values are calculated by averaging over all countries in each regime.



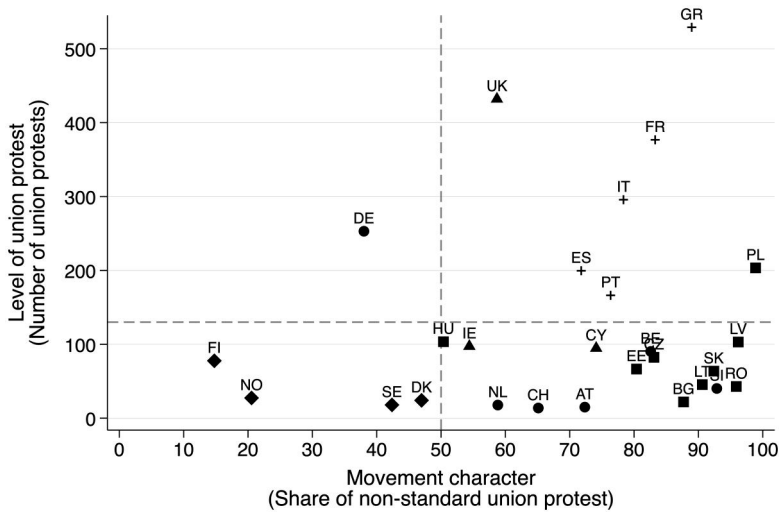
**Figure 3** Level and movement character of union protest by regime.

*Note:* [Figure 3](#) sets the absolute number of union protest (y-axis) in relation to the share of non-standard union protest (x-axis) for each regime. Numbers are calculated for an average country in each regime; The dashed y-line represents the mean level of union protest; the x-line represents the 50% threshold.

(intermediate to) strong movement character; and lastly, the state-centred and liberal regimes (Q3), demonstrating high levels of union protest combined with a strong movement character. Interestingly, the top-left corner of high union protest and low movement character (meaning a high share of workplace strikes) remains empty.

To test the robustness of our regime-level analysis, we examine the variation more closely on the country level (see [Figure 4](#)). Our observations on the country level largely support our analysis on the regional level; however, a few nuances become visible. The first notable case is Germany, the only country to enter the top-left quadrant of high protest levels combined with a weak movement character. Since Germany is generally regarded as the typical social partnership country, where one would expect relative labour peace and an intermediate movement character, the discrepancy to the rest of the social partnership regimes is notable. However, since the early 2000s, strike action in Germany has become much more prominent in the non-tradable service sectors, reflecting a ‘tertiarisation of conflict’ ([Lesch, 2005](#); [Bewernitz and Dribbusch, 2014](#)). Thus, while Germany is generally not known for high levels of industrial action, Germany’s union landscape may become more contentious with progressing de-industrialization.

Furthermore, it becomes clear that the liberal regime is split into the UK on the one hand and Ireland and Cyprus on the other hand. As the typical representative of the liberal regime, the UK records the second-highest number of overall union protest events, and it is clearly situated in the top-right quadrant of high protest levels and strong movement character. By contrast, its liberal counterparts display much lower levels of union protest and are thus located in the bottom-right quadrant. While this split is due to the heterogenous



**Figure 4** Level versus movement character of union protest by country.

*Note:* Figure 4 sets the absolute number of union protest (y-axis) in relation to the share of non-standard union protest (x-axis) for each country. Numbers are calculated for an average country in each regime; The dashed y-line represents the mean level of union protest; the x-line represents the 50% threshold.

and small-N makeup of the liberal industrial regime, the degree of contentiousness is highly similar amongst the three countries. Lastly, Poland stands out from the other Central-European countries with higher than average levels of union protest, but with a very similar movement character.

To provide a more concrete illustration of how our indicator for the movement character of union protest is able to capture the complexity of varying issues, forms and alliances, Table 2 illustrates this across regimes. Starting with the protest issues, there is an almost inverse relationship between the centrality of so-called ‘private economic’ issues in the corporatist regimes and the growing importance of broader societal protest issues (includes public economic, political and other topics) as one moves towards the more strongly movement-oriented union regimes. This is also reflected in the composition of action forms: While strike remains a central action form in all regimes, strikes are less central in the CEE regimes, where they make up less than half of all reported actions. However, it should be noted that these shares also include general or political strikes next to workplace-related strikes, as here we look at action forms in isolation. Demonstrations are the second most important form of mobilization for unions, while the other action forms are much rarer. Lastly, when it comes to cooperation with other protest actors, the regimes are highly similar: Based on our data, unions mostly protest alone or together with occupational social groups. Unions in CEE regimes are the least likely to cooperate with others (except for political parties), but the difference to liberal and state-centred regimes is marginal. Although cooperation with broader alliances is a key element of movement unionism, we do not see this reflected strongly in the overall union protest activities of any regime.

**Table 2** Union protest repertoire by industrial relations regimes

	Corporatism (North)	Social partnership (West)	State-centred (South)	Liberal (Anglo-Saxon)	CEE regimes
<b>Issues</b>					
Econ Private	77.5	39.5	22	40	19
Econ Public	16	48.5	59	44	63.5
Political/Cultural*	6	10	14.5	9.5	11.5
Other issue	1	2	5	6.5	6
<b>Action Forms</b>					
Strikes	79.5	58.5	52	68	38.5
Demonstrations	12	32	35.5	25.5	44
Petition/symbolic	2	3	2	2.5	8.5
Confrontations/blockades	3.5	4.5	6.5	3	6
Violent protest	1.5	0.5	2.5	0.5	0.5
Other protest	1.5	1.5	1	0.5	2.5
<b>Cooperation with other protest actors</b>					
Unions 'alone'	67	62	70	73.5	74.5
w. occupational social groups	25	29	20.5	20	19
w. other social groups	1	1.5	2.5	1.5	1.5
w. political parties	0.5	2	2	1.5	2.5
w. other actors	2	4	2.5	2	1.5

*Notes:*

\*The category 'Political/Cultural' includes issues coded by [Kriesi et al. \(2020a,b\)](#) as political, culturally liberal, culturally conservative or xenophobia. Percentages are calculated for an average country in each region. The difference to 100% is due to rounding errors.

In the final step of our analysis, we test the effect of the union regimes on the level and movement character of union protest in a multilevel logit regression. We do so to identify the effects of industrial relations regimes on top of cross-national heterogeneity and contextual factors, namely, unemployment rates, fluctuations in government cabinets and the financial crisis. [Table 3](#) presents the results.

Starting with the role of the industrial relations regimes in these two models, we find that while the regimes appear to have no (significant) association with the relative presence of unions in the protest arena (DV1/Model 1), we do observe a significant relationship between the regimes and the movement character of union protest (DV2/Model 2). Corroborating our previous descriptive findings, the margins plot in [Figure 5](#) shows that the corporatist and CEE regimes stand apart with the lowest and highest movement character respectively. The remaining regimes cluster relatively close together in the middle. However, it should be noted that while there is a substantive difference in movement character between the state-centred and CEE regimes, this difference is not significant, suggesting that the two regimes are in fact similarly movement oriented. [Supplementary Appendix Table A1](#) provides an overview of the same regression with rotating reference categories. While there is no strict linear relationship between the (lack of) institutional access and movement character, our findings do strongly suggest that in contexts of high



**Table 3** Level of union protest (DV1) and movement character of union protest (DV2)

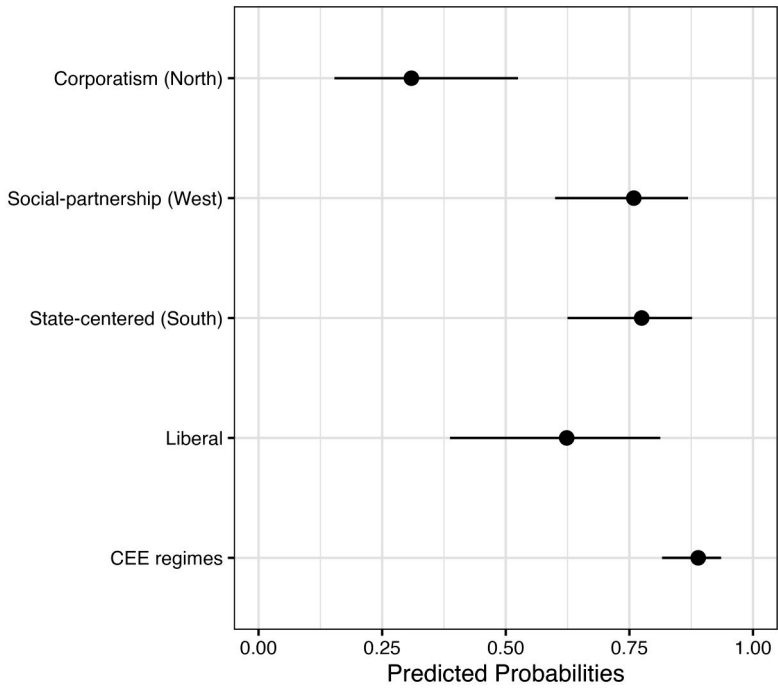
	Model 1 Union sponsorship of protest (=1)	Model 2 Movement character of union protest (=1)
<b>Region (Ref: Corporatist: North)</b>		
Social-partnership (West)	0.07 (0.29)	1.95 (0.57)***
State-centred (South)	0.36 (0.30)	2.04 (0.59)***
Liberal	0.18 (0.33)	1.31 (0.65)*
CEE regimes	0.13 (0.27)	2.89 (0.54)***
<b>Protest Issues</b>		
Private economic (0,1)	2.25 (0.07)***	
Public economic (0,1)	2.27 (0.06)***	
Political (0,1)	-1.09 (0.07)***	
Cultural (0,1)	-1.32 (0.08)***	
<b>Action Forms</b>		
Demonstration (0,1)	0.90 (0.06)***	
Strike (0,1)	2.49 (0.07)***	
<b>Protest Actors</b>		
Occupational social group (0,1)	-3.12 (0.06)***	-0.07 (0.09)
Other social group (0,1)	0.99 (0.12)***	2.62 (0.48)***
Parties (0,1)	-1.06 (0.09)***	3.00 (0.52)***
<b>Participation rate</b>	5.06 (0.94)***	12.47 (3.07)***
<b>Crisis (Ref: Normal Times)</b>		
Shock period	0.31 (0.13)*	0.73 (0.23)**
Euro crisis	-0.09 (0.11)	0.08 (0.18)
Post-crises years (after 2015)	-0.97 (0.11)***	0.29 (0.20)
<b>Political &amp; economic context</b>		
Cabinet left-right	-0.03 (0.19)	-0.03 (0.32)
Unemployment (quarterly)	0.24 (0.32)	1.89 (0.58)**
Num. obs.	25711	6638
Num. groups: str_label	589	479
Num. groups: iso2code	27	27

Note:

\*\*\*  $P < .001$ ; \*\*  $P < .01$ ; \*  $P < .05$ . The dependent variables are binary and are defined in the following way: DV1: Levels of union protest; 1 = Union-sponsored protest events; 0 = All other protest events; DV2: Movement character of union protest; 1 = Non-standard union protest; 0 = Workplace strikes. We use multilevel logit regressions with random intercept, with protest events nested in country\*year contexts, nested in countries. Protest issues and action forms appear in model 1, but not in model 2, since the second dependent variable is defined by the combination of action forms and protest issues.

institutionalization and union power, the movement character of union protest is low, while the opposite is the case for contexts of very low institutional access and union power.

Moving on to the specific characteristics of union protest, the regression supports the tendencies presented descriptively: unions are more likely to sponsor protest on private or public economic issues, while they are less likely to participate in events related to political or cultural issues (Model 1). Further, the most likely action form for unions is the strike, followed by demonstrations. Importantly, we find that when unions mobilize beyond the



**Figure 5** Predicted probabilities of industrial relations regimes on unions’ movement character (Model 2; DV2).

*Note:* [Figure 5](#) presents predicted probabilities for the effect of the industrial relations regimes on unions’ movement character. The results are calculated based on Model 2 (DV2) in [Table 3](#) above.

workplace strike, they are more likely to cooperate with non-occupational social groups or parties than to protest alone (Model 2).

Exploring the role of additional contextual factors, we find that the political orientation of the government does not play a role for unions’ presence in the protest arena, or for the movement character of union protest. Contrary to the literature on the relationship between unemployment and union protest, our findings show that unemployment rates do not significantly affect unions’ relative presence in the protest arena (DV1). At the same time, higher unemployment seems to increase the likelihood of unions to move beyond the workplace strike and mobilize in the streets, even when controlling for the crisis years (DV2).

Lastly, we perform three robustness tests on our regime effects. First, to ensure that our results are not only due to the prolonged economic crisis, we follow [Kriesi et al. \(2020a\)](#) in exploring a crisis effect, and run a split sample regression for the pre-crisis years (2000–2007) versus the crisis years (2008–2015) (see [Supplementary Appendix Table B1](#)). Second, to strengthen the case for our regime argument, we test to what extent the effect of union regimes is robust to controlling for intra-regional heterogeneity in industrial relations (union density, bargaining levels, tripartite councils and routine involvement) and whether the effect of these variables holds explanatory power beyond the clusters of union regimes (see [Supplementary Appendix Tables B2 and B3](#)). Here we also test whether the regime

differences are explained by differential exposure to the economic crisis, the so-called refugee crisis or the Coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) pandemic. Third, to account for possible heterogenous overtime and cross-national characteristics, we change our modelling strategy and, despite their limitation (Imai and Kim, 2021), employ a two-way fixed effects model with regime and year dummies and two-way clustered standard errors.

Starting with the split sample regression, we find that for both of these time periods, unions were equally present in the protest arena compared to other protest actors (DV1). Unions were therefore not disproportional carriers of protest during the crisis, but were also not underrepresented. In a similar vein, we do not find significant differences for the movement character of the different union regimes (DV2) when comparing the pre-crisis with the crisis years (with the exception of the liberal regime as in [Supplementary Appendix Figure 2B](#) shows). Interactions between the crisis periods (normal times, shock period and Eurozone crisis) and the union regimes do not yield significant results for either DV1 or DV2. We therefore conclude that the regime effects on both dependent variables are robust to the period effect of the Eurozone crisis.

Turning to our second robustness test, we compare classical institutional union variables against the industrial relations regimes. We find that in settings of decentralized bargaining (company and industry) as well as with regular involvement in policymaking (full levels of concertation), unions are less present in the protest arena. In contrast, higher union density significantly increases the presence of unions in the protest arena in a linear, as opposed to a curvilinear fashion (DV1). In comparison, none of the institutional union variables are significant in explaining the movement character of union protest until the union regimes are introduced (DV2). In conclusion, the industrial relations regimes outperform classical institutional variables in explaining the movement character (DV2), but not the relative presence of unions in the protest arena (DV1). This suggests that there is a (possibly cultural) regime effect in explaining the movement character of union protest beyond just institutional factors. Controlling for differential exposure to economic circumstances (unemployment & GDP per capita), asylum seekers or Covid-19 cases does not change the substantive conclusions we draw on the relative differences between the regimes in predicting the movement character of trade unions.

Lastly, we run our analyses using regime and year fixed effects. The results are substantively similar to the conclusions we presented above. We find that the regimes only differ in the movement character of unions, but not in the level of mobilization. In terms of the movement character of union protest (DV2), the difference between the state-centred south and the CEE regime shrinks, but the relative rank order largely follows the expected pattern.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

In this article, we have built bridges between social movement studies and industrial relations research by examining how the level and movement character of union protest varies in the context of different industrial relations regimes. We make a theoretical contribution to the social movement and industrial relations literature by extending theories on economic and political strike occurrence to union protest beyond the workplace (Korpi and Shalev, 1979; Brandl and Traxler, 2010; Lindvall, 2013). We make an empirical contribution by examining workplace strikes and protest beyond the workplace *jointly* as part of

unions' protest repertoires (Jansson and Uba, 2023) and by offering a quantitative operationalization of the 'movement character' of union protest to debates on social movement unionism (Della Porta, 2006; Fairbrother, 2008). We also present the first large-n comparative assessment of union protest across industrial relations regimes.

First, countering claims by social movement scholars, we are able to show that unions are still highly relevant protest actors, accounting for about a third of all protest events, even independent of crisis moments like the Great Recession. Further, our analysis shows that the composition of union protest across Europe is much more movement-oriented than expected: Beyond the corporatist North, we see that *union protest in the public sphere notably outweighs union protest at the workplace*. Public economic, political and other issues characterize union protest action more than private economic issues. Contrary to what one might expect in environments of high social movement unionism, we find that in the overwhelming majority of cases, unions sponsor protest on their own and relatively rarely ally with other civil society actors.

Second, we find that unions' movement orientation strongly depends on the industrial relations regime: To what extent unions resort to strike-heavy versus protest-heavy repertoires depends on the institutional setting and the related strength of union movements. Our regression analyses show that while there is no strict linear relationship, highly institutionalized union settings tend to display low levels of movement character, while we observe higher degrees of movement orientation in settings with low institutional access. It is especially notable that these regime effects on unions' movement character are robust to classical institutional union variables as well as to the years of the Great Recession and Eurozone crisis.

What are the general implications of our findings? We observe remarkable vitality of unions as protest actors at the beginning of the 21st century. This also suggests that viewing unions as pure interest groups or focusing exclusively on strike patterns does not do justice to their varied mobilization repertoire. On a larger scale, union engagement *beyond* the workplace may be a reflection of their position in a hyper-globalized economy. In this context, protest beyond strikes may be both the result of as well as a means to compensate for declining institutional and associational power. In line with the social movement unionism literature, broader protest action can be both a sign of structural weakness but also a tool and strategy for organization and revitalization. Examining long-term changes over time with data covering earlier periods of union strength and subsequent decline can give us more insight into whether our findings are a sign of union revitalization or document a struggle from a position of weakness.

## Supplementary material

[Supplementary material](#) is available at *Socio-Economic Review* journal online.

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