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## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Works councils and workers' party preferences in Germany

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**Abstract**

Research on the consequences of works councils has been dominated by economic aspects. Our study provides evidence that works councils have non-financial consequences for society that go beyond the boundaries of the workplace. Using panel data from a large sample of workers in Germany, we show that works councils have an influence on workers' party preferences. Works council presence is negatively associated with preferences for extreme right-wing parties and positively associated with preferences for the Social Democratic Party and The Left. These results hold in panel data estimations including a large set of controls and accounting for unobserved individual-specific factors. Our findings fit the notion that workplace democracy increases workers' solidarity and their awareness of social and political issues. However, the influence of works council representation on party preferences is gender-specific. Asymmetric gender norms within society may entail a lower responsiveness of women's party preferences to workplace democracy.

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

For the last three decades or so, economists and management scholars have shown a remarkable interest in the economic consequences of works councils (Jirjahn & Smith, 2018; Mohrenweiser, 2022). A large number of studies have examined the influence of works councils on financial outcomes such as productivity, profitability and wages. While examining the economic consequences is undoubtedly a necessary component of evaluating works councils, a narrow focus on economic aspects does not take into account the full weight of this institution of worker representation. It is crucial to recognize that works councils can have non-financial consequences for society that go beyond the narrow boundaries of the workplace. Political spillover theory suggests that participation in the firm's decision making fosters workers' political interest and engagement (Budd, 2014; Budd & Lamare, 2020).<sup>1</sup> This also applies to works councils (Jirjahn & Le, 2024).

However, works councils may not only have an influence on workers' political interests and engagement but also on their party preferences. Examining the influence of works councils on workers' party preferences appears to be particularly important in times of increasing political apathy on the one hand (Solijonov, 2016) and globally spreading authoritarian populism and transnational right-wing extremism on the other (Auger, 2020; Guriev & Papaioannou, 2022; Pantucci & Ong, 2021). It provides insights into whether works councils can strengthen the functioning and resilience of democratic systems.

This study is the first to systematically examine the link between works councils and workers' party preferences. In doing so, the study focuses on the German case. The German case is particularly interesting for at least three reasons. First, while works councils play a role in the corporate governance of firms in many European countries, German works councils have acquired more extensive powers than their counterparts in most of the other countries. Second, the overwhelming majority of studies have used German data to show that works councils substantially shape the personnel policy of firms and influence firm performance. Thus, at issue is whether works councils also have broader implications for the German political system. Third, given Germany's history, it appears to be particularly important to examine the factors influencing the functioning of democracy in this country.

In our theoretical background discussion, we argue that works councils can have an influence on workers' party preferences for two reasons. First, participating in the firm's decision making and negotiating with management increase workers' awareness that the quality of working life depends on labour law legislation and, hence, on political decisions made outside the firm. Greater awareness of the political dimension of work implies that workers are more likely to support parties advocating stronger labour rights and redistributive policies. Second, workplace democracy may lead to increased solidarity among workers. This not only reinforces the tendency of giving preference to a social democratic or left-wing party. If workers develop a sense of universal solidarity irrespective of nationality, origin and race, they should be less likely to have preferences for extreme right-wing parties.

In Germany, the creation of a works council depends on the initiative of the firm's workforce. Thus, works councils are not present in all eligible firms. This allows conducting a within-country study comparing workers in firms with and without a works council. Using panel data from a large sample of workers, our empirical analysis shows that the presence of a works council indeed has a significant influence on workers' party preferences. Workers in firms with a works council have stronger preferences for worker-friendly parties and are less likely to prefer extreme right-wing parties. These findings conform to the notion that workplace democracy plays a role in the functioning of society and, hence, has consequences that go beyond the boundaries of the workplace.

However, our results also show that the influence of works council representation on party preferences is gender-specific. While we find a significant influence on the party preferences of men, we do not find a significant influence on the party preferences of women. We argue that this may reflect the moderating role of asymmetric gender roles still prevailing in society. These gender roles infer that political engagement is more of a male than a female characteristic. Thus, the party preferences of women are less responsive to workplace democracy than the party preferences of men.

Our study not only brings a new twist to the literature on works councils. It also contributes to the general literature on political spillovers. Studies on political spillovers have mainly focused on the link between worker representation and workers' political interests and engagement (Budd & Lamare, 2020). Systematic studies on worker representation and party preferences are scarce. The few available studies only consider the influence of unions (Arndt & Rennwald, 2016, 2017; Hadziabdic & Baccaro, 2020; Leigh, 2006; Mosimann et al., 2019). These studies suggest that union members are more likely to lean towards left-wing parties and are less likely to lean towards the radical right. At issue is whether other forms of representation also play a role in the party preferences of workers.

Our study examines an institution of worker representation that has functions sufficiently different from those of unions. Importantly, we can isolate the influence of works councils from that of unions as our dataset enables us to control for union membership. Disentangling the roles of union and non-union representation is particularly important in a European context where works councils are mandated in many countries and strong linkages between works councils and unions exist.

Most of the previous studies on political spillovers have used cross-sectional data. This gives rise to the concern that their findings may be at least partially driven by workers' self-selection and, hence, suffer from endogeneity issues. Our panel data estimations help mitigate such concerns. The key findings not only hold in regressions including a rich set of control variables but also persist in fixed effects estimations accounting for unobserved time-invariant influences.

Finally, previous studies on political spillovers usually have not distinguished between worker representatives and those who are represented. Yet, such distinction can be important as the presence of worker representatives in the data is likely to result in positively skewed estimates of the influence of worker representation on workers' political behaviours and attitudes. Our data allow distinguishing between works councillors (worker representatives) and those who are represented by the works council. We find an association with party preferences not only for works councillors but also for workers who are represented by the works council. Thus, our results are not simply driven by politically engaged worker representatives.

## 2 | INSTITUTIONAL AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND DISCUSSION

In what follows we set the stage with a brief introduction into the German party system. We proceed with a discussion on works councils and their possible influence on workers' party preferences.

### 2.1 | Political parties in Germany

The party system in postwar Germany has undergone some substantial changes (Bräuniger et al., 2019; Poguntke, 2014; Weisskircher et al., 2023). During the decades of separation, the Eastern

part of the country was governed by the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED). In the Western part of the country, the party system consolidated into a few major parties after some initial years of partisan volatility and instability. The party system became a two-and-a-half-party contest between the Christian Democrats (the CSU in Bavaria and its national sister, the CDU) on the centre right, the Social Democrats (SPD) on the centre left and the smaller Liberal Party (FDP) in the centre. This party system had a remarkable integration function for about three decades. A new era of the West German party system began in the early 1980s with the entry of The Greens (Die Grünen) into the German parliament.

The next change of the system came after reunification in 1990. While the SED collapsed and political parties were largely adapted from West to East Germany, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) was founded and had some sizable electoral support in the Eastern federal states. In the year 2005, the PDS and the West German party WSAG (Labor and Social Justice – The Electoral Alternative) merged. A new party, The Left (Die Linke), was founded. This left-wing party had some remarkable electoral support in both the East and the West.

Finally, a further change of the system occurred with the rise of the Alternative for Germany (AfD). The AfD was founded in the year 2013 as a Eurosceptic party but exhibited within just a few years tendencies of a populist right-wing party (Arzheimer, 2015; Giebler et al., 2021). The movement to the right was accompanied by severe power struggles between the more moderate national-conservative and the right-wing faction within the party. The AfD also had sizable electoral support. Thus, the recent party system of Germany can be characterized as a six-party system (Dostal, 2021).

Of course, there are a series of other parties in Germany which, however, usually do not play an important role in elections. Most salient to our topic, postwar Germany saw the foundation of several extreme right-wing parties – specifically the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD), The Republicans (REP) and the German People's Union (DVU). While these parties had only limited electoral success, they can be nonetheless seen as the tip of the iceberg. The extreme right subculture is well developed with a whole network of neo-Nazi organizations, and Germany has experienced a high number of violent attacks by right-wing extremism, antisemitism or xenophobia (Backes & Mudde, 2000; Eger & Olzak, 2023; Koehler, 2018; Koopsmans & Olzak, 2004; Krueger & Pischke, 1997; Parkin et al., 2017).

## 2.2 | Works councils and workplace democracy

German industrial relations are characterized by a dual structure of worker representation (Behrens, 2016; Keller & Kirsch, 2015; Müller-Jentsch, 1995; Silvia, 2013). While unions negotiate over collective agreements on a broad industrial level, works councils provide a highly developed mechanism for participation in decision making at the establishment level. As laid down in the Works Constitution Act (WCA), works councils shall be elected by the whole workforce in establishments with five or more employees. However, the creation of a works council depends on the initiative of the establishment's workers.

The WCA provides works councils with quite extensive participation rights. On some issues, they have the right to information and consultation, on others a veto power over management initiatives and on still others even the right to co-equal participation in the design and implementation of policy. Their rights are strongest in social and personnel matters including payment methods, allocation of working hours, monitoring employee performance and up- and downgrading.

Works councils are institutionalized bodies of employee representation that have functions distinct from those of unions. First, while unions have a redistribution function, works councils are designed to increase joint establishment surplus rather than to redistribute the surplus. Works council and employer are obliged by law to cooperate 'in a spirit of mutual trust ... for the good of the employees and of the establishment'. Thus, the balancing of interests plays a crucial role in the function of works councils. This means balancing not only the interests of employees and employers but also the interests of different groups of employees within the workforce. Second, the modes of interaction differ between unions and works councils. While industrial action is the most important measure of unions to represent workers' interests, communication and consultation play a key role in non-union worker representation. Works councils do not have the right to strike. If the council and management fail to reach an agreement, they may appeal to an internal arbitration board or the labour court. Third, while unions are mainly concerned with wage negotiations, works council representation has a much broader scope. A works council participates in almost every decision management makes. Fourth, unions in Germany represent workers' interests at the industry level while works councils represent workers at the establishment level and, hence, are much closer to the workers and their workplaces.<sup>2</sup> Fifth, unions particularly mobilize workers when negotiations over collective agreements occur. By contrast, works council representation involves a much more continuous participation in management decisions.

Empirical studies confirm that works councils have a far-reaching influence on the personnel policy of firms (Jirjahn, 2018; Jirjahn & Smith, 2018; Mohrenweiser, 2022) and even may informally extend their influence to issues that are nowhere covered by the WCA (Jirjahn & Smith, 2006; Jirjahn et al., 2011). Firms with a works council are characterized by lower wage inequality. They are less likely to use the threat of dismissal as an incentive and are more likely to use incentive schemes such as profit sharing. They also provide more training and have a higher probability of implementing family-friendly practices and promoting occupational health and safety. Moreover, they appear to have larger internal labour markets. Firms with a works council are characterized by increased employee retention and a higher tendency to pay seniority wages.

Thus, previous research suggests that works councils are an effective institution of representative worker voice. Such voice institution has the potential to contribute to workplace democracy. Workplaces without worker voice are highly authoritarian entities (D'Art & Turner, 2007; Ryan & Turner, 2021; Turner et al., 2020). Management unilaterally makes decisions, determines the rules of the workplace and even structures the dominant discourse of beliefs and attitudes that construct a particular world view. A works council allows workers to challenge management authority and raise concerns over matters affecting their working lives. Such representative voice provides a channel through which workers can influence managerial decision making and the setting of the terms and conditions of employment relationships. It enables them to bring in their own perspectives and ideas.

Works councils not only contribute to more workplace democracy by levelling the unequal playing field between management and employees. They also promote democratic processes among workers. Regular elections of works councillors are held every 4 years. All employees of the firm have active and passive voting rights. Once implemented a works council holds regular works meetings with the whole workforce to report on its activities and to discuss topics such as collective bargaining policy, social policy, environmental and financial matters, equal opportunities or work-life balance. The works meeting may make suggestions to the works council and take a stand on its activities.

## 2.3 | The influence on workers' party preferences

Political spillover theory suggests that participation in the firm's decision making fosters workers' political participation (Budd & Lamare, 2020; Budd et al., 2018; Jirjahn & Le, 2024). It can lead to feelings of political effectiveness, the development of political skills, a higher awareness of political issues and an increased solidarity among workers. However, worker participation may have an influence on not only workers' political interest and engagement but also their party preferences. In what follows, we argue that some of the mechanisms that play a role in workers' political participation are also relevant for shaping their party preferences.

Of course, workplace democracy can only have an influence on the party preferences of employees if these preferences are to some extent malleable. In political science, there has been for many decades a controversy as to whether or not party preferences are stable in adulthood. While one strand of the literature assumes that these preferences are mainly formed during childhood and adolescence (Campbell et al., 1960), another one argues that new experiences can lead people to change their party preferences even when they are adults (Fiorina, 1981; Key, 1968). In the end, the stability of party preferences is a matter of degree. Even though early life socialization plays a role, this does not mean that party preferences are completely stable in adulthood (Achen, 2002; Gerber & Green, 1998). People learn and may change their preferences in the wake of new experiences and information.

A series of empirical studies for various countries including Germany show that party preferences are reasonably dynamic (Clarke & McCutcheon, 2009; Kroh & Selb, 2009; Neundorf et al., 2011; Ohr et al., 2005). These studies reveal a very interesting and perhaps surprising pattern. Relatively few people switch their longer term support from one party to another. A change in party preferences usually means a movement from having no party preferences at all to having preferences for a particular party or vice versa. This pattern gains increasing importance in times of partisan dealignment (Clark & Suzuki, 1994; Zuckerman & Kroh, 2006). An increasing share of people have no party preferences at all. This generalized decline of party identification has been going on in Germany and other affluent democracies for several decades (Dalton, 2002, 2014; Dassonneville et al., 2012). While the decline to some extent indicates more volatile voters who do not adhere to a particular party, it also reflects decreasing social and political engagement; that is, an increasing share of people without any political interest (Milner, 2002; Putnam, 2000).

Political spillover theory suggests that workplace democracy can counteract the trend of political apathy. It increases workers' political interest and engagement outside the workplace (Jirjahn & Le, 2024). Workplace democracy may help that politically interested workers remain interested and uninterested workers develop political interest. In this study, we go a step further and hypothesize that workplace democracy not simply contributes to a political activation of workers but also steers workers' engagement in a certain political direction. It influences workers' party preferences through increased issue awareness and a greater sense of solidarity.

Participating in decision making and negotiating with management over better working conditions lead to a politicization of the workplace (Peterson, 1992). This politicization of the workplace involves a cognitive mobilization of workers; that is, it promotes greater political and social awareness. Of course, a works council is a representative institution. Works councillors and not individual workers negotiate with management. Nonetheless, the works council as a collective voice institution has to aggregate workers' preferences and bring its policy into agreement with the workforce (Jirjahn & Smith, 2018). This implies intensified communication and discussion about work-related issues within the workforce. In particular, the regular work meetings can



serve as a forum to even discuss broader political topics. In total, the presence of a works council means that workers become more educated about their rights on the job and obtain more policy-relevant information. They learn that the quality of working life depends on the legal framework and, hence, on political decisions made outside the workplace. Workplace democracy provides exactly the type of information update considered by political scientists as being important for shaping party preferences (Achen, 2002; Gerber & Green, 1998). Greater awareness of the political dimension of work implies that workers are likely to support parties advocating stronger labour rights.

A second explanation as to why workplace democracy influences party preferences takes into account that these preferences involve not only a cognitive component but also an emotional one that is related to an individual's social identity. Social identity can be defined as a sense of belonging to certain social groups together with the value and emotional significance attached to these groups (Tajfel, 1978).<sup>3</sup> It influences political attitudes and party preferences as thinking about politics is to some extent organized in terms of social groups and not only in terms of specific issues. If people feel that they belong to certain groups and they perceive the groups as being aligned with particular parties, they evaluate these parties more positively (Greene, 2004; Wlezien & Miller, 1997). Thus, party preferences are (at least partially) also a reflection of group orientation. If an individual changes their sense of belonging to certain groups, this can imply a change in their preferences for particular parties. This again brings us to the question of the malleability of identity and preferences. While some political scientists use the concept of social identity to assume that party preferences are stable (Bankert et al., 2017; Huddy et al., 2015), social psychology shows that people's identity, albeit to a varying degree, can be responsive to new experiences (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001; Burke, 2006).<sup>4</sup>

We suggest that workplace democracy shapes workers' identity toward greater solidarity. Repeated interaction with each other and learning about shared interests imply that workers identify to a larger degree with the working class and develop a sense of "oneness". I is transformed into We. In this context, it is also important to note that shared moral beliefs are central to the social identity of people (Heiphetz et al., 2018). Workplace democracy promotes values of collective responsibility, caring and compassion. Open discussion about fairness and legitimacy of rules, exposure to different points of view, learning about others' needs and confrontation with social problems lead workers to develop a stronger prosocial orientation that goes beyond myopic self-interest (Weber et al., 2008, 2009).<sup>5</sup> This increases their propensity to support parties advocating equality and redistributive policies.

Altogether, the presence of a works council should increase workers' preferences for worker-friendly parties because of a higher awareness of the political dimension of work and a stronger solidarity. Thus, taking into account that the Social Democratic Party and The Left promote labour market regulations strengthening worker rights, redistribution and social security (Franzmann et al., 2020), we can state our first hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 1.** The presence of a works council leads to increased preferences for social democratic and left-wing parties (SPD, The Left).

More democratic processes within the firm can imply that workers develop a sense of universal solidarity and care about the fate of the whole working class. Workers take on a broader class-based perspective and recognize that their interests are bound together irrespective of nationality, origin or race. Intensified communication and discussion within the workforce means that the various groups of workers have more contact with each other. As suggested by Allport (1954),



intergroup contact under appropriate conditions reduces prejudice between majority and minority group members. Institutional support of such contacts leads to the perception of common interests and common humanity. Indeed, case studies and econometric examinations suggest that worker's voice is associated with more positive attitudes toward immigration and a higher degree of integration of immigrants into the workplace (Bedaso & Jirjahn, 2024; Ryan & Turner, 2021; Schmidt & Müller, 2013, 2021). Such increased universal solidarity suggests that workers are less likely to have preferences for right-wing parties. While right-wing parties may pretend to defend the interests of workers, they typically have an anti-immigration agenda. Their populist rhetoric only promotes nationalist solidarity among natives or, in a transnational context, ethnic solidarity among whites (Mosimann et al., 2019). Particularly extreme right-wing parties tend to have an even racist, xenophobe and antisemitic stance. This stands in sharp contrast to universal worker solidarity. Against this background, we state our second hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 2.** The presence of a works council leads to decreased preferences for extreme right-wing parties (NPD, DVU, Republicans).

For a correct interpretation of our hypotheses, two remarks may be in order. First, while the mechanisms underlying the two hypotheses overlap, the hypotheses should not be interpreted as implying a simple switch of political preferences from extreme right-wing parties to the Social Democratic Party or even to The Left. The hypotheses just predict that workplace democracy decreases workers' propensity for extreme right-wing parties and increases their propensity for the Social Democratic Party or the Left. This can reflect various possible scenarios. For example, one scenario consistent with the two hypotheses could be that workplace democracy induces some workers to switch from extreme right-wing parties to the Christian Democrats and others from the Christian Democrats to the Social Democratic Party. However, taking into account that the dynamics of party preferences usually means a movement from having no party preferences to having preferences (or vice versa), other scenarios appear to be more likely. For example, workers who have initially no party preferences are less likely to develop a preference for an extreme right-wing party. They are more likely to develop a preference for the Social Democratic Party or The Left. This scenario can be seen as an expansion of the political spillover theory. Workplace democracy not only fosters workers' political interest. It also steers their interest in a particular political direction.

Second, we recognize that our hypotheses might be tempered by combative attempts of right-wing groups to nominate candidates for works council elections and to ideologically indoctrinate workforces (Aderholz, 2021; Dörre, 2018; Kim et al., 2022; Schroeder et al., 2019). These groups clearly promote nationalist solidarity and stir up fear against foreigners. The success of these groups so far has been limited. Nonetheless, we are careful and stress that our hypotheses hold for a democratic environment. In such an environment, works councils can strengthen the resilience and functioning of democracy. The hypotheses may not hold in a context where worker representation is instrumentalized by authoritarian or fascist political parties.

## 2.4 | A Moderating role of gender

The influence of workplace democracy on workers' political behaviour and attitudes may depend not only on the political system but also on broad societal factors. In particular, gender norms may imply that the influence differs between men and women. Gender division appears to be

one of the most fundamental social cleavages. The traditional gender roles are that women nurture their families while men are the heads of their households by providing financial resources and making important family decisions (Blackstone, 2003; Wood & Eagly, 2012). Gender asymmetries still hold – albeit less pronounced – in recent times. While labour force participation and educational achievement of women have increased and the gender wage gap has fallen in many developed countries (Blau & Kahn, 2017; Lundberg & Pollak, 2007), gender inequality continues to exist (World Economic Forum, 2022) and women still remain disproportionately responsible for the family even when they work (Bredtmann, 2014; Garcia et al., 2011; Sellach & Libuda-Köster, 2017). A violation of gender norms can have severe social backlash. For example, the risk of divorce increases if a wife is economically more successful than her husband (Baktash et al., 2023; Bertrand et al., 2015; Folke & Rickne, 2020).

Most salient to our topic, traditional gender roles infer that political participation is more of a male than a female characteristic (Campbell et al., 1960; De Vries & O'Brien, 2022; Hershey, 1977; Jennings, 1983). Empirical studies provide evidence that even in recent time women are less likely to be interested in politics than men (Fraile & Gomez, 2017; Fraile & Sánchez-Vitores, 2020; Jirjahn & Le, 2024; Paxton & Hughes, 2014; Quaranta & Dotti Sani, 2018).<sup>6</sup> Thus, traditional gender roles can imply that women are less responsive to circumstances encouraging more political participation. Indeed, Jirjahn and Le (2024) find a positive influence of workplace democracy on political interest only for men but not for women. Against this background, we state our third hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 3.** The presence of a works council has a less strong influence on the party preferences of women than on the party preferences of men.

In our empirical analysis, we will provide separate estimations for male and female workers to test our third hypothesis. Before we turn to the empirical analysis, two remarks clarifying this hypothesis may be in order.

First, there are two transmission channels as to why gender norms can influence the malleability of party preferences. On the one hand, society exerts pressure on individuals to conform to gender norms (Wood & Eagly, 2012). Women acting in a masculine way – for example, by showing strong political engagement and a clear political opinion – are more likely to experience negative reactions. On the other hand, gender norms are one of the most basic and fundamental components of people's identity. This fundamental component influences the responsiveness of other components such as political identity to circumstances and new experiences.

Second, one may wonder whether there could be alternative explanations for our third hypothesis. There has been a long-standing concern that worker organizations predominantly take men's interest into account while women fall more or less outside the scope of those organizations (Cunison & Stageman, 1995; Dickens, 2000). Against this background, one might argue that a weaker influence of workplace democracy on women's party preferences is just because works councils do not take female workers' interests into account. However, empirical research suggests that this does not hold true. Works councils promote the use of family-friendly and equal opportunity practices (Heywood & Jirjahn, 2009; Jirjahn & Mohrenweiser, 2021) and contribute to a smaller gender wage gap within firms (Gartner & Stephan, 2004; Heinze & Wolf, 2010). They appear to decrease profits that are due to wage discrimination of women while they increase profits that are due to cooperation (Jirjahn, 2011). These findings conform to the view that works councils foster notions of fairness and solidarity within the workforce to increase cohesiveness among workers and, hence, to strengthen their bargaining power (Jirjahn & Kraft, 2007). Against this background,

we argue that possible differences between men and women in the link between workplace democracy and party preferences rather reflect asymmetric gender norms within society.

### 3 | DATA, VARIABLES AND ESTIMATION METHODS

#### 3.1 | The dataset

We draw our data from the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP). The SOEP is a large representative longitudinal survey of private households in Germany (Goebel et al., 2019). The survey is administered by the German Economic Institute (DIW). Infratest Sozialforschung, a professional survey and opinion institute, conducts the face-to-face interviews. Routine socio-economic and demographic questions are asked annually. Different ‘special’ topic questions appear in specific waves.

We use panel data from the waves 2006, 2011, 2016 and 2019. These waves provide both information on works councils and information on party preferences.<sup>7</sup> We consider native workers aged 18 to 65 years in private sector firms with at least five employees. We do not consider employees with extensive managerial duties, as the WCA does not apply to managers. We also exclude marginally employed individuals (monthly earnings of below 450 Euros) and those working for an employment agency. The former usually work only a few hours, while the latter very frequently change the firm they have to work for.

#### 3.2 | Dependent variables

Our dependent variables for party preferences are built from a three-stage question asking first whether or not the interviewee leans towards a particular party. Second, if the interviewee answers in affirmative, he or she is asked to indicate the particular party he or she supports. Third, the interviewee is asked to report the strength of his or her preference for this party on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “very weak” to “very strong”.

From the answers to this three-stage question, we construct ordered variables for preferences towards the following political parties: (1) Social Democratic Party, (2), The Left, (4) The Greens, (3) Liberal Party, (4) Christian Democratic Party (CDU or CSU), (5) extreme right-wing party (NPD, DVU or REP) and (6) another party (e.g., the Pirate Party).<sup>8</sup> For each of these parties, the corresponding ordered variable measures the interviewee’s preferences on a 6-point scale ranging from 0 ‘no party preferences at all/no preference for the respective party’ to 5 ‘strong preference for the respective party’. Information on the preference for the AfD is only available for the years 2016 and 2019. Thus, we subsume it under the category ‘another party’ in our main regression.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, as a check of robustness, we will also provide additional estimations on preferences for the AfD using the 2 years of observations for which information on this party is available.

Tables 1 and 2 show the distribution of the dependent variables for male and female workers. For each party, we have a high share of observations falling into the category of ‘no party preferences at all/no preferences for this party’. This is to a large part driven by persons who have no party preferences. In our sample of male workers, there are 56.32 per cent who have no party preferences at all. This reflects the process of partisan dealignment emphasized in our institutional and theoretical background discussion. In the sample of female workers, the proportion of those without any party preferences is 63.63 per cent and, thus, even higher than the one in the male

TABLE 1 Distribution of party preferences; men.

Relative frequency (Absolute frequency)							
0	1	2	3	4	5		
Variable	Definition	No party preferences at all / no preference for this party	Very weak preference	Weak preference	Modest preference	Strong preference	Very strong preference
The Left	Ordered variable capturing the employee's preference for The Left (Die Linke).	96.81 (8488)	0.00 (0)	0.21 (18)	1.47 (129)	1.31 (115)	0.21 (18)
Social Democratic Party	Ordered variable capturing the employee's preference for the Social Democratic Party (SPD).	88.29 (7741)	0.11 (10)	0.55 (48)	6.31 (553)	3.80 (333)	0.95 (83)
The Greens	Ordered variable capturing the employee's preference for The Greens (Die Grünen).	93.33 (8183)	0.00 (0)	0.22 (19)	2.95 (259)	3.11 (273)	0.39 (34)
Liberal Party	Ordered variable capturing the employee's preference for the Liberal Party (FDP).	97.78 (8573)	0.03 (3)	0.11 (10)	1.12 (98)	0.84 (74)	0.11 (10)
Christian Democratic Party	Ordered variable capturing the employee's preference for a Christian Democratic Party (CDU or CSU).	84.44 (7404)	0.09 (8)	0.55 (48)	7.99 (701)	5.98 (524)	0.95 (83)
Extreme right-wing party	Ordered variable capturing the employee's preference for an extreme right-wing party (NPD, DVU or REP).	99.10 (8689)	0.05 (4)	0.05 (4)	0.44 (39)	0.25 (22)	0.11 (10)
Other Party	Ordered variable capturing the employee's preference for another party.	96.58 (8468)	0.03 (3)	0.17 (15)	1.29 (113)	1.35 (118)	0.58 (51)

Data: Waves 2006, 2011, 2016 and 2019 of the SOEP. Note: Number of observations = 8768.

**TABLE 2** Distribution of party preferences; women.

Variable	Relative frequency					
	(Absolute frequency)					
	0	1	2	3	4	5
	No party preferences at all/no preference for this party					
	Very weak preference	Weak preference	Modest preference	Strong preference	Very strong preference	
The Left	97.45 (7266)	0.04 (3)	0.13 (10)	1.21 (90)	1.02 (76)	0.15 (11)
Social Democratic Party	90.45 (6744)	0.12 (9)	0.58 (43)	5.36 (400)	2.94 (219)	0.55 (41)
The Greens	91.26 (6804)	0.04 (3)	0.21 (16)	3.65 (272)	4.22 (315)	0.62 (46)
Liberal Party	98.65 (7355)	0.04 (3)	0.21 (8)	0.64 (48)	0.47 (35)	0.09 (7)
Christian Democratic Party	87.82 (6548)	0.09 (7)	0.58 (43)	6.95 (518)	4.01 (299)	0.55 (41)
Extreme right-wing party	99.81 (7442)	0.01 (1)	0.00 (0)	0.12 (9)	0.05 (4)	0.00 (0)
Other party	98.19 (7321)	0.03 (2)	0.07 (5)	0.74 (55)	0.75 (56)	0.23 (17)

Data: Waves 2006, 2011, 2016 and 2019 of the SOEP.

Note: Number of observations = 7456.

sample.<sup>10</sup> This difference between men and women conforms to the notion that traditional gender roles (at least partially) still limit women's political engagement.

### 3.3 | Explanatory variables

Table 3 provides the definitions and descriptive statistics of the explanatory variables which are of primary interest. Our key explanatory variable captures the presence of a works council. Importantly, the data not only provide information on whether a works council is present. It also provides information on whether the worker himself or herself is a works councillor. This allows distinguishing between worker representatives and those represented by a works council. Thus, we include a dummy variable equal to one if a worker is employed in a firm with a works council and is not a works councillor him- or herself. In order to examine if being a worker representative has a special influence on an individual's party preferences, we also include a dummy equal to one if he or she is a works councillor. The reference group consists of workers employed in firms without a works council. We also include a dummy for union membership. Workers in firms with a works council have a higher likelihood of being union members (Bedaso & Jirjahn, 2024; Behrens,

**TABLE 3** Definitions and descriptive statistics of the key explanatory variables.

Variable	Definition	Men Mean, Std. Dev.	Women Mean, Std. Dev.
Works council	Dummy equals 1 if a works council is present in the firm and the employee is not a works councillor.	0.530, 0.499	0.435, 0.496
Works councillor	Dummy equals 1 if a works council is present in the firm and the employee is a works councillor.	0.039, 0.195	0.027, 0.161
Union member	Dummy equals 1 if the employee is a member of a trade union.	0.191, 0.393	0.101, 0.302
Number of observations		8768	7456

Data: Waves 2006, 2011, 2016 and 2019 of the SOEP.

2009; Jirjahn, 2021). Thus, it is important to disentangle the influence of works council presence and union membership.

The descriptive statistics show interesting gender differences. Women are less likely than men to work in firms where employees are represented by a works council. They are less likely to be a works councillor. And they are less likely to be the member of a trade union. While this pattern suggests an important gender representation gap, the question most salient to our topic is whether gender plays a moderating role in the relationship between worker representation and party preferences.

The dataset provides a rich set of control variables. Online Appendix Table A1 shows their definitions and descriptive statistics. Party preferences may be also influenced by other work-related factors (Arndt & Rennwald, 2017). Thus, we control for firm size, tenure, working hours, occupation, industry and having a fixed-term contract. Moreover, as stressed by Budd and Lamare (2020), worker's earnings may be a confounding factor when estimating the influence of worker representation on political preferences. Indeed, most studies show that the presence of a works council is associated with higher wages (Mohrenweiser, 2022). Thus, in order to avoid that an estimated link between works council presence and workers' party preferences simply reflects higher wages we control for earnings.

Furthermore, we include variables for education, age, marital status, number of children, health and disability to capture the worker's socio-demographic background. We also account for home ownership (Huber & Montag, 2020), household debt and unemployment experience as possible determinants of political attitudes. The regressions additionally include federal state dummies and a dummy for residing in an urban area to take into account that regional factors play a role in political attitudes (Dill, 2013; Voigtländer & Voth, 2012a, 2012b). Finally, we control for the year of observation.

### 3.4 | Methodology

In what follows, we will provide both random effects and fixed effects ordered logit estimations. The estimations take into account that the ordered variable  $y_{it}$  for the party preferences of worker



$i$  in year  $t$  depends on a latent variable  $y_{it}^*$ :

$$y_{it} = \begin{cases} 0 & \text{if } y_{it}^* \leq \mu_{i1}, \\ 1 & \text{if } \mu_{i1} < y_{it}^* \leq \mu_{i2}, \\ \vdots & \\ 5 & \text{if } \mu_{i5} < y_{it}^*, \end{cases} \quad (1)$$

where  $\mu_{ik}$  ( $k = 1, \dots, 5$ ) denotes the respective threshold value. The latent variable is given by

$$y_{it}^* = \beta' x_{it} + u_i + v_{it}, \quad (2)$$

where  $x_{it}$  is the vector of explanatory variables and  $\beta$  is the vector of coefficients. The random effects and the fixed model both assume that the error term of the regression can be decomposed into two parts, a time-varying component  $v_{it}$  and an individual-specific time-invariant component  $u_i$ . The two models differ in their distributional assumptions with respect to  $u_i$ . A potential shortcoming of the random effects model is the requirement that the individual-specific time-invariant effects are independent of the explanatory variables (Cameron & Trivedi, 2005). By contrast, the fixed effects model allows for any correlation of these effects with the explanatory variables. It accounts for possible endogeneity of the explanatory variables, that is due to time-invariant unobserved variables. Thus, the fixed effects model is more suited to address a possible self-selection of workers on unobserved time-invariant characteristics (i.e., unobserved worker characteristics that influence both political preferences and the sorting into firms with a works council).<sup>11</sup>

The random effects model uses both the within and between variations of the variables. By contrast, the fixed effects model only uses the within variation (changes in a variable across time for the same worker) contained in the data. Considering our key explanatory variable, this implies that the fixed effects model only uses observations from workers who have a change in the variable for works council representation. On the one hand, there may be a change in the works council status of the firm the worker works for. That means a works council is newly implemented or abolished in the firm. On the other hand, the variable for works council representation may change if a worker moves to another employer. The worker may move from a firm without a works council to a firm with a works council or vice versa.

While estimating a random effects ordered logit model is quite standard, estimating a fixed effects ordered logit model requires some explanation. Here we use the blow-up and cluster estimator implemented in *Stata* (Baetschmann et al., 2015; Baetschmann et al., 2020). In order to avoid the incidental parameters problem, the outcome categories of the ordered dependent variable are dichotomized into binary variables by using clones of each individual's observations. These binary variables are combined back into one likelihood function to provide a single set of estimates. The dichotomization allows applying the well-known conditional maximum likelihood estimator (Chamberlain, 1980).

As the fixed effects model only uses observations with within variation in the data, the number of observations in our fixed effects regressions is smaller than in the random effects regressions. First, our data contain a larger number of singleton observations; that is, observations from workers who only appear once in the data. In the sample of male workers, 3,159 out of 8,768 observations are singleton observations. In the sample of female workers, 3,026 out of 7,456 observations are singleton observations. Singleton observations cannot be used in fixed effects regressions as calculating within variation requires that a worker is observed at least twice. A further restriction

comes from the nonlinearity of our model. The blow-up and cluster estimator that accounts for the ordered nature of the dependent variable is based on the conditional fixed effects logit model. The conditional fixed effects logit requires that also the dependent variable exhibits some within variation. Observations from workers who have no variation in the dependent variable are not considered.<sup>12</sup> Altogether, the smaller sample size makes estimating the fixed effects model more challenging. If the fixed effects estimations nonetheless confirm the results of the random effects regressions, this increases confidence in our findings.

## 4 | EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

### 4.1 | Men

To examine whether the influence of workplace democracy on party preferences is moderated by gender, we run separate regressions for men and women. Table 4 provides the key results of both random effects and fixed effects ordered logit estimations with the sample of male workers.<sup>13</sup> For the random effects estimations, the table shows not only coefficients but also average marginal effects calculated on the probability of answering one of the three highest categories (modest, strong or very strong preference) of the 6-point Likert scale. For the fixed effects ordered logit estimations, we follow the usual procedure and only provide coefficients. The underlying conditional fixed effects logit does not deliver estimates of the individual-specific fixed effects that can be used when calculating marginal effects.

Union membership is positively associated with preferences for the Social Democratic Party and negatively associated with preferences for the Liberal Party. These findings are significant in both the random effects and the fixed effects estimations. There is also some evidence that union membership is positively associated with preferences for The Left and negatively associated with preferences for a Christian Democratic Party. However, these associations are only significant in the random effects estimates.

Most salient to our topic, being represented by a works council is a significantly positive determinant of preferences for the Social Democratic Party and preferences for The Left. This holds in both the random effects and the fixed effects estimations. The influences of works council representation are quantitatively substantial. Works council representation increases the probability of having modest or stronger preferences for the Social Democratic Party by 1.9 percentage points.<sup>14</sup> Taking into account that we have 11.06 per cent of observations with modest or stronger preferences for the Social Democratic Party in our sample, this implies an increase of about 17 per cent. Considering The Left, works council representation is associated with a 0.9 percentage point higher likelihood of having modest or stronger preferences for this party. Given that there are 2.99 per cent of observations with these preferences in our data, this implies an increase of about 30 per cent. Altogether, the findings conform to Hypothesis 1. Participation in the firm's decision making increases workers' political and social awareness and promotes their solidarity with the working class. Thus, workers are more likely to support parties advocating stronger labour rights, equality and redistributive policies.

Moreover, both the random effects and the fixed effects estimates show that works council representation is a significantly negative determinant of preferences for an extreme right-wing party. This negative influence is also quantitatively substantial. Being represented by a works council reduces the probability of having modest or stronger preferences for an extreme right-wing party by 0.4 percentage points. Taking into account that we have 0.8 per cent of observations with mod-

TABLE 4 Determinants of party preferences: men.

Variable	(1) Random effects ordered logit	(2) Fixed Effects ordered logit
	<i>The Left</i>	
Works council	0.722 [0.009] (1.80)*	1.272 (1.84)*
Works councillor	1.871 [0.031] (3.06)***	2.458 (2.18)**
Union member	1.290 [0.017] (3.38)***	0.097 (0.12)
Log-likelihood	−1,234.923	−212.628
Number of employees	5,454	104
Number of observations	8,768	265
Variable	<i>Social Democratic Party</i>	
Works council	0.476 [0.019] (2.26)**	0.730 (2.06)**
Works councillor	1.162 [0.051] (3.46)***	2.085 (2.43)**
Union member	1.381 [0.058] (6.93)***	1.249 (3.14)***
Log-likelihood	−3,624.922	−697.869
Number of employees	5454	349
Number of observations	8768	900
Variable	<i>The Greens</i>	
Works council	−0.166 [−0.004] (0.60)	−0.336 (0.66)
Works councillor	−0.267 [−0.006] (0.45)	−1.534 (1.29)
Union member	−0.187 [−0.004] (0.60)	1.367 (1.63)
Log-likelihood	−2,088.783	−368.436
Number of employees	5454	182
Number of observations	8768	471
Variable	<i>Liberal Party</i>	
Works council	−0.057 [−0.001] (0.14)	−0.195 (0.23)
Works councillor	−0.732 [−0.007] (0.75)	0.117 (0.05)
Union member	−1.362 [−0.012] (2.30)*	−3.429 (2.54)**
Log-likelihood	−968.485	−89.197
Number of employees	5454	69
Number of observations	8768	174

(Continues)

**TABLE 4** (Continued)

<b>Variable</b>		<b>Christian Democratic Party</b>
Works council	−0.230 [−0.011] (1.28)	−0.012 (0.04)
Works councillor	−0.028 [−0.001] (0.07)	−0.726 (1.13)
Union member	−0.683 [−0.033] (3.23) <sup>***</sup>	0.263 (0.68)
Log-likelihood	−4,353.090	−918.071
Number of employees	5454	386
Number of observations	8768	1002
<b>Variable</b>		<b>Extreme Right-wing Party</b>
Works council	−1.202 [−0.004] (2.08) <sup>**</sup>	−3.505 (2.36) <sup>**</sup>
Works councillor	−1.572 [−0.005] (1.02)	0.766 (0.20)
Union member	0.455 [0.002] (0.63)	−2.307 (1.24)
Log-likelihood	−414.140	−36.331
Number of employees	5454	32
Number of observations	8768	84
<b>Variable</b>		<b>Other Party</b>
Works council	0.083 [0.002] (0.31)	0.453 (0.69)
Works councillor	0.132 [0.003] (0.23)	−0.755 (0.54)
Union member	−0.226 [−0.004] (0.81)	1.011 (1.03)
Log-likelihood	−1,506.896	−229.119
Number of employees	5,454	133
Number of observations	8,768	346

Data: Waves 2006, 2011, 2016 and 2019 of the SOEP. *Note:* The table shows the estimated coefficients. Z-values in parentheses are based on standard errors clustered at the employee level. Marginal effects are in square brackets. Marginal effects are calculated on the probability of answering one of the three highest categories of the 6-point Likert scale. Control variables are included, but are suppressed to save space. <sup>\*\*\*</sup> $p < 0.01$ , <sup>\*\*</sup> $p < 0.05$ , <sup>\*</sup> $p < 0.10$ .

est or stronger preferences for extreme right-wing parties, this implies a decrease of 50 per cent. The finding of a negative influence of works council representation on preferences for extreme right-wing parties provides empirical support for Hypothesis 2. Workplace democracy leads workers to develop a sense of universal solidarity irrespective of nationality, origin or race. This makes it less likely that they support extreme right-wing parties as these parties have a strong populist rhetoric and a pronounced anti-immigration agenda.

Finally, being a works councillor has a significant positive influence on preferences for the Social Democratic Party and The Left. This finding holds in both the random effects and the fixed effects estimations. Being a works councillor is associated with a 5.1 percentage point higher prob-

ability of having modest or stronger preferences for the Social Democratic Party and with a 3.1 percentage point higher probability of having modest or stronger preferences for the Left. Thus, being a works councillor has an even stronger influence on preferences for the Social Democratic Party and The Left than being represented by a works council. This makes sense. Being a works councillor means that an individual is particularly concerned with social issues and questions of labour law. This makes it much more likely that the individual reflects the political dimension of work.

The estimates do not reveal a significant association of being a works councillor and preferences for an extreme right-wing party. However, it has to be taken into account that we have both a low share of works councillors and an even lower share of individuals with preferences for extreme right-wing parties in our data. This may make it difficult to identify a significant relationship.

## 4.2 | Women

We now turn to the results for the sample of female workers. With the exception of extreme right-wing parties, we consider the same party preferences we have analysed for male workers. As shown in Table 2, only a very small number of women in our dataset have preferences for an extreme right-wing party. This small number does not allow a multivariate analysis of the determinants when restricting our analysis to the subsample of female workers.

Table 5 provides the key findings. Works council representation does not emerge as a significant determinant of women's party preferences. The finding also holds true for preferences for the Social Democratic Party or The Left. This contrasts with the result that works council representation has a significant influence on the preferences of male workers for the two parties. Thus, our pattern of results is in line with Hypothesis 3. Gender moderates the relationship between workplace democracy and party preferences. Women appear to be less responsive to workplace democracy than men.

Considering the variable for works councillors, the estimations do not provide a clear pattern. In contrast to the regressions for male workers, being a works councillor has no significant influence on women's preferences for the Social Democratic Party or The Left. The random effects estimates indicate that being a works councillor has instead a positive influence on preferences for The Greens and the Liberal Party. The fixed effects estimate even indicates a positive influence on preferences for other parties. We are cautious in interpreting these heterogeneous results and suggest they may be further evidence that traditional gender roles complicate a coherent response of women's party preferences to workplace democracy.

## 4.3 | Further estimations

So far we provided separate estimates for men and women. This approach follows from our hypothesis that gender plays a moderating role in the relationship between works council representation and party preferences. Thus, the estimated coefficients on works council representation should not be the same for men and women. Our empirical results conform to this hypothesis. Of course, it may be interesting to examine whether gender not only plays a moderating role but also directly influences party preferences. In Table A9 in the Online Appendix, we show estimations with the combined sample of men and women and additionally include a dummy for gender as an explanatory variable.<sup>15</sup> The estimations show that – with the exception of preferences for The

**TABLE 5** Determinants of party preferences: women.

<b>Variable</b>	<b>(1) Random effects ordered logit</b>	<b>(2) Fixed effects ordered logit</b>
<i>The Left</i>		
Works council	0.639 (1.33)	1.100 (1.07)
Works councillor	0.132 (0.11)	0.837 (0.49)
Union member	0.796 (1.42)	−4.285 (2.44)**
Log-likelihood	−860.710	−99.083
Number of employees	4867	61
Number of observations	7456	156
<i>Social Democratic Party</i>		
Works council	0.103 (0.44)	−0.212 (0.60)
Works councillor	0.048 (0.09)	−0.538 (0.60)
Union member	1.088 (4.02)***	−0.121 (0.26)
Log-likelihood	−2673.637	−492.398
Number of employees	4867	226
Number of observations	7456	584
<i>The Greens</i>		
Works council	0.221 (0.87)	0.414 (0.85)
Works councillor	1.100 (1.97)**	1.243 (0.99)
Union member	0.474 (1.42)	0.560 (0.57)
Log-likelihood	−2266.437	−412.662
Number of employees	4867	186
Number of observations	7456	468
<i>Liberal Party</i>		
Works council	0.064 (0.13)	−0.009 (0.01)
Works councillor	1.845 (1.76)*	0.070 (0.03)
Union member	−0.488 (0.71)	−3.157 (2.59)***
Log-likelihood	−566.338	−98.129
Number of employees	4867	69
Number of observations	7456	174

(Continues)



TABLE 5 (Continued)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Christian Democratic Party</i>	
Works council	−0.073 (0.39)	0.226 (0.57)
Works councillor	0.096 (0.21)	0.244 (0.35)
Union member	−0.669 (2.30)**	0.175 (0.34)
Log-likelihood	−3187.517	−648.798
Number of employees	4867	275
Number of observations	7456	707
<i>Variable</i>	<i>Other Party</i>	
Works council	0.060 (0.19)	0.408 (0.39)
Works councillor	0.249 (0.30)	3.541 (2.00)**
Union member	−0.512 (0.99)	2.347 (1.78)*
Log-likelihood	−744.656	−54.971
Number of employees	4867	53
Number of observations	7456	127

Data: Waves 2006, 2011, 2016 and 2019 of the SOEP. *Note:* The table shows the estimated coefficients. Z-values in parentheses are based on standard errors clustered at the employee level. Control variables are included, but are suppressed to save space. \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.10$ .

Greens – women are less likely to have preferences for any of the parties considered. This can be seen as further evidence of the notion that traditional gender roles make it more difficult for women to develop political preferences.

Considering our explanatory variable of primary interest, works council representation continues to be a significant determinant of preferences for the Social Democratic Party and The Left but does no longer emerge as a significant determinant of preferences for an extreme right-wing party. For all three party preferences, the magnitudes of the estimated works council coefficients are smaller compared to those obtained for the male subsample. These results do not come as a surprise. Our separate estimations by gender show that the influence of works council representation on party preferences differs between men and women. Against this background, using a combined estimation sample of men and women implies that the estimated influence is the average of the gender-specific influences. Hence, the estimated influence is less strong than in the male estimation sample. Altogether, this exercise underscores that it is important to provide separate estimates by gender to account for the heterogeneous influences of worker representation. Otherwise, the full pattern of influences may remain partially obscured.

Finally, in Table A10 in the Online Appendix, we examine the determinants of preferences for the AfD. Information on preferences for the AfD is only available for the years 2016 and 2019. Therefore, as explained in detail in note 9, we have so far subsumed the AfD under the unspecific catch-all category ‘another party’. Of course, in light of recent political developments in Germany, it is interesting to examine the preferences for the AfD in more detail with the two waves of data we

have at hand. The estimates show no significant association between works council representation and preferences for the AfD. This holds for the subsamples of men and women as well as for the combined sample of both genders. The AfD was founded as a Eurosceptic party but has shown strong tendencies of a radical right-wing party in recent times. It is important to note that the AfD was subject to turbulent changes in its early years, and the shift to the right was accompanied by power struggles between the more moderate and the right-wing factions. This has fuelled a heated public and scientific debate over the party's ideological position, the heterogeneous profile of its electorate and strong differences across regions during the years of transition. The AfD was often characterized as a populist right-wing party during those years but could not be subsumed under the same extreme right-wing category as the NPD with its neo-Nazism ideology (Arzheimer, 2023; Bücker et al., 2019; Heitmeyer, 2018; Kleinert, 2018; Pfahl-Traughber, 2019).<sup>16</sup> Our results are in line with this view. While we find a negative influence of works council representation on preferences for extreme right-wing parties such as NPD, our estimations show no significant associations between works council representation and preferences for the AfD.

## 5 | CONCLUSIONS

Our study provides evidence that work councils have consequences for society that go beyond the narrow boundaries of the workplace. The presence of a works council in the workplace influences workers' party preferences. Using panel data from a large sample of workers, the results show that works councils provide a democratic dividend. Workers are less likely to have preferences for an extreme right-wing party if a works council is present. The finding fits the notion that workplace democracy leads workers to develop a general sense of solidarity with the working class irrespective of nationality, origin or race. This is an important result in times of spreading authoritarian populism and right-wing extremism. The aspect should be taken into account in the political discussion on measures to strengthen the position of works councils. In Germany, the share of firms with a works council is in decline in recent years (Ellguth & Kohaut, 2021).

Furthermore, our analysis shows that the presence of a works council has a positive influence on preferences for the Social Democratic Party and for The Left. This finding also fits theoretical expectations. Workplace democracy increases not only workers' solidarity but also their awareness of the political dimension of work. This increases their propensity to support parties advocating stronger labour rights, equality and redistributive policies. Of course, the positive influence of works councils on workers' preferences for worker-friendly parties may spark a political backlash. While the Social Democrats and The Left have an incentive to strengthen the rights of works councils, this does not hold true for the Christian Democrats and the Liberals. Thus, it is an open question of whether politicians will take the necessary steps to counteract the decline in the prevalence of works councils. The basic point is that the stand a political party takes on works councils may be at least partially driven by political self-interest. Workplace democracy influences workers' political preferences implying that some parties will be losers and other parties will be winners. This makes it even more important that science provides objective knowledge about the functioning of works councils.

On a broader scale, our study contributes to the general discussion in political science on the dynamics of party preferences. First, it contributes to the discussion on the reasons for the trend of partisan dealignment (declining party identification). One explanation put forward in the literature is that better political education and higher cognitive mobilization make people more independent (Dalton, 2002). They do no longer need a particular party for their politi-

cal orientation and judgement. By contrast, the theoretical considerations guiding our empirical results suggest that an increased cognitive mobilization stimulates party identification. Workplace democracy leads to greater issue awareness counteracting political apathy and shaping preferences for particular parties.

Second, some authors have used the concept of social identity to argue that party preferences are stable in adulthood (Bankert et al., 2017; Huddy et al., 2015). By contrast, our study indicates that people's identity and their party preferences are responsive to circumstances and experiences at work. Our results conform to theoretical considerations, suggesting that workplace democracy shapes workers' social identity toward greater solidarity. The workplace is one of the places where people spend the bulk of their lives. It makes a difference in their political behaviours and preferences whether this place is organized in an autocratic or more democratic way.

However, our results also suggest that the malleability of party preferences depends on broader societal circumstances. The influence of works council representation on workers' party preferences appears to be gender-specific. We find an influence only for male workers but not for female workers (with the caveat that our data did not allow us to examine the influence on women's preferences for extreme right-wing parties). The moderating role of gender conforms to our theoretical considerations. Asymmetric gender roles within society limit the responsiveness of women's party preferences to a more democratic workplace structure.

We emphasize that future research on the political dimension of works councils is certainly warranted. First, we recognize that there are recent attempts by right-wing groups to instrumentalize worker representation. While these groups have not been very successful so far, continued research is required to examine if they will gain more influence in the future. Second, given the latest political developments in Germany, it would be interesting to analyse the determinants of preferences for the AfD with data for the most recent years. Third, the analysis should be expanded to other countries where works councils are present. On the one hand, participation rights of works councils differ between countries. For example, works councils also have strong participation rights in the Netherlands while their rights are less strong in France and Belgium. Examining the influence of works councils on workers' party preferences in different countries could give an answer to the question of how strong worker representation needs to be to have an influence on party preferences. On the other hand, countries can differ in the degree of gender inequality. It would be interesting to examine whether worker representation has an influence on women's party preferences in countries with more equal gender roles.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data of the SOEP are publicly available at the DIW.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup>The idea that experience with decision-making participation in firms builds effective participation in democratic processes goes back at least to J.S. Mill (1848). It has been revived by political theorists (Pateman 1970) and advocates of labour-managed firms (Vanek 1971); see Greenberg (1981) and Smith (1985) for some early empirical studies on the political spillover theory.
- <sup>2</sup>Findings by Jirjahn et al. (2024) conform to this notion. The presence of a works council, but not the coverage by a collective bargaining agreement improves the functioning of management practices.
- <sup>3</sup>See Akerlof and Kranton (2000) for a formal model of social identity.
- <sup>4</sup>Akerlof and Kranton (2005) provide a series of examples showing how firms and the army shape people's identity.
- <sup>5</sup>Experiments by Kraus et al. (2010) and Piff et al. (2010) suggest that identification with the lower social class is associated with increased empathy and willingness to help.
- <sup>6</sup>As Fraile and Sánchez-Vitores (2020, p. 90) put it: 'Previous scholars have documented the existence of a substantive gender gap in political interest both in Europe and across the world [...] These differences in the political realm have traditionally been attributed to gendered socialization processes'.
- <sup>7</sup>The 2001 wave also provides information on works councils and party preferences. We do not use this wave for two reasons. First, in 2001, the question on preferences for extreme right-wing parties only captured the DVU and the Republicans, but not the NPD. Second, The Left was not in existence in 2001.
- <sup>8</sup>The category 'another party' is an unspecific catch-all category. We just take it into account as a matter of completeness.
- <sup>9</sup>One might wonder whether the AfD should be instead subsumed under the category 'extreme right-wing party'. We do not make such subsumption as the party was particularly in its early years subject to constant change and power struggles between the more moderate and the right-wing faction. This has fuelled scientific and public debate over the party's ideological position, its electorate's profile, and different developments in East and West Germany (Arzheimer, 2023; Bücker et al., 2019; Heitmeyer, 2018; Kleinert, 2018; Pfahl-Traughber, 2019). Thus, it is difficult to subsume it under the same category as the NPD, which is clearly characterized by an extreme degree of antisemitism, racism and xenophobia and even shows readiness to use violence. Of course, the AfD and its electorate have continued to move towards more radical and even extreme right-wing positions in recent years (Vehrkamp 2021). While this may call for an analysis with data for the most recent years, the basic point remains that categorizing the AfD as an extreme right-wing party in its early years is a highly controversial issue.
- <sup>10</sup>To assess the credibility of our data, we also considered information on party preferences contained in the European Social Survey (ESS). We used the German subsample and pooled the waves 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016 and 2018. To obtain a sample similar to our estimation sample, we focused on workers with a German citizenship in private firms with at least 10 employees. This exercise with the ESS showed a similar pattern as the SOEP. 46.27 per cent of the male workers ( $N = 4,513$ ) and 55.60 per cent of the female workers ( $N = 3,694$ ) had no party preferences at all.
- <sup>11</sup>Of course, in the end, the question of whether there exists a self-selection issue can only be answered empirically. On the one hand, one may call into question if a self-selection of workers plays a role in our context. The presence of a works council is not a decision made by the individual worker. It depends on the decision of the workforce and this decision is influenced by firm characteristics such as firm size or firm age (Jirjahn, 2009; Jirjahn & Smith, 2006). On the other hand, workers are more or less mobile and decide about the firm they work for. Hence, individual worker characteristics can influence the sorting into firms with works councils (Jirjahn & Lange 2015). In a similar vein, the direction of a possible self-selection bias is not clear from a theoretical viewpoint and can only be answered empirically. The impact of works council representation will be overestimated in a random effects regression if there are unobserved time-invariant factors that influence sorting into works council firms and party preferences positively or negatively in the same direction. The impact will be underestimated if the unobserved time-invariant factors influence sorting into works council firms and party preferences in opposite directions.
- <sup>12</sup>Thus, the number of observations may differ across the fixed effects estimations for the various parties.
- <sup>13</sup>Control variables are included in the regressions, but are suppressed to save space. See the Online Appendix Tables A2–A8 for the full results. As shown in the tables, we dropped some explanatory variables with relatively low within-variation from the specification of the fixed effects regressions to improve estimability. As a check of robustness, we also estimated the random effects model with the same reduced specification. This exercise did

not change our key pattern of results. The results of this robustness check are available from the authors upon request.

<sup>14</sup> Taking into account that the magnitude of the estimated coefficient in the random effects model is less strong than the one in the fixed effects model, we may interpret the marginal effect of the random effects regression as a lower bound. This reasoning also applies to the marginal effects of the works council variable in the regressions for the SPD and the extreme right-wing parties.

<sup>15</sup> As the variable for gender is time-invariant, we only provide estimations using the random effects model.

<sup>16</sup> As Kleinert (2018, p. 13; translation by the authors) puts it: 'While the term right-wing populism is despite its pitfalls and vagueness still somewhat justifiable in the context of the AfD, the usage of terms such as "extreme right-wing", "racist" or "neo-Nazism" has to be at least weighed as careless. Up to now, absolutely no evidence has been provided of a placement of the AfD in the tradition of the German National Socialism. Those who interpret the AfD's fundamental criticism of the government's asylum and migration policy or the verbal attacks of single representatives against refugees along these categories, run intellectually the danger of contributing to a trivialization of the racist delusion of destruction and extinction'.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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