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Safeguarding or sidestepping? The centre-right, the minimum wage, and collective bargaining autonomy in the German and Italian low-wage s ectors

MPIfG Discussion Paper, No. 26/2

Provided in Cooperation with:
Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies (MPIfG), Cologne

Suggested Citation: Cova, Joshua; Marenco, Matteo (2026) : Safeguarding or sidestepping? The centre-right, the minimum wage, and collective bargaining autonomy in the German and Italian low-wage s ectors, MPIfG Discussion Paper, No. 26/2, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, Cologne,
https://doi.org/10.17617/2.3718195

This Version is available at:
https://hdl.handle.net/10419/343055

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MPIfG Discussion Paper 26/2
Max-Planck-Institut für Gesellschaftsforschung, Köln
Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, Cologne
May 2026
DOI: 10.17617/2.3718195

MPIfG Discussion Paper
ISSN 0944-2073 (Print)
ISSN 1864-4325 (Internet)

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Abstract

Opposition to statutory minimum wages by right-of-centre parties has typically been framed around employment externalities. Yet in Germany before the adoption of a statutory minimum wage, and in Italy today, right-of-centre parties have often invoked a different rationale: defending collective bargaining autonomy against state interference. In this paper, we investigate how centre-right parties in both countries have engaged with collective bargaining while each facing a specific scenario: declining coverage in Germany, and weakened representativeness in Italy. Examining recent policy proposals such as linking public procurement to collective bargaining agreements or regulating union representativeness, we find that these measures were largely opposed by the centre-right. A quantitative text analysis of parliamentary debates further reveals a strategic use of collective bargaining discussions by centre-right parties: In Germany, salience peaked before the statutory minimum wage was introduced but fell sharply thereafter, while collective bargaining gained prominence discursively for the Italian centre-right only in conjunction with the minimum wage debate. Complemented by stakeholder interviews and electoral data analysis, our findings suggest that this trend reflects ideological as well as electoral dynamics, as centre-right parties draw on significant support from small business owners in sectors with weak collective bargaining. Appeals to bargaining autonomy thus function less as substantive commitments than as instruments to preserve the status quo in the low-wage sector.

Keywords: collective bargaining, low-wage sector, minimum wage, quantitative text analysis

Zusammenfassung

Die Ablehnung gesetzlicher Mindestlöhne durch Mitte-rechts-Parteien wird meist mit möglichen negativen Beschäftigungseffekten begründet. In Deutschland vor der Einführung des Mindestlohns und im heutigen Italien griffen diese Parteien jedoch häufig auf ein anderes Argument zurück: den Schutz der Tarifautonomie vor staatlichen Eingriffen. In diesem Beitrag untersuchen wir, wie Mitte-rechts-Parteien in beiden Ländern mit der Tarifpolitik umgegangen sind, wobei sie mit unterschiedlichen Ausgangslagen konfrontiert waren – einer rückläufigen Tarifbindung in Deutschland und einer geschwächten Repräsentativität der Tarifparteien in Italien. Die Analyse aktueller Reformvorschläge, etwa zur Bindung öffentlicher Auftragsvergabe an Tarifverträge oder zur Regulierung der gewerkschaftlichen Repräsentativität, zeigt, dass solche Maßnahmen von Mitte-rechts-Parteien überwiegend abgelehnt werden. Eine quantitative Textanalyse parlamentarischer Debatten macht zudem deutlich, dass Verweise auf Tarifautonomie strategisch eingesetzt werden: In Deutschland gewann das Thema kurz vor der Einführung des Mindestlohns stark an Bedeutung, verlor danach jedoch deutlich an Salienz, während es für das italienische Mitte-rechts-Lager erst im Kontext der Mindestlohndebatte diskursiv an Gewicht gewann. Ergänzt durch Interviews mit zentralen Akteuren sowie eine Analyse von Wahldaten legen die Ergebnisse nahe, dass diese Muster sowohl ideologisch als auch wahlstrategisch motiviert sind. Mitte-rechts-Parteien stützen sich in erheblichem Maße auf Kleinunternehmer in Branchen mit schwacher Tarifbindung. Der Rekurs auf Tarifautonomie erweist sich daher weniger als Ausdruck einer konsistenten politischen Position denn als Mittel zur Stabilisierung bestehender Strukturen im Niedriglohnsektor.

Schlagwörter: Mindestlohn, Niedriglohnsektor, Quantitative Textanalyse, Tarifverträge

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Safeguarding or Sidestepping? The Centre-Right, the Minimum Wage, and Collective Bargaining Autonomy in the German and Italian Low-Wage Sectors

1 Introduction

When Italy's right-of-centre government declined to introduce a statutory minimum wage in 2024, it justified its decision by asserting that such a measure would endanger trade unions' collective bargaining autonomy and, by extension, jeopardize the collective bargaining system as a whole. This argument bears striking similarity to that advanced by the German Christian Democrats (CDU) and the economically liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) before the introduction of a statutory minimum wage in Germany ten years prior. Faced with an increasingly large low-wage sector and declining collective bargaining coverage, the CDU and FDP likewise justified their opposition to a statutory wage floor on the grounds that it would infringe upon the social partners' constitutionally protected wage-setting autonomy and thus amount to undue state interference.

Such arguments might seem puzzling, as conservative parties' resistance to state intervention in labour regulation has typically not been linked to a desire to defend collective bargaining autonomy but to concerns associated with the potential negative employment externalities the introduction of a statutory minimum wage could bring (Meyer 2016; Franko and Witko 2017). Historically, protecting collective bargaining autonomy has been a priority for social democratic parties. Indeed, in many countries, those parties' close relationship with trade unions has led them to oppose government minimum wage legislation on the grounds that state intervention in statutory wage minima could undermine unions' wage bargaining autonomy (Meyer 2016; Ahlquist 2017).

This paper considers the puzzle of why right-of-centre parties in Germany and Italy have vigorously defended the collective bargaining autonomy of the social partners when confronted with the prospect of introducing a statutory minimum wage, a policy measure that had (or could have had) radical consequences for the political economy of the two countries' low-wage sectors. In this paper, we map out the discourse of right-of-centre parties on the statutory minimum wage to investigate how those parties have positioned themselves on collective bargaining autonomy in the recent past and what incentives they might have to maintain the status quo in the low-wage sector. We focus not only on the statutory minimum wage but also on other policies, such as the linking of public procurement tenders to collective bargaining agreements and the introduction of measures with clearer criteria for determining which unions can be deemed to be truly representative of the workforce. Expanding the scope to these policies is relevant in that it allows us to empirically scrutinize the positioning of right-of-centre parties on policies that could have strengthened collective bargaining coverage and trade

union autonomy in the low-wage sector and, consequently, could have helped to avert the need to introduce a statutory minimum wage.

Despite their long-standing involvement in wage-setting practices and labour market regulation, German and Italian trade unions have in the recent past experienced structural weaknesses in their collective bargaining systems. Therefore, they stand out as compelling cases. In Germany, collective bargaining coverage continues to decline, and employers' associations have often disengaged from collective bargaining altogether (Müller and Schulten 2019; Günther and Höpner 2023). Italy, meanwhile, despite exhibiting nominally high collective bargaining coverage rates, faces a proliferation of collective bargaining agreements signed by non-representative unions ('pirate contracts'), which has raised questions about union representativeness and compliance particularly among small and medium-sized enterprises in economic sectors with a high incidence of low-wage work (Garnero 2017; Lucifora and Vigani 2021). This, along with the country's comparatively high in-work poverty rate, has made the introduction of a statutory minimum wage an increasingly debated policy. Thus, even though the specific problems they face differ, unions in both countries have found themselves institutionally weakened and more dependent on political support to achieve their policy goals, in the form of higher collective bargaining *coverage* (in Germany) and greater collective bargaining *representativeness* (in Italy). This makes it essential to study the support (or lack thereof) that political parties offer social partners in enabling them to engage in collective bargaining, especially in the low-wage economic sectors where collective bargaining tends to be at its weakest.

By examining how centre-right parties have articulated their positions vis-à-vis collective bargaining in Germany and Italy, this study makes a series of contributions. First, it addresses the relatively underexplored interactions between the centre-right and trade unions, a topic largely overshadowed by research on unions and the centre-left (Rueda 2005; Allern and Bale 2017). Second, it shifts the analytical focus away from how party–union interactions influence the articulation of specific labour market policies – such as unemployment insurance (Clegg, Heins, and Rathgeb 2022) or active labour market policies (Emmenegger 2014) – to analyze instead how party–union relationships strengthen or weaken collective bargaining. Indeed, while unions may enjoy *de jure* collective bargaining autonomy, governments can *de facto* strengthen or weaken this autonomy through concrete policy actions (Kjellberg 2009).

Importantly, we embed our analyses of the centre-right and collective bargaining in the broader political economy of low-wage work in Germany and Italy. As documented in microdata from German and Italian labour force surveys, collective bargaining tends to be especially fragile in non-offshorable sectors characterized by a high incidence of in-work poverty and low-wage employment, such as construction, accommodation, and food services – precisely the areas in which the introduction of a statutory minimum wage could have the greatest impact (Giesselmann 2015; Bavaro and Raitano 2024). Situating centre-right parties' approaches to collective bargaining autonomy within the

wider political economy of the low-wage sector is crucial to understand why these parties have defended social partners' weakened wage-setting autonomy when confronted with the potential introduction of a statutory minimum wage.

The paper proceeds as follows: We first review the political science and industrial relations literature on parties, unions, and collective bargaining autonomy, with a particular focus on Germany and Italy. We then consider two complementary mechanisms that may help explain how right-of-centre parties articulate their positions on the statutory minimum wage and collective bargaining autonomy: an *ideological* explanation and an *electoral* explanation. The first focuses on uncovering the centre-right's positioning on the statutory minimum wage and collective bargaining autonomy as reflected in the discursive explanations and justifications adopted by it. To explore this dimension, we analyze parliamentary debates in Germany and Italy since the early 2000s. Our quantitative text analysis reveals that, while centre-left parties historically devoted more attention to the statutory minimum wage and collective bargaining, centre-right parties in Germany gave collective bargaining autonomy unusually high prominence in parliamentary debates in the years preceding the introduction of a statutory minimum wage. This is mirrored by the parliamentary behaviour of right-wing parties in Italy, which only discussed collective bargaining prominently when the minimum wage became a publicly salient policy. However, when confronted with concrete legislative measures, which enjoyed the support of trade unions and could have led to an expansion of collective bargaining coverage or enhanced trade union representativeness in economic sectors with a high incidence of low-wage work, centre-right governments often blocked or diluted them, favouring market-oriented approaches that offered greater employer discretion.

These findings lead us to focus on what we term the *electoral* explanation. Using survey data on voter preferences, we analyze the socio-economic composition of centre-right voters, by profile and sector of employment, in order to assess the extent to which these parties' positions are conditioned by the nature of their electoral support. Our analysis of electoral preferences shows that centre-right parties perform particularly well among small business owners and shopkeepers in economic sectors where collective bargaining is weak. Finally, we complement our analysis with a series of interviews with centre-right politicians and trade union officials in Germany and Italy.

2 Literature review

In Western Europe, the foremost political interlocutors of trade unions have historically been social democratic parties. A vast scholarship in industrial relations and political science has traced the evolution of the relationship between social democratic parties and trade unions across national contexts (Korpi 1978; Rueda 2005; Refslund and Arnholtz 2022). By the late twentieth century, however, their strong relationship had be-

come increasingly strained due to globalization, the progressive embrace of 'Third Way' market-oriented reforms by social democratic parties, and socio-demographic shifts in social democratic voter profiles (Huo 2009).

The relationship between right-of-centre parties and trade unions has received comparatively less attention in the literature. Existing research, often based on country-specific case studies, has primarily focused on the adversarial dynamics between trade unions and right-wing populist parties (Meardi, Simms, and Adam 2021). While in some European countries (e.g. Hungary and Poland, characterized by more liberal labour markets) the relationship between trade unions and right-of-centre governments has often been confrontational, in others, particularly those with strong corporatist traditions, it has been less antagonistic (Rathgeb and Klitgaard 2022).

Beyond examining the broader relationship between trade unions and political parties, existing research has also explored how interactions between them influence policy outcomes. Across several European democracies, party–union interactions have historically explained different outcomes in labour market policy, particularly in corporatist countries, where unions have played an institutionally enshrined role in policymaking (Emmenegger 2014; Jensen 2011). A policy area that illustrates the extent to which trade unions and political parties shape different policy outcomes is the administration of unemployment insurance through the Ghent system, in which unions are responsible for managing unemployment benefits. Where political conditions have supported the continuation of this model, research has shown that union density and collective bargaining coverage have tended to remain high (Schnabel 2013). Conversely, political interventions restricting union-administered unemployment insurance have been linked to declining union power and lower collective bargaining coverage (Kjellberg 2009). Crucially, government policy can thus create either a supportive or a hostile environment for trade unions, which, in turn, can strengthen or weaken their influence on the labour market.

In recent decades, however, declining collective bargaining coverage across many European countries has made unions increasingly reliant on state support. It is therefore crucial to embed the actions of unions and the preservation of collective bargaining systems in the study of the state's role in employment relations. While state intervention in employment relations was rather limited in the post-war era across many European countries, neoliberal labour market reforms beginning in the 1980s caused a fundamental shift in the relationship between the state and social partners. While neoliberalism is typically associated with market deregulation and reduced state involvement in economic affairs, in the sphere of industrial relations, neoliberal reforms weakened collective bargaining institutions and concomitantly increased the state's role in regulating employment relations (Piore and Safford 2006; Howell 2021). Yet it is not only the regulation of working conditions that has entered the legislative domain. In many countries, the expansion of low-wage employment has prompted governments to intervene in wage-setting by introducing statutory minimum wages. As the German case demonstrates, this form of state intervention has emerged in response to the fundamental

weakness of collective bargaining in economic sectors with a high incidence of in-work poverty (Marx and Starke 2017).

While collective bargaining autonomy is constitutionally enshrined and enjoys broad levels of cross-partisan support in Germany, the past decades have demonstrated that the real issue for trade unions lies not in changes to the existing collective bargaining framework, but rather in the erosion of its coverage. Here, *institutional drift* has been identified as a key explanatory mechanism (Thelen 2009; Baccaro and Howell 2017). Institutional drift captures how inertia can be as consequential as deliberate institutional reform, particularly in contexts where the goodwill and continued participation of the social partners are crucial to sustain the effectiveness of collective bargaining institutions. In Germany, employers have used the discretion afforded to them within the existing collective bargaining framework to increasingly opt out of collective bargaining agreements. Consequently, the erosion of collective bargaining in Germany is not the result of targeted reform but has rather been found to reflect a failure of maintenance.

Institutional drift can be observed in Italy too. Like in Germany, the collective bargaining system is structurally unaltered and constitutionally protected, yet this conceals some significant changes. Italian unions historically relied on encompassing agreements covering wide segments of the workforce. As the labour market became more fragmented and precarious, however, the past few decades have witnessed the emergence of collective bargaining agreements signed by non-representative unions, with pay rates often significantly lower than those offered by 'established' unions (Lucifora and Vigani 2021). Therefore, although Italy's collective bargaining system has not undergone notable institutional change, unions' collective bargaining autonomy has been much eroded, especially in the low-wage sector.

The upshot of social partners' weakened autonomy is that politics and partisanship now play a far more central role in regulating labour markets and in sustaining industrial relations (Beramendi et al. 2015). In several countries, faced with declining membership and reduced bargaining power, social partners are increasingly dependent on legislative intervention and state support to regulate employment relations.

While debates persist over whether partisanship continues to play a decisive role in shaping labour market policies, the mechanisms underlying how parties articulate their positions can be thought of as falling into two *complementary* areas (Beramendi et al. 2015; Zohlnhöfer and Voigt 2021). The first is *ideological*: Right-of-centre parties may advocate for economically liberal agendas in line with their core beliefs regarding the benefits of limited state intervention and free markets. The second is *electoral*: Policy choices are likely also influenced by the electoral composition of parties' voter bases and preferences of their key constituencies. For instance, as documented by Bürgisser and Kurer (2021), social democratic parties may expand or reduce employment protection legislation depending on the extent to which their electoral support is driven by labour market outsiders or insiders. In this vein, Bulfone and Tassinari (2021) have illustrated

how the class composition of party electorates played a key role in explaining variations in Southern European countries' implementation of labour market reforms during the eurozone crisis. The interplay between electoral considerations and ideological tendencies can thus be indicative of the extent to which political parties are inclined to support specific policies in the labour market.

3 Case selection

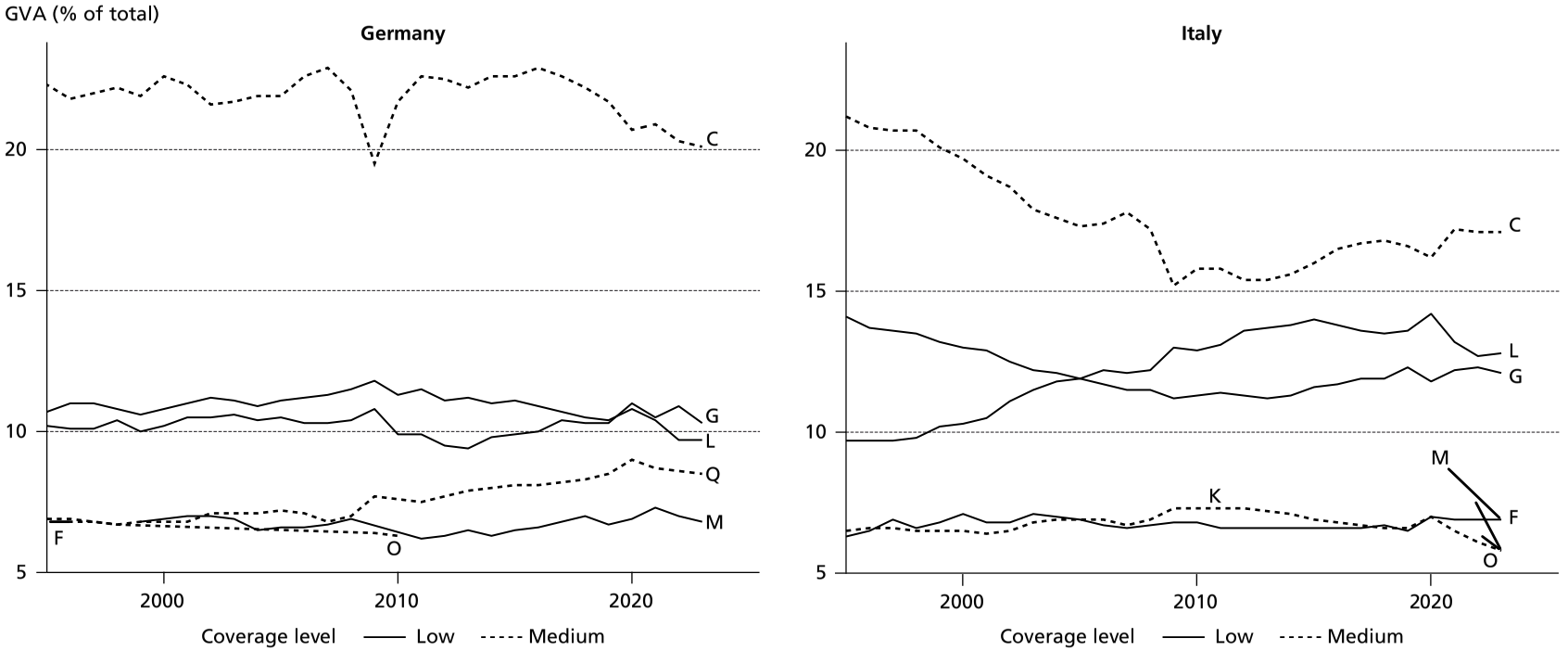
By selecting Germany and Italy as our case studies to examine the political preferences of the centre-right, the statutory minimum wage, and the collective bargaining autonomy of social partners in the low-wage sector, we focus on two countries that exhibit structural and institutional similarities in their industrial relations systems and in the political economy of low-wage work. As discussed earlier, both countries have seen their collective bargaining systems becoming increasingly weak. While these weaknesses have manifested differently, in both cases they have been most pronounced in low-wage sectors.

These shifts in industrial relations are deeply intertwined with the economic structures of the two countries. As shown in Figure 1, a significant share of gross value added in each economy stems from sectors characterized by low collective bargaining coverage. Notably, the presence of a large, deregulated low-wage sector has played a central role in sustaining wage restraint and lowering labour costs, which have been key elements in the success of Germany's export-oriented growth model (Höpner and Lutter 2018). Although Italy has sought to emulate this model of export-driven competitiveness grounded in wage moderation (Baccaro and Bulfone 2022), research has noted that tourism-led growth, which depends heavily on low-wage employment in the accommodation, food services, and real estate sectors, has significantly contributed to the economies of Southern European countries, and to Italy's in particular (Bürgisser and Di Carlo 2023).

As Figure 2 illustrates, the economic sectors with low collective bargaining coverage are also the sectors in which a large share of the workforce is employed in micro firms and SMEs. While such firms are often described as forming the economic backbone of both Germany and Italy (Signoretti 2016; Bellman et al. 2021), it is more challenging for social partners to ensure effective collective bargaining within them.

The similarities between the two economies extend beyond their productive structures and are also apparent in the economic sectors where in-work poverty is prominent. In Italy, in-work poverty has been steadily rising (Bavaro and Raitano 2024), with the highest incidence among workers in construction, accommodation and food services, and other personal service sectors. Comparable findings emerge for Germany, where studies show that in-work poverty is also concentrated in these sectors (Giesselmann 2015; Brülle et al. 2019).

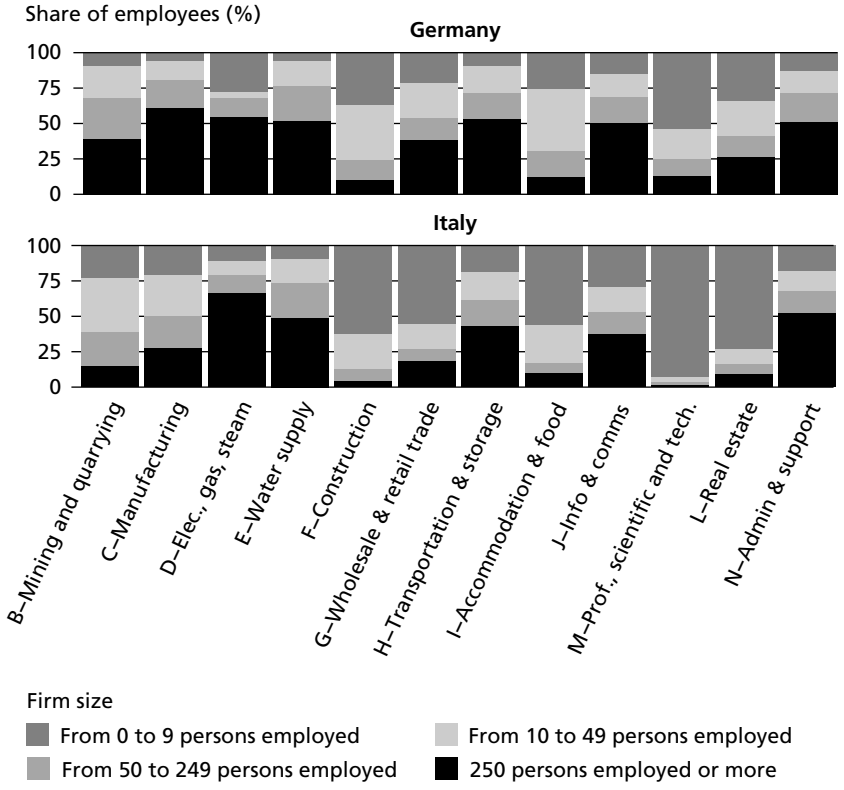
Figure 1 Gross value added by industry and coverage level (top 5 economic sectors)



Data: Eurostat.

B Mining and quarrying
C Manufacturing
D Electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply
E Water supply, sewerage, waste management and remediation activities
F Construction
G Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles
H Transportation and storage
I Accommodation and food service activities
J Information and communication
K Financial and insurance activities
L Real estate activities
M Professional, scientific and technical activities
N Administrative and support service activities
O Public administration and defence; compulsory social security
Q Human health and social work activities

Figure 2 Share of employees by firm size in Germany and Italy



Source: Annual Enterprise Statistics by Size Class for Special Aggregates of NACE Rev. 2 Activities (2005–2020).

The two countries' shared characteristics – namely, the structure of their productive sectors, the sectoral incidence of low-wage employment, and similar trends in collective bargaining decline – justify the selection of Germany and Italy as comparative case studies. However, differences exist on a party-political dimension, as reflected in the ideological orientations of their main centre-right parties, which have dominated government policy in both countries for many years. Notably, these parties differ on the socio-cultural axis. Moreover, the relationship between right-of-centre parties and trade unions has historically been more adversarial in Italy than in Germany, where union–state relations have tended to be less politicized (Crouch 1993; Streeck and Hassel 2003). Nonetheless, despite these socio-cultural divergences, the centre-right in Germany and in Italy display notable similarities along the economic left–right axis (Figure A1 and Appendix). Furthermore, although their interactions with trade unions differ, their positions on the statutory minimum wage and on policies supporting collective bargaining reveal some striking parallels, as we will illustrate below.

Germany

Throughout the post-war period, the collective bargaining autonomy (*Tarifautonomie*) of Germany's social partners was a cornerstone of the country's labour market and industrial relations system. This constitutional arrangement reflects a formal division of responsibilities between social partners, with sector-level collective bargaining agreements serving as the primary mechanism for regulating labour relations and wages.

From the early 2000s, however, structural and policy-driven changes began to undermine the country's collective bargaining system. German reunification, intensified global competition, and the spread of outsourcing and offshoring practices among employers eroded unions' bargaining power vis-à-vis employers. The consequential Hartz labour market reforms (2003 to 2005) liberalized and deregulated employment by tightening unemployment benefits, promoting non-standard forms of work, and granting employers greater discretion in wage bargaining and employment protection matters (Baccaro and Howell 2017). Furthermore, a growing number of companies joined employers' associations without being bound by collective agreements (*OT-Mitgliedschaft*), thus accelerating the decline of collective bargaining coverage rates (Paster, Oude Nijhuis, and Kiecker 2020).

These developments fuelled the expansion of a substantial low-wage sector, particularly in low-skilled service industries such as hospitality, retail, and logistics, where collective bargaining coverage is weak (Hassel, Knudsen, and Wagner 2018). Growth in temporary agency work, mini-jobs, and other precarious forms of employment deepened segmentation between unionized, well-protected sectors and poorly protected, low-wage segments of the labour market. This made the statutory minimum wage a more palatable policy option. Even though major political and economic actors had long argued against it and professed their preference for collective bargaining autonomy, diminishing collective bargaining coverage rates, the danger of being outpriced by the increasingly large non-unionized low-wage sector, and public dissatisfaction with existing levels of inequality led trade unions to change their calculus on state intervention in wage-setting (Mabbett 2016; Marx and Starke 2017).

Initially, the Christian Democrats voiced concerns over the potential negative employment externalities of a minimum wage. Nonetheless, taking their cue from what would soon become their Social Democrat coalition partners, the CDU/CSU revised their position in the early 2010s by arguing in favour of extending collective bargaining agreements and introducing wage floors in sectors where social partners were unable to reach agreement. In doing so, CDU/CSU leaders were careful to point out that they were not in favour of 'a political minimum wage'. Since its contested beginnings in 2015, the statutory minimum wage in Germany has not only enjoyed widespread public support but also become a highly politicized policy.

While the political salience of the statutory minimum wage as well as its socio-economic impact has continued to increase, collective bargaining coverage rates have continued to fall. By 2022, collective bargaining coverage had declined from 73 percent in 1998 to 51 percent, with particularly low rates observed in eastern Germany and in the service sectors.

In response, trade unions have pushed for reforms that could strengthen collective bargaining coverage, including simplifying the legal process for extending collective agreements to non-signatory employers (Müller and Schulten 2019; Günther and Höpner 2023). Although statutory mechanisms for extending collective agreements do legally exist, they often fail due to employers' opposition to state intervention in wage-setting (Paster, Oude Nijhuis, and Kiecker 2020). Another much debated policy option for increasing collective bargaining coverage through state legislation has been the awarding of public procurement contracts only to companies adhering to collective bargaining agreements (Sack and Sarter 2018; Arnholtz et al. 2025). The goal is to prevent public procurement decisions being driven solely by cost-minimization concerns. Given the decline in collective bargaining coverage rates, public procurement has thus been viewed as an instrument for raising collective bargaining coverage, with supporters proposing that the use of labour clauses in public contracts could increase wages and improve working conditions. While trade unions and centre-left parties have viewed public procurement as a way to strengthen collective bargaining coverage, right-of-centre parties have, as we will see, tended to be more sceptical, citing concerns about excessive bureaucracy and violations of free market principles.

Italy

Italy's collective bargaining system took shape after the end of Fascism. A major concern of the post-war years was how to minimize state intervention in work regulation. This resulted in an industrial relations system characterized by high levels of voluntarism and autonomy among the social partners (Crouch 1993). As a result, no statutory minimum wage or *erga omnes* sectoral extension of collective agreements were introduced. While the Italian Constitution foresees such an extension, the country's social partners and political parties have historically been loath to apply it, fearing that it would translate into a loss of bargaining autonomy in favour of more state intervention.

Nonetheless, sectoral extension of wage levels has been guaranteed via court rulings based on the interpretation of existing constitutional and Civil Code provisions. The Constitution establishes that 'workers are entitled to remuneration commensurate with the quantity and quality of their work, and in any case sufficient to ensure to them and their families a free and honourable existence'. Most rulings have defined 'sufficient' with reference to the most applied collective agreement of the sectors. Moreover, the Civil Code prescribes that judges can set wages in the absence of a collective agreement (Meardi and Seghezzi 2025).

The system of de facto extension via court judgements explains the very high and stable collective bargaining coverage, applying to nearly 100 percent of the Italian workforce according to OECD data. One limitation of such an arrangement, however, is that judicial interpretations do not create binding precedents and are subject to change. Furthermore, the proliferation of small trade unions and often not representative collective bargaining agreements has weakened judicial enforcement as incentives to adopt less protective agreements have grown (Orlandini and Meardi 2023). This is noticeable in the explosion of pirate contracts stipulated by non-representative bargaining parties, which has engendered race-to-the-bottom dynamics and a fragmentation in labour standards (Lucifora and Vigani 2021).

Such structural shortcomings, coupled with comparatively high levels of in-work poverty, involuntary part-time work, and long-standing real wage stagnation, have challenged the autonomy of collective bargaining institutions. This made the introduction of a statutory minimum wage a politically salient topic at the turn of the 2010s (Saraceno, Benassi, and Morlicchio 2020). Currently, the right-wing government led by Brothers of Italy (FDI) opposes the introduction of a minimum wage as the policy is seen as impinging on collective bargaining autonomy, thus constituting undue interference in the wage-setting process traditionally negotiated by social partners. Proponents of a statutory minimum wage, however, have viewed it as a necessary corrective to rising in-work poverty and the proliferation of pirate contracts, which are estimated to affect approximately half a million workers (Dustmann et al. 2025).

Central to this debate is the question of representativeness; that is, which unions can be considered sufficiently representative of the workforce to legitimately conclude collective bargaining agreements that are binding and broadly applicable. Consequently, political parties and social partners have also discussed a 'law on representativeness', which would put a brake on the development of pirate contracts by establishing objective criteria to determine which social partners are representative and therefore which agreements are legitimate to be applied. All major trade unions seem to agree that such legislation could strengthen union representativeness and especially support collective bargaining in low-wage sectors.[1]

4 Research design and methodology

Our analysis of the centre-right's stance on the statutory minimum wage and collective bargaining in the low-wage sector approaches these issues from two complementary perspectives. The first is the *discursive* or *ideological* channel, which captures how centre-right

1 See Federico Chirico's article 'Correttivo Codice Appalti Pubblici: La Posizione dei Sindacati' in *Bollettino ADAPT* on December 11, 2024.

parties articulate and justify their positions. The second is the *electoral* channel, which aims to explain why these parties adopt particular positions in light of the socio-economic composition of their electorates. We explore these dimensions by employing distinct empirical strategies and drawing on diverse data sources and methodological approaches.

To examine the discursive politics of the statutory minimum wage and collective bargaining in Germany and Italy, we leverage modern computational techniques in the field of text-as-data to analyze how Italian and German right-of-centre parties have discussed the statutory minimum wage and collective bargaining autonomy in parliamentary debates, which can provide an 'unfiltered' window into policymakers' perceptions and preferences. For the Italian case, we use the *ItaParlCorpus* dataset (Cova 2025), an annotated database recording all parliamentary debates in the Italian Parliament's Lower House between 1948 and 2022. For Germany, we rely on the *Open Discourse* database, an annotated corpus of the Bundestag's parliamentary protocols (Richter et al. 2023).

Thanks to our systematic quantitative text analysis of a large corpus of parliamentary data, we can explore both the *salience* of and the *context* in which parliamentarians discussed the statutory minimum wage and collective bargaining. To analyze the context of these discussions, we employ natural language processing (NLP) techniques, specifically word embeddings, to examine how the contextual meaning and framing of discussions on these policies vary across parties and over time. In a word embedding analysis, the co-occurrence of certain words in a document and their distribution in a text can be exploited to derive broader insights into the role of specific words for distinct actors. If words are assigned a unique numeric score, word embeddings can be representative of the locations of different words in a multi-dimensional semantic space. The proximity of certain words to others can therefore be indicative of the *context* in which words are used in discourse. When words are represented numerically, as embeddings, it is thus possible to detect underlying patterns in how different groups discuss a common policy. For our application, we use the minimum wage as the keyword and examine the embeddings used in the context of this policy discussion. In doing so, we aim to gain insights into how the words that are closest to our keyword differ across party lines (i.e. centre-left vs. centre-right). This allows us to systematically map the discourse employed by right-of-centre policymakers for the statutory minimum wage.

We conduct our text analysis on a corpus of parliamentary speeches within the timeframe 2000 to 2022. Given the political prominence of the statutory minimum wage in Germany and Italy, the corpus of parliamentary texts discussing the policy is quite large (N=3,897). The size of the corpus enables us to draw on large-scale automated quantitative content analysis techniques to analyze policymakers' positions. However, as the other policies we explore in this paper have received comparatively less parliamentary attention from policymakers, we additionally conduct a *qualitative* analysis of parliamentary speeches that is designed to tease out the most important discursive aspects mentioned by centre-right politicians. While the analysis of text data can provide us with an understanding of how collective bargaining and the minimum wage are discussed,

it fails to reveal the causal links that explain why policymakers position themselves as they do. We thus complement insights gained from our quantitative data analysis with semi-structured interviews of politicians and trade union officials (N=6) to help us understand the *ideological* mechanisms underpinning our quantitative findings.

Finally, to uncover potential *electoral* explanations, we draw on data from the European Social Survey (ESS) to analyze whether the electoral composition of the centre-right electorate can shed light on these parties' policy positions on collective bargaining autonomy, especially in economic sectors with a high incidence of low-wage employment.

5 Mapping the discourse of right-of-centre parties on the minimum wage and collective bargaining

We begin our analysis by examining the frequency with which German and Italian parliamentarians discussed the statutory minimum wage and collective bargaining in parliamentary debates. We operationalize this *salience* by calculating the proportion of parliamentary speeches devoted to these specific issues relative to all speeches made by each party group (Figures 3 and 4). The results show that the salience of the statutory minimum wage and collective bargaining in both countries is demarcated by clear party-political dynamics, with centre-left parties emerging as the primary 'issue owners'. In the case of Italy, the statutory minimum wage has become significantly more salient in recent years, a trend that has also been linked to the introduction of the EU Adequate Minimum Wage Directive.

While this analysis highlights the extent to which parliamentary debates on the two policies is predicated upon party-political dynamics, it does not yet consider the broader context in which these discussions have taken place. We now address this question through the word embedding analysis introduced earlier, specifically by employing word embeddings to identify the words most uniquely associated with each party group in discussions of the statutory minimum wage (see Table A1 in the Appendix for how parties have been aggregated within broader party groups). This approach allows us to isolate terms that appear most distinctively alongside the keyword in different party groups. In the Italian case, we focus on the keywords that most clearly distinguish the discourse of centre-right parties from that of centre-left parties in parliamentary discussions of the statutory minimum wage.[2] For Germany, given that a statutory minimum wage was introduced in 2015, we further subdivide the word embedding analysis into two periods: *before* and *after* its introduction.

2 Given the pro-minimum wage stance of the Five Star Movement (M5S), in this analysis we include the party in the category 'left-wing parties'. While the positioning of the M5S on the left–right spectrum has been widely debated, one of the group's most discernible left-leaning characteristics has been its advocacy for pro-outsider social policies, a stance that has drawn comparisons with other European parties aligned with the 'new left' movement (Carella and Marenco 2022).

Figure 3 Parliamentary salience of minimum wage (MW) and collective bargaining (CB) in the Italian parliament, clustered by party family

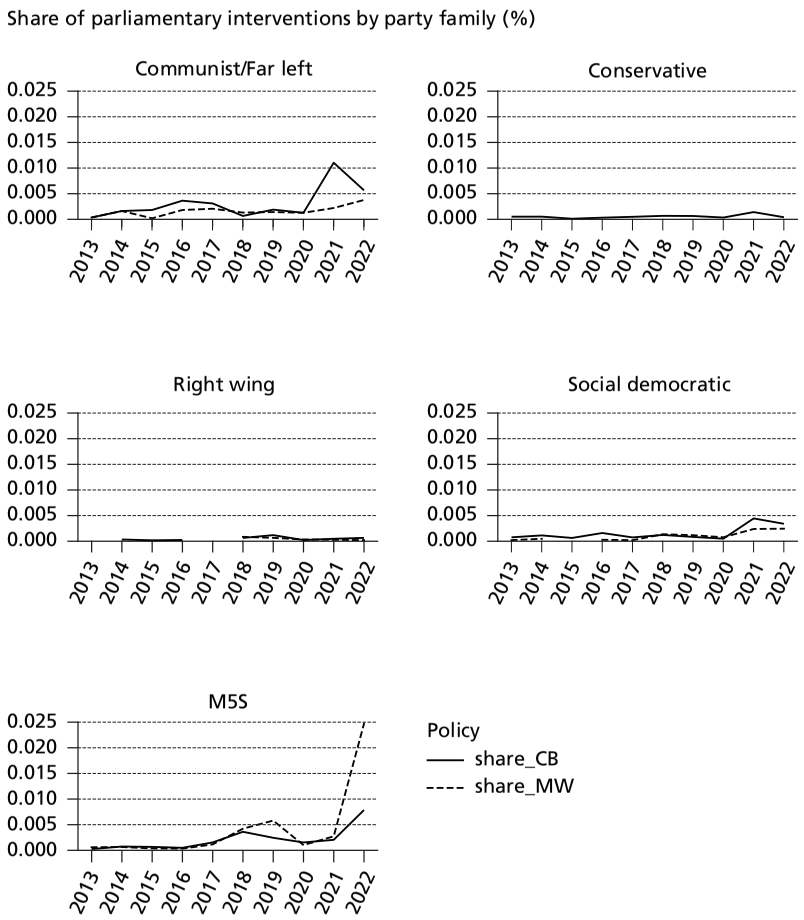
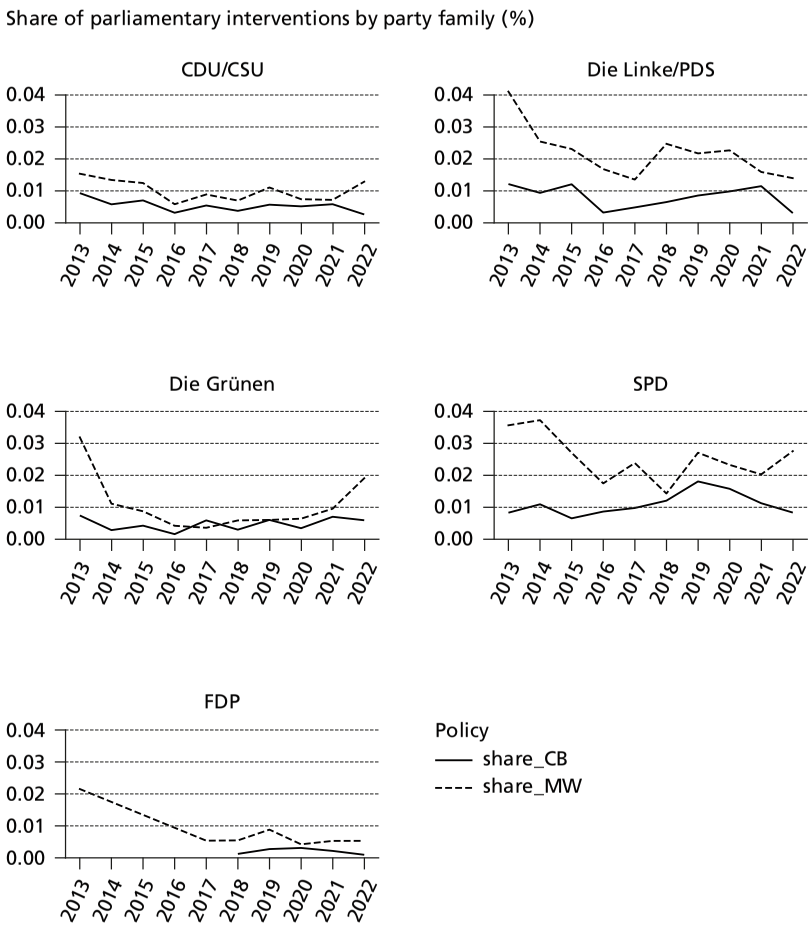
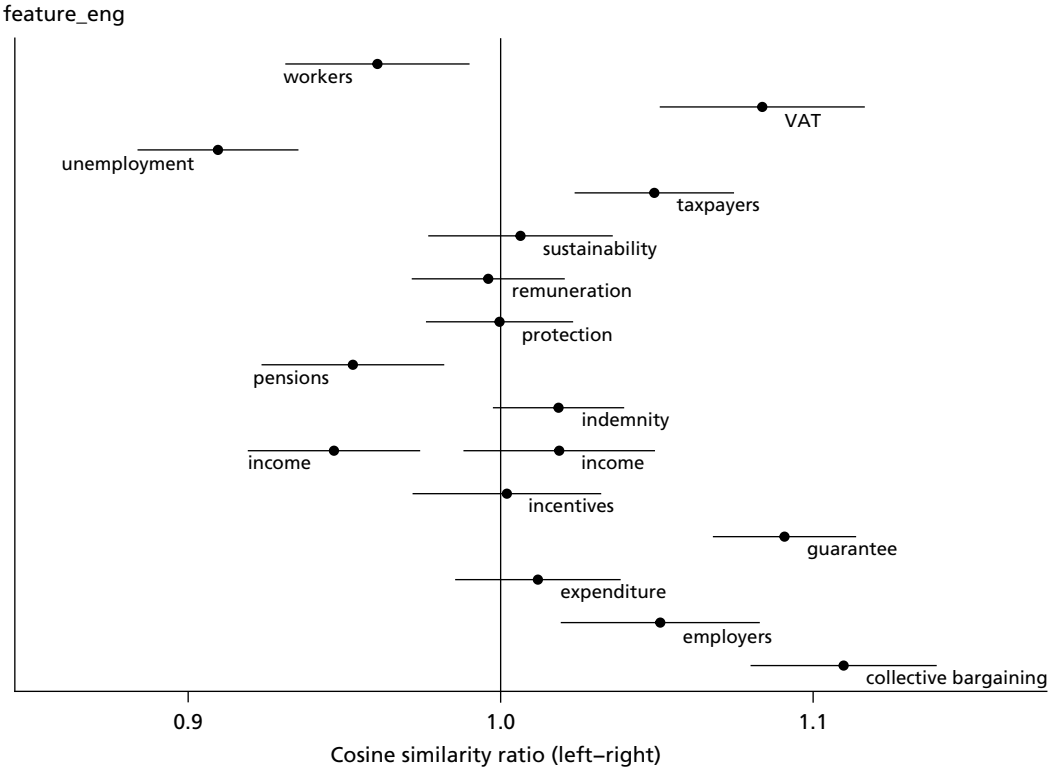


Figure 4 Parliamentary salience of the minimum wage (MW) and collective bargaining (CB) in the German parliament, clustered by party family



Figures 5 and 6 illustrate that discourse on the minimum wage exhibits pronounced party-political differences in the Italian case, as indicated by the number of words (*features*) exclusively associated with each party group. Our quantitative text analysis shows that, for left-of-centre parties, the terms most uniquely linked to discussions of the statutory minimum wage are broadly connected to workers' rights ('workers', 'unemployment'). The discourse of Italian right-of-centre parties diverges markedly. While these parties, as expected, tend to discuss the minimum wage in the context of taxation and employers' interests, it is notable that for them the most distinctive term is 'collective bargaining'.

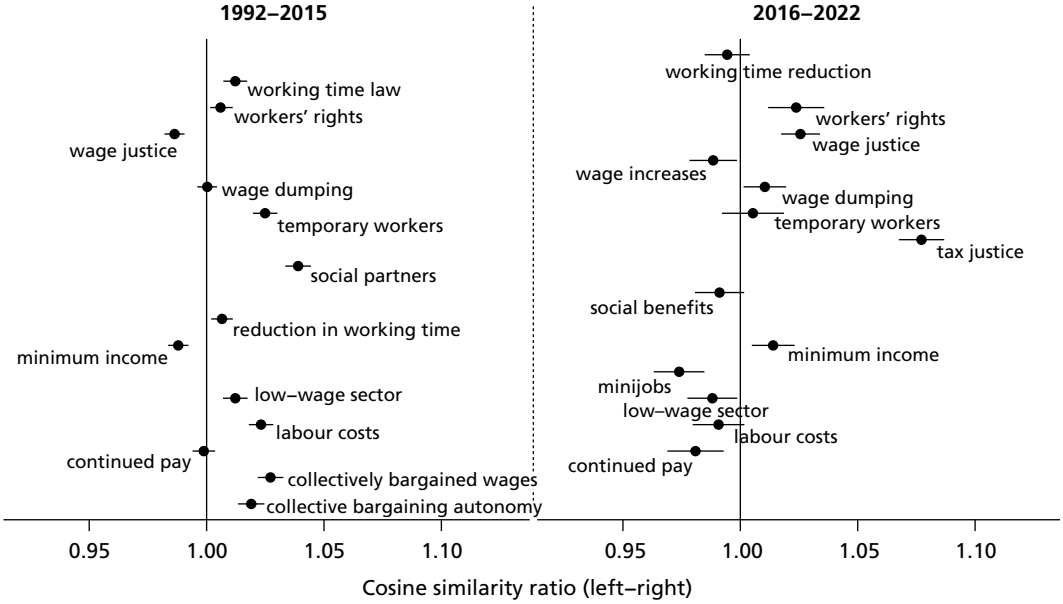
Figure 5 Word embedding analysis for Italian policymakers' parliamentary interventions on the statutory minimum wage



Notes: Confidence intervals are reported. Terms that overlap the vertical axis (1.00) are indistinguishable between the two groups. The further a term is from the vertical axis, the more distinctive it is for the respective 'camp'.

In the German case, prior to the introduction of the statutory minimum wage in 2015, the terms most closely associated with right-of-centre parties' discourse on the statutory minimum wage centred on collective bargaining agreements and the social partners' collective bargaining autonomy. After 2015, however, the very same parties focused instead on themes such as tax justice and labour costs, issues that have traditionally been close to Germany's centre-right agenda. This shift suggests that the emphasis on safeguarding collective bargaining autonomy diminished once a statutory minimum wage was in place, and gave way to more 'standard' concerns about employment externalities

Figure 6 Word embedding analysis for German policymakers' parliamentary interventions on the statutory minimum wage



Notes: Confidence intervals are reported. Terms that overlap the vertical axis (1.00) are indistinguishable between the two groups. The further a term is from the vertical axis, the more distinctive it is for the respective 'camp'.

and competitiveness. Our initial quantitative text analysis thus offers large-scale empirical evidence for the puzzling observation highlighted at the outset; namely, that in discussing the statutory minimum wage, right-of-centre parties in Germany and Italy have emphasized collective bargaining autonomy. This position, however, is at odds with the historical salience of collective bargaining in centre-right party discourse.

6 Legislative support for collective bargaining: Public procurement and union representativeness

As illustrated above, the introduction of a statutory minimum wage in Germany was largely driven by the limited collective bargaining coverage in low-wage sectors. Since extensive collective bargaining coverage can act as a 'functional equivalent' to a statutory minimum wage in mitigating low-wage work (Pedersen and Picot 2023), it is important to assess the policy positions of centre-right parties in our two country case studies on other legislative measures that could have strengthened collective bargaining in the low-wage sector. As previously outlined, the challenges facing trade unions in the German and Italian low-wage sectors stem from their distinct contexts. While the central issue in Germany is declining collective bargaining coverage, in Italy it is that collective

bargaining autonomy – understood as the authority and representational strength of 'established' trade unions – has been increasingly undermined by the proliferation of pirate contracts in the low-wage sector. Trade unions in both countries have been active proponents of legislative actions that governments could take to bolster the coverage and representativeness of collective bargaining. We will focus on two of these: awarding public procurement contracts only to contractors adhering to collective bargaining agreements, and introducing legislation that sets out quantitative criteria to determine which unions can be deemed representative.

In Germany, until the 2025 coalition agreement between the CDU/CSU and the SPD, under which the governing parties committed to introduce a federal law to ensure compliance in public tendering procedures with collective bargaining agreements (*Tariftreuegesetz*), party positions on labour clauses in public procurement were clearly defined. Left-of-centre parties, aligned with trade unions, argued that legislation linking the awarding of public contracts to firms adhering to collective bargaining agreements would strengthen bargaining coverage, curb wage dumping, and reduce in-work poverty. Opposition, voiced primarily by the CDU/CSU and FDP, rested on claims that linking public procurement to collective agreements would disproportionately disadvantage economically weaker eastern German states, impose excessive bureaucratic burdens – particularly on SMEs – and risk exacerbating unemployment.[3] Critics further maintained that such measures could restrict competition, deter investment, raise costs and, especially in sectors such as construction, even lead to bankruptcies. Beyond these economic arguments, centre-right opposition frequently stressed the need to protect SME owners, with CDU politicians in particular warning that additional bureaucratic requirements would effectively exclude SMEs from being awarded public procurement contracts altogether.[4] Interestingly, however, following the introduction of a statutory minimum wage, the discourse shifted: Opponents increasingly argued that federal legislation on labour clauses was unnecessary, as introduction of the minimum wage had already addressed the issue of low-wage employment in the (sub-)contracting of public procurement work.

Given that partisanship appears to shape support for legislative interventions aimed at strengthening collective bargaining in Germany, we now turn to the Italian case to examine the positions of centre-right parties on union representativeness and public procurement reform. The current right-of-centre Italian government has rejected the introduction of a statutory minimum wage, arguing that wage-setting is the prerogative of the social partners. However, proponents of the minimum wage have argued that the increased proliferation of pirate contracts signed by non-representative unions undermines collective bargaining, which therefore needs to be reinforced via legislation.

3 Werner Kuhn (CDU): 'Mit der Verabschiedung Ihres Tariftreuegesetzes werden Sie erreichen, dass ostdeutsche Bauunternehmen überhaupt keine Chance mehr haben, sich am öffentlichen Wettbewerb in den alten Bundesländern zu beteiligen' (2012).

4 Thomas Jarzombek (CDU): 'Wir in Nordrhein-Westfalen sind gebrannte Kinder durch Tariftreuegesetze, die den Mittelständlern und gerade den kleinen Mittelständlern so viel bürokratisches Blei ans Bein binden, dass kein kleines Unternehmen mehr Aufträge bekommen kann' (2017).

Recent government proposals have, however, moved in a different direction. Under current proposals, a representative collective bargaining agreement would not be defined by quantitative indicators of union representativeness among the workforce but by whether it is the most widely applied agreement in a given sector.[5] Critics have however warned that this approach would allow firms to coordinate around an economically convenient collective bargaining agreement, which in turn would allow it to become the most widely applied. The growth in the number of agreements in the past years, many of which can be presumed to be pirate contracts, has opened up this possibility. Although the expansion of pirate contracts has accelerated since the eurozone crisis and added a sense of increased urgency to the issue of union representativeness, centre-right parties have historically opposed legislative interventions in this area, instead advocating for a pluralist and competitive model of trade unionism grounded in free market principles. This is also rooted in the traditionally adversarial relationship between centre-right parties and the major confederal unions, reflecting the rather politicized nature of party–union relations in Italy (Carrieri 2014).

In more recent times, trade unions in Italy have also criticized the government's proposed revisions to the public procurement code (Codice Appalti), which would substantially expand the discretion of contracting authorities in selecting which collective bargaining agreement to apply.[6] Under proposals advanced by transport minister Matteo Salvini, contracting entities would be granted greater flexibility in choosing the applicable agreement. The reform package additionally introduces a new requirement mandating that at least 20 percent of subcontracting be reserved for small, medium, and micro enterprises.

7 Exploring the electoral dimensions

Our text analysis of parliamentary discourse and overview of policy proposals has shed light on what we have termed the 'ideological' channel; however, we suspect that the position of the centre-right on collective bargaining is also likely to be motivated by the specific socio-economic profiles of the electoral groups that typically support centre-right parties. Empirical research on voting intentions has documented that centre-right parties garner significant support among SME business owners and shopkeepers (Oesch and Rennwald 2018; Bulfone and Tassinari 2021). We complement this perspective by focusing on how such support is modulated by the strength of collective bargaining in

5 See Senato della Repubblica, 'Deleghe al Governo in materia di retribuzione dei lavoratori e di contrattazione collettiva nonché di procedure di controllo e informazione; Disposizioni per l'istituzione del salario minimo', last updated September 23, 2025. https://www.senato.it/export/ddl/full/58520

6 See, for example, Carlo Ruggiero's article on Collettiva.it, 'Il Far West degli Appalti', of December 5, 2024.

Table 1 Collective bargaining coverage rate by economic sector in Germany (SES data, 2018)

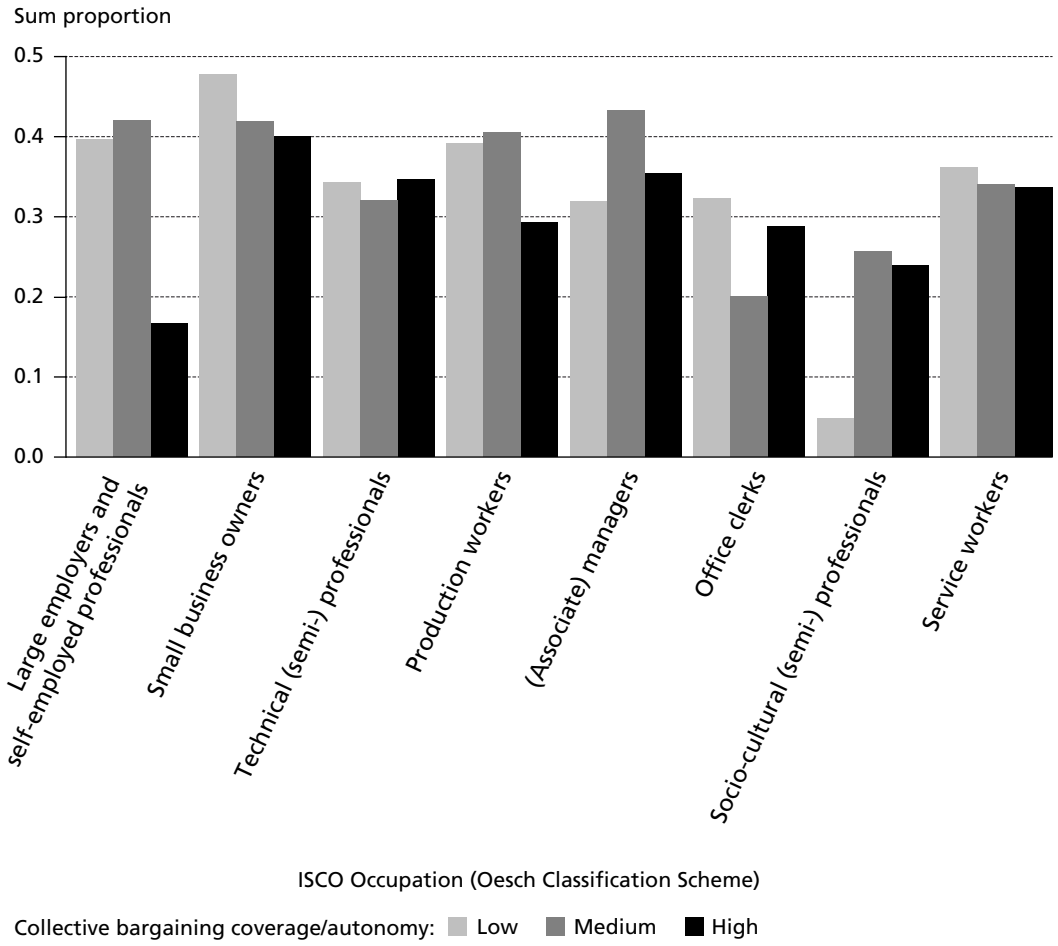
Economic sector (NACE Rev. 2)	Collective bargaining coverage rate	Category
Agriculture, forestry and fishing (A) Construction (F) Wholesale and retail trade (G) Transportation and storage (H) Accommodation and food service activities (I) Information and communication (J) Arts, entertainment and recreation (R) Real estate activities (L) Professional, scientific and technical activities (M) Other service activities (S)	<40%	Low
Manufacturing (C) Mining and quarrying (B) Administrative and support service activities (N) Water supply, sewerage, waste management and remediation activities (E) Human health and social work activities (Q)	>= 40% & <=60%	Medium
Electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply (D) Financial and insurance activities (K) Public administration and defence; compulsory social security (O) Education (P)	>60%	High

the economic sectors in which voters are employed. This allows us to address the question of whether SME business owners and shopkeepers employed in sectors with low collective bargaining coverage are particularly likely to vote for the centre-right.

To assess which sectors have low collective bargaining coverage, we employ data from Eurostat's Structure of Earnings Survey (SES), which has indicated that certain economic sectors are more likely than others to exhibit low levels of collective bargaining coverage. Drawing on the SES data for Germany (Table 1), we categorize economic sectors into three groups according to their collective bargaining coverage: low (<40 percent), intermediate (40–59 percent), and high (≥60 percent). It is not possible to apply this categorization directly to Italy, given that collective bargaining coverage in the country is generally considered to encompass the entire workforce. Rather, as we have seen, issues around the Italian collective bargaining system relate less to *coverage* than to collective bargaining *representativeness*. Secondary analyses, however, suggest that many of the same economic sectors identified as having low coverage in Germany, most notably agriculture and construction, are also those in Italy that are most affected by dysfunctionalities, particularly, as discussed, the proliferation of pirate contracts (Leonardi 2018; Lucifora and Vigani 2021).

Building on this tripartite classification of economic sectors, we examine how voters employed in sectors with varying degrees of collective bargaining are inclined to support centre-right parties, and how this relationship is shaped by socio-economic class. To investigate this, we draw on data from the European Social Survey (ESS), using as our dependent variable the survey item 'Which party do you feel closest to?'. We pool

Figure 7 Vote intention by socio-economic class and economic sector of employment (Italy)

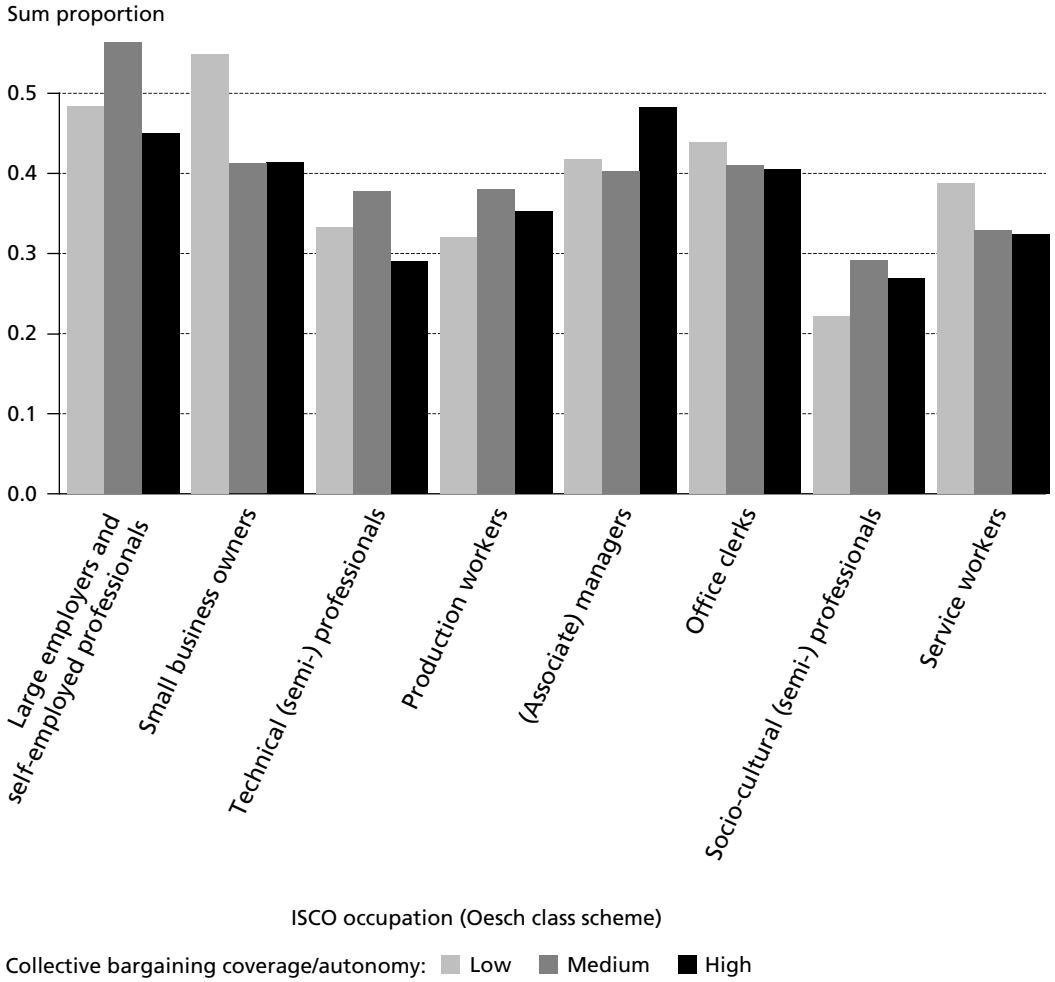


Data: European Social Survey (Waves 6–11).

data from waves 6–11 and compute averages across survey rounds. To capture the socio-economic profile of respondents, we employ Oesch's eightfold social class schema (Oesch 2006; Oesch and Rennwald 2018; Bulfone and Tassinari 2021), which enables a disaggregation of the social class composition of party electorates.

While comparative and country-specific studies on voter preferences in Italy and Germany have shown that centre-right parties perform particularly well among certain socio-demographic groups, such as small business owners and shopkeepers (Elff and Rossteutscher 2011; Burroni, Pavolini, and Regini 2022), our analysis focuses on examining whether this pattern varies depending on the economic sectors in which these typically right-leaning voters are employed, as distinguished by the relative strength of collective bargaining. Our descriptive findings (Figures 7 and 8) based on ESS data for Germany and Italy indicate that small business owners employed in sectors with *low collective bargaining* coverage are especially supportive of centre-right parties, underscoring the importance of accounting for the sectoral dimension in explaining why

Figure 8 Vote intention by socio-economic class and economic sector of employment (Germany)



Data: European Social Survey (Waves 6–11).

right-of-centre parties seemed to have favoured the status quo in economic sectors with a particularly high incidence of low-wage work in Germany and Italy.

To further interrogate these findings, we conducted interviews with key stakeholders, namely centre-right elected representatives, with particular expertise in labour market and industrial relations, as well as with trade union representatives (see Appendix for details).

One Italian interviewee, a parliamentarian of the governing FDI party, acknowledged the paradox of collective bargaining and the autonomy of social partners being prominent in right-of-centre discourse while historically having been a domain associated with the political left. The interviewee nevertheless emphasized that FDI aspires to represent both capital and labour interests. From this perspective, its defence of collective bargaining autonomy is consistent with its broader ideological positioning. Further, the

interviewee argued that a statutory minimum wage would constitute unnecessary state intervention in an area traditionally reserved for independent negotiation between social partners, and could in fact weaken collective bargaining by reducing incentives to renew existing agreements.

A comparable rationale emerged in our interviews with members of Germany's CDU/CSU, including members of parliament and a labour minister from a major state government. CDU/CSU representatives expressed concern that statutory wage-setting could politicize the minimum wage debate, potentially fostering 'populist' policymaking, and maintained that state intervention in determining minimum pay standards risks undermining the autonomy of collective bargaining actors. Interestingly, trade union leaders we interviewed noted that the centre-right's vocal defence of collective bargaining autonomy was not matched by their support for complementary measures that might in fact strengthen collective bargaining institutions, such as public procurement reforms. Trade union officials in both countries suspected that the centre-right's refusal to intervene legislatively in the area of minimum wages had more to do with a desire to preserve a status quo advantageous to the growth models favoured by the centre-right than with any normative commitment to social partnership.

8 Conclusion

In countries where collective bargaining enjoys high levels of autonomy, its resilience as a framework for wage-setting and employment relations relies not only on historical legacies and existing institutional and legal frameworks but also on continued engagement between social partners. When this engagement weakens, political actors become increasingly important in maintaining it. In this context, party strategies around collective bargaining autonomy become a key determinant, which can help explain patterns of institutional resilience or erosion.

While explicit state interventions, such as legislative reforms targeting union-administered unemployment benefits (Kjellberg 2009) or measures that decentralize wage bargaining (Rathgeb and Tassinari 2022), can weaken collective bargaining systems, erosion may also occur through institutional drift. Although institutional drift in wage-setting has contributed to the emergence of a low-wage sector with a functional role in supporting economic sectors that contribute significantly to gross value added in Italy and Germany, the increasing fragmentation of collective bargaining has also pushed in-work poverty and state involvement in wage-setting practices to the centre of the political debate. It is in this context that our paper has examined how centre-right parties in Germany and Italy have positioned themselves on the statutory minimum wage and collective bargaining autonomy, especially in the low-wage sector.

In both countries, centre-right parties have opposed the introduction of a statutory minimum wage, claiming that state intervention would undermine the autonomy of social partners. This stance is puzzling given that defending collective bargaining autonomy has historically been associated with social democratic parties. As we have argued, however, given the social partners' weakness in economic sectors with a high incidence of low-wage work, the position is tantamount to maintaining the status quo. Our empirical analysis has sought to map out this paradox as well as offer potential explanations for it.

By conducting a quantitative text analysis of a large corpus of parliamentary debates in Germany and Italy, we have found that while collective bargaining autonomy has historically been more salient in left-wing party discourse, centre-right parties discuss the topic primarily in connection with minimum wage debates. In Germany, this became especially clear after the introduction of the statutory minimum wage in 2015; while it was frequently discussed by centre-right parliamentarians in the context of collective bargaining before its introduction, centre-right rhetoric shifted away from collective bargaining issues towards more 'conventional' topics, such as taxation and labour costs, thereafter. This seems to suggest that collective bargaining becomes salient mainly when the salience of the statutory minimum wage increases, thus suggesting that the topic is used *instrumentally*.

Prior to the introduction of the statutory minimum wage in Germany, and in Italy to date, right-of-centre parties have opposed state intervention, instead emphasizing the importance of collective bargaining between the social partners. However, if collective bargaining continues to be the most adequate solution to address the issue of in-work poverty, which is what a minimum wage aims to address, what other legislative measures can be introduced to maintain the resilience of collective bargaining? In this paper, we have focused on examining how right-of-centre policymakers have discussed two policy solutions: tying public procurement tenders to CBAs in Germany, and introducing a law on union representativeness in the Italian case. While centre-right parties blocked these measures, our qualitative analysis has found that they justified their opposition with reference to bureaucratic burdens and excessive state interference, particularly for micro enterprises and SMEs.

We have sought to explain this pattern through two complementary mechanisms: an *ideological-discursive* channel and an *electoral* channel. Ideologically, centre-right parties tend to prioritize the preservation of existing institutional arrangements out of concern that state intervention could impose excessive requirements, particularly on micro enterprises and SMEs operating in sectors such as construction and food and accommodation, thus harming economic competitiveness. As we have seen, these sectors contribute significantly to the two countries' gross value added and overall employment, especially in micro firms and SMEs. Electorally, the centre-right's position aligns with the interests of its core constituencies, small business owners and shopkeepers, who generally benefit from greater wage flexibility. Analysis of ESS data supports this link:

While small business owners and shopkeepers display a higher propensity to vote for the centre-right, this tendency is particularly strong among those employed in sectors with low collective bargaining coverage, such as agriculture and construction.

Taken together, our findings suggest that the centre-right's invocation of collective bargaining autonomy does not necessarily signify renewed support for the collective bargaining autonomy of the social partners, but rather a strategic use of traditional labour institutions to justify resistance to new regulatory instruments such as a statutory minimum wage. Policy inaction and a lack of legislative intervention in wage-setting or collective bargaining can, in this sense, serve as a means of preserving existing distributions of power and resources, rather than promoting forms of renewal. Defending collective bargaining autonomy therefore does not necessarily reflect a commitment to social partnership; rather, it represents a form of defence of the status quo: a way to legitimize non-intervention while protecting the economic and political interests embedded in existing arrangements that are the result of a combination of ideological convictions and electoral interests.

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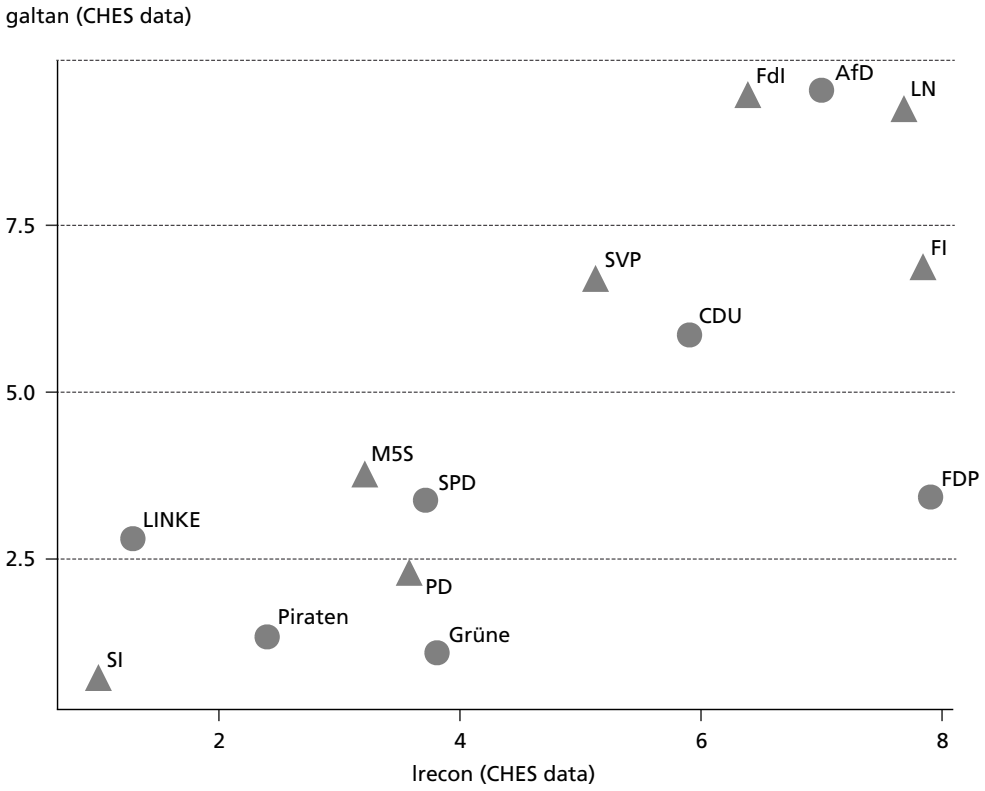
Appendix

List of interviewees

1. CDU politician and labour minister of a German state government, October 18, 2024; in person
2. CDU Member of Parliament, October 18, 2024; online
3. Former CDU Member of Parliament and current representative of a large employers' organization, August 5, 2024; online
4. Member of Parliament (Fratelli d'Italia), October 1, 2024; online
5. Board member of the German Trade Unions organization (DGB), September 18, 2024; in person
6. Italian trade union spokesperson on the minimum wage, October 10, 2024; online

Placement of German and Italian political parties on left–right economic and socio-cultural dimensions

Figure A1 The ideological scaling of German and Italian parties



Notes: Circles = German parties; triangles = Italian parties. The x-axis represents the left–right economic dimension, and the y-axis the GAL-TAN scale (GAL: Green-Alternative-Libertarian and TAN: Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist).
Source: Chapel Hill Expert Survey.

Political party aggregation

Table A1 Political party aggregation by party family for Italy

Political party	Party family
Movimento Sociale Italiano	Right-wing
Lega Nord	Right-wing
Lista Pannella	Others
Partito Socialista Italiano	Social democratic
Federazione dei Verdi	Others
Democrazia Cristiana	Christian democratic
Partito Socialista Democratico Italiano	Social democratic
Partito Repubblicano Italiano	Liberal
Partito della Rifondazione Comunista	Communist/Far-left
Partito Liberale Italiano	Liberal
Partito Democratico della Sinistra	Social democratic
Union Valdotaine	Others
Movimento per la Democrazia – La Rete	Christian democratic
Südtiroler Volkspartei	Others
Liga Lombarda	Others
Liga Veneta	Others
Others	Others
Government	Government
Polo del Buon Governo	Conservative
Alleanza Nazionale	Right-wing
Polo delle Liberta	Conservative
Alleanza dei Progressisti	Social democratic
Forza Italia – Il Popolo della Libertà	Conservative
Patto per l'Italia	Christian democratic
Partito Popolare Italiano	Christian democratic
Patto Segni	Christian democratic
Lega d'Azione Meridionale	Right-wing
Centro Cristiano Democratico/Cristiani Democratici Uniti	Christian democratic
Unione / Centro	Christian democratic
L'Ulivo	Social democratic
Polo per le Liberta	Conservative
Popolari per Prodi	Christian democratic
Lista Dini – Rinnovamento Italiano	Liberal
Democrazia Libertà – La Margherita	Liberal
Casa delle Liberta	Conservative
Democratici di Sinistra	Social democratic
Democrazia Cristiana per le Autonomie	Christian democratic
Rosa nel Pugno	Social democratic
Partito dei Comunisti Italiani	Communist/Far-left
Italia dei Valori	Liberal
Unione Democratici per l'Europa	Christian democratic
L'Unione-Prodi	Social democratic
Movimento per l'Autonomia	Christian democratic
Partito Democratico	Social democratic
Partito Comunista Italiano	Communist/Far-left
Scelta Civica	Liberal
Movimento 5 Stelle	M5S
Centro Democratico	Liberal
Sinistra Ecologia Liberta	Communist/Far-left
Fratelli d'Italia	Right-wing

Table A1, continued

Associativo Italiani all'Estero	Others
USEI	Conservative
Radicali	Social democratic
+Europa	Liberal
Centrosinistra	Social democratic
Lega	Right-wing
Centrodestra	Conservative
MAIE	Others
SVP-PATT	Others

Table A2 Political party aggregation at the macro level (Germany and Italy)

Country	Party family/Party	Macro category
Germany	FDP, CDU/CSU	Right-wing
	SPD, Grüne, Linke	Left-wing
Italy	Right-wing, Conservative, Christian democratic, Liberal	Right-wing
	Social democratic, M5S, Communist/Far-left	Left-wing

Classification of social classes

Table A3 Oesch's eight class schema, with illustrative typical occupations (Oesch 2006)

		Work logic			
		Independent work logic	Technical work logic	Organizational work logic	Interpersonal work logic
Level of marketable skills	(Associate) professional/ managerial	**Large employers and self-employed professionals** Firm owners Lawyers Dentists	**Technical (semi-) professionals** Engineers Technicians Computer scientists	**(Associate) managers** Business administrators Consultants Tax officials	**Socio-cultural (semi-) professionals** Journalists Teachers Social workers
	Vocational/ low-skilled	**Small business owners** Shopkeepers Farmers Artisans	**Production workers** Machine operators Assemblers Agricultural labourers	**Office clerks** Secretaries Receptionists Bank tellers	**Service workers** Waiters Shop assistants Care workers

Table A4 Average proportion of centre-right vote share by social class and collective bargaining coverage per macro-economic sector for Germany (ESS Waves 6–11)

Social class	Collective bargaining coverage per macro sector	Average proportion
Large employers and self-employed professionals	High	0.452
Large employers and self-employed professionals	Low	0.486
Large employers and self-employed professionals	Medium	0.566
Small business owners	High	0.416
Small business owners	Low	0.551
Small business owners	Medium	0.414
Technical (semi-) professionals	High	0.292
Technical (semi-) professionals	Low	0.334
Technical (semi-) professionals	Medium	0.380
Production workers	High	0.354
Production workers	Low	0.322
Production workers	Medium	0.382
(Associate) managers	High	0.485
(Associate) managers	Low	0.420
(Associate) managers	Medium	0.404
Office clerks	High	0.407
Office clerks	Low	0.441
Office clerks	Medium	0.412
Socio-cultural (semi-) professionals	High	0.270
Socio-cultural (semi-) professionals	Low	0.223
Socio-cultural (semi-) professionals	Medium	0.293
Service workers	High	0.325
Service workers	Low	0.390
Service workers	Medium	0.330

Table A5 Average proportion of centre-right vote share by social class and collective bargaining coverage per macro-economic sector for Italy (ESS Waves 6–11)

Social class	Collective bargaining coverage per macro sector	Average proportion
Large employers and self-employed professionals	High	0.167
Large employers and self-employed professionals	Low	0.396
Large employers and self-employed professionals	Medium	0.420
Small business owners	High	0.400
Small business owners	Low	0.478
Small business owners	Medium	0.419
Technical (semi-) professionals	High	0.346
Technical (semi-) professionals	Low	0.343
Technical (semi-) professionals	Medium	0.320
Production workers	High	0.293
Production workers	Low	0.391
Production workers	Medium	0.405
(Associate) managers	High	0.354
(Associate) managers	Low	0.319
(Associate) managers	Medium	0.433
Office clerks	High	0.288
Office clerks	Low	0.323
Office clerks	Medium	0.201
Socio-cultural (semi-) professionals	High	0.239
Socio-cultural (semi-) professionals	Low	0.048
Socio-cultural (semi-) professionals	Medium	0.257
Service workers	High	0.336
Service workers	Low	0.362
Service workers	Medium	0.340

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