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Varieties of trade unions and support for redistribution

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ABSTRACT
Many studies of cross-national survey data find that union members are more likely to be supportive of redistributive policies than respondents who are not union members. Analysing British, German and Swedish survey data, this article demonstrates that the union membership effect on support for redistribution varies depending on the kinds of unions to which individuals belong. Regardless of their own income, wage-earners who belong to unions whose membership encompasses a wide swath of the income distribution tend to be more supportive of redistribution than members of unions that are less inclusive. This suggests that the decline of union membership among poorly paid wage-earners—a common trend across OECD countries—has more far-reaching implications for the politics of redistribution than commonly recognised.

In most OECD countries, union density has declined sharply since the 1980s. Less commonly recognised, the socio-economic characteristics of union members have changed as union membership has held up better in the public sector than in the private sector and, relatedly, has held up better among white-collar employees than among workers. There are good reasons to suppose that de-unionisation has contributed to declining political participation among low-income citizens and that inequality of participation helps explain the apparent reluctance of democratically elected governments to compensate low- and middle-income households for rising top income shares. This article focuses on another mechanism whereby unionisation and the characteristics of unions might affect the politics of compensatory redistribution, viz., the effect of union membership on the policy preferences of politically active citizens.[1]

Studies of preferences for redistribution that include union membership as an explanatory variable invariably find that respondents who identify themselves as union members are more likely to support redistribution than other respondents, controlling for income and other socio-demographic characteristics (e.g. Mosimann and Pontusson 2017; Yang and Kwon 2021). Seeking to contribute to this literature, we explore how the characteristics of unions condition the effects of union membership on support for redistribution. Our core hypothesis is that the union membership effect is bigger for individuals who belong to unions that primarily organise low-wage workers than for individuals who belong to unions that primarily organise high-wage workers.

In what follows, we motivate our core hypothesis and then present the results of three complementary analyses. To begin with, we analyse British survey from 1974, showing that that members of general and sectoral unions were more supportive of redistribution than members of occupational unions in the mid-1970s. Secondly, we analyse support for redistribution among Swedish white-collar employees based on survey data for 1986-2001. Distinguishing between members of sectoral unions affiliated with TCO and occupational unions affiliated with SACO, we find that the former were significantly more egalitarian than the latter in the period covered by our analysis. Thirdly, we explore the effects of the 2001 union merger that created Ver.di, Germany's second largest union, with data from the European Social Survey (ESS). This analysis suggests that Ver.di members became more supportive of redistribution in the 15 years following the merger and that this was particularly true for Ver.di members who came from constituent unions that were less low-wage inclusive prior to the merger.

The social and political contexts of our three case studies are clearly very different. In our view, this makes for an attractive combination, allowing us to draw on the logics of both research designs identified by Przeworski and Teune (1970). Taken by themselves, each of our case studies represents a most-similar-system design in that we compare members of different types of unions while holding constant variables pertaining to the national and temporal context. At the same time, the three case studies taken together amount to something akin to a most-different system design. As Przeworski and Teune teach us, observing predicted associations between variables across very different contexts should increase our confidence in the theory on which the predictions are based.

Theoretical framework

We hypothesise that there are two potential effects of belonging to a trade union on individual preferences for redistributive policy: an enlightenment effect and a solidarity effect. Assuming that union

membership is a source of knowledge about the distribution of income and one's relative position therein, the enlightenment hypothesis holds that union members are better able to calculate whether they stand to gain from redistribution than non-members. The solidarity hypothesis, by contrast, proceeds from the proposition that self-interest alone does not explain support for redistribution and posits that there are effects of union membership that operate through 'other-regarding motives' (Rueda and Stegmueller 2019). The most intuitive formulation of this hypothesis holds that high-wage workers who belong to a union that encompasses low-wage workers will, to some extent, take the latter's interests into account when they form policy preferences, but solidarity could also work the other way around: union membership may lead unskilled workers to feel affinity with skilled workers and embrace the idea that wage differentials fairly reward investment in skills (and perhaps work effort as well). On the simple assumption that individuals in the bottom half of the income distribution stand to benefit from redistribution while individuals in the upper half do not stand to gain, we propose to operationalise the enlightenment effect of union membership as the difference in support for redistribution between union and non-union survey respondents in the lower half of the income distribution and to operationalise the solidarity effect of union membership as the difference in support for redistribution between union and non-union respondents in the upper half of the income distribution

Enlightenment and solidarity may be a result of political discussions among union members at the workplace (Iversen and Soskice 2015). It is also plausible to suppose that information provided by unions and arguments that they advance, in public media as well as newsletters and meetings directly targeted to their members, shape the preferences of union members by promoting self-interested rationality and (or) egalitarian norms.[2] These mechanisms are not mutually exclusive and there is no obvious reason why we must choose between them, but contemporary unions are not 'close-knit communities' and we should allow for the possibility that union membership influences the preferences of individuals who do not participate actively in the union to which they belong.

It is a common rhetoric of local as well as national union leaders that solidaristic policies serve the collective interests of all workers and that such policies will benefit high-wage workers over the long run by strengthening the 'worker collective.' In a similar vein, union rhetoric typically challenges the market-liberal notion of a trade-off between equality and economic growth and union leaders often argue that wage solidarity promotes productivity growth by removing the 'cheap labour option' (Swenson 1989).

Whether it occurs through interactions among union members or through information and arguments diffused by unions, the solidarity effect of union membership presupposes that unions organise workers with different skill levels and earnings. For the sake of argument, suppose that there are ten unions, and that each union exclusively organises workers in a specific income decile. In this scenario, we would not expect there to be any solidarity effect associated with union membership. Assuming that unions consistently enlighten their members, and that the benefits (or costs) of redistribution are strictly a function of relative income, we would expect union members in lower deciles to be more supportive of redistribution than their non-union counterparts and union members in higher deciles to be less supportive of redistribution than their non-union counterparts.

While solidarity features in the rhetoric and practices of most unions, unions differ in how broadly they conceive the scope of solidarity and the extent to which they conceive of solidarity in terms to redistributing income (or earnings), as distinct from, for example, defending rights of (other) workers vis-à-vis their employer. Much of this variation can be explained, we think, by the distribution of union members across the income distribution. On the assumption that egalitarian union practices and rhetoric are a function of the extent to which union leaders depend on the support of workers who stand to benefit from redistribution, we expect unions that primarily organise low-wage workers to emphasise wage solidarity and redistribution to a greater extent than unions that primarily organise high-wage workers. By the logic of enlightenment, membership in low-wage-inclusive unions should be associated with support for redistribution among low-wage workers and, by the logic of solidarity, it should also be associated with support for redistribution among high-wage workers.

Our emphasis on union inclusiveness as a source of variation in the effects of union membership on support for redistribution dovetails with the 'revisionist' account of the role of trade unions in the development of European welfare states provided by Oude Nijhuis (2009). In Oude Nijhuis' formulation, public provisions of social insurance redistribute income among wage-earners and the extent to which organised labour supports such provisions depends on how unions are organised. In countries where wage-earners who occupy privileged positions in the labour market have been organised separately in occupational unions, trade-union support for universalistic welfare reforms has been ambivalent.

Unions differ in respects other than the composition of their membership by skills and earnings. Ahlquist and Levi (2013) emphasise the political orientation of union leaders as key to the realisation of unions as 'communities of fate.' In a similar vein, Arndt and Rennwald (2016) show that the effects of union membership on party choice varies across

countries and that this variation reflects the strength of leftist union confederations relative to confessional and 'apolitical' confederations. In arguing for inclusiveness as an important source of variation in the effects of union membership, we do not wish to imply that internal union politics and party-political affiliations of unions do not matter.

The issue of self-selection looms large in the literature on union membership effects on political attitudes and behaviour.[3] Individuals who support redistribution are no doubt more likely to join unions than individuals who oppose redistribution and this may be especially true for high-wage workers who choose to join unions that primarily organise low-wage workers. Yet it is equally clear that other factors must be taken into account in order to explain why some individuals belong to unions and others do not. Most obviously, we know that individuals with permanent employment contracts are more likely to be union members than individuals with temporary contracts and that legal provisions and employer attitudes to unions matter a great deal (see Schnabel 2013).

Analysing panel data, Hadziabdic and Baccaro (2020) explore the effects of between union membership and a range of behavioural and attitudinal variables (including support for specific policies with distributive implications). These authors show that effects of switching status, from union member to non-member or vice-versa, disappear once individual-level fixed effects are introduced. However, they recover important membership effects when they adopt a dynamic perspective: there are significant 'anticipation effects' in the sense that individuals change attitudes and behaviour in the one to three years before they join a union and the effects of joining a union play themselves out over several years. Hadziabdic and Baccaro's analysis also indicates that some of the effects of union membership persist after individuals stop being union members.

The obvious attraction of analysing panel data is that it allows us to take into account unobserved heterogeneity among individuals. However, existing panel data do not allow us to take into account *heterogeneity among unions*. For all the insights it yields, Hadziabdic and Baccaro's (2020) analysis pertains to the average effects of joining any number of different, more or less encompassing, unions. In what follows, we seek to break new ground by instead leveraging within-country variation in union characteristics.[4] In due course, we will return to the issue of self-selection.

Support for redistribution

The dependent variables in the analyses we present below are based on survey questions designed to tap into a general disposition in favour of reducing income inequality. For the British case study, we analyse

responses to a question asking respondents to evaluate the statement that 'the government should redistribute income and wealth in favour of ordinary working people,' with response options on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'very important that this be done' to 'very important that this not be done' (the middle category being neutral). For the Swedish case study, we pool responses to two survey questions. In 1986 and 1988, the SOM surveys on which we rely asked respondents whether they favoured a reduction of 'income differences in society.' In 1998, 1999 and 2001, SOM surveys instead asked respondents whether they favoured an increase in 'wage differences.' In both cases, the surveys solicited responses on a five-point scale, ranging from 'very good proposal' to 'very bad proposal.' For the German case study, finally, we rely on the standard ESS question about redistribution, which asks respondents whether they agree with the proposition that 'the government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels,' with five response options ranging from 'agree strongly' to 'disagree strongly' ('neither agree nor disagree' being the middle category).[5]

The main results that we report below are based on estimating logistic regression models with a dummy variable takes the value of 1 for respondents who agree or strongly agree that income differences should be reduced and zero for other respondents as the dependent variable. In adopting this setup, we follow standard practice in the literature on preferences for redistribution, commonly justified in terms of the ease of interpreting the results of estimating logistic regression models by comparison to the results of ordered logit or probit models. We treat Swedish respondents who consider an increase in wage differentials to a 'bad' or 'very bad' proposal as supporters of redistribution. As shown in the supplementary materials (Online appendix 1), opposition to increases of wage differentials is more widespread than support for reductions of income differentials in Swedish case, but the differences between respondents sorted by union status are similar across the two survey items. Note also that estimating ordered logit models with our British and Swedish data yields results that are, in most respects, very similar to our logit results (the main differences will be noted below).

The precise meaning of 'support for redistribution' is by no means straightforward. As commonly noted, support for redistribution measured by the percentage of survey respondents who agree that 'the government should take make measures to reduce income differences' is quite high across West European countries, even among respondents in the top quintile of the income distribution. Also, support for redistribution measured in this manner has been remarkably stable over the last two or three decades, despite dramatic increases in both pre-fisc and post-fisc inequality (Kenworthy and McCall 2008; Gonthier 2017). It is tempting

to argue that standard survey questions about support for redistribution capture only a vague 'value orientation,' with very limited (if any) impact on the politics of policy choice, and that the literature on the politics of redistribution instead ought to focus on public support for specific policies with (different) implications for the distribution of income and wealth.[6] While we are sympathetic to such a reorientation, support for redistribution remains, we think, a politically meaningful variable that allows us to compare the effects of union membership across different political contexts. Pooling data from the European Social Survey of 2008, we show in Online appendix 2 that British, German and Swedish respondents who support redistribution are more likely to think that it is the government's responsibility to ensure a 'reasonable' standard of living for the old and the employed and to ensure 'sufficient' childcare services for working parents than respondents who do not support redistribution.[7]

Britain 1974

The post-war British trade-union landscape has been (and remains) notoriously fragmented, characterised by a multiplicity of unions with overlapping jurisdictional boundaries. It is commonplace in the literature on British trade-unionism to identify three distinct types of unions (e.g. Clegg 1979): (1) craft unions organising skilled workers based on their occupation and/or vocational qualifications; (2) industrial unions organising workers in a more or less well-defined economic sectors, regardless of qualifications and tasks performed; and (3) general unions organising across sectors and occupations. Dwarfing all but one of the sectoral unions in terms of membership numbers, the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) and the General and Municipal Workers' Union (GMWU) emerged in the post-war era as the main representatives of the interests of low-wage workers within the trade-union movement. Most importantly for our present purposes, these unions insisted on relative gains for low-wage workers as a prerequisite for the voluntary wage restraint that Labour governments in the 1960s and 1970s wanted the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and its affiliates to deliver (Bornstein and Gourevitch 1984: 52–62; Oude Nijhuis 2016).

A 1960s survey program called 'Political Change in Britain' asked survey respondents whether they belonged to a union and followed up by asking respondents who answered in the affirmative to name the union to which they belonged. The Election Studies of February and October 1974 repeated these questions, but subsequent election surveys stopped asking unionised respondents to identify the union to which they belong. Altogether, there are five British surveys from 1963-74 that

allow us to explore heterogeneity in the union membership effect on political attitudes, but only one of these surveys, the October 1974 Election Study, asked about support for redistribution.

Our analysis of responses to the redistribution question in the October 1974 Election Study is restricted to the pool of potential union members, defined as employed respondents between the ages of 15 and 65. Dropping cases with missing values on covariates, we end up with a sample of 1,172 respondents, of whom 38.6% declared themselves to be union members. We distinguish three groups of union members: (1) respondents who identify themselves as members of the TGWU and the GMWU ($N = 99$); (2) respondents who identify themselves as members of one of the four sectoral unions on the list provided in the survey questionnaire ($N = 106$); and (3) respondents who identified themselves as belonging to some other union, including, in the terminology of the election survey, 'white-collar unions in the TUC,' 'white-collar unions not in the TUC,' and 'other mixed TUC unions' ($N = 243$). Though the third group includes members of some unions with an ambition to organise on a sector-wide basis, we refer to these respondents as members of occupational unions.[8]

Seeking to distinguish between enlightenment and solidarity, we are interested in the effects of union membership conditional on income. The 1974 British Election Study asked respondents to place their household in one of 13 income bands. Following conventional practice in the literature on preferences for redistribution (e.g. Rueda and Stegmueller 2019), we assign the mid-points of these income bands to each survey respondent and then assign respondents to income deciles based on household incomes adjusted for household size. Table 1 sorts respondents in our restricted sample by union membership and shows the percentage of respondents in each category who reported a household below the median income of the full survey sample. On average, respondents included in our restricted sample report a higher household income that respondents excluded from our sample (students, homemakers, unemployed and retired). Members of general unions stand out as the group with the highest share of household incomes below the median (nearly 50%). While members of sectoral unions closely resemble non-union members, a large majority of members of occupational unions are in the upper half of the income distribution.

To reiterate, our empirical strategy is to distinguish between respondents who favour redistribution (in this case, respondents who think that it is

Table 1. Percentage of respondents with incomes below the median, British 1974 data.

Members of general unions	48
Members of sectoral unions	43
Not union members	41
Members of occupational unions	33

Data: British Election Survey October 1974.

'important' or 'very important' that the government redistribute income and wealth to 'ordinary working people') and those who do not support redistribution and to estimate effects of union membership and other variables on the probability of belonging to the former group. For our main results, we estimate logistic regression models with robust standard errors.[9] Both of the models presented in Table 2 include age, gender, years of education, and religiosity as control variables and interact union membership with a dummy variable for household income above the median. The two models differ in that one includes party identification as a control variable while the other does not. Unsurprisingly, respondents who identify with Labour are much more likely to support redistribution than respondents who identify with the Tories. While there are good reasons to suppose that union membership affects party identification as well as support for redistribution, controlling for party identification should allay concerns about the effect of union membership on support for redistribution being entirely due to self-selection (pro-redistributionists selecting into unions with an egalitarian orientation).

Table 2. Average predicted probabilities of redistribution support conditional on union membership and income, British 1974 data.

	With party ID			Without party ID		
	Income			Income		
	Below median	Above median	Differences	Below median	Above median	Differences
Probabilities						
General union members	.733	.658	.075 (.434)	.778	.762	.016 (.851)
Sectoral union members	.703	.646	.057 (.545)	.787	.695	.092 (.281)
Occupational union members	.648	.576	.072 (.257)	.682	.619	.063 (.307)
Non-members	.576	.501	.075* (.034)	.544	.442	.102** (.003)
Differences						
(1) General vs None	.157* (.024)	.157* (.040)		.234 *** (.000)	.320 *** (.000)	
(2) Sectoral vs None	.127† (.089)	.145* (.038)		.243 *** (.000)	.253 *** (.000)	
(3) Occupational vs None	.072 (.212)	.075† (.092)		.138* (.023)	.177 *** (.000)	
(4) General vs Occupational	.085 (.305)	.082 (.305)		.096 (.200)	.143* (.044)	
(5) Sectoral vs Occupational	.055 (.527)	.070 (.345)		.105 (.177)	.076 (.288)	
(6) General vs Sectoral	.030 (.749)	.012 (.899)		-.009 (.911)	.067 (.430)	

P-values in parentheses; *** significant at .01%, ** significant at 1%, * significant at 5%, † significant at 10%.; t-test of equality hypothesis for differences. Based on Models 2 and 4 in Online appendix 3. Data: British Election Survey October 1974.

Not controlling for party identification, we find that belonging to any one of the three types of unions is associated with support for redistribution and that this holds for respondents in both halves of the income distribution. For members of general unions, the solidary effect is noticeably larger than the enlightenment effect. The differences across types of unions conform to our expectations with one exception (the enlightenment effects of belonging to a sectoral union is the same as the enlightenment effect of belonging to a general union), but only one of the between-union differences (the difference between belonging to a general union and an occupational union for high-income respondents) clears the 95% significance threshold. Controlling for party identification consistently reduces the size of union membership effects and the differences between membership in different types of unions. Still, members of general and sectoral unions are significantly more likely to support redistribution than respondents who do not belong to a union, irrespective of their relative income. In the upper half of the income distribution, members of occupational unions are also more likely to support redistribution than non-members. Focussing on point estimates rather than p-values, these results suggest that the of membership in general and sectoral unions were similar and considerably larger than the effect of membership in occupational unions in the 1970s. The results also suggest that the effects of membership in sectoral as well as general unions involved enlightenment and solidarity in equal measure.

Swedish white-collar unions

Sweden is commonly considered as the example *par excellence* of a strong, coherent, and unified labour movement. This characterisation holds for the blue-collar part of the Swedish union movement, but it misses the fact that unions affiliated with the LO (*Landsorganisationen*) do not organise white-collar employees and that white-collar unions have become increasingly important over the last four decades. More importantly for our present purposes, the conventional view misses the heterogeneity of white-collar unions in Sweden. As noted at the outset, there are two distinct types of white-collar unions in Sweden, with separate confederations. Like the LO unions, some white-collar unions organise on a sectoral basis. These unions belong to *Tjänstemännens Centralorganisation* (Swedish Association of Professional Employees), TCO for short. The other white-collar unions organise on an occupational basis and belong to a confederation with a Swedish name that literally translates as 'the confederation of Swedish academics' (*Sveriges akademikers centralorganisation*), SACO for short. Historically, membership in SACO-affiliated unions has been restricted to individuals with tertiary degrees and, by and large, this remains the case today (Kjellberg 2013).[10]

The dramatic increase in white-collar unionisation that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s was spearheaded by the TCO. While overall union density increased from 61% in 1960 to 81% in 1980, the LO unions' share of total union membership fell from 75% to 62% and the TCO unions' share increased from 20% to 31% over this period (Martin 1984: 345). In the 1970s, the TCO embraced its own version of solidaristic wage policy, insisting that central wage agreements prioritise wage increases for their less well-paid members, and also joined the LO in pushing for employment protection and co-determination reforms (see Martin 1984). As LO's dominance has declined and SACO unions have expanded their membership since the 1980s (see Online appendix 6), the TCO has become less closely aligned with LO, but the rhetoric and wage-bargaining practices of TCO unions remain distinctly different from those of SACO unions (Jansson 2022).

Over the period 1986-2011, recurring surveys by the SOM Institute at the University of Gothenburg asked respondents whether they were union members and, for union members, whether they belonged to a union affiliated with LO, TCO or SACO.[11] We use data from these surveys to identify the characteristics of white-collar unions and, in a second step, to estimate the effects of union membership on support for redistribution conditional on income and type of union. Our analysis is restricted to the period 1986-2001 because there is only one subsequent SOM survey that asked either of the questions on which we rely for our dependent variable and that survey was fielded in the immediate aftermath of the Great Recession, raising concerns about comparability with earlier surveys.[12]

As the Swedish system of unemployment insurance incentivizes individuals to remain union members when they become unemployed, we analyse a sample that encompasses all survey respondents in white-collar occupations who are either currently employed or looking for a job. Having removed cases with missing values on our covariates, we end up with a sample of 1,821 respondents.

Over the time covered by our analysis, SOM surveys consistently ask respondents about household income before taxes, but the number of income bands presented to respondents varies across surveys. To render responses to the income question comparable, the SOM Institute has created a scheme consisting of five income groups: very low, low, medium, high, and very high. Collapsing the first two of these categories yields four income groups that broadly resemble income quartiles, with 16% of SOM respondents in the low-income group, 27% in the lower middle group, 30% in the upper middle group, and 27% falling into the high-income group. For simplicity, we refer to the first two groups as the lower half and second two groups as the upper half of the income distribution. Averaging across the five surveys on which we draw, Table 3 reports our estimates of the percentage of TCO- and SACO-affiliated

Table 3. Percentage of white-collar employees with household incomes below the median, Swedish 1986-2001 data.

TCO members	40
SACO members	33
Not union members	35

Data: SOM Institute 1986-2001.

union members as well as unorganised white-collar employees in the lower half of the income distribution for all survey respondents. Not surprisingly, white-collar employees are more commonly found in the upper half of the income distribution than in the lower half. More importantly for our purposes, Table 3 shows that TCO unions are, on average, more low-income-inclusive than SACO unions.

The predicted probabilities of supporting redistribution presented in Table 4 are based on logistic regression models with support for a reduction of income differences or opposition to an increase of wage differences as the dependent variable (dichotomized). As in the British case study, we distinguish between enlightenment and solidarity effects by interacting union membership with a dummy variable that takes the value of 1 if the respondent's self-reported household income exceeds the median household income. The results presented in Table 4 are based on models that include year dummies as well as controls for respondents' age, gender, educational attainment, and a dummy for respondents who were unemployed at the time of the survey. Again, we present results for a model that controls for respondents' political orientation—in this case, their self-placement on a Right-Left scale ranging from 0 to 10—as well as a model without this variable.

Controlling for ideological self-placement reduces the size of union membership effects, but even with ideological self-placement we find that respondents who belong to a TCO union are significantly more likely to support redistribution than respondents who belong to a SACO union as well as respondents who are not union members. This holds for respondents in the bottom half of the income distribution as well as respondents in the upper half of the income distribution. Holding ideological self-placement constant, the difference in support for redistribution between TCO union members and non-members is notably bigger for respondents in the upper half of the income distribution (14.6 percentage points) than for respondents in the lower half (10.1 percentage points). We also observe a solidary effect of belonging to a SACO union, but this effect is, at best, borderline significant when we control for ideological self-placement, and support for redistribution among low-income members of SACO unions is no higher than support for redistribution among low-income white-collar employees who are not union members.

The case of Swedish white-collar employees provides a unique opportunity to address concerns about self-selection. As noted above, the

Table 4. Average predicted probabilities of redistribution support conditional on union membership and relative income, Swedish 1986-2001 data.

	with ideology			without ideology		
	Income			Income		
	Below median	Above median	Differences	Below median	Above median	Differences
Probabilities						
TCO members	.572	.491	*.081** (.005)*	.626	.516	*.110*** (.000)*
SACO members	.431	.425	*.006 (.900)*	.448	.403	*.045 (.412)*
Non-members	.471	.345	*.126* (.019)*	.426	.255	*.171*** (.000)*
Differences						
TCO vs. none	*.101* (.043)*	*.146*** (.000)*		*.200*** (.000)*	*.261*** (.000)*	
SACO vs. none	*-.040 (.519)*	*.080† (.066)*		*.022 (.731)*	*.148*** (.000)*	
TCO vs. SACO	*.141** (.004)*	*.066† (.060)*		*.178*** (.000)*	*.113** (.003)*	

P-values in parentheses; *** significant at .01%, ** significant at 1%, * significant at 5%, † significant at 10%.; t-test of equality hypothesis for differences. Based on logistic regression with robust standard errors, continuous control variables centred at their sample mean. Based on Models 2 and 4 in Online appendix 6. Data: SOM Institute 1986-2001.

Swedish system of unemployment insurance incentivizes individuals to join unions (see Clasen and Viebrock 2008). At the same time, some white-collar employees have the option of joining either a TCO union or a SACO union while others can only join a TCO union. It is reasonable to suppose that individuals in the former category would choose between TCO and SACO unions based on prior dispositions for or against redistribution while individuals in the latter category would join a TCO union for essentially self-interested reasons (i.e. to secure access to unemployment compensation). The key characteristic distinguishing these two categories of individuals from each other is that the former—potential SACO members—possess tertiary degrees. By the logic of self-selection, the TCO membership effect on support for redistribution (and other political attitudes) should be larger among individuals with tertiary degrees than among other individuals.

Table 5 presents results that we obtain when we estimate a three-way interaction between union membership, educational attainment, and income while controlling for ideological self-placement. Consistent with the logic of self-selection, the enlightenment effect of belonging to a TCO union appears to be specific to low-income individuals with tertiary degrees if we control for ideological self-placement.[13] This finding implies that the enlightenment effect of belonging to a TCO union may be entirely due to self-selection. On the other hand, we do not observe any significant difference in the effect of belonging to a TCO between

Table 5. Average predicted probabilities of redistribution support among white-collar employees conditional on membership in a TCO union, income, and education, controlling for ideology, Swedish 1986-2001 data.

	Income			
	Below median		Above median	
Level of education	Secondary or less	Tertiary	Secondary or less	Tertiary
Probabilities				
TCO members	.625	.556	.558	.447
Non-members	.626	.296	.424	.303
Differences	-.001	.260***	.134**	.144**
	(.993)	(.000)	(.004)	(.002)
Differences-in-differences	.261***		.010	
	(.001)		(.873)	

P-values in parentheses; *** significant at .01%, ** significant at 1%, * significant at 5%, † significant at 10%.; t-test of equality hypothesis for differences. Based on Model 6 in Online appendix 6: note that the model controls for SACO membership. Data: SOM Institute 1986-2001.

high-income respondents with university degrees and high-income respondents without university, suggesting that the solidarity effect of belonging to a TCO union cannot be explained by self-selection alone.

The Ver.di merger

Typically undertaken to offset membership losses, union mergers represent a quite common occurrence in OECD countries over the last two or three decades (Waddington, Kahmann, and Hoffmann 2005). By definition, mergers produce more encompassing unions. From our perspective, the interesting question is whether mergers alter the composition of union membership and the internal political dynamics of unions. While unions with similar occupational and sectoral profiles are probably more likely to merge than unions with different profiles, it seems likely that union mergers involve some change in union inclusiveness or, in other words, the political weight of low-wage workers within the union to which a given individual belongs. To the extent that this is so, union mergers might be conceived as quasi-natural experiments, allowing for a clean test of our core argument. Ideally, such a test would involve the use of panel data. allowing us to identify individuals who belonged to the unions that merged. One would then track the evolution of support for redistribution among individuals who belonged to the unions that merged and compare changes in their support for redistribution to changes among 'untreated individuals' (members of unions that were not part of the merger or non-unionised survey respondents).[14]

We would not expect the merger treatment to have immediate effects on individual attitudes. Our core argument posits that a change in the

composition of union membership—say, an increase in the percentage of low-wage workers—will lead union leaders to adapt their rhetoric and policy positions, but this adaptation is likely to take several years. Indeed, it may well involve the election of new leaders and the appointment of new staff. The process whereby union members internalise new messages emanating from the leadership or respond to changes in the tenor of workplace discussions organised by unions is also bound to take time.

We have not been able to identify a union merger and a panel dataset that satisfy the specifications of the ideal research design. As a poor substitute, let us briefly, and very tentatively, explore the effects of the 2001 merger that created Ver.di (Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft), Germany's second largest union, by analysing German data from the European Social Survey over the period 2002-16. Accounting for 34% of workers and employees belonging to unions affiliated with the Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (DGB) in 2010, Ver.di was created by the merger of four major unions organising public and private services: the Salaried Employees' Union (DAG), the Public Services, Transport, and Traffic Union (ÖTV), the Trade, Banking, and Insurance Union (HBV), and the Media Union (IG Medien).[15]

While the ESS asks respondents whether or they are members of a union, it does not include any follow-up questions that would allow us to distinguish between members of different types of unions. In the German case, however, we can use occupational information (4-digit ISCO codes) to identify, in a rough manner, categories of employees who, if unionised, would likely have belonged to one of the unions that formed Ver.di in 2001 (see Online appendix 9). Pooling several ESS surveys in order to obtain a reasonable number of observations for the constituent Ver.di unions, we propose to compare levels of support for redistribution among former members of these unions in 2002-06 (three surveys) with levels of support in 2012-16 (three surveys). In so doing, we assume that levels of support for redistribution in 2002-06 were determined by information and experiences that pre-date the merger and that changes from this period to the latter period can be considered, at least in part, as effects of the merger. We also assume that union members in the occupational categories that we identify with the five unions that merged in 2001 became Ver.di members (that is, we assume that they did not switch to another union) and that Ver.di did not, to any significant extent, organise new occupational categories in the wake of the merger. These assumptions seem reasonable in light of the well-established jurisdictional boundaries among DGB unions.

We restrict our samples of ESS respondents to currently employed working-age individuals who were at least 24 years of age (and below 66 years of age) in 2001 and thus could plausibly have been a union

Table 6. Percentage of respondents with incomes below the median, German ESS 2002-06 data.

Medien	60
ÖTV	57
HBV	48
DAG	45
Ver.di	50
Other unions	48
No union	53

Data: European Social Survey 2002-06.

member at the time of the Ver.di merger. With this restriction in place, we end up with a 2002-06 sample of 3,488 respondents, 232 of whom are identified as Ver.di members, and a 2012-16 sample of 3,161 respondents, 242 of whom are identified as Ver.di members (see Online appendix 9 for a breakdown of Ver.di members by constituent unions).

We sort ESS respondents into income deciles based on self-reported disposable household income and household size. For 2002-06, Table 6 reports our estimates of the percentages of different union members and non-union respondents with household incomes below the median household income of the whole population. The share of Ver.di members with incomes below the median is slightly smaller than the share of non-union respondents below the median and slightly bigger than the share of other union members below the median. For our present purposes, the interesting question is how the membership composition of Ver.di compares to the membership composition of its constituent unions. According to these estimates, the ÖTV and IG Medien were more low-income-inclusive than Ver.di while the HBV and the DAG were less low-income-inclusive than Ver.di.

Our theoretical framework leads us to expect an increase in support of redistribution among former HBV and DAG members over the 10-15 years following the merger that created Ver.di. By contrast, we would expect little change or even some decline in support for redistribution among former ÖTV and IG Medien members. Of course, many other things happened between 2002/06 and 2012/16, notably the Harz reforms and the Great Recession, and there are good reasons to suppose that these also affected preferences for redistribution. As our expectations concern the specific effects of the Ver.di merger, they are expectations about deviations from trends captured by support for redistribution among ESS respondents who were not directly affected by the merger, i.e. members of other unions and non-union respondents.

With support for redistribution operationalised by agreement (including strong agreement) with the statement that 'the government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels,' Table 7 shows our estimates of levels of redistribution support among former members of unions

Table 7. Support for redistribution across time, German ESS data 2002-16.

	All respondents			Above median income
	2002-06	2012-16	*Change*	*Change*
ÖTV /IG Medien occupations				
Union members	64	78	*+14*	*+20*
Non-members	57	73	*+16*	*+11*
DAG/HBV occupations				
Union members	54	80	*+26*	*+25*
Non-members	46	64	*+18*	*+18*
All Ver.di occupations				
Union members	58	79	*+21*	*+24*
Non-members	49	67	*+18*	*+17*
Other union members	60	74	*+14*	*+13*
All non-union members	52	70	*+18*	*+17*

Data: European Social Survey 2002–16.

that were more low-income inclusive than Ver.di (ÖTV and IG Medien) and former members of unions that were less low-income inclusive than Ver.di (DAG and HBV) as well as members of other unions and non-union respondents in 2002-06 and 2012-16. The last column reports separate estimates for respondents in the upper half of the income distribution.

The first thing to be noted about Table 7 is that support for redistribution increased among all categories of working-age Germans over this period. Among non-union respondents, the share of redistribution supporters increased by 18 percentage points. The corresponding figure for respondents who belonged to some union other than Ver.di was 14 points. In other words, the general shift towards support for redistribution appears to have been most pronounced among non-union members. Consistent with our expectations, former ÖTV and IG Medien members (Ver.di members coming from unions that were more low-income inclusive than Ver.di) moved less in the direction of redistribution than non-unionised respondents. The shift among these respondents is of the same magnitude as the shift among other unionised respondents. By contrast, we observe bigger increases in the percentage of redistribution supporters among former members of DAG and HBV (Ver.di members coming from unions that were less low-income inclusive than Ver.di) than among union members who were not implicated in the Ver.di merger. Support for redistribution among these Ver.di members appears to have caught up with support for redistribution among Ver.di members who came from the ÖTV or IG Medien.

As reported in Online appendix 10, the only between-group difference in changes in support for redistribution that clears the 90% threshold for statistical significance is the difference between former DAG/HBV

members and members of unions other than Ver.di.[16] Given the small number of observations involved, the lack of statistical significance of over-time changes in between-group differences should not come as a big surprise. The descriptive analysis presented in Table 7 still provides, we think, suggestive evidence in support of the proposition that people who belong to more low-income-inclusive unions tend to be more supportive of redistribution and that this holds whether or not the members themselves stand to gain from redistribution.

A potential objection to this interpretation has do with the fact that Ver.di lost more members than other DGB-affiliated unions over the time period covered by our analysis.[17] We cannot rule out the possibility that the increase in support for redistribution among Ver.di members—and, more specifically, the increase in support among former members of the DAG and the HBV—was due to reverse selection or, in other words, redistribution-averse individuals opting to leave the union. It deserves to be noted, however, that cross-national comparison does not provide any support for the idea that the effect of union membership on support for redistribution increases as union membership declines. In all but one of the 17 ESS countries for which we can estimate the membership effect on support for redistribution in 2004-06 and 2014-16, union density fell from 2000 to 2014 and, in many of these countries, it fell quite dramatically. (On average, union density declined by 6.6 percentage points). Yet we observe a significant change in the membership effect in only one country. The exception is Italy, where union density held steady and the effect of union membership on support for redistribution increased. Setting statistical significance aside, changes in the membership effect are positively correlated with changes in union density positively across these 17 countries.[18]

Pooling German ESS data for 2002-16, Figure 1 displays the results of estimating logistic regression models of support for redistribution that distinguishes between former union members and respondents who never belonged to a union (and includes the standard control variables introduced earlier). If individuals freely choose whether to join or leave unions and that choice is determined by preferences for redistribution, we should expect the preferences of former union members to be indistinguishable from the preferences of individuals who never belonged to a union. With or without controlling for ideological self-placement, the results presented in Figure 1 show that former union members are less supportive of redistribution than current members, but also significantly more supportive of redistribution than 'never members.' Consistent with Hadziabdic and Baccaro's (2020) analysis of panel data, this finding suggests that belonging to large, encompassing unions of the German
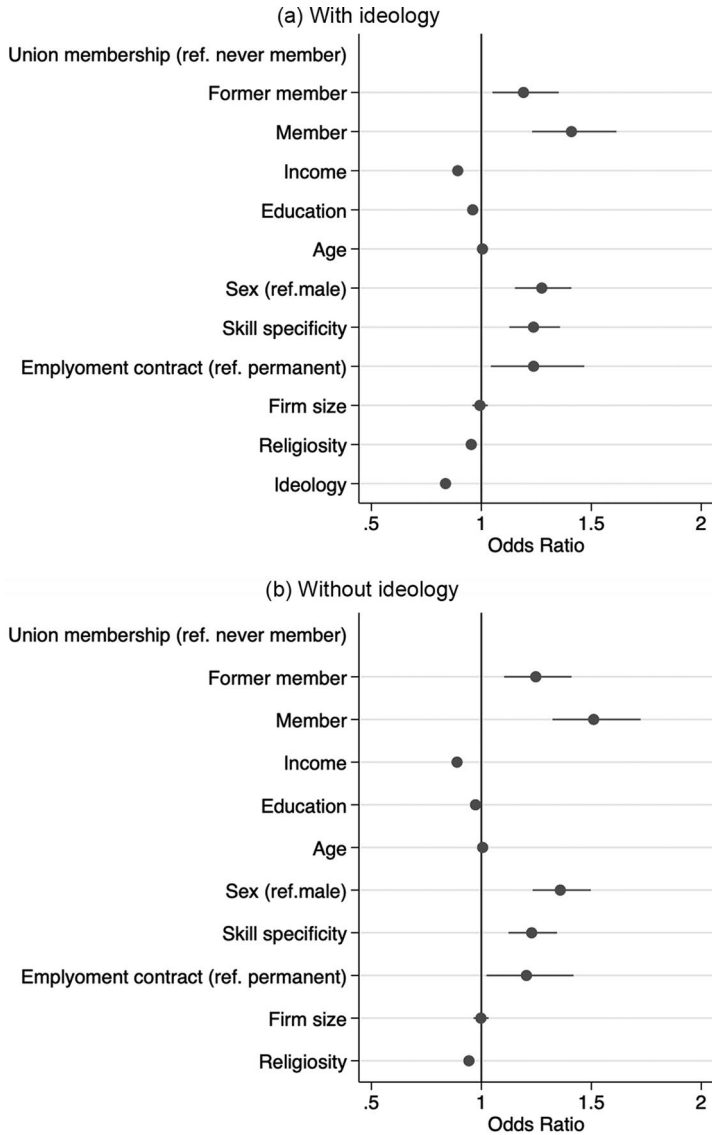
Figure 1. Support for redistribution among former union members, German ESS data 2002–16. Based on logistic regression with robust standard errors and time fixed-effects, continuous control variables centred at their sample mean. Full models in Online appendix 13. European Social Survey 2002-2016.

type has effects on policy preferences that endure beyond the period the membership period. Indeed, the growing number former union members may partly explain the increase in support for redistribution among non-union members that we observe in the German case (Table 7).

Conclusion

As we have noted repeatedly, some of the empirical results presented above are suggestive but fail to clear conventional thresholds of statistical significance. In our view, it is equally important to note, in closing, that the results are quite consistent across our three 'case studies.' All three analyses yield evidence in support of the proposition that individuals who belong to unions that organise more low-income workers are more likely to support redistributive government policies than individuals who belong to unions that primarily organise high-income workers and professionals. The proposition seems to hold for individuals in white-collar as well as blue-collar jobs and for white-collar unions (Sweden) as well as unions that primarily organise blue-collar workers (British unions in the early 1970s) and for unions that cross the blue-collar/white-collar divide (German unions at the time of the Ver.di merger).

Controlling for partisan identification, the British evidence suggests that the solidarity and enlightenment effects of belonging to more inclusive unions are of more or less the same magnitude. Similarly, the positive of effects of the Ver.di merger on support for redistribution among former members of high-wage unions (DAG and HBV) appears to have been the same in the lower and upper halves of the income distribution. The Swedish case is more ambiguous in this regard. Controlling for ideological self-placement, the difference-in-difference between belonging to a TCO union and a SACO union is larger for survey respondents in the lower half of the income distribution than for respondents in the upper half. However, this enlightenment effect appears to be attributable to self-selection, for it disappears if we restrict the analysis to individuals who do not have the option of joining a SACO union. By contrast, our Swedish analysis suggests that solidarity effect of belong to more inclusive unions cannot be explained by self-selection alone.

As noted at the outset, union membership has declined dramatically in many countries since the 1980s and it is primarily low-wage workers that have dropped out of unions (or failed to join unions at previous rates). An implication of our analyses is that the salience of redistributive issues for low-income citizens has declined as a result of these developments. Another implication is that changes in the overall composition of union membership have eroded support for redistribution among unionised workers and professionals in the middle and the upper half of the income distribution. At the same time, our Ver.di case study suggests that union mergers may have offset some of the consequences of the decline of union membership among low-wage workers.

Notes

1. Yet a third mechanism is identified by Becher and Stegmueller (2021), who demonstrate that representatives of more unionized US congressional districts are more responsive to the preferences of low-income constituents.
2. See Uba and Jansson (2021) for a comparative analysis of online communication by trade unions.
3. See Checchi et al (2010) and, for studies that explicitly attempt to take account of self-selection, Kim and Margalit (2017), Mosimann and Pontusson (2017) and MacDonald (2019).
4. Previous studies focusing on within-country variation in union characteristics include Arndt (2018) and Bergene and Drange (2021) as well as Arndt and Rennwald (2016).
5. See Supplementary Materials, Online appendix 1, for information on how to access the data analysed in this paper.
6. See, e.g. Cavaillé and Trump (2015), Naumann (2018) and Sudo (2020). Bledow and Busemeyer (2021) analyse the effects of union membership on support for different types of welfare policy.
7. Regarding high overall levels of support for redistribution, note that support for redistribution among non-union respondents in the datasets that we analyse rarely exceeds 50% (see Online appendix 1) and that ceiling effects would make it less likely to observe effects of union membership.
8. The four sectoral unions are the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU), the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR) and the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW).
9. Estimating ordered logit models yields very similar results: see Online appendix 4.
10. According to our data, some 88% of SACO members and 39% of TCO members held tertiary degrees in 1986-2001.
11. From 2011 onwards, SOM surveys ask unionized respondents to identify the union or confederation to which they belong in an open-ended manner, but responses to this question do not feature in the cumulative files.
12. Including data from SOM 2011 yields results that are very similar to the ones reported here (available upon request).
13. Without controlling for ideological self-placement, the effect of belonging to a TCO union among low-income respondents without university degrees clears the 95% significance threshold: see Online appendix 8. As reported in Online appendix 7, the enlightenment of belonging to a TCO union also turns out to be statistically insignificant when we estimate an ordered logit model that includes ideological self-placement. At the same time, this specification yields bigger differences between TCO and SACO members in the lower half of the income distribution than those shown in Table 4: low-income SACO members are less likely to consider a reduction of income differences to be a "very good proposal" that low-income respondents who do not belong to any union (p=.094).
14. Exemplifying such a research design, Sverke, Chaison, and Sjöberg (2004) explore the effects of a 1993 Swedish union merger on membership sat-

      isfaction and participation, based on conducted surveys before and after the merger.

15. The much smaller Postal Union (DGP) was also part of the merger. Based on the procedure described in Online appendix 9, we can only identify three ESS respondents as potential former members of the DGP. These respondents are dropped from the following analysis. See Waddington, Kahmann and Hoffmann (2005) for background information on the Ver. di merger. Membership figures for DGB-affiliated unions are available at https://www.dgb.de/uber-uns/dgb-heute/mitgliederzahlen.

16. Note that the predicted probabilities shown Online appendix 10 are based on a logistic regression model that does not control for ideological self-placement and does not interact union membership with income.

17. According to the DGB website, Ver.di lost 27.3% of its membership while the other seven affiliates lost 20.1% of their members from 2001 to 2014.

18. Data and results available upon request.

Aknowledgements

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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