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TRADE UNIONS AND VOTING FOR THE LEFT IN FRANCE AND BELGIUM.

TRISTAN HAUTE

AUTHOR BIO

Tristan Haute is a lecturer in political science at the Faculty of Legal, Political and Social Sciences at the University of Lille and a researcher at CERAPS (Centre d'études et de recherches administratives, politiques et sociales, CNRS/Université de Lille). His research focuses on the social determinants of voting, in the political and professional fields, as well as on employee participation at work (unionisation, strike action, etc.), on employees' attitudes towards unions and on the political uses of social networks.

INTRODUCTION

THERE IS AN INCREASING AMOUNT OF RESEARCH studying the influence of professional experience on electoral behaviour, with some very interesting results, especially when these studies go beyond a one-dimensional conception of professional activity (Delli Carpini, 1986) and take into account socio-professional position, the sector of activity, the status of activity, type of contract, working conditions such as autonomy at work, job satisfaction or recognition of work. One of these dimensions has, however, been less fully explored: the relationships that employees have with trade unions.

Some studies have highlighted, in Europe and in the United States, strong links between union membership and electoral turnout (D'Art & Turner 2007; Kerrissey & Schofer 2013). Following Carole Pateman (1970), these research studies consider that participation in the workplace, in whichever form, would encourage political participation outside of work, by increasing the interest in politics and the feeling of political competence of citizens. However, the effects of union membership for political participation, though still significant, are less salient for the 1980s generation than for older generations (Turner et al., 2020). At the same time, other studies looked at possible links between union membership and voting choice. Thus, in Europe, union members vote significantly more for the social democratic and radical left and significantly less for the greens, for the right and for the far right (Arndt & Rennwald, 2016).

In Australia, Andrew Leigh (2006) observes a significantly higher vote for Labour among union members. However, in the United States, the most recent study (Zullo, 2008) claims that unionisation no longer has an effect on voting orientation, whereas previous studies suggested that union members overvoted in favour of the Democrats (Sousa, 1993).

We contribute to this literature by taking account, beyond union membership, of the diversity of trade union organisations and by including in our analysis some of the different behaviours and attitudes related to labour unions (vote in union elections or attitudes towards unions' actions). However, to take account of the specific features of the industrial relations system and of the structure of the trade union landscape, it appears necessary to carry out analysis at national level.

That's why we are focusing on France and Belgium, two European countries where some data are available and in which the political context and the industrial relations systems are very different. Belgian employees are more unionised than in France: in the 2010s, around 55% of employees were union members, compared with 11% in France. The role of trade unions is also very different. We use seven electoral surveys (five in France, two in Belgium) carried out between 2007 and 2022 that provide information on voting behaviour and several variables that describe the relationship to trade unions (trade union membership, participation in union or social elections, and attitudes towards trade unions and strikes). Nevertheless, not all indicators are available in all surveys and the numbers of employees surveyed are limited (see Tables 1 and 2).

A DECREASING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN UNION MEMBERSHIP AND THE LEFT-WING VOTE?

If we look at trade union membership, we can see a weakening of the left-wing overvote in France between 2007 and 2022. As shown in Table 1, in 2007 and 2012, union members voted more than non-union members for the left candidates in the first round of presidential elections. The difference is slight in 2017 and only concerns Jean-Luc Mélenchon. But, if we take into account the social and professional situation, the overvote of union members for the left still remains

significant. Nevertheless, in 2022, there was no longer any difference between union members and non-union members. In Belgium, in 2014, union members voted more for left parties than non-union members (see Table 2), especially for socialist or radical left parties. If the difference is slight in 2007, it remains significant if we take account of the social and professional situation of the respondents.

Table 1 - Left-wing vote and union membership (France, 2007-2022)

	2007	2012	2017	2022
Non-union members	35.2	38.4	25.1	24.8
Union members	57.9	60.5	34.8	25.5
Full sample	37.5	40.7	26.3	24.9

Sources: French Election Studies, CDSP, 2007-2012-2017; PEOPLE2022 survey, CERAPS / ESPOL / LEM, 2022
Fieldwork: employed respondents (n=894 in 2007, n=710 in 2012, n=695 in 2017, n=1001 in 2022)

Table 2 - Left-wing vote and union membership (Belgium, 2007-2014)

	2007	2014
Current union members	39	35.6
Previous union members	37.4	22.4
Non-union members	35	23.9
Full sample	36.8	30.3

Sources: Belgian National Election Studies, 2007-2014 (Swyngedouw et al. 2009; Abts et al. 2015)
Fieldwork: employed respondents (n=860 in 2014, n=957 in 2007)

The Belgian case is interesting because the high rate of unionisation allows us to differentiate voting choices according to the trade union organisation to which each union member belongs. It is mainly the members of the General Labour Federation of Belgium (FGTB/ABVV), close to the left parties, who voted massively for these parties (50.2% in 2007, 51% in 2014). On the contrary, members

of the Confederation of Christian Trade Unions (CSC/ACV) voted less for the left (20.1% in 2014, 30.1% in 2007). Thus, according to other analysis in Sweden (Arndt & Rennwald 2016) and France (Parsons 2015; Pernot 2022), the support of union members for the left concerns more the confederations historically close to this political family.

THE ATTITUDES TOWARDS UNIONS, A MORE SIGNIFICANT VARIABLE.

Although in France the vote of union members does not seem to be more left-wing oriented, other surveys show that people who are union supporters vote even more for the left (Pernot 2022). It therefore seems appropriate to diversify the indicators of the relationship to trade unions by not limiting it to membership.

We can firstly look at participation in union or social elections. However, in Belgium, the difference between employees who voted in the 2012 social elections and those who abstained (respectively 36.1% and 31.3% vote for the left) are much smaller than those observed between union members and non-union members. Thus, if we have shown that, in France, it is not so much union membership or union presence that could increase electoral turnout but rather the participation in union elections (Haute 2022), workplace participation seems to have no significant impact on the voting choice.

Finally, we can look at employees' attitudes towards trade unions. This indicator is interesting as it does not have exactly the same social logics and dynamics: the decline in union membership in Europe has not been accompanied by a decline in pro-union attitudes; on the contrary (Frangi et al. 2017; Haute 2021).

In France, we find that employees with positive attitudes towards trade unions vote significantly more for the left. In 2012, employees confident in trade unions were much more likely to vote for left candidates (57.6%) than employees who lacked confidence in them (26.9%). Similarly, employees who approved of the use of strikes also voted much more for the left than those who disapproved (47.9% vs 21.7%).¹ Above all, this observation is repeated in 2022, even though union members are no longer distinguished by a more important left-wing vote. Thus, employees who strongly

agreed with the fact that trade unions provide services to employees are three times more likely than employees who strongly disagreed to have voted for left-wing candidates (38.6% vs 13.8%).

A very similar result is obtained in Belgium: employees who are confident in the unions, who are less numerous than union members, voted slightly more for left parties than employees who lacked confidence in the unions (46.7% vs 25.6% in 2007, 40.2% vs 16.9% in 2014). If trust in labour unions is not the better indicator of employees' attitudes towards unions, we obtain the same results when we use an aggregation of the nine opinion questions about unions available in the 2014 Belgian national election study (Swyngedouw et al. 2016). Moreover, if we compare, in regression models, the impact of union membership, workplace participation and attitudes towards unions on the left-wing vote, attitudes are always more significant than the other dimensions of the relationship to trade unions. Therefore, what should worry left parties in France, Belgium or elsewhere is not only the decline of union membership, but also the drop in the number of strikes and the number of employees taking part in them, the drop in turnout in union or social elections and, above all, the drop in positive attitudes towards unions in favour of

¹ Source : CEVIPOF post-electoral survey, CDSP, 2012; employed respondents (n=1161)

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