

Does Union Membership Matter? Political Participation, Attachment to Democracy and Generational Change

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Since 1980 authoritarianism in the United States and Europe as measured by a weakening of support for democracy and its institutions appears to be increasing (Stefan Foa and Mounk, 2016). The democratic system of governance seems to be under threat from the growing electoral success of populist movements in many European countries (Yilmaz, 2012). A bulwark against the erosion of a democratic system of governance is a citizenry that espouses the core values of democracy and actively participates in the democratic process (Almond and Verba, 1963). Explanations of the factors that encourage political participation in democracies have focused on levels of economic development and structural characteristics such as education and social position (Inglehart, 1990; 1997); positive civic attitudes particularly inter-personal trust (Putnam, 1993; Inglehart, 1997); and engagement in politics as learned behaviours arising from a spill-over from other institutions and associations (Pateman, 1970; Putnam, 1993).

Here we focus on the spill-over effects of trade unions in the workplace as one important factor in the development of a democratically oriented citizenry participating in the democratic process and attached to its core values. As most people spend a great part of their life in the workplace, the way that the authority structures function in the workplace is likely to influence the extent to which there is a positive or negative spill-over into democratic behaviours. While firms are vertically organised with hierarchical power relations, trade unions are horizontal associations where all members are essentially equal (Putnam, 1993). As such trade unions function as democratic associations embedded in authoritarian entities. Such collective participatory actions by union members in the workplace are possibly complementary to the development of a wider positive democratic culture. In this article we examine the relationship between trade union membership and political participation and commitment to democracy over time and the possible implications of declining union membership across European countries for democratic culture and authoritarian attitudes.

Using three waves of the European Values Study (EVS) we examine whether membership of a trade union enhances an individual’s democratic orientation and behaviour such as political activism and beliefs in the democratic system. While previous research indicates that membership of a trade union can provide a stimulus to both electoral and political participation, the receding tide of union membership may have weakened this relationship (Arndt and Rennwald, 2017; Author). Consequently any positive relationship between union membership and political participation may have evaporated for later generations of unionised workers particularly the 80s generation compared to the 60s generation. The propensity of trade unions to influence political participation among members may have waned given the weakened trade union power and influence in society more generally. In the context of

declining union membership, the critical question is whether the relationship between union membership and democratic behaviour has remained constant or changed across the generations.

Keywords: unions, politics, democracy, authoritarianism, generations

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