

V. UNION REVITALIZATION IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Union Revitalization through Political Action? Evidence from Five Countries

Kerstin Hamann
University of Central Florida

John Kelly
London School of Economics

Abstract

Political action features as one of the most prevalent strategies unions in the United States, Britain, Germany, Spain, and Italy have pursued in their strife for revitalization. We examine six types of political action—links with political parties, voter mobilization, lobbying, social pacts, political strikes, and legal avenues—in five countries to understand better what drives unions' use of political action as well as the success of these actions across countries. We explain the variation in the types of political action with differences in economic and political institutions, the need of the government to find allies, as well as union traditions and union leaders' strategic choices. We conclude that the links between political action and revitalization are tenuous and need to be placed in the context of other strategies pursued by unions.

Author's address: University of Central Florida, Dept of Political Science, CNH, Office 415K, Orlando, FL 32816-1356.

Political Action and Union Revitalization

This paper forms part of the second phase of a five-country study of union revitalization. In the first phase, teams of researchers in Germany (a coordinated market economy), Italy and Spain (Mediterranean economies), and the United Kingdom and the United States (liberal market economies) examined the variety of methods used by national union movements to recover their influence.¹ In the second phase of the project, the focus has shifted from countries to strategies as the unit of analysis. In all our country cases, political action has been one of the most prominent forms of activity undertaken by unions as they have sought to acquire and deploy political power resources in order to overcome the limitations of labor process and labor market power.

This paper first describes the different forms of political action and considers how they may contribute to different dimensions of union revitalization. We then examine each form in turn and describe variations among our five countries. The next section aims to account for differences and similarities across countries at a point in time. The final section presents a brief and preliminary evaluation of the effectiveness of political action for union revitalization.

Conceptualizing the Forms and Outcomes of Political Action

We distinguish six main forms of political action: links with a political party; electoral activity, particularly voter mobilization; lobbying the legislature, executive or bureaucracy; social pacts with governments through which unions are involved in state policy formation; political strikes; and the strategic use of legal challenges (e.g., to the European Court of Justice [ECJ]). While analytically distinct, these forms of political action can be used in conjunction; for example, strikes might be used simultaneously with lobbying. One reason for differentiating forms of union political activity is that it allows us to develop explanations and assess outcomes in a more meaningful manner. We distinguish between immediate outcomes, such as voter turnout in elections, and secondary outcomes—namely, union revitalization. We define revitalization along four separate though interconnected dimensions: union membership, union bargaining power, political influence, and “union vitality” (Behrens and Hurd 2002). This last notion attempts to capture the degree to which unions have changed their structures and methods in order to become both innovative and adaptive in the face of new pressures and demands.

Forms of Political Action in Practice

Links with political parties During the prolonged period of Labour opposition (1979–97), British unions were left without political allies and without direct access to the policy-making process. The Labour Party restructured

itself, reducing the role of unions within its decision-making bodies and enhancing the autonomy of the party leadership at the expense of both the party conference and organized labor (McIlroy 1998). Since the beginning of Blair's government, the relationship between the party and the unions has become looser and more distant as the broadly neoliberal government policies have diverged from union goals despite the implementation of some pro-labor policies on union certification and on the minimum wage. Prior to the late 1980s, Spanish unions used their close ties to leftist political parties to gain access to the policy-making arena. When the relationship between the UGT (General Workers' Union) and the Socialist Party (PSOE) deteriorated in response to the PSOE government's economic and social policies, formal ties between the party and the union were cut in 1989. Since the mid-1990s, unions have pursued more pragmatic relationships with all major parties while maintaining the unions' political and organizational autonomy (Hamann 2001a). Ties between unions and parties in Italy changed dramatically between 1992 and 1994, when the political party structure disintegrated. The disappearance of the Socialist and Christian Democratic Parties and the transformation of the Communist Party led each of the three main union confederations to adopt a policy of increased political independence.

By contrast with developments in Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom, unions in the United States attempted to move closer to the Democratic Party and significantly increased their political expenditure in order to secure the party's electoral success. At the same time, however, they have remained organizationally autonomous and there were continuing, major policy differences between the AFL-CIO and the Democrats as Clinton pursued a neoliberal program of free trade and welfare reform (Shoch 2001). Despite historically close ties between German unions and the SPD, the unions have largely maintained the autonomy from political parties they had gained in the postwar period, although in the 1998 and 2002 elections the confederation openly campaigned for the party, provoking a backlash from CDU union members.

Electoral activity British and American unions have devoted increased resources, both financial and personnel, to electoral activity since the early 1990s. In the United Kingdom, unions mobilized even more activists in more districts in the 2001 election than in 1997, targeting 146 constituencies in 2001 as compared to 93 constituencies in 1997 (Ludlam and Taylor 2002:16). In the United States, the AFL-CIO voted to spend \$35 million in the 1996 congressional elections, in addition to the \$65 million that would come from individual unions through political action committees (Dark 1999:184–85). Union expenditure in the 2000 election appears to have been even higher.

Lobbying by unions is primarily used in the US. For example at the height of the ultimately unsuccessful campaign to reform U.S. healthcare in summer 1994, 53 union organizers worked full time on lobbying representatives and senators (Dark 1999:168). During the mid-1990s debates on free trade the AFL-CIO bolstered its lobbying with threats to cut funds to individual Democrats, a threat rendered credible by their increased dependency on union finance (Shoch 2001:297-300).

Lobbying is far less developed in Europe. In the United Kingdom, the TUC appointed its first parliamentary lobbyist as late as 1996 (Heery 1998:343). Traditionally, the TUC and its affiliated unions had sought to exert influence either through links with the Labour Party or directly through government ministries. By contrast Spain's standing order of parliament mandates party discipline, and parliamentary party groups are very hierarchically structured, which renders parliamentary lobbying an ineffective strategy. In Germany, the DGB successfully lobbied for legal extensions to the coverage of works councils in exchange for concessions over pension reforms. All four European union movements have engaged in lobbying at the level of the European Commission, but, despite the growth of European regulation, national political institutions remain the dominant focus of union activity.

Social pacts The 1990s witnessed a resurgence of national-level concertation, or social pacts, as both left- and right-wing governments struggled to contain public spending and government borrowing within the strict limits required for monetary union in 2002. Social pacts formed a significant component of Spanish and Italian union strategy in the 1990s, covering pension reforms, labor market flexibility, and wage restraint (Hamann 2001a). Despite ideological differences with their respective governments, the unions' continuing autonomy from political parties has allowed them to bargain successfully. Although many of the reforms agreed upon through social pacts have not been especially welcome to unions, their leaderships have taken the view that it was preferable to be involved in rather than excluded from negotiations when opposition from outside bears little promise of affecting policy changes. German unions have come close to neocorporatist arrangements in recent years but without the formal structures of the Southern European pacts. Social pacts have not featured in either the United Kingdom or the United States.

Strikes The level of strike activity (working days lost per 1,000 employees) fell significantly between 1990 and 1999 in all five of our countries. This common experience masks one continuing difference among the five, the persistence of the national, political strike in Italy and Spain as a means of trying to influence government policy. Typically, the confederations in these

countries have called one-day national strikes and demonstrations as an adjunct to consultations with governments over labor market reforms (e.g., April and October 2002, in Italy, and June 2002, in Spain). By contrast, the political strike is rare in Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Using legal avenues as political action The establishment of the ECJ has granted unions in EU member countries access to a new, additional opportunity to affect governmental policies. British unions in particular have used this avenue to gain rights denied to them by the government. In 2001, for example, the ECJ ruled against the Labour government that workers employed on short-term contracts had the right to receive four weeks of paid holidays per year in a test case taken by the television workers' union BECTU. Legal services are provided to members by unions and confederations in our other four countries but there is no evidence of any strategic use of the ECJ by unions comparable to the British case (Sweet and Brunell 1998).

Explaining the Different Forms of Political Action

How can we account for the patterns of political action across countries? First, the *variety of capitalism, the particular configuration of economic and industrial relations institutions* (Hall and Soskice 2001), makes a significant difference, especially to the presence or absence of social pacts. These have emerged (or reemerged) in the Mediterranean economies of Italy and Spain but have been absent from the liberal market economies in the United Kingdom and the United States, which lack mechanisms to facilitate the widespread acceptance and implementation of tripartite agreements. Second, the *character of the electoral and party system* also affects the way unions attempt to influence politics. Lobbying of individual legislators occurs where they represent individual districts or constituencies as in the "first-past-the-post" electoral systems of the United Kingdom and the United States. There is far less lobbying in the multimember district, proportional electoral system of Spain, where the connection between individual legislators and their electoral base is relatively weak (Hamann 2001*b*). The mixed systems of Germany and Italy—with the German one leaning more towards a proportional representation system and the Italian one being a mix of both systems, though the majority of the seats is determined by "first-past-the-post" rules—are more difficult to link to institutional incentives and opportunities for parliamentary lobbying. Third, the *politics of union leaderships* help account for significant variations in strike propensity between countries. Longstanding leftist traditions in the union movements of Italy and Spain (and indeed of the other Mediterranean economies) continue to be expressed in the form of political mobilizations directed toward the state. Fourth, the *strategic choices of party leaders* are

important. British Labour's antipathy to social pacts is heavily influenced by its electoral calculation that such close union-government ties would strengthen unions and damage its electoral success. Aznar's first social pact with the Spanish unions was influenced by the party leadership's desire to reposition his party as a modern conservative force that could work with unions. Finally, the *strength of the government* also appears to be important. Where governments command a clear legislative majority, they are less likely to turn to unions for support, or be amenable to union lobbying.

Outcomes of Political Action

Immediate outcomes Evidence from the United Kingdom and the United States suggests that the Labour and Democrat votes are higher where unions mobilize voters. The union effect is significant but not large: some finely balanced contests were turned in a pro-Labour or Democrat direction in recent elections, but without affecting the overall result. *Lobbying* has produced significant results for the U.K., U.S., and German union movements (e.g. the U.S. "living wage" laws [Luce 2001]). *Social pacts* have been associated with some labor market reforms, but also with relatively modest real wage growth. Evidence on *legal rulings* shows unions can successfully use the ECJ to overturn restrictive interpretations of European law. *Links to political parties* have proved to be of declining value.

Political action and union revitalization American unions have continued to lose membership, as well as bargaining power, despite increased electoral activity and lobbying. British unions experienced a weakening in their ties to the Labour Party and were unable to secure any kind of social pact with the new government, but were still able to lobby successfully for legal changes that facilitated an upsurge in organizing and a modest recovery in membership. The modest degree of political action by German unions—electioneering and lobbying in particular—helped secure two SPD electoral victories but has so far neither translated into a recovery of union membership and political influence nor prevented the continuing erosion of bargaining coverage. In Italy and Spain, a combination of social pacts and worker mobilization through strike action has helped unions to return to growth and to increase their political influence.

Conclusions

Through the 1990s, union links to parties have loosened in Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom but in certain respects have become closer in Germany and the United States. Electioneering and lobbying are significant features of U.K. and U.S. union activity and have become more so in Germany. Social

pacts with governments and political strikes are hallmarks of union political action in Italy and Spain but are absent from our three other countries, despite attempts in Germany. These cross-national patterns are shaped by a number of factors: economic and industrial relations institutions, the electoral system (first-past-the post versus proportional representation), the policies of both union and party leaders, and the strength of government. In terms of union membership and political influence, the Italian and Spanish unions have performed relatively well, and the German and American unions least well. Superficially this might seem to argue for the benefits of social pacts and strikes as compared to electioneering and relatively close party ties; however, the link between union political action and union revitalization is not straightforward. Other factors, such as unemployment, affect union membership; the behavior of other actors, notably employers, also makes a difference to union outcomes; and finally it may be the combination of different forms of political action and other strategies, such as organizing drives or alliances with other social movements, that is critical to union success.

Notes

1. The results of this first phase are published in a special issue of the *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 9, no. 1, March 2003.

References

- Behrens, Martin and Rick W. Hurd. 2002. "Organizational Restructuring and Union Revitalization." Paper presented at the conference on "Labor Strategies in the Global North," London School of Economics, London, 19–20 Sept.
- Dark, Taylor E. 1999. *The Unions and the Democrats*. Ithaca, NY: ILR Press.
- Hall, Peter, and David Soskice. 2001. "An Introduction to Varieties of Capitalism." In Peter A. Hall and David Soskice, eds., *Varieties of Capitalism: The Institutional Foundations of Comparative Advantage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.1–70.
- Hamann, Kerstin. 2001a. "The Resurgence of National-Level Bargaining: Union Strategies in Spain." *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol. 32, no. 2, pp.154–72.
- Hamann, Kerstin. 2001b. "Spain: Changing Party-Group Relations in a New Democracy." In Clive S. Thomas, ed., *Political Parties and Interest Groups: Shaping Democratic Governance*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, pp. 175–91.
- Heery, Edmund. 1998. "The Relaunch of the Trades Union Congress." *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 36, no.3, pp. 339–60.
- Luce, Stephanie. 2001. "Building Political Power and Community Coalitions: The Role of Central Labor Councils in the Living-Wage Movement." In Immanuel Ness and Stewart Eimer, eds., *Central Labor Councils and the Revival of American Unionism: Organizing for Justice in Our Communities*. Armonk, NY: M. E.Sharpe, pp.140–60.
- Ludlam, Steve, and Andrew J. Taylor. 2002. "The Political Representation of the 'Labour Interest': Is the British 'Labour Alliance' Finished?" Presented at the *British Journal of Industrial Relations* conference on "Politics of Employment Relations," September 16–17, London.

- McIlroy, John. 1998. "The Enduring Alliance? Trade Unions and the Making of New Labour, 1994–1997." *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 36, no. 4, pp. 537–64.
- Shoch, James. 2001. "Organized Labor Versus Globalization: NAFTA, Fast Track, and PNTR With China." In Lowell Turner, Harry C. Katz and Rick W. Hurd, eds., *Rekindling the Movement: Labor's Quest For Relevance in the 21st Century*. Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, pp. 275–313.
- Sweet, Alec Stone, and Thomas L. Brunell. 1998. "The European Court and the National Courts: A Statistical Analysis of Preliminary References, 1961–95." *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 5, no.1, pp. 66–97.