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Left parties and trade unions in France

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Abstract Historically, the supposed independence of unions from parties in France has been a myth, with the development of close relations between the CGT and the PCF, on the one hand, and looser ones between the CFDT in particular and the PS, on the other. These links weakened from the 1980s on, but appeared to be re-established, with some changes, when unions backed François Hollande in the 2012 presidential elections. The decline of the PCF and the rallying of unions behind Hollande appeared to signal the possibility of a social democratic bloc in France. However, in reality, this is a temporary and unstable phenomenon as few mutual benefits can be assured by either unions or the Socialist Party through the creation of more stable union–party links. The explanations for this are structural, ideational and contingent.
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Introduction

Historically, particularly in Western Europe, left-wing parties were seen to have close links with trade unions in a mutually beneficial exchange wherein unions mobilized voters for parties and received access to power, or at least influence over policy, in return. Despite variation in the degree and pace of change across countries, some recent studies suggest a weakening of links over the past two decades (Thomas, 2001; Upchurch *et al*, 2009; Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2010; Allern and Bale, 2012).

With the notable exception of Daley (1993), very little has been written in the last few decades specifically on party–union links in France, but now is a good time to reassess the situation as France appears to be bucking wider trends. Indeed, the 2012 presidential election suggested movement towards closer party–union links after decades of professed neutrality on the part of unions. François Hollande's campaign

team recruited members of the Democratic French Confederation of Labour (CFDT), while the campaign itself was influenced by CFDT notions of social democracy. After the election, CFDT members took up positions within the new governing administration, and Hollande implemented his campaign promise to hold annual 'Social Conferences' involving representatives of employers, unions and the State. With unions across the board either implicitly or explicitly backing Hollande in the elections, the constitution of a social-democratic force uniting the political and industrial wings of the labour movement finally appeared possible.

In what follows, we will argue that although some of the structural conditions for close party–union relations have improved, they work in contradictory directions. The result is that cost–benefit analysis still mitigates against close links, while ideational norms are still powerful obstacles that mean that party–union relations will be characterized by *ad hoc* arrangements for the foreseeable future. For these reasons, Hollande's rapprochement with the unions cannot last. First, we will review the literature on party–union relations, with the specific aim of setting out what these structural conditions are before giving a brief overview of changes in union–party relations in France in the post-war period. We will then examine whether the 2012 elections represent a sea-change in these relations. Elements of continuity and change will then be explained before concluding comments are made.

Before this, however, a brief methodological note is in order. This article is based upon research carried out within the framework of an international project examining party–union relations in 13 countries across the world. The results reported here are based on an examination of secondary literature, press reports, party and union documentation, and on questionnaires sent to high-level union representatives in France. The detailed results of the questionnaires are reported elsewhere (see Allern and Bale, forthcoming).[1] Although an attempt is made to cover all union organizations, for reasons of space, the main focus will be on the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) and CFDT as the largest unions with, historically, the closest links to left parties.

Party–Union Links

Party–union links can take many forms and have been operationalized in many ways (see, for example, Duverger and Wagoner, 1972; Wilson, 1990; Thomas, 2001; Allern and Bale, 2012). For the purposes of this article, due to limitations of space, we will not enter into this debate but adopt a broad definition of such linkages as encompassing, through the notion of 'political families' – here defined as the sharing of broad ideological views and values across organizations –, a degree of organizational closeness that can be mapped through political support of unions for parties and reciprocation in the form of policy enactments by parties that are negotiated with, and are in line with, union preferences.

Several trends apparent since the 1970s have been used to explain the weakening of union–party relationships across these dimensions. First, the catch-all party thesis (Kirchheimer, 1966) suggests that as parties attempt to appeal to a greater cross-section of society to gain power, they weaken their links with the social movements that had sustained them in the past for fear of alienating other social groups. This evolution can be seen as linked to the idea that deep-class and other – particularly religious – cleavages in society resulted in close union–party links as a means of gaining influence and power (Rokkan, 1968). The attenuation of such cleavages and 'ideological blurring' (Pasture, 1996, p. 380) suggest that this leads to a weakening of party–union links. The cartel party thesis (Katz and Mair, 2009) suggests that as parties are increasingly incorporated into the State, including by public financing of their activities, they lose room for manoeuvre in policy terms as they become increasingly dependent on the State rather than individuals or interest groups for funding. Such external constraints are reinforced by globalization, Europeanization and, latterly, by economic crisis all of which reduce margins for manoeuvre in the search for international competitiveness (Parsons, 2012). The resultant policy implications mean that links with parties become less attractive to unions.

From the trade union side, the decline of the blue-collar working class, the tertiarization of the economy and the rise of the middle class have led to both ideological shifts away from social democracy and to a loss of members among unions. Again, these trends are seen as weakening party–union links, not only because unions can offer parties less, but also because unions attempt to recruit new members with different identities and interests from those of their traditional base (Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2010, p. 321).

As well as these more recent trends, the political system has been seen as affecting party–union relations. As far as France is concerned, these can be briefly summarized as follows. The predominance of a technocratic approach to decision-making overseen by a strong, self-assured bureaucracy produced in the system of elite *grandes écoles* was reinforced by the semi-presidential system put in place after 1962. The presence of a strong executive, supported by cohesive parties in a weak parliament, resulted in a relative isolation of ministers from interest group activities. This feeds off of a deep-rooted Jacobin political culture that sees the State as the guardian of the general will (Parsons, 2013). Consultation with unions and, hence, strong party–union links, were thus never considered important by governing elites. This is all the more so as organizational fragmentation and competition, particularly among unions, precluded any close and long-lasting relationships (Howell, 1992, p. 48).

Within the above constraints, party–union links have often been conceptualized in terms of a cost–benefit exchange (see, for example, Allern *et al*, 2007). Thus, for parties, close links with unions give access to electoral support as members may be mobilized to vote for the party, as well as to, in some cases, provide financial support

and help during election campaigns. For unions, the benefits may involve increased membership if the party encourages this and, particularly, influence over the party's policies. On the cost side, a party needs to take into account the possibility of alienating other groups of voters or possible coalition partners if it is seen as the union's party, and the potential for making policy promises that may conflict with other priorities. For unions, the main risk lies in alienating current and potential members and in the loss of the freedom to seek arrangements with other parties who may offer a better deal. Changes in cost–benefit calculations will therefore affect party–union relations.

Finally, in the French case, one other consideration appears crucial. Taylor *et al* (2011) argue that national patterns of party–union relations are path-dependent and influenced by ideology and framing. Thus, normative factors may temper rational cost–benefit analysis and are rooted in historical legacies. We therefore now turn to a brief historical overview of party–union relations in France.

Parties and Unions in France: A Fragmented Landscape

Historically, the general picture of left parties and unions in France is one of fragmentation, particularly on the trade union side. Two major left-wing parties have existed since a split in the French Section of the Workers' International (SFIO) – created in 1905 from the amalgamation of several left organizations – led to the establishment of the French Communist Party (PCF) in 1920. These two formations struggled for supremacy on the left with the SFIO, after changing its name to the Socialist Party (PS) in 1969, finally supplanting the PCF as the dominant party of the left from the mid- to late 1970s under the leadership of François Mitterrand, and becoming a 'catch-all' party by the 1981 elections (Knapp and Wright, 2006, pp. 200–201). Since World War Two, the PCF vote in parliamentary elections declined from 28 per cent in 1946 to 21 per cent in 1978 to 4.3 per cent in 2007 before the Party allied with Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Left Party to score 7 per cent in the 2012 legislative elections. Over the same period, the socialists increased their score from 18 per cent in 1946 to 23 per cent in 1978 and 48.5 per cent in 2012 (france-politique, no date, a, b).

On the trade union side, things are more complicated. Historically, unions in France generally recruit members across all sectors of the economy, with members joining out of ideological affiliation rather than occupational category. The oldest major union, the CGT, was founded in 1895, although divisions soon surfaced. Early divisions centred on religion, with the French Confederation of Christian Workers (CFTC) being established in 1919 as a moderate Catholic alternative to the radical CGT. The next major development occurred in 1948, when *Force ouvrière* (FO) was established following a split within the CGT in reaction to the increasing influence of the PCF over the confederation,

which was cemented in the World War Two resistance movement. In addition, the CFDT was created in 1964 when the majority of the CFTC decided to deconfessionalize and pursue a 'third way' between the reformist FO and CFTC on the one hand, and the bureaucratic state socialism of the CGT–PCF tandem on the other.

Although the CGT emerged from World War Two as the largest French union confederation, it has been in constant decline from the 1970s, a trend that has also affected the PCF. In 1946, the CGT claimed nearly six million members, a number that had fallen to just under two million by the end of the 1970s and now stands at nearly 700 000 (Bevort, 1995, p. 45; Dayan, 2012). To combat this trend, the CGT has, since the 1980s, attempted to distance itself from the declining PCF, moving – albeit hesitatingly – towards the social-democratic middle ground. This opened up space on the left for the so-called 'autonomous' unions, unattached to any confederation, to grow. Thus, autonomous *Solidaires, unitaires, démocratiques* (SUD) movements developed in many public sector organizations from 1989 onwards as members defected from established confederations. The SUD unions joined, and radicalized, the 'Group of 10' unions unaffiliated to any confederation, which was created in 1981 and became the *Union syndicale solidaire* (USS) in 1998. Furthermore, the far left *Fédération des syndicats unifiée* (FSU) and the social-democratic *Union nationale des syndicats autonomes* (UNSA) grew out of a split in the National Education Federation (FEN), a teachers' union in 1992. Union weakness can be seen in the fact that less than 8 per cent of wage earners are unionized in France – the lowest of any OECD country – as compared to 30 per cent in 1949 and 20 per cent in the mid-1970s (Parsons, 2013, pp. 190–191). French unions have lost two-thirds of their members since the 1970s (Andolfatto, 2007, p. 233).

Party–Union Relations: The Myth of Independence

Party–union relations (or lack of them), however, are not merely the result of historical divisions within the industrial arm of the French labour movement, but can also be ascribed to a divided political Left at the time of the formation of French unions. Although not precluding a close relationship between union and party on the communist left in the post-war period, these historical considerations have left a marked legacy on party–union relations in France.

At its creation in 1895, the CGT was marked by anarcho-syndicalist ideas and, in a context of political fragmentation on the left, opted for independence from political parties. This orientation was enshrined in the Charter of Amiens of 1906, which has become the iconic text of the French trade union movement, and one to which all unions in France still make implicit or explicit reference.

For parties, although the independence of the trade union movement is respected, things are more nuanced. According to the Chapter 1.6 of the Statutes of the PCF (2013):

> […] communists create and participate in the creation of all forms of appropriate partnerships with all progressive organizations: political organizations, unions, groups, interested citizens, while respecting the identity, specific aims and independence of each.[2]

For the PS (2012), 'Members of the Party are encouraged to belong to a trade union' or other interest group (Statutes, Art. 2.1.1.2.3), and indeed have a 'duty' to do so according to the Party's Ethics Charter (PS, no date).

Thus, while unions clearly assert their desire for complete independence, party statutes suggest that relations are far more nuanced than a clear-cut division of labour between the industrial and political wings of the labour movement would suggest. Indeed, the history of union–party relations in France clearly demonstrates that the idea of complete independence for the trade union movement has been a myth, at least since the creation of the PCF in 1920. At this point in time, the CGT split into revolutionary and reformist factions. While, following the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, revolutionaries accepted the Leninist conception of the subordination of trade union action to a revolutionary party in order to capture control of the State, the reformists sought accommodation with the State (Charles *et al*, 1995, pp. 44–48; Robert, 1995).

After World War Two, the main cleavage on the left in France was between the communists with tight links between the CGT and PCF, and the non-communist left with FO, then the CFDT, forming (less tight) bonds with the PS. On the communist side of the divide, during the period from the end of World War Two to the mid-1990s, although there were no formal links between the two organizations, it was customary for the General Secretary of the CGT to be a member of the Political Bureau of the PCF. Indeed, 'the party used its leadership positions within the union to make labour market actions complement programmatic positions' (Daley, 1993, p. 57). In general terms, although the CGT gained some 'relative autonomy' from the 1960s to the mid-1970s, the CGT acted as a 'transmission belt' for the PCF within a wider 'communist ecosystem' comprising clubs, societies, pressure groups and municipalities as well as the union and party (Andolfatto and Sabot, 2004, pp. 17–18; Pernot, 2010, pp. 198–199, 204–205). However, CGT support for the PCF was not always unconditional. Although the CGT aligned itself with the PCF's 'pauperization' thesis, claiming the decline in the living standards of the working classes in a period of economic boom, in 1955, the Soviet intervention of Hungary in 1956 was not supported by the CGT leadership, despite the approval of the PCF (Andolfatto and Sabot, 2004, pp. 28–29). Nevertheless, in the 1980s, the CGT was an enthusiastic supporter of François Mitterrand's Socialist–Communist coalition government of 1981–1984, only offering 'muted' criticism of austerity policies

while attempting to distance itself from them. Once the PCF withdrew from government in 1984, however, the CGT 'was only too happy to return to an adversarial stance' (Howell, 1992, p. 164).

Among the non-communist trade unions, relations were looser being 'more characterized by personal affinities than by organizational linkages' (Daley, 1993, p. 57). Thus, although FO was a heterogeneous grouping held together by anti-communism, and therefore espoused a minimalist ideology of incremental gains through collective bargaining, it had good relations with the SFIO and then its successor, the PS. In the 1960s, the other main left-wing non-communist union, the CFDT, formed, with the Unified Socialist Party (PSU), part of the 'second left', rejecting the Soviet-influenced bureaucratic centralism of the CGT–PCF tandem and the welfare reformism inherent in FO's approach to political and social change. In 1974, however, the PSU merged with the PS and many CFDT members and leaders, wishing to build up a unified non-communist left, followed, despite strong criticism from the left of the confederation (ibid, 1993, p. 57). Following the failure of the Common Programme of Government and the Left's failure to win the 1978 parliamentary elections, the CFDT embarked on a process of 'resyndicalization' – or focussing on trade union action, notably through collective bargaining, rather than seeking national-level political and social transformation. Although this resulted in more difficult relations with the political left, there was an 'alignment of the CFDT on socialist positions in the quarrel between the PS, the PCF and the CGT' (Labbé and Croisat, 1992, pp. 140–141) and the CFDT called for a vote in favour of the socialist François Mitterrand in the 1981 presidential elections. Following the latter's victory, high-ranking CFDT (and CGT) members were recruited as advisors in ministerial cabinets, although this was in a personal rather than organizational capacity (Kergoat, 1984; Labbé and Croisat, 1992, pp. 140–141). By the 1980s, CFDT influence on PS policy could be clearly seen in the field of industrial relations, with the passing of the Auroux Laws in 1982 (Labbé and Croisat, 1992, pp. 140–141). Even austerity policies from 1982 onwards received broad, if not at times unqualified, CFDT support (Howell, 1992, pp. 161–164; Pernot, 2010, p. 213).

The Weakening of Party–Union Links from the 1980s

Relations between the CGT and PCF were becoming problematic from the late 1970s onwards. In 1977, the CGT criticized the attitude of the PCF when renegotiation of the Common Programme of Government with the PS failed and ended in acrimony, resulting in the Left's failure to win the 1978 parliamentary elections when it had seemed on the verge of power for the first time since the creation of the Fifth Republic. The CGT Congress that year saw Georges Séguy criticize his own communist-dominated leadership as it did not 'always correctly reflect the diversity of the CGT' and for its 'intolerance towards different ideas' (cited in Andolfatto and

Sabot, 2004, p. 34). His call for greater diversity and openness, however, was rejected by other leaders, and the organization returned to its orthodox communist beliefs under Henri Krasucki in 1982. As PCF electoral fortunes and CGT membership both declined throughout the 1980s, however, critical voices from within the CGT demanded 'modernization', and with it, greater autonomy from the PCF. The result was that whereas previous post-war elections were always marked by CGT calls for a vote for the PCF, from 1988 onwards the CGT has not given any guidance to members on how to vote in either parliamentary or presidential elections.

At the 29th Congress of the CGT in 1995, Louis Viannet, the then General Secretary, announced that he no longer needed to be an 'organic liaison' between the party and trade union, and that he was resigning from the PCF National Bureau (now Executive Committee), signifying the end of the 'transmission belt' between the party and the masses, despite the fact that several other PCF members remained as leaders of the CGT, and despite the fact that he kept his seat on the National Committee, the 'parliament', of the PCF (Courtois and Andolfatto, 2008). Since then, neither of his successors, Bernard Thibault (1999–2013) and the current incumbent, Thierry Lepaon, have been members of the National Bureau/Executive Committee. Thibault was a member of the National Council but resigned his seat in 2001, arguing that the confederation needs greater 'autonomy of thought and decision-making' (cited in Andolfatto and Sabot, 2004, p. 39). This left the CGT without any representation on the central governing bodies of the PCF (Courtois and Andolfatto, 2008). In 2013, when the Executive Commission of the CGT and National Council of the PCF were re-elected, only one person, Pascal Joly, sat on both. He was, however, not on the more-restricted governing body – respectively the Confederal Bureau and the Executive Committee – of either. This distancing has not been without problems, however, and has led to tensions between 'modernizers' and the 'orthodox' line. Notably, in 2005 Thibault was outnumbered when arguing for neutrality in the referendum on the EU Constitutional Treaty by those faithful to the PCF line, favouring opposition (ibid.).

Although the CFDT had supported Mitterrand's election and some leading members had worked for the PS government, relations soon soured in a context of persistently high unemployment, unpopular austerity policies and a rapidly declining membership base. The CFDT, for the first time since 1970, did not call for a vote for the Left in the 1986 parliamentary elections. This distancing from the political left continued with no call to vote for Mitterrand in the 1988 presidential elections. By this stage, the process of 'resyndicalization' was complete as the emphasis on what was 'negotiable in the here and now' resulted in 'a certain negation of the role of politics' (Pernot, 2010, p. 214). Nevertheless, certain individuals maintained close ties with the government: following Mitterrand's second presidential election victory in 1988, Jacques Chérèque, the CFDT Deputy General Secretary and later General Secretary, became Minister for Regional Development and Industrial Reconversion in Michel Rocard's centre-left government, and Hubert Prévot, a national secretary,

oversaw the break-up of the publicly owned post and telecommunications company, the PTT (Landré, 2013). However, the new reformist orientation of the confederation was confirmed in spectacular fashion in 1995 when the CFDT supported the broad thrust of the Gaullist Prime Minister Alain Juppé's social security reforms despite the opposition of all other unions and the largest strike wave, in November and December of that year, seen in France since May 1968. Since then, the CFDT has persisted in its reformist-syndicalist logic, proving itself to be the confederation most likely to sign deals with employers (Pernot, 2010, pp. 212–216).

Finally, while the CGT appeared to be moving, hesitatingly, towards a centre-left position in an attempt to distance itself from a declining communist party, for example in joining the social-democratic ETUC in 1999 (Parsons, 2005, p. 56), FO moved in the other direction, becoming more radical when Marc Blondel succeeded André Bergeron in 1989 with the support of members also affiliated to the Trotskyist Workers' Party. As they increased their influence within the confederation, relations with the PS became increasingly tense (Andolfatto and Sabot, 2004, p. 37).

Trade union desires for autonomy from political parties were reflected in the pronouncements of parties in the 1990s. Hence, reflecting the deep-rooted Jacobin political culture that is suspicious of the role of intermediary bodies between the government and the people, the then First Secretary and later Prime Minister, Lionel Jospin, argued, at the PS Congress of 1994, that trade unions were valuable interlocutors of government, but that their role should be limited to consultation and negotiation on labour market issues. Policy-making and implementation was 'the responsibility of the political powers in the economic sphere, and hence their obligation to determine priorities, objectives and the means of obtaining results' (cited in Parsons, 2002, p. 119). Likewise, the PCF called for the increased influence of tripartite bodies in policy-making 'to help *those elected to office* to take decisions' (cited in Parsons, 2002, p. 119; my emphasis).

The 2012 Presidential Elections – A Turning Point?

During elections since the 1980s, trade unions maintained the strict 'neutrality' that the CGT and CFDT opted for in 1986 and 1988, respectively, with none calling for voters to vote for any particular party or candidate. In 2012, however, in the wake of years of austerity policies and social reform following the 2008 financial and economic crisis, there was evidence of unions attempting to influence elections again. Thus the CGT, FSU and USS called on voters to 'beat Sarkozy', while the CFDT, although declaring itself neutral, was highly critical of the outgoing president (Andolfatto, 2012). Days before the first round of the elections, Bernard Thibault was more explicit: on 1 May 2012, when interviewed on *Europe 1*, he declared that he and the CGT supported the PS candidate, François Hollande, 'on the basis of trade union demands' (Europe 1, 2012).

Despite officially respecting its neutrality in the 2012 presidential election, the CFDT too is renewing ties to the party. Indeed, CFDT thinking seems to have been influential in François Hollande's election campaign. From June 2011, Hollande was setting out his vision of social democracy (Hollande, 2011) – a vision directly inspired by the CFDT, while Jacky Bontems, the former Deputy General Secretary of the CFDT was recruited to his campaign team along with members of UNSA (Laurent, 2012). Reciprocally, the PS, and François Hollande in particular, have been making overtures to the unions. In September 2011, during his PS 'primaries' campaign, he met with 240 trade unionists from across the board with the exception of the USS. In line with his promise of a renewal of social democracy and in exchange for the mobilization of trade unionists' votes, Hollande promised the unions greater influence in the elaboration of social policies (Lhaïk, 2011). Following Hollande's victory, François Chérèque, the General Secretary of the CFDT until November 2012, was named Inspector for Social Affairs in early January 2013, where his first task would be to oversee an anti-poverty plan that he himself had proposed to the new government at a social summit a few months earlier. In addition, Bontems was recruited to the government's strategic planning office, the *Commissariat général à la stratégie et à la prospective*, while the former national secretary for relations with political parties, Laurence Laigo, was recruited to the ministerial cabinet of Najat Vallaud-Belkacem, the Minister for Women's Rights until November 2013 (Landré, 2013; Mariaucourt, 2013). Finally, in what was seen as a cynical move to try to reconnect with working-class voters being lost to the FN, the CFDT General Secretary of the Steelworkers Federation in the North-Lorraine region, Edouard Martin, was designated to lead the PS list for the East France constituency in the 2014 European elections, less than a year after criticizing the government for not doing enough to prevent the closure of Arcelor-Mittal steelworks in the Lorraine (Bourmaud, 2013).

Thus, the 2012 election appeared to suggest that unions were coming out of their hyper-neutral stances of the previous 20 years and positioning themselves on the left, with the PS being seen as the privileged political partner. Subsequent events, however, have shown this rapprochement to be very fragile.

Even though Holland promised to 'make the bankers pay' for economic crisis with the tacit backing of the unions, his governments have implemented austerity measures in order to attempt to reduce state deficits and debts. Nevertheless, to reconcile the need for debt reduction with economic and employment growth, in his end-of-year speech to the nation in 2013 Hollande proposed a 'Responsibility and Solidarity Pact' between employers and unions, involving reduced taxes and social charges to total €50 million for companies in exchange for job creation, training and investment, with employer commitments on these to be the subject of the Pact. In the end only the CFDT, and the right-leaning CFTC, as well as the managerial union CGC-CFE, signed the Pact with employer organizations (vie-publique, 2014).

This suggests that, with the possible exception of the CFDT, links are weak and that unions have little impact upon government policy, a notion confirmed in the July

2014 'Social Conference', an annual event instituted by Hollande as a forum for tripartite social dialogue. In 2014, the CGT, FO, USS and FSU all walked out of the conference, criticizing the government for a lack of true dialogue, and for the general orientation of its policies. Only the CFDT, UNSA and CFTC, again with the CGC-CFE, remained willing to remain in discussion with the socialist government (Roussel, 2014).

Thus, the trade union movement appears to be divided between what could loosely be termed a social democratic bloc and 'contestataires' holding to a more radical line. As noted above, the other major change in party–union relations – the gradual dissolution of the PCF–CGT dyad – appeared to be confirmed in the 2012 presidential elections as the CGT backed Hollande rather than the PCF-backed *Front de gauche* candidate, Jean-Luc Mélenchon. Explanations for these evolutions and to what extent they represent a durable new configuration of party–union relations in France will now be discussed.

Evaluating Change

The closest and most stable union–party relationship in France developed after World War Two between the CGT and PCF. On the non-communist left, close relationships also developed between the PS on the one hand and FO and the CFDT on the other. In both cases, however, although 'political families' may still be discernible, the links between unions and parties have become weaker since the 1980s, as can be seen from voting behaviour.

While data on the voting behaviour of trade union members is not available, opinion polls regularly measure voting behaviour according to trade union 'sympathy' or 'proximity', and this can be used as a proxy for the extent to which unions can deliver votes to parties and, conversely, the extent to which parties can deliver members to unions.

Until the 1980s, it was possible to speak of loose ties based on ideological affinity (Daley, 1993). Thus, the majority of CGT members would follow the union's call to support the party at election time. Likewise, the majority of CFDT members would vote for the PS, resulting in one communist and one non-communist bloc on the Left of French politics. However, in recent years these ideological links appear to have weakened. Even though the CGT stopped issuing any voting guidance to its members in the 1988 presidential election, over half of the members of the confederation voted communist in the next national elections, the 1993 legislatives. By the 1997 legislative elections, however, this figure had fallen to 39 per cent, while more of those close to the CGT voted for the socialist candidate, Lionel Jospin, than voted for the communist candidate, Robert Hue – 39 to 35 per cent – in the 1995 presidential election (Andolfatto, 2001, pp. 75–77). This trend has continued into the 2000s, with the PS candidate gaining more votes

Table 1: Voting behaviour according to trade union support (first round of Presidential elections, %)

	Ext left	*PCF/FG*	*PS*	*Centre*	*Gaullist*	*National front*	*Other*
CGT							
2002	20	18	24	6	9	12	11
2007	12	7	42	11	11	12	5
2012	2	39	44	2	1	9	3
CFDT							
2002	7	1	26	18	19	10	19
2007	3	1	39	24	20	8	5
2012	2	6	56	4	15	12	5
FO							
2002	20	3	18	12	15	15	17
2007	15	3	25	19	20	14	4
2012	8	13	28	5	15	25	6
CFTC							
2002	4	1	3	15	39	19	19
2007	6	1	7	24	39	8	15
2012	1	4	20	15	42	15	3
UNSA							
2002	n.d.	n.d	n.d	n.d	n.d	n.d	n.d
2007	0	4	29	29	23	0	15
2012	0	14	49	5	10	16	6
FSU							
2002	n.d.	n.d	n.d	n.d	n.d	n.d	n.d
2007	9	3	69	14	1	0	4
2012	0	31	61	3	1	3	1
USS (SUD)							
2002	39	1	25	4	4	3	24
2007	22	0	42	27	2	1	6
2012	9	39	35	5	0	4	8

n.d. : no data

Sources: 2002, 2007: CSA; 2012 clesdusocial.com

from CGT sympathizers than the PCF candidate in the presidential elections of 2002, 2007 and 2012 (Table 1). The latter election did see a drift back towards the PCF-backed candidate, but this was not a communist. Indeed, after a disastrous showing in the 2007 elections when the PCF candidate, Marie-Georges Buffet, scored less than 2 per cent in the first round (with only 7 per cent of CGT sympathizers voting for her as opposed to 42 per cent who voted for the PS candidate, Ségolène Royal), the PCF did not put up its own candidate, but allied

itself with Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Left Party to form the Left Front with Mélenchon as the presidential candidate.

As we have seen, the CFDT has been close to the PS since the 1970s. In the 1993 legislative elections, just over 40 per cent of those professing to be close to the CFDT voted for PS, with 45 per cent giving their support to Lionel Jospin, the PS candidate in the 1995 presidential elections (Andolfatto, 2001, pp. 75–77). Support, however, has fluctuated in the twenty-first century, falling to 26 per cent in the 2002 presidential elections before rising again to 56 per cent in 2012 (Table 1). Although the PS gets the lion's share of the votes from CFDT sympathizers, the vote is split. One in five CFDT sympathizers regularly votes for the Gaullist candidate in presidential and legislative elections, a figure that rose to one in three in 1997 (Andolfatto, 2001, p. 76), and to 44 per cent in the 2007 presidential elections. Even in 2012, when CFDT supporters returned to the socialist fold, 15 per cent still voted for the Gaullist candidate, Nicolas Sarkozy, and 12 per cent for the National Front's Marine Le Pen (Table 1).

FO, traditionally close to the left of the PS, shows a similar trajectory: a move away from support for extreme left parties and increasing support for the socialists. The latter trend is not as pronounced as for the CFDT or CGT, and the voting behaviour of FO supporters is the most diverse of any of the unions considered here. Indeed, while the PS again gets the highest share of the votes at 28 per cent, the centre, Gaullists and the FN also score well, with the latter getting one in four votes from FO sympathizers in 2012 (Table 1).

Among other trade unions, similar trends can be seen. Most unionists' votes go to the PS, with the exception of the USS, whose members seem to have progressively abandoned the extreme left, initially to the benefit of the socialists, then to the benefit of the Left Front in 2012. FSU and USS votes are far more concentrated on the left of the political divide than those of other unions, with the FSU, in particular, showing strong support for the PS.

Thus, while the PS still benefits from the highest levels of electoral support from trade unionists in France (with the exception of the right-leaning CFTC), the seemingly stable 'political families' of the 1970s are disintegrating. The PCF–CGT dyad has all but disappeared, with CGT voters only returning to the fold once the PCF has lost its prominent position as the main left alternative to the PS. Even then, PS supporters outnumbered PCF/FG supporters among CGT sympathizers in 2012. Along with the CGT, USS votes are split between the FG/extreme left and the PS. The main unions historically close to the PS – the CFDT and FO – have seen large percentages and at times the majority of their sympathizers abandon the left altogether for centrist, Gaullist and even National Front candidates in presidential elections in the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, CFDT, UNSA and FSU sympathizers tend to support the PS. However, while the PS is the main electoral beneficiary of trade unionists' votes, this support is volatile and fragmented with only sympathizers of the FSU voting in their majority for the PS candidate in more than one of the three presidential elections of the twenty-first century (Table 1).

From the party side, trade union weakness and fragmentation in France has long weakened the attractiveness of stable party–union relations. Indeed, the traditional independence of unions and their appeal to workers irrespective of their partisan allegiance means that they cannot deliver voters en bloc to any one party at election time, a problem that has continued into this century. Thus, in terms of cost–benefit exchange, with the exception of the FSU, unions cannot consistently deliver voters to the PS. Once in power, the PS has little to lose, therefore, in alienating some of its trade union constituency by pursuing policies it perceives as necessary and achievable within the wider constraints imposed by global financial markets and economic crisis.

The fact that union sympathizers have coalesced behind the PS in recent elections should not therefore be seen as a sign of closer ties or union influence, but of the fact that since the late 1970s, the PS has emerged as the only credible left party of government. Put simply, if they wish to have any influence on government policy, unions, their members and sympathizers have nowhere else to go. However, if a left party captures power, it lacks a credible and dependable union interlocutor due to the political heterogeneity of the union base. While close relations are at times possible, these tend to be unstable as the experience of the 1981–1984 socialist government's relations with the CFDT show.

For parties in government, this is not a major problem. Historically, the State has been seen, and has portrayed itself, as the guarantor of the general interest. As we have argued elsewhere (Parsons, 2002), there are deep historical roots to this, producing a powerful discourse about the role of the state in France that has resulted in a certain suspicion of organized interests, and a consequent centralization of decision-making power. Under the Fifth Republic, established in 1958, de Gaulle rejected any claims of interest groups to determine policy, claiming that even the most representative lacked authority and political responsibility, as opposed to the state that, alone, could incarnate and serve the national interest. On the other hand, he accepted that they should be consulted over policy. However, the general picture was one of highly centralized, state-dominated policy-making (Hazareesingh 1994, pp. 151–152; Knapp and Wright, 2006, p. 321). From the 1980s, the Jacobin state may have come under pressure, externally from globalization and Europeanization and internally from state policies of decentralization, deregulation and privatization, but unions have not been able to capitalize on this as these same developments have weakened them (Parsons, 2005, 2013).

From the union side, the political heterogeneity of membership means that they have little incentive to continue to support a government that cannot, or will not, deliver their preferred policies. This is all the more the case as such rational calculations must be made within the constraints of an ideational heritage that looks unfavourably upon close union–party links.

Structurally, the multi-party system in France means that political division risks being internalized by unions. Although the main unions had a political project,

defined in terms of the emancipation of the working class, partisan political allegiance was rejected for this reason in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While this model did not reflect the reality of relations in the post-war period, there has, to some extent at least, been a return to it since the 1980s. The main manifestation of this is the weakening of the link between the PCF and the CGT, and this can largely be explained by the electoral decline of the communists following participation in the first Mitterrand government and the collapse of the USSR (Pernot, 2010, p. 194). While one in five voters voted for PCF candidates in presidential and parliamentary elections in the 1960s and 1970s, this had halved by the mid-1980s and halved again during the 2000s with the PCF regularly scoring under 5 per cent, and the PCF candidate, Marie-George Buffet, only gaining 1.9 per cent of the votes in the first round of the 2007 presidential elections (france-politique, no date, c). While the CGT's search for greater autonomy from the PCF reflects the battle between orthodox and modernizing currents within both organizations, strategic cost–benefit considerations related to the decline of the PCF are also important, with the CGT having a strategic incentive to broaden its appeal beyond its traditional communist base and to avoid the reputational damage of being closely allied to a declining and increasingly discredited political force. Other unions find themselves in a similar, although not so severe, situation, with a need to take the political heterogeneity of their members and potential members into account when assessing the benefits of relations with parties.

Thus, contradictory trends seem to be at work. On the one hand, the emergence of the PS as the only credible Left party of government may give unions greater incentives to support the party in the hope of gaining political influence, giving rise to the possibility of a more institutionally linked social democratic bloc. Such a possibility is increased by the break-up of the PCF–CGT dyad and the rallying of the majority of the latter's sympathizers to the PS. On the other hand, other structural variables – the fragmentation of the union movement, the catch-all nature of the PS, the continued relative centralization of decision-making power and the constraints of globalization and Europeanization – as well as political contingencies associated with policy-making during a time of crisis, all mitigate against close party–union relations. Thus, alongside austerity packages, Hollande's presiding over an increased flexibility of the labour market through the 'flexicurity' agreement may have been a 'considerable achievement', but it was also upsetting to the trade union movement (Clift, 2014, p. 10; Clift and Ryner, 2014). Given these major constraints, the rallying of support to Hollande in 2012 was ever only likely to be temporary.

Indeed, in many respects the changes associated with the 2012 presidential elections were politically contingent, dependent upon the impact of right-dominated governments since 2002, which engaged in sometimes radical social reform against the wishes of the unions – in particular the raising of the pension age from 60 to 62 in 2010. To this could be added the effects of crisis management by these right-wing governments, with announcements of spending cuts and rising taxes to deal with

government debt in a context of high and rising unemployment. In this respect, the CFDT's stance could be explained, not by a desire to renew and reinforce ties with PS, but by the restricted space for collective bargaining on issues such as pension reform under the previous administration (Pernot, 2010, pp. 213–214). For other unions too, any attempt to gain political influence could only mean support for the PS as the other major party of the Left, the PCF, had gone into sharp decline. As Didier Le Reste, the General Secretary of the CGT Railway Federation, put it, 'I think that we went too far towards a position of independence and political neutrality. That led to a certain depoliticization, which contributed to weakening the balance of power' (Deslandes, 2011). Unions therefore want to see the left returned to power in the hope of gaining support for trade union campaigns and struggles.

However, with the exception of Thibault, union leaders hesitated to come out in favour of any particular party. In the case of the CGT this can be explained by its desire to clearly demarcate itself from the CGT and to appeal to a wider social base. For other unions, in the context of multi-party electoral competition engendered by the French two-ballot system, it is better to say who you are against rather than to specify who you are for. This is not only because unions' membership bases have become more politically heterogeneous, so a declaration in favour of any particular candidate or party runs the risk of alienating significant proportions of the current and potential members. It is also a function of the ideational heritage of the early trade union movement in France.

Indeed, any transgression of the demarcation between what is considered union activity and the role of parties comes up against a strong element of French political culture. As has been demonstrated above, trade union independence from political parties was a myth, but it was, and still is, a powerful one. Opinion polls regularly show that, while French unions have a generally positive image among French workers, the main criticism of them is that they are too politicized (Labbé and Croisat, 1992, pp. 129–131; Parsons, 2013). In 2013, a TNS-Sofres poll found that the level of confidence in unions among wage-earners to defend their interests had remained stable since 2010 at 55 per cent. However, there was also a degree of stability in the proportion criticizing unions for being 'too ideological' (76 per cent in 2013) and 'too politicized' (69 per cent in 2013) (TNS-Sofres, 2013). In Labbé and Croisat's (1992) study of the CFDT, even those sympathetic to, or members of, a political party rejected party–union links. Indeed, in the study this was a motivating factor for 40 per cent of those who had left the CFDT (Labbé and Croisat, 1992, pp. 129–152). Maintaining, in public, at least, a distance from political parties therefore serves union interests in a situation where membership is already extremely low, inter-union rivalry fierce and the free rider problem acute due to the nature of the French industrial relations system. In effect, extension procedures for collective agreements and the applicability of union gains to non-members reduce individual incentives to join (Parsons, 2005). The attempt to recruit across as broad a base as possible, therefore, gives an incentive to relations with parties being kept on a largely informal and *ad hoc* basis.

It can be seen that party–union links in France have been historically shaped by the notion of union independence enshrined in the 1906 Charter of Amiens. While complete union independence may have been a historical myth, the lack of organic links means that unions do not donate to parties, either to sponsor election campaigns or MPs, or via a collective affiliation of members, again weakening incentives for close relations on a cost–benefit calculation.

Conclusion

Change and continuity in party–union relationships in France can be analysed from a cost–benefit perspective. Unions see few benefits from party affiliation and closeness for several reasons: the multi-party nature of the system and the political heterogeneity of their own current and potential memberships; the inability of the only credible broadly left-wing party to deliver policies in line with their own preferences due to the constraints of electoral competition, crisis, Europeanization and globalization that limit the party's margin for manoeuvre when in government. Likewise, for parties there is little incentive for highly institutionalized relationships with fragmented, weak unions that cannot consistently deliver voters en masse, particularly as, when in power, they are relatively easily bypassed when it comes to policy delivery. The essence of these structural considerations has not changed in over 100 years.

The main change in party–union relations in France since the 1980s has been the weakening of the link between the CGT and PCF so that one can no longer see the union as the 'transmission belt' of the party. The principal explanation for this lies in the decline of the PCF, which has seen the erosion of both its ideological and sociological bases. For its own survival in a situation of generalized trade union decline and inter-union rivalry, the CGT has had to try to diversify its membership base by appealing to workers more broadly. The CGT's move away from its former communist base has opened up the possibility of a social-democratic bloc in France based around the PS and a constellation of unions.

Beyond the communist left, much of the continuity in party–union relations can be explained structurally by inter-union rivalry and weakness and party competition, and contemporaneously by the experience of the left in government. However, they are also historically conditioned by powerful normative discourses that see a separation between unions and parties as desirable. These discourses emanate not only from unions through their continued adherence, at least in public, to the principles of the Charter of Amiens, but also through political parties and State institutions through the notion of governing in the general interest. Thus, while the emergence of the PS as the only left alternative for government may improve the structural conditions for a reinforcement of ties on the party side of the equation, continued union fragmentation and rivalry, along with public antipathy to

'politicized' unions, mean that this is unlikely to happen, with party–union relations remaining structured around ever looser and unstable notions of 'political families'.

While the above may explain the fragility of union support for Hollande in general, it does not explain why the CFDT continues to support the government, or at least has not gone to a position of outright opposition as other unions have, in the face of austerity policies. Structural variables and a cost–benefit calculation cannot in themselves explain this position. Indeed, the risk for the CFDT is to be seen as the government's union and to alienate members and potential members as austerity continues to bite. An explanation must therefore be sought in the ideational realm as well as in cost–benefit analysis. Effectively, the CFDT is sticking to a path traced since the mid-1970s when it embarked upon the process of *recentrage* and *resyndicalization*. Its strategy of delivering concrete gains through collective bargaining has seen the confederation grow since the 1980s. The calculation is that signing deals such as the Responsibility Pact will continue to yield concrete results and reinforce the confederation's image of 'responsible' unionism, thereby attracting new members.

This invites two observations. First, the CFDT's position is not so much one of being closely tied to the PS, but one of negotiation with the State as policy-maker and with employers as bargaining partners. Second, as the structural and ideational incentives for links with parties are not strong, but with a need for dialogue with government for policy influence, support for the Hollande administration can be expected to weaken over time, with a return to neutrality in the 2017 elections a distinct possibility. Thus, the rallying of unions, even in the case of the CFDT, to Hollande for the 2012 presidential elections does not represent a sea-change in party–union relations in France. Rather the rapprochement of unions to the PS is politically contingent, and with underlying structural and ideational variables mitigating against party–union ties, it is ultimately fragile and in all probability, temporary.

Notes

1 Generally, the results from the questionnaires showed that the major change in party–union relations in France is the disintegration of the PCF–CGT link since the 1980s. Party–union relations in France are multi-directional, with no exclusivity in any relationship, on either the union or the party side. As a result, they are *ad hoc*, fairly weak, giving unions little influence in policy-marking. The explanation for these elements of continuity and change are explained by cost–benefit exchange theory. However, these exchanges are also historically and ideationally conditioned, a theme explored more fully in this article.

2 All translations from the original French are by the author.

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