

Workers in smaller companies are more likely to vote conservative



Does company size affect political attitudes and voting behaviour? This was the main question of our recent paper. Particularly, we wanted to examine whether company size matters for traditional and new centre-right voting among workers.

This is a relevant political and empirical question because we can observe a huge cross-country variation in Europe when it comes to the electoral success of traditional and newer right-wing parties compared with their social democratic opponents. In some countries (e.g. Denmark, Norway or Switzerland), an important number of workers had turned to older and newer right-wing parties, while in other countries they still remain loyal to their traditional social democratic ally.

In our view, company size and industry structure are important explanations for that pattern and we believe that our research points towards important structural explanations of working class support for old and new right parties and its cross-national differences.

Our arguments combine existing theories from the field of industrial relations and electoral behaviour. In a nutshell, we argue first that in small-sized workplaces, there is less antagonism between employer and employees than in larger ones. Similarly, workers in smaller plants are typically less unionized and more sceptical towards trade unions compared to their colleagues in larger plants. Weaker unionization in smaller establishments then implies lower saliency of issues related to industrial conflict and other economic matters such as state intervention or redistribution.

We therefore expect workers in smaller companies to be more “right-wing” on economic issues. We also expect workers in smaller, less unionised, companies to be more conservative when it comes to traditional values and immigration. This is because unions dampen the effect of conservatism since union elites typically hold more liberal views on non-economic issues and do communicate these to their fellow members.

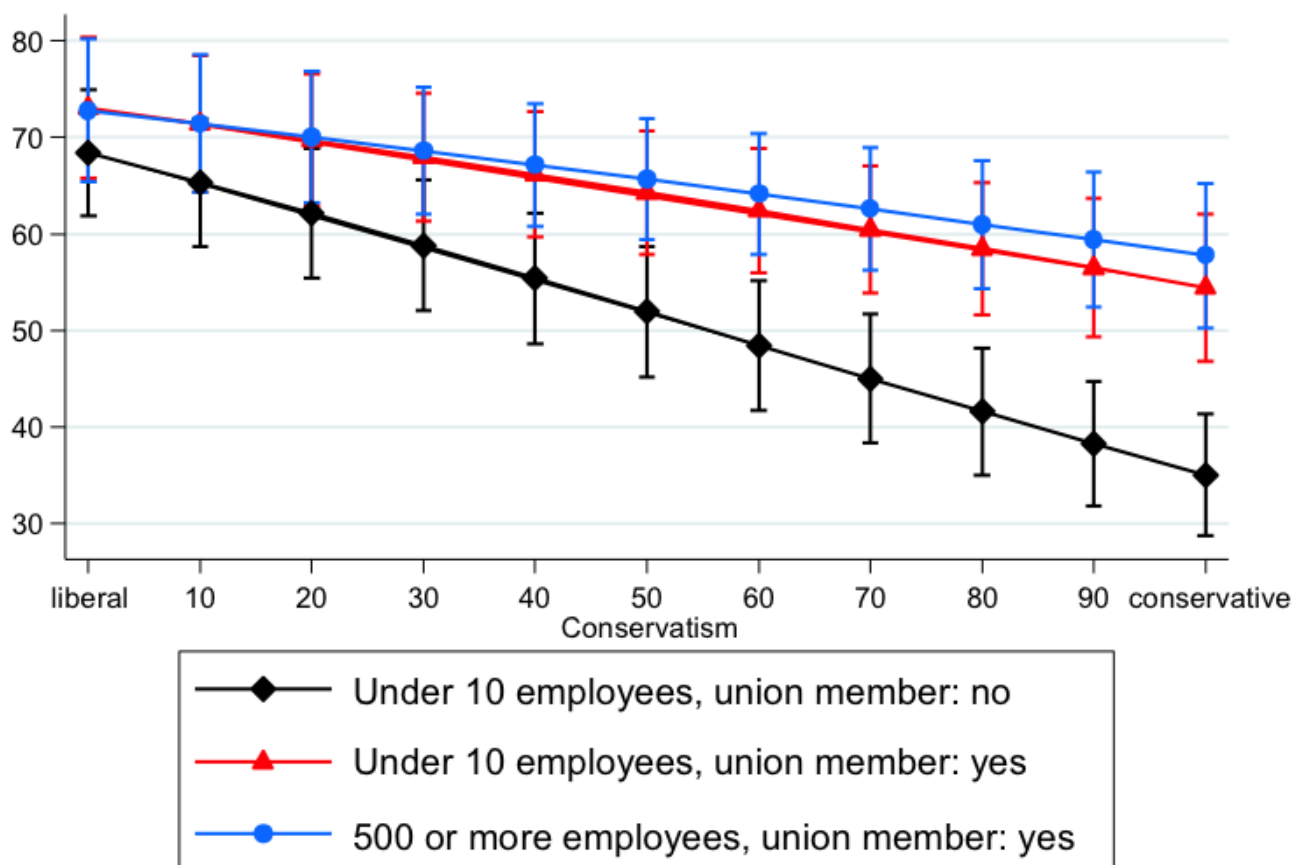
Unions are therefore an important mediator in the relationship between workplace size, political attitudes and vote choice. Hence, economic attitudes play a larger role among the workforce in larger companies, while smaller plants strengthen the effects of conservative attitudes on voting behaviour in a second step. Accordingly, we expected workers in smaller plants to support old and new right-wing parties to the disadvantage of social democratic parties, which in turn fare better in larger, unionised plants.

We use a series of statistical models that analyse the effect of company size on political attitudes in the first step and voting behaviour in the second step. We employed data from the European Social Survey for 16 countries in the period 2002-2010.

Our first analysis reveals that workers in smaller companies are indeed more right-wing – or market-liberal – on some socio-economic issues. We also find that employees in smaller plants favour less state intervention and are more sceptical when it comes to the need for trade unions. They are also more conservative on the issue of immigration, and if satisfied with their work conditions, more conservative on traditional values. The opposite pattern is true for their colleagues in large plants (see Table 1 in our article for full documentation).

When we look at vote choice in a second step of our analysis, we can see that company size works together with the respective attitudes. To ease presentation, we compare the probability of voting for the social democratic party (e.g. SAP, Labour or SPÖ) in a given country with the joint vote choice for all established and new right-wing parties (e.g. Moderate Party, Danish People's Party or CDU/CSU). The probabilities in Figure 1 show the expected vote share for the social democrats across our conservatism index (0-100) and three constellations of company size.

Figure 1: Effect of conservatism on social democratic support by plant size and union membership



Note: Bars denote 95% confidence interval. Source: Model 5 from Table 2 in article from BJIR

The overall pattern is that more conservative attitudes unsurprisingly diminish support for social democratic parties and strengthen the right since the predicted probability of voting for the social democrats falls the more conservative a voter is. This pattern, however, is strongest for a worker who is not union member and who works in a small company. Here, the effect of conservatism on voting for right-wing parties is strongest. The comparison of a unionised worker in a very small and very big company also reveals that union membership is an important condition here since the effects for these two conditions are not that different compared to the non-unionised worker in a small workplace. This supports our expectation that union membership moderates the effect of conservatism.

We believe that our findings have some notable implications. First, the article sheds light on the difficulties and opportunities for political parties to gain support among workers in contexts where large factories no longer dominate the industrial landscape. Unionised workers are usually more likely to support social democratic parties than right-wing parties.

Consequently, in times of weaker unionisation, social democratic parties are less able to mobilise their historical core constituency, that is, the working class. The mushrooming of smaller plants under industrial restructuring and the corresponding low level of unionisation will therefore permit traditional and new conservative parties to gain ground inside the working class with a culture-based appeal.

Without the presence of unions who emphasise the importance of economic issues, workers in smaller plants are more likely to consider cultural issues more important for their vote choice. De-unionisation might be well a decisive element for the phenomena of electoral dealignment and realignment that many Western European countries have faced since the 1970s. Second, and in a comparative perspective, we believe that our findings contribute to the understanding of favourable context conditions for the establishment of right-wing conservative parties (such as the Danish People's Party or the Progress Party in Norway).

If workplace size has an effect on workers' political attitudes and their voting behaviour, then it follows that countries with an industry structure characterised by a high share of small and medium-sized plants provide a favourable context for the establishment and electoral performance of the new right parties. In contrast, countries with the dominance of big companies constitute a more difficult terrain to establish a new right party and also makes it more difficult for established conservative parties to gain ground among working class voters.



Notes:

- This blog post is based on the authors' paper [Workplace Characteristics and Working Class Vote for the Old and New Right](#), *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 55 Issue 1, March 2017.
- The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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Christoph Arndt is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Aarhus University, Denmark.



Line Rennwald is a Max Weber Fellow at the European University Institute in Florence. She is a political scientist whose research interests lie at the crossroads of political sociology, comparative politics and industrial relations. In her PhD, obtained at the University of Geneva, she examined the evolution of working-class support for social democratic parties in Western Europe. She is currently pursuing her research on the transformations of class voting with a focus on the role of trade unions.