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UNEQUAL DEMOCRACIES

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Trade Unions and Left Parties in Sweden 1986-2018

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ABSTRACT:

This paper describes trends in union membership and their consequences for electoral politics in Sweden since the mid-1980s. The paper documents a sharp decline unionization among blue-collar workers and white-collar employees without university education and argues that this has weakened support for Left parties. In addition, union membership has become less closely associated with support for Left parties. We attribute the latter development to increased competition between unions, decentralization of wage bargaining and welfare-state retrenchment.

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This paper explores how changes in the Swedish industrial relations landscape and trade-union politics have affected electoral support for Left parties since the mid-1980s. Sweden is often cited as the example *par excellence* of successful social democracy. From 1932 to 1976, the Social Democratic Workers' Party (*Socialdemokratiska Arbetarpartiet*; SAP for short) held the office of prime minister for all but 100 days. Since 1976, the Social Democrats have held the office more often than not (29 out of 47 years), but they have become increasingly reliant on the support of the Left Party (*Vänsterpartiet*) and the Greens. Even so, SAP-led governments since 2006 have been minority governments. As we shall document below, electoral support for SAP, and for the Swedish Left as a whole, fell by 20 percentage points from 1994 to 2018 (recovering slightly in 2022).

It is commonplace to attribute the historic dominance of Swedish social democracy to the strength and encompassing character of Swedish trade unions, notably blue-collar unions affiliated with the confederation known as LO. Przeworski and Sprague's (1986) well-known account of the electoral dilemma of social democracy proceeds from the observation that the working class never became the electoral majority anticipated by Marxists and that social democratic parties must appeal to middle-class voters to gain political power. Social democratic parties tend to lose working-class support as they engage in cross-class appeals, but the presence of encompassing unions mitigates this trade-off by strengthening the class identity of workers. This, according to Przeworski and Sprague, is the key to the success of social democracy in Sweden and the other Scandinavian countries (see also Korpi 1983).

While Przeworski and Sprague's account focuses on the effects of unionization among workers, narrowly defined as manual workers, what distinguishes the Scandinavian countries is first and foremost the high rate of unionization among white-collar employees, which in

turn is related to the existence of separate white-collar unions. In the Swedish case, as Svensson (1994) explains in detail, the confederation of sectorally organized white-collar unions known as TCO emerged as a pivotal interest group in the course of the 1960s and SAP members played a key role in directing TCO-affiliated unions towards practices and objectives that supported the social democratic project. Extending Przeworski and Sprague's core argument, white-collar unionization arguably made it possible for the Swedish Social Democrats to mobilize middle-class voters on terms that were more consistent with working-class mobilization than elsewhere.¹

Providing generous benefits through public subsidization of union-administered unemployment insurance funds, the Swedish system of unemployment insurance creates strong selective incentives for people to join unions and has commonly been invoked to explain the high rate of unionization. Rothstein (1992) adds an interesting twist to the conventional story of the success of Swedish social democracy by suggesting that strategic foresight motivated the Swedish Social Democrats to opt for a "Ghent system," as opposed to state-administered unemployment insurance, in the 1930s.²

Against this background, we identify three developments pertaining to the organization and role of trade unions that have adversely affected the mobilizational capacity of the Swedish Left since the mid-1980s. The first development is de-unionization. As we shall see, the unionization rate of blue-collar workers has declined sharply since the early 1990s and the unionization rate of less educated white-collar employees has also declined over the last two decades. The consequences for overall unionization have been partly offset

¹ See Rennwald and Pontusson (2021) for a comparative analysis of how unionization affects the electoral trade-offs confronting social democratic parties in the contemporary era.

² Rasmussen and Pontusson (2018) provide an alternative take on the origins and effects of Ghent systems of unemployment insurance.

by the fact that unionization among university-educated white-collar employees has been stable while the university-educated white-collar employees have come to account for a larger share of the labor force. Related to expansion of university education, the second development that we wish to highlight is the shift of white-collar union membership from sectoral unions to more narrow occupational unions, engaged in bargaining practices and policy advocacy that are less conducive to generating electoral support for Left parties. Thirdly, and finally, we argue that decentralization of collective bargaining, welfare-state retrenchment and increased competition among unions have rendered all unions, including unions traditionally affiliated with the Left, more focused on delivering concrete benefits for their own members.

Our discussion is organized as follows. We begin by describing the electoral decline of the Swedish Left and broad trends in the class composition of the Swedish labor force from the 1980s to the later 2010s. Reviewing recent literature, we proceed to articulate a set of general arguments about the influence of union membership on policy preferences and electoral behavior and how this influence varies across different types of unions and different contexts. Returning to the Swedish case, we mobilize administrative data as well as data from SOM surveys to describe unionization trends by social class as well as changes in the structure of the Swedish union movement over the last four decades. In this section, we also discuss, briefly, the main reasons behind the aforementioned developments. Finally, we analyze the effects of union membership on party preferences (Left-party vote intention) based on SOM survey data for the period 1986-2018.³ In so doing, we sort survey respondents into three broad classes (blue-collar workers, white-collar employees without tertiary education and

³ The SOM postal surveys have been conducted annually since 1986 by researchers at the University of Gothenburg. They are directed to a randomized, representative sample of the Swedish population. Surveyed individuals are between the ages of 16-85 and sampled from the Swedish tax register.

white-collar employees with tertiary education) and distinguish between union members based on the confederal affiliation of the union to which they belong. We also explore whether the effects of belonging to different types of unions have changed over time. To anticipate, our results confirm that de-unionization and the rise of occupational unions have adversely affected support for Left parties and also suggest that members of traditionally leftist unions were less prone to favor Left parties in the late 2010s than in the 1980s.

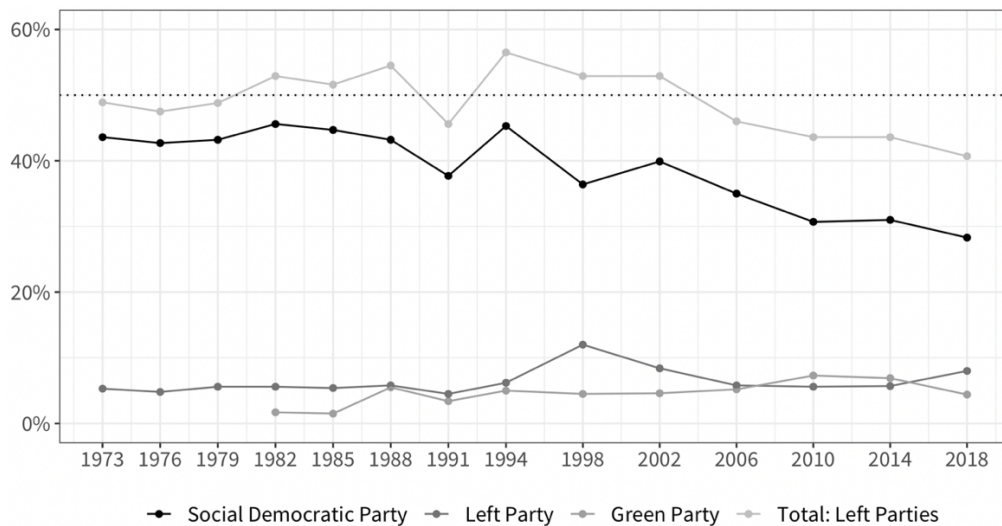
It should be noted at the outset that the changes in the trade-union landscape that we identify as politically consequential can partly be attributed to political choices made by Social Democratic governments as well as Center-Right governments in the 1990s and 2000s. We do not conceive of “changes in the trade-union landscape” as exogenous variables that explain changing political dynamics. The point of this paper is rather to highlight the co-evolution of union politics and electoral party politics.

Electoral and structural-occupational change in Sweden

As background to the discussion that follows, Figure 1 provides an overview of the electoral performance of SAP and the Left as a whole from 1973 to 2018. Having fluctuated between 43 and 46% in the 1970s and 1980s, SAP’s share of the vote dropped to 37.7% in 1991 and recovered in 1994. From 1994 to 2018, SAP lost electoral support in every election but one (the election of 2002). The vote share in 2018 (28.3%) was SAP’s lowest vote share since the introduction of universal suffrage in 1919. Gains by the Left party partly offset Social Democratic losses in 1998, but the combined vote share of SAP, the Left Party and the Greens dropped from an all-time high of 56.5% in 1994 to 36.3% in 2018. (The vote share of the Left

as a whole increased to by 1.4 percentage points while SAP's vote share increased by 2 points in 2022).

Figure 1: Vote share of Swedish left-wing parties in parliamentary elections, 1973-2018.

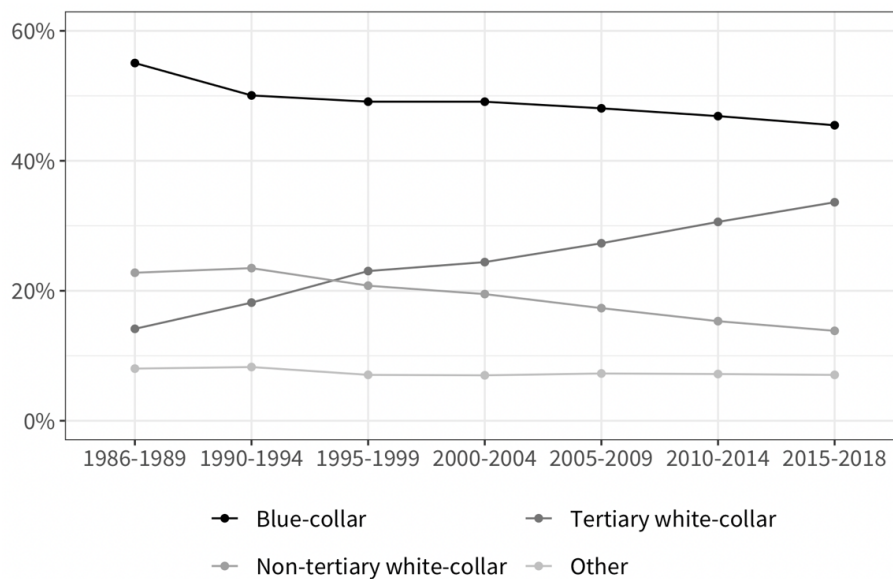


Notes: Data from Statistics Sweden, dotted line displays 50% threshold to attain parliamentary majority. Green party formally established in 1981.

The right-wing populist Sweden Democrats (SD) entered parliament with 5.7% of the popular vote in 2010 and steadily gained support in the course of the 2010s. With 20.5% of the vote in the 2022, SD is now the largest “bourgeois” (non-socialist) party. As commonly noted (e.g., Dal Bo *et al.*, forthcoming), SD exemplifies the new welfare-chauvinist variant of right-populism, combining opposition to immigration with support for welfare provisions for deserving “natives,” and many of its members of parliament come from working-class and lower-middle-class backgrounds. The party appeals to traditional social democratic voters as well as lower-class Center-Right voters. As Figure 1 illustrates, however, the electoral decline of the Left clearly started before SD’s breakthrough in 2010. The rise of right-wing populism is arguably a consequence rather than (or as much as) a cause of the declining mobilizational capacity of SAP (cf. Oskarsson and Demker 2015).

Needless to say, the electoral decline of Left parties, especially mainstream Left parties, is by no means a uniquely Swedish phenomenon. In the comparative literature on this topic, it is commonplace to attribute the electoral difficulties of social democratic to the decline of the industrial (or manual) working class. With this in mind, Figure 2 tracks changes in the Swedish class structure based on SOM data from 1986 to 2018. The figure reports on the share of working-age survey respondents who fall into four broad occupational classes: blue-collar workers (*arbetare*), white-collar employees (*tjänstemän*) without tertiary education, white-collar employees with tertiary education and self-employed “others” (farmers, small businessmen and self-employed professionals).⁴

Figure 2: Over-time change in the class-composition of Swedish labor force.



Own calculations, based on SOM data.

⁴ Our coding relies on occupational categories created by SOM. For this figure and the following analysis, we restrict the sample to respondents between ages 18 and 60 of age while dropping respondents who have never engaged in paid work. Educational attainment is coded based on the highest degree attained by respondents, where enrolled students are categorized based on the degree that they are pursuing. For further elaboration on coding procedures, see appendices A and B.

Based on SOM criteria, the blue-collar share of the labor force declined from 55% in the mid-1980s, to slightly less than 45% in the late 2010s. We do not wish to deny the relevance of this development, but Figure 2 reveals another, more pronounced, class-structural change, viz. the expansion of the class of university-educated white-collar employees. As a share of the labor force, this group increased from about 15% in the mid-1980s to 33% in the late 2010s.⁵

Union membership as a determinant of partisan preferences

A fairly extensive comparative literature on the political effects of union membership has emerged recent years. This literature features three distinct arguments about ways in which union members potentially boost electoral support for social democratic parties (and perhaps radical Left parties as well).⁶

The first line of argument simply posits that union involvement promotes interest in politics and political participation or, alternatively, that trade unions encourage and facilitate political participation—in the first instance, electoral participation—by their members. In the pure version of this argument, union activities and communications from unions to their members do not have any effect on the policy or partisan preferences of union members: union membership simply increases political participation (much like membership in other kinds of associations or social networks). This “participation effect” boosts support for Left parties to the extent that unions mostly organize individuals whose “objective interests” are

⁵ It is hardly necessary to point out that changes in the class structure of the labor force translate into changes in the class structure of the electorate with some time lag. The retired currently make up 28% of the Swedish electorate (SCB 2021).

⁶ For further discussion and references, see Pontusson (2013), Mosimann and Pontusson (2017, 2022) and Rennwald and Pontusson (2021).

aligned with the policies advocated by Left parties or, perhaps, whose “group identity” is aligned with “group appeals” by Left parties (cf. Thau 2021).

The second line of argument assumes that the policy preferences of union members are predetermined (precede union membership), but activities and information associated with being a union member help individuals to connect their policy preferences to the platforms of political parties and, perhaps, to prioritize certain policy preferences over others. Again, this “enlightenment effect” boosts support for Left parties to the extent that unions organize individuals whose economic or redistributive policy preferences are aligned with the policy commitments of Left parties (but who may be “distracted” by other considerations). For example, there is quite a lot of evidence to suggest that many working-class citizens are “cross-pressured” in the sense that they favor restrictions on immigration as well as redistribution and there are (or were) few parties that advocate this combination of policies. In this instance, the argument suggested here would be that union members are just as likely to be cross-pressured as other working-class citizens, but they are more likely to opt for redistribution as the criterion for their vote choice (cf. Rennwald and Mosimann 2023).

The third—most empirically demanding—line of argument, developed by Mosimann and Pontusson (2017, 2022), posits that union membership influences policy preferences—in particular, preferences for redistribution—and that this “preference effect” renders union members more likely to vote for Left parties. As documented by many studies, unions commonly pursue some form of “solidaristic wage policy” in bargaining with employers. Across workplaces, sectors and countries, unionization is consistently associated with more compressed earnings differentials. It is a commonplace that wage solidarity has been a particularly important feature of collective bargaining in the Swedish case, until recently characterized by centralized bargaining directly involving trade-union confederations or

sectoral “cartels” of blue-collar and white-collar unions. More so than in any other country, the Swedish trade-union movement of the 1960s and 1970s promoted and implemented a coherent intellectual construct that challenged the idea of a trade-off between egalitarianism and economic growth (the so-called “Rehn-Meidner model”). It seems quite plausible to suppose that trade-union practices and rhetoric in this period promoted egalitarian norms, strengthening public support for welfare-state universalism and redistribution across the political spectrum and thus provided the Left with an enduring electoral advantage vis-à-vis the “bourgeois parties.”

Whatever effects of union membership that we observe may be a result of social interactions among union members, but, as suggested above, they may also be the result of information and arguments that trade unions communicate to their members through meetings, newsletters, and public media.⁷ Contemporary trade unions, especially the encompassing unions that dominate the Swedish trade-union landscape, are hardly “close-knit communities.” Also, a key point of the following analysis (and the literature that inspires it) is that “trade unions” are not all the same. We can distinguish between trade unions with historic, more or less institutionalized ties to Left parties and trade unions without such ties. This distinction would appear to be most relevant to the extent that union membership directly affects vote choice (see Arndt and Rennwald 2016). For egalitarian norms and support for redistributive policies, the distinction between encompassing (low-wage-inclusive) unions and narrower occupational or professional unions is arguably more important. Crudely put, we expect union membership to have a stronger effect on the

⁷ See Jansson and Uba (2019) for a fascinating analysis of the communication strategies of different Swedish trade unions.

redistributive policy preferences of a doctor if she belongs to a union that also organizes nurses than if she belongs to a union that only organizes doctors.⁸

Needless to say perhaps, the question of self-selection looms large in the literature on the effects of union membership on policy preferences and political behavior. It is likely that individuals who choose to join unions are more likely to vote in the first place—and that individuals who choose to join Left-leaning unions are more likely to be Left-leaning. Similarly, it is probable that skilled, relatively high-paid individuals who join encompassing (low-wage-inclusive) unions are more likely to support redistribution than individuals who join professional unions. Two features of the Swedish case lead us to believe the effects of union membership that we identify in the following analysis cannot be entirely attributed to these dynamics of self-selection. First, there are strong selective incentives to join unions in the Swedish case, primarily due to the fact that unions administer the system of unemployment insurance. Second, the vast majority of blue-collar workers and white-collar employees without tertiary degrees do not have a choice as to which union to join.

Again, we expect the effects of union membership on political attitudes to vary depending on whether unions organize on a sectoral or an occupational basis. We also expect the effects of union membership to vary depending on the broader context in which unions operate and, relatedly, to vary over time. To begin with, there is the question of how de-unionization—a prominent trend in most OECD countries since the late 1970s and, as noted at the outset, quite prominent in Sweden since the early 1990s—affects the effects of union membership on political attitudes. The logic of self-selection would lead us to expect de-

⁸ See Arndt (2018) and Cronert and Forsén (2021) as well as Mosimann and Pontusson (2022) for analyses of variation in policy preferences across members of different types in Sweden (and, in Arndt's case, Denmark and Norway as well).

unionization to be associated with an increase in the (“leftist”) membership effect on political attitudes, for self-selection implies that Right-leaning individuals should be more likely to opt out of unions than Left-leaning individuals. The alternative hypothesis is that socialization within unions has enduring effects and that de-unionization is associated with some diminution of differences in political attitudes between union members and non-union members as it entails an increase in the percentage of former union members among non-union members.⁹

Competition between unions constitutes another contextual (and time-varying) factor that deserves to be considered. We expect unions that organize on a sectoral basis and include low-wage workers to promote stronger egalitarian norms (and, by extension, affinity for Left parties) among their membership base, when compared to occupational unions that only organize skilled and relatively well-paid wage-earners. Moreover, we predict that competition with narrower (“upscale”) unions for potential members from skilled wage-earners, represents a constraint on the egalitarianism of encompassing unions. This should occur as increased competition forces encompassing unions to start providing selective incentives—as opposed to broad-based redistribution—to its (potential) membership base. As we shall see, this consideration is most relevant for understanding the dynamics of white-collar unionism in the Swedish case. However, blue-collar unions have also come under increased competitive pressure as the distinction between blue-collar and white-collar jobs has become more blurred. Furthermore, blue-collar and white-collar unions alike seem to have responded to membership losses by emphasizing individual benefits of union membership in communicating with their members and advertising themselves to potential

⁹ Note that de-unionization does not necessarily involve individuals dropping out of unions. In addition, de-unionization occurs if the take-up of union membership by new labor-force entrants declines. The latter phenomenon is likely as important (if not more important) than the former.

members.¹⁰ For reasons suggested above, we would expect such “re-branding” efforts to translate into a diminution of the membership effect on political attitudes.

Swedish trade unions

Organizational fragmentation has become an increasingly important feature of the Swedish trade-union landscape, but it dates back to the 1930s and 1940s. There are three distinct, though overlapping, dimensions of this fragmentation: first, the distinction between blue-collar and white-collar unions; second, the distinction between unions that organize workers/employees based on the sector in which they work (“sectoral unions”) and unions that organize workers/employees based on their professional qualifications and the jobs they perform (“occupational unions”); and, finally, the distinction between social democratic unions and unions that purport to be politically neutral.

Founded in 1898, *Landsorganisationen* (LO) was from the beginning a confederation of unions that sought to organize manual, hourly-paid “blue-collar workers” (in Swedish, *arbetare*), as distinct from salaried “white-collar employees” (*tjänstemän*). Even though LO embraced the principle of industrial unionism in the interwar period, its affiliates showed little interest in organizing white-collar employees. While there are some “employees” that belong to LO-affiliated unions, most LO-affiliated union members are classified as “workers” in government statistics as well as election surveys and there are (more or less explicit) non-competition agreements in place between LO unions and their white-collar equivalents.¹¹

¹⁰ See Jansson’s (2022) case study of the (white-collar) union of municipal government employees (Vision).

¹¹ Note that this organizational divide rests on a definition of “blue-collar workers” that is broader than the conventional definition in the Anglophone world: for example, blue-collar and white-collar unions alike consider assistant nurses and most people who work in retail and hospitality jobs to be “blue-collar.”

LO and its affiliates showed little interest in organizing white-collar employees in the interwar period because they conceived themselves as part of a political movement headed by the Social Democratic Party. Until recently, it was common practice for the locals of LO-affiliated unions (*fackklubbar*) to be collectively affiliated with SAP, while allowing individual members to opt out of party membership. Under the threat that parliament might outlaw collective affiliation, the SAP decided to discontinue this practice in 1990, with SAP party membership plummeting as a result, yet many organizational and informal ties between LO and SAP remain (Aylott 2003 and Jansson 2017).

The close ties between LO and SAP in turn served to discourage nascent white-collar unions from seeking to affiliate with LO, even though many of these unions modeled themselves on LO unions by embracing sectoral unionism.¹² Nascent white-collar unions instead formed a separate confederation, TCO (*Tjänstemännens Centralorganisation*): the apolitical white-collar equivalent of LO. As recounted by Svensson (1994), TCO became a key ally of LO and SAP in the struggle over pension reform in the 1950s, during which the Social Democrats switched from pursuing a “worker-farmer alliance” to pursuing a “wage-earner strategy”. With Social Democrats assuming leadership positions in many TCO unions and in the confederation itself, TCO and LO increasingly coordinated their wage bargaining and their efforts to shape government policies in the 1960s and 1970s.

The emergence of sectoral white-collar unions set in motion a process whereby existing professional associations of lawyers, medical doctors and engineers mobilized to defend pay differentials and other privileges associated with professional status and new professional associations were formed with similar objectives in mind. Forming their own

¹² One (small) white-collar union, the Union of Social Insurance Employees, did affiliate with LO. This union became part of TCO by merging with a TCO-affiliated union in 2002.

umbrella organization, SACO (*Sveriges Akademikers Centralorganisation*), in 1947, these associations gradually came to assume the characteristics of trade unions. With membership restricted to people with university degrees, SACO unions primarily organized public-sector employees until the 1970s.¹³ Through a series of strikes in the 1960s, public-sector SACO unions established a reputation for militancy in opposition to the solidaristic wage policies pursued by LO and TCO unions. SACO unions also mobilized against comprehensive schooling and other Social Democratic reform projects at this time.

While the TCO of the 1970s and 1980s might be described as “apolitical but leaning Social Democratic,” it would be more accurate to describe SACO at that time as “apolitical but leaning against Social Democracy.” The contrast between the political complexions of two white-collar confederations has subsequently become less pronounced. Though still coordinated, the wage-bargaining system has become more decentralized and individual wage-setting has become a norm across bargaining areas, most notably in the public sector (see Baccaro and Howell 2017, ch. 8 and Kjellberg 2019a). In this setting, SACO’s opposition to wage compression no longer stands out and SACO unions have developed more cooperative relations with TCO unions, even though they commonly compete for university-educated members. While SACO unions have become more politically diverse and more strictly “apolitical” as their membership has expanded, TCO unions have downplayed their links to SAP (as LO unions have also done).

Table 1 reports on total membership in LO-affiliated, TCO-affiliated and SACO-affiliated unions at the beginning and the end of the period covered by our analysis of the partisan preferences of union membership (1986-2018). To elaborate a bit further, 17 unions

¹³ The public sector’s share of SACO-affiliated union members peaked at 84% in 1966 (Kjellberg 2013). Known in English as “the Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations,” the literal translation of SACO is “the Confederation of Swedish Academic Degree-Holders.”

were affiliated with the LO in 1986. As a result of one departure and two mergers, this number had dropped to 14 by 2018. Three of the 14 LO-affiliated unions in 2018 are small unions that organize workers on an occupational basis (electricians, painters, and musicians). The 11 unions that organize on a sectoral basis accounted for more than 97% of total LO membership and the three largest affiliates accounted for 71% of total membership in 2018. The two largest LO unions, the Municipal Workers Union (*Kommunal*) and the Union of Manufacturing Workers (*IF Metall*), alone accounted for more than 60% of LO's total membership in 2018 (Kjellberg 2022).

Table 1: Economically active union members by confederation (in thousands), 1986 and 2018.

	1986	2018
LO	2,004	1,233
TCO	1,108	1,097
SACO	219	539
Independent	21	103

Figures include the unemployed, but not full-time students and pensioners. Source: Kjellberg (2019b), Appendix 4, Table 46.

In 1986, TCO consisted of 11 unions that Kjellberg (2013) categorizes as “vertical” (in our terminology, sectoral) unions and 9 unions that he categorizes as “professional” (in our terminology, occupational) unions. Over the period covered by our analysis, one small sectoral union (pharmaceutical employees) left to join SACO; the Association of Supervisors (SALF) was expelled from TCO for failing to comply with agreed-upon jurisdictional boundaries, and TCO-affiliated teachers’ unions merged. As a result of these changes, TCO consisted of 8 or 9 sectoral unions and 4 or 5 occupational unions in 2018, depending on how one chooses to code the post-merger Teachers’ Union (*Lärarförbundet*). Including the

Teachers' Union, sectoral unions accounted for 88% of total TCO membership; without it, they accounted for 70%. Including the Teachers' Union either way, the three largest unions accounted for 78% of all TCO-affiliated union members in 2018.¹⁴

Some 20-22 unions were affiliated with SACO during the period covered by our analysis. All of these unions organize on an occupational/professional basis, but some organize several kindred professions while others define their remit more narrowly. Though some SACO-affiliated unions encompass professions that do require tertiary degrees, the vast majority of SACO-affiliated union members still hold tertiary degrees. By far the largest SACO affiliate, the Association of Swedish Engineers, was only half the size of the blue-collar manufacturing union (*IF Metall*) in 2018, and the latter in turn was less than half the size of the two giants, the TCO-affiliated Union of Employees in Industry and Private Services (*Unionen*) and the LO-affiliated Union of Municipal Workers (*Kommunal*). Altogether, the three largest SACO-affiliated unions accounted for 47% of total SACO membership in 2018.

Figures 3-5 are based on sorting employed working-age SOM respondents into blue-collar workers and white-collar employees with and without tertiary education. For blue-collar workers and white-collar employees without tertiary degrees, Figures 3 and 4 show the percentage of respondents who were members of LO-affiliated and TCO-affiliated unions and the percentage who did not belong to any union, by sub-periods of four or five years. For white-collar employees with tertiary degrees, Figure 5 in turn shows the percentage of respondents who were members of TCO-affiliated and SACO-affiliated unions and the percentage who did not belong to any union, again by sub-period.¹⁵

¹⁴ The largest TCO-affiliated union in 2018 was the Union of Employees in Manufacturing and Private Services (*Unionen*), the second largest the Teachers' Union and the third largest the Union of Municipal Government Employees (*Vision*). The Teachers' Union left TCO to join SACO in January, 2022.

¹⁵ The trends shown in Figures 3-5 are very similar to Kjellberg's (2019b) description based on administrative data. SOM-based estimates of overall union density also track OECD figures closely. According to the latter,

According to SOM data, slightly more than 77% of employed blue-collar workers belonged to LO-affiliated unions in the second half of the 1980s. The corresponding figure for the second half of the 2010s was 42%. While some blue-collar workers have joined TCO-affiliated unions, de-unionization is clearly the big story for blue-collar workers (the share on non-union members rising from 18% in the half of the 1980s to nearly 40% in the late 2010s). Among non-tertiary white-collar employees, we also observe some de-unionization, with the non-unionized increasing from 21% to 27%. Much of this decline in unionization also involves membership losses by LO-affiliated unions. The share of non-tertiary white-collar employees belonging to TCO-affiliated unions essentially held constant, between 55 and 60%, over the period covered by our analysis. Among white-collar employees with tertiary degrees, finally, we observe an increase in the share of non-unionized, from 17% to 26%, and a corresponding the decline in TCO membership, from 47% to 33%, with SACO membership increasing slightly, from 34% to 37%.

overall density peaked at 86.6% in 1994 and stood at 60.1% in 2018 (<https://www.oecd.org/employment/ictwss-database.htm>).

Figure 3: Unionization among blue-collar workers

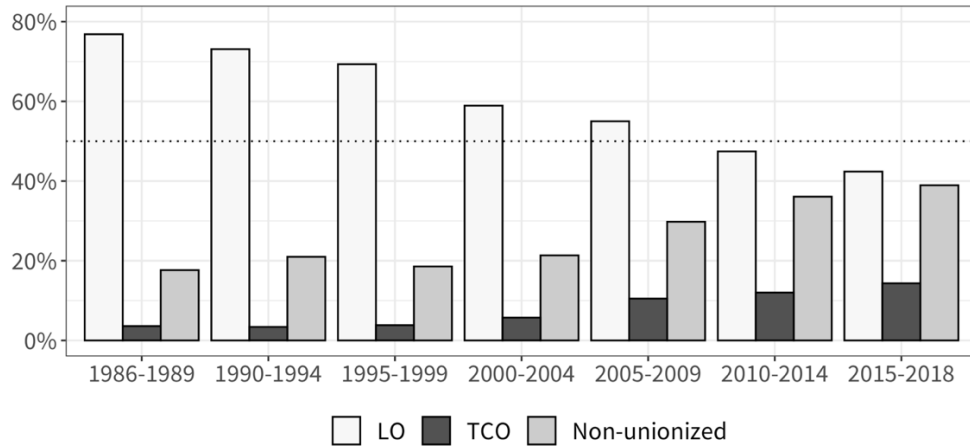


Figure 4: Unionization among white-collar workers employees without tertiary education

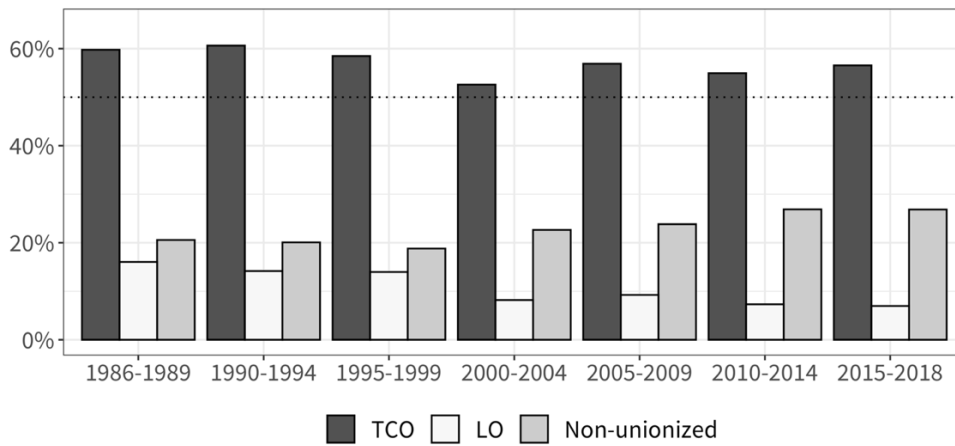
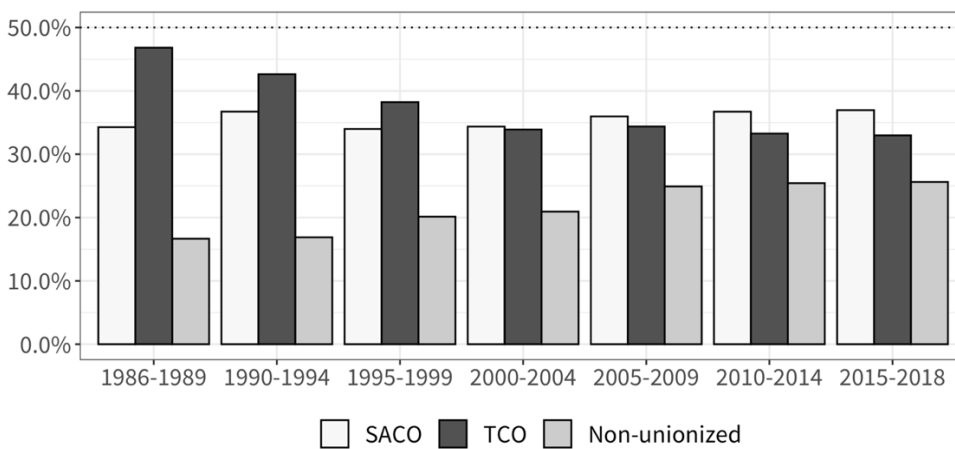


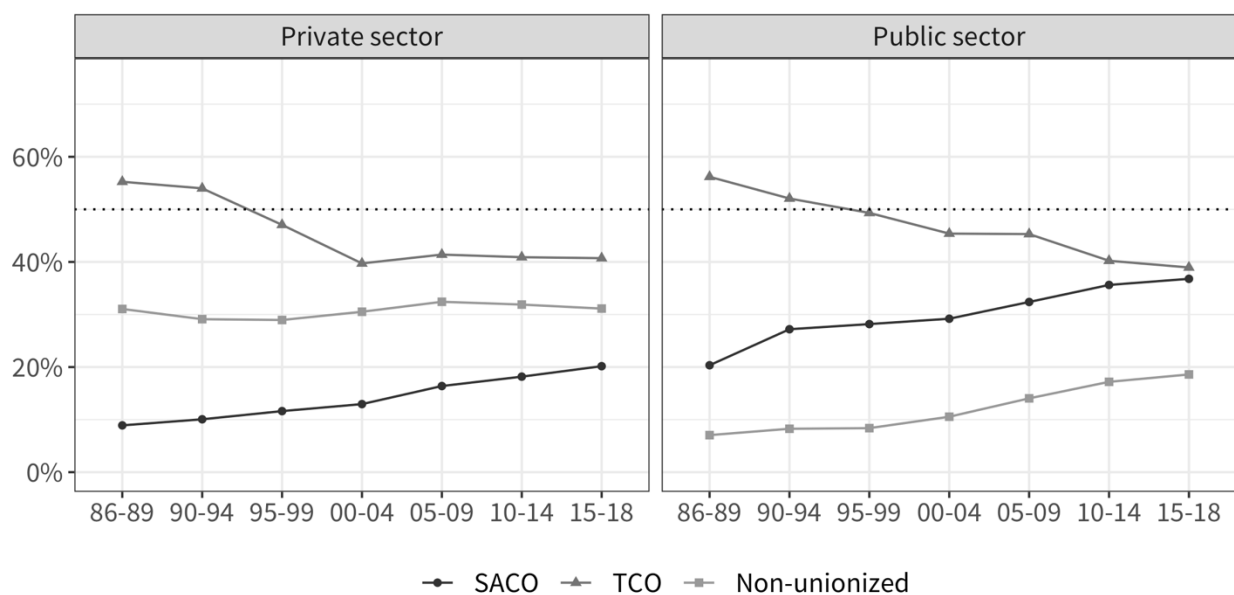
Figure 5: Unionization among white-collar employees with tertiary education



Own calculations of SOM data. Distinctions based on educational attainment, are made by coding the highest degree attained by a given survey respondent.

By treating non-tertiary and tertiary white-collar employees separately, Figures 4-5 fail to capture the organizational implications of the expansion of tertiary-educated employees. Figure 6 addresses this point by reporting on unionization by confederation for all white-collar employees while distinguishing between the private and the public sector. In the private sector, overall unionization held steady from the mid-1980s to the late 2010s, while the share of TCO unions declined by about 15 percentage points and the share of SACO unions increased correspondingly (11 points). By contrast, we observe some de-unionization in the public sector and, more strikingly, SACO-affiliated unions have almost overtaken TCO-affiliated unions in terms of their overall share of public-sector employees.

Figure 6: Unionization among white-collar employees by sector.



Note: To make the figures more reader-friendly, we refrain from plotting LO-membership among white collar workers in this figure. In the private sector, white-collar LO membership is minimal throughout the entire period examined (3-5%). In the public sector, LO membership declined from 16% in the late 1980s, to about 3% in the late 2010s.

While the share of white-collar employees with tertiary education who belong to TCO-affiliated unions has declined, the share who belong to SACO-affiliated unions has remained essentially unchanged since the 1980s (see Figure 5). Some employees with the option to join either a TCO or a SACO union have switched from TCO to SACO and the SACO option appears to have more attractive relative to the TCO option, but the main reason for the rise of occupational unions is clearly the expansion of university-educated white-collar employees or, in other words, the increase in the labor-force share of individuals with the option of joining a SACO-affiliated union. This in turn reflects decisions to expand tertiary education in the 1980s and the 1990s, most notably by the Social Democratic government that took power in 1994 (Thelen 2019). Whether or not Social Democratic policymakers recognized the problem that expanding tertiary education would pose for TCO unions—and, by extension, for SAP’s capacity to mobilize middle-class voters—would be an interesting question to explore, but we are not in a position to do so at the moment.

Some discussion of the reasons for de-unionization among blue-collar workers and white-collar employees without university education would seem to be in order before we proceed to explore how membership in LO-, TCO- and SACO-affiliated unions affects partisan preferences. It is commonplace to attribute de-unionization to the reform of unemployment insurance enacted by the Center-Right coalition government that came to power in 2006 (see, e.g., Kjellberg and Ibsen 2016, Gordon 2017). On the back of previous cuts of replacement rates in unemployment insurance, the 2006 reform tightened eligibility requirements and, most importantly, introduced a new system whereby insurance premia to be paid by insurance-fund members would vary depending on the rate of unemployment in the sector(s) covered by each fund (i.e., the rate of unemployment among fund members). The upshot was a dramatic increase in insurance premia, especially for unemployment-exposed blue-

collar workers, and this in turn led to an exodus from union-administered insurance funds in the years that followed the reform. Not surprisingly, most people who dropped out of unemployment insurance funds also left the union that administered the fund to which they used to belong.

There can be no doubt that the unemployment insurance reform of 2006 had an important negative effect on incentives to join unions. The differential impact of this reform helps explain why some unions—in particular, LO unions in the private sector—have suffered bigger membership losses than other unions. That said, it deserves to be noted that blue-collar unionization began to decline already in the 1990s and that this trend continued even though the “market principle” for setting unemployment insurance premia was abandoned in 2014 (before the 2018 election that brought the Social Democrats back to power). Other factors need also to be taken into account in order to explain why many Swedish workers have left unions and why labor-market entrants have been less prone to join unions than they used to be.

The extensive privatization of public services undertaken by Social Democratic as well as Center-Right governments in the 1990s and 2009s would appear to be important development that has largely been neglected by industrial relations scholars working on unions. To be sure, de-unionization is not exclusively a private-sector phenomenon (as can be seen in Figure 6 above), but it is important to keep in mind that welfare-state privatization has first and foremost taken the form of public-sector entities (schools, hospitals and other care facilities) subcontracting various activities (meals, cleaning, etc.) to private firms. Individuals working for private subcontractors in the public sector are likely to identify

themselves as “public-sector employees” and, indeed, are often identified as such in official statistics.¹⁶

Closely related to welfare-state privatization, the expansion of fixed-term employment represents another important development that has contributed to de-unionization. For obvious reasons, people with temporary employment contracts are much less likely to join unions than people with permanent employment contracts.¹⁷ In the Swedish case, Center-Right governments removed restrictions on fixed-term employment contracts as part of their effort to stimulate employment growth during the crisis of the early 1990s. Further deregulation in this domain was implemented by the Social Democrats in the late 1990s and by the bourgeois parties during the crisis of 2008-09.¹⁸ Most dramatically, the incidence of fixed-term employment among employed individuals in the 15-24 age group increased from 48.4% in 1997 (the earliest figure recorded by the OECD) to an all-time peak of 57.3% in 2008. As with voting, there is every reason to believe that people become less likely to join a union the longer they are in the labor force without joining a union.

Finally, it deserves to be noted that the unionization rate for workers born abroad has dropped more sharply than the unionization for workers born in Sweden. At 77%, the unionization rate of these two categories of blue-collar workers was exactly the same in 2006 according to administrative data presented by Kjellberg and Nergaard (2022: 67). By 2019, unionization of foreign-born blue-collar workers had dropped to 51% while unionization of “Sweden-born” blue-collar had (only) dropped to 64%. This divergence partly reflects the

¹⁶ See Gingrich (2011) on welfare-state privatization in comparative perspective, with special attention to the Swedish case.

¹⁷ Analyzing of data from the European Social Survey, we find this holds across West European countries. Results available upon request.

¹⁸ The Swedish score on the OECD temporary employment protection index fell from 4.08 in 1991 to .81 in 2008 (and has since remained stable).

concentration of immigrants in occupations, sectors and workplaces where unions are weaker, but it may also be that more recent immigrants (mostly refugees) have been less effectively integrated.

Union membership and partisan preferences

SOM surveys annually ask respondents to identify their preferred political party.¹⁹ We interpret answers to this question as indicative of the party that the respondent would vote for if an election were held at that time. Using this survey item, we estimate OLS models of the predictors for preferring (intending to vote for) SAP, as well as preferring any of the three Left-of-Center parties represented in parliament (including SAP). To do so, we leverage data on working-age SOM respondents, and run a series of models, each looking at respondents from a distinct occupational class (i.e., blue-collar, non-tertiary white-collar, or tertiary white-collar). The independent variable of primary interest is a categorical variable indicating whether a given respondent belongs to an LO-affiliated union, a TCO-affiliated union, or a SACO-affiliated union, with non-unionized as the reference category. In all models, we control for respondents' gender, age bracket, education level, sector of employment and region of residence.²⁰ To account for time trends, our model specifications also include year-fixed effects. Finally, it should be noted that we drop the relatively small number of SOM respondents who chose not to identify a preferred political party (ranging between an

¹⁹ The exact question wording is as follows: "Which party do you like the best today?" Respondents are allowed to state their most preferred party, but only a singular choice is permitted.

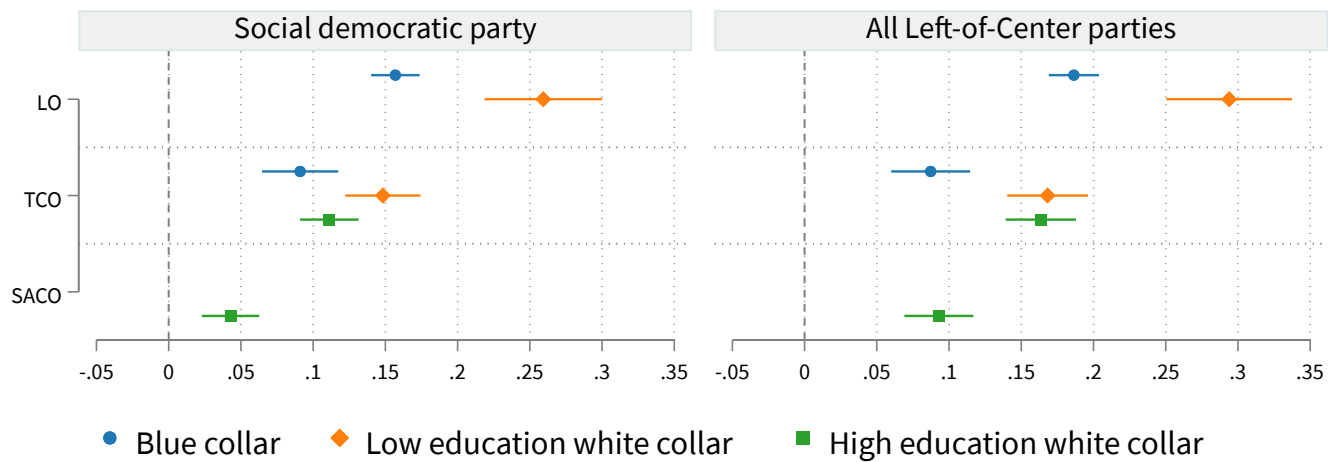
²⁰ Education is a categorical variable that differentiates between persons that have not attended high school (gymnasium), those who have obtained at most a high school degree (or are currently pursuing one), and those obtained (or are pursuing) tertiary-level education. This variable does not feature in models run on tertiary white-collar employees. See appendix B on the operationalization of other control variables.

average of 5.2% for surveys carried out in 2010-14 to 7.8% for surveys carried out in 2000-04).

Figure 7 presents the main results that we obtain when we estimate these models with SOM data for the entire period from 1986 to 2018.²¹ The first thing to be noted is that union members, regardless of confederal affiliation, are more likely to vote for Left parties and more likely to vote for SAP than respondents who do not belong to a union. The union effect on the likelihood of preferring SAP to other parties, ranges from 4 percentage points for white-collar employees with tertiary education who belong to a SACO-affiliated union to 26 percentage points for white-collar employees without tertiary education who belong to an LO-affiliated union. These two categories also constitute the extremes for the union effect on the likelihood to prefer any Left party to non-Left parties, now ranging from 9 to 29 percentage points. It is noteworthy that unionization among tertiary-educated white-collar employees primarily favors Left parties other than the SAP and that this is especially the case for membership in SACO-affiliated unions.

²¹ See Table A2 in Appendix C for full regression results.

Figure 7: Marginal effects of union membership on party preference by occupational class.



Bars indicate 99% confidence interval. Baseline category consists of the non-unionized. Models control for gender, age, sector of employment, education level, region of residence and year.

Within each occupational class, we observe significant differences in union effects on partisan preferences across the three confederations. Among blue-collar workers and white-collar employees without tertiary education, members of LO-affiliated unions are, on average, more Left-leaning than members of TCO-affiliated unions. And among white-collar employees with tertiary education, members of TCO-affiliated unions are, on average, more Left-leaning than member of SACO-affiliated unions. This suggests that there is some ideological/partisan sorting at work: given a choice, Left-individual tend to join Left-leaning unions and Right-leaning individuals join “apolitical” unions. It is again important to note that blue-collar workers and white-collar employees without tertiary education only have such a choice in special cases (where the blue-collar/white-collar distinction is blurred). Considering the dominance of LO-affiliated unions among blue-collar workers and the dominance of TCO-affiliated unions among white-collar employees without tertiary education, a very noteworthy of Figure 7 is that the effect of belonging to a TCO-affiliated union on the partisan

preferences of white-collar employees without tertiary education is indistinguishable from the effect of belonging to an LO-affiliated union on the partisan preferences of blue-collar workers.

If the union effects identified in Figure 7 have been stable over time, there would appear to be two main implications of changes in unionization patterns for electoral politics. First, de-unionization of blue-collar and white-collar employees without tertiary education has diminished electoral support for SAP and the Left as a whole. Secondly, the shift of white-collar union members from TCO to SACO unions has also diminished electoral support for SAP and, to a somewhat lesser extent, for the Left as a whole.

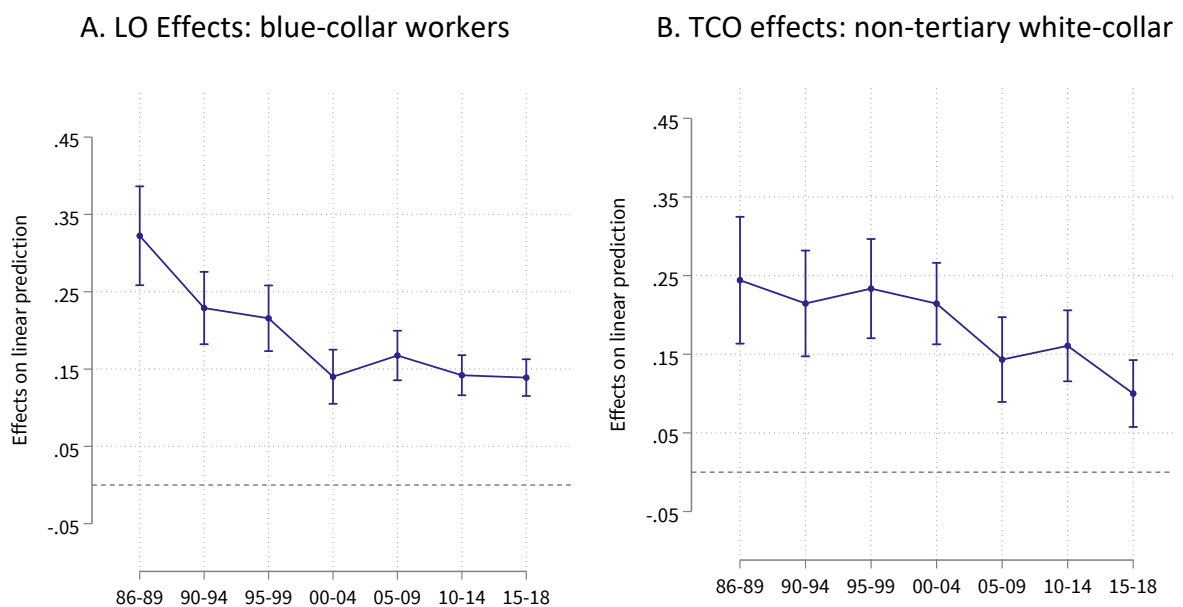
Have the effects of union membership on partisan preferences indeed been stable over time? To address this question, we include period dummies to the regression model described above (instead of year-fixed effects) and interact these dummies with our indicators of social class and union membership by confederation. In other words, we derive period-specific average marginal effects of belonging to different unions (again, distinguished by the confederal affiliation) by estimating an interaction model. While the first and last periods encompass all SOM surveys carried over four years (1986-89 and 2015-2018), the middle five periods encompass surveys carried out over five years (1990-94, 1995-99, etc.). The dependent variable in this analysis is choosing a Left party as the most preferred party (i.e., we no longer distinguish between support for SAP and support for the Left as a whole).

Figure 8A shows the evolution of the effect of belonging to an LO-affiliated union for blue-collar workers and Figure 8B, in turn, shows the evolution of effect of belonging to a TCO-affiliated union for white-collar employees without tertiary education.²² In both cases,

²² For estimated marginal effects in table form, see Tables A3-A5 in Appendix C.

the reference is non-unionized respondents, who are members of the same social class. Over time, LO-affiliated as well as TCO-affiliated union members have become less Left-leaning relative to blue-collar workers and white-collar employees without tertiary education who do not belong to unions. The difference in the propensity to identify a Left party as the preferred party between LO members and non-unionized blue-collar workers has declined by about 15 percentage points from the second half of the 1980s. The decline in the difference between TCO members and non-unionized white-collar follows an identical pattern. Union members remain more Left-leaning than non-members, and de-unionization continues to have negative consequences for Left parties, but the negative effects of de-unionization have diminished along with the positive effects of union membership.

Figure 8: Over-time marginal effects of union membership on party preferences (I).



Bars indicate 95% confidence intervals; Reference group is set to the non-unionized. Models control for gender, age, sector of employment, education level and region of residence.

The decline of union effects on partisan preferences shown in Figure 8 are the opposite of what we would expect if political disenchantment with leftist unions were a key driver of de-unionization. In this scenario, self-selection should render union effects successively stronger, as non-Left-leaning members opt out of the union movement. This clearly has not happened in the Swedish case.

The decline of union effects on partisan preferences shown in Figure 8 might be attributed to individuals with a leftist inclination dropping out of unions (boosting support for Left parties among non-union members), but it can also be seen as a manifestation of changes in union practices and rhetoric. As we noted above, relations between LO and SAP became strained in the 1980s, for multiple reasons, and the LO leadership has since distanced itself from the SAP leadership in many public debates. The end of collective affiliation is part of this story and may have contributed to the decline of the LO effect on partisan preferences. On the other hand, one might perhaps explain the decline of the TCO in terms of TCO-affiliated union leaders retreating from earlier engagements in response to growing competition with SACO-affiliated union for university-educated members. Plausible as these arguments appear to be, they leave something to be desired in that the story about strained relations is first and foremost about LO unions (and their ties to SAP) while the story about inter-confederal competition is first and foremost a story about TCO unions.²³

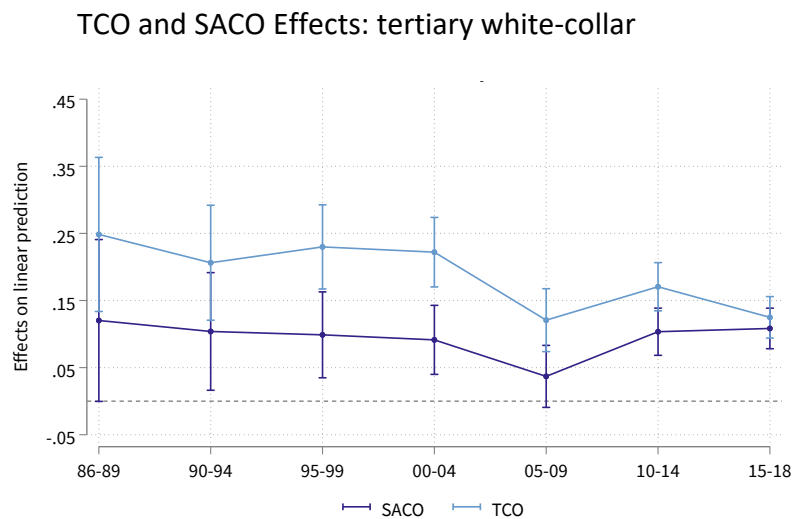
A more unified explanation of the results presented in Figure 8 posits that LO and TCO unions alike have been forced to accept individual wage-setting procedures in private companies as well as the public sector and that wage solidarity has simply become a less prominent feature of what these unions do and what they communicate to their members.

²³ Note also that competition from SACO is most pronounced in the public sector (see Figure 6), yet the trends shown in Figures 8-9 hold for the private sector as well as the public sector.

Like their counterparts in other countries, these unions have responded to membership losses by emphasizing the services (support) that they provide to their members (Jansson 2022). In the context of successive welfare retrenchments since the early 1990s, supplementary insurance schemes (in the first instance, supplementary unemployment insurance) negotiated with employers feature prominently in the new emphasis on “selfish” reasons for belonging to unions (Kjellberg 2019a). Decentralization of wage bargaining, welfare-state retrenchment, and inter-union competition arguably constitute a “vicious cycle” that explains the decline of union effects on partisan preferences.

Finally, Figure 9 in turn plots changes in the effects of belonging to TCO- and SACO-affiliated unions among white-collar employees with tertiary degrees (again with non-unionized respondents as the reference category). In the upper white-collar class, TCO-affiliated union members also appear to have become less distinctly Left-leaning, but the change is less pronounced than for white-collar employees without tertiary education (see figure 8). Members of SACO-affiliated unions, on the other hand, display a similar propensity to favor Left parties throughout the entirety of the period examined.

Figure 9: Over-time marginal effects of union membership on party preferences (II).



Bars indicate 95% confidence intervals; Reference group is set to the non-unionized. Models control for gender, age, sector of employment and region of residence.

The apparent convergence of TCO and SACO effects in the 2010s among white-collar employees with tertiary education may be attributable to TCO members migrating to SACO unions, but the membership shift from TCO and SACO is first and foremost a shift in their relative ability to recruit labor-market entrants. The main take-away from Figure 9 is perhaps that SACO-affiliated unions have become more encompassing as their membership has expanded and that self-selection into SACO-affiliated unions based on ideology (opposition to egalitarianism) has become less relevant over the last two decades.

Conclusion

The preceding analysis shows that Swedish union members are still more favorably disposed towards Left parties than other citizens and, by extension, that de-unionization is relevant for understanding the electoral decline of the Swedish Left since mid-1990s. At the same, the advantage that Left parties enjoy among unionized blue-collar workers and white-

collar employees without tertiary education has diminished. Over time, the effects of belonging to LO- and TCO-affiliated unions have come to resemble the (stable) effects of belonging to SACO-affiliated unions. Swedish trade unions have become more focused on defending short-term interests of their members and less of a force for societal change. In this sense, Swedish trade unions have become more like trade unions in other liberal democracies.

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APPENDICES

A. Occupational class coding

Categorical variables on occupational class and educational attainment, were coded based on SOM’s pre-generated variables. Respondent occupation is coded by SOM into twelve categories listed below, based on self-stated occupational descriptions provided by respondents (open-ended questions). Where this data is not provided, SOM classifies a respondent’s occupation based on other variables, such as sector of employment and other employment characteristics. The occupational classification scheme is identical to that used by the Swedish National Election Studies. For the purposes of our study, we collapse SOM’s twelve categories into four, as displayed in Table A1. Respondents who have no occupational class information (i.e. homemakers or individuals who have yet to enter the job market) have been delimited from our sample.

Table A1: Occupational coding (based on recode of SOM’s OCCGR indicator)

SOM classification (<i>occgr</i>)	Recode categories
White-collar worker	White-collar
White-collar worker with supervisory status	White-collar
White-collar worker in a senior leadership position	White-collar
Blue-collar worker	Blue-collar
Blue-collar worker with supervisory status	Blue-collar
Self-employed blue-collar worker	Blue-collar
Farmer: no employees	Other
Farmer: one/several employees	Other
Self-employed: no employees	Other
Self-employed: 1-9 employees	Other
Self-employed: 10 or more employees	Other
Never had paid work	<i>Excluded from analysis</i>

B. Other variables

Aside from respondent occupation, we use several other variables from the SOM dataset in our analysis. We elaborate on these below. Data on respondent age, sex and region of residence is pre-generated, based on data from the Swedish national population register. Other variables are based on information that is self-reported by respondents when taking the survey.

Union federation membership: Variable generated from three different survey formulations, provided annually in the SOM dataset (*unionm1986*, *unionm1999* and *unionm_open*). In questions prior to 2012, there is only information on union federation (i.e. LO/TCO/SACO). From 2012-2018 there is only a categorical variable on smaller union organizations (e.g. IG Metall, Naturvetarna etc.) To expand the panel, we hand-code the umbrella unions of the smaller unions and have used this in the analysis. Classification shared upon request.

Education level: Categorical variable (*edu3*), three categories:

[Max-High School] | [High School] | [Post High-School]

Sector of employment: Dummy variable (*sector*), 1 = [Public sector] | 0 = [Private sector]

Party preference (SocDem): Dummy variable (*cb10*), attained from recode of question

'Which party do you like best today?' (only one response permitted). 1 = [Social Democrats]; 0 = [Other parties] | [No Party].

Party preference (any Left party): Dummy variable (*cb10*), attained from recode of question

'Which party do you like best today?' (only one response permitted). 1 = [Social Democrats] | [Left Party] | [Green Party]; 0 = [Other party] | [No Party].

Respondent age: Categorical (*age4a*), three categories. [18-30] [30-49] [50-60]

Gender: Dummy variable (*sex*), 1 = [Female]; 0 = [Male]

Region of residence: Categorical eight-region classification (*natgeo*): Stockholm; East Mid-Sweden; Småland and Islands; South Sweden; West Sweden; North Mid-Sweden; Mid-North Sweden; Upper-North Sweden.

C. Regression results

Table A2: Union membership and party preference by social class

Outcome variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Blue collar SocDem pref	Blue collar All Left party pref	Non-tertiary White-collar SocDem pref	Non-tertiary White-collar All Left party pref	Tertiary WC SocDem pref	Tertiary WC All Left party pref
LO membership	0.16*** (0.01)	0.16*** (0.01)				
TCO membership	0.09*** (0.01)	0.07*** (0.01)	0.15*** (0.01)	0.17*** (0.01)	0.11*** (0.01)	0.16*** (0.01)
SACO membership					0.04*** (0.01)	0.09*** (0.01)
Constant	0.29*** (0.05)	0.33*** (0.06)	0.22*** (0.08)	0.28*** (0.08)	0.13* (0.08)	0.23** (0.09)
Observations	30,408	30,408	9,885	9,885	18,344	18,344
R-squared	0.08	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.04	0.07

Baseline category: Non-unionized. Estimates control for respondent gender, age category, region of residence and sector of employment.

Model specifications additionally include year fixed effects, Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table A3: Marginal effects of union membership on party preference by social class (I)

	Blue-collar LO members All Left party pref
Period: 1986-1989	0.32*** (0.03)
Period: 1990-1994	0.23*** (0.02)
Period: 1995-1999	0.22*** (0.02)
Period: 2000-2004	0.14*** (0.02)
Period: 2005-2009	0.17*** (0.02)
Period: 2010-2014	0.14*** (0.01)
Period: 2015-2018	0.14*** (0.01)
Observations	27,308

Baseline category: non-unionized blue-collar workers. Estimates control for respondent gender, age category, region of residence, education level and sector of employment. Standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table A4: Marginal effects of union membership on party preference by social class (II)

	Non tertiary White-collar TCO members All Left party pref
Period: 1986-1989	0.24*** (0.04)
Period: 1990-1994	0.21*** (0.03)
Period: 1995-1999	0.23*** (0.03)
Period: 2000-2004	0.21*** (0.03)
Period: 2005-2009	0.14*** (0.03)
Period: 2010-2014	0.16*** (0.02)
Period: 2015-2018	0.10*** (0.02)
Observations	9,885

Baseline category: non-unionized non tertiary white-collar workers. Estimates control for respondent gender, age category, education level, region of residence and sector of employment. Standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table A5: Marginal effects of union membership on party preference by social class (III)

	Tertiary White-collar TCO members All Left party pref	Tertiary White-collar SACO members All Left party pref
Period: 1986-1989	0.12* (0.06)	0.25*** (0.06)
Period: 1990-1994	0.10** (0.04)	0.21*** (0.04)
Period: 1995-1999	0.10*** (0.03)	0.23*** (0.03)
Period: 2000-2004	0.09*** (0.03)	0.22*** (0.03)
Period: 2005-2009	0.04 (0.02)	0.12*** (0.02)
Period: 2010-2014	0.10*** (0.02)	0.17*** (0.02)
Period: 2015-2018	0.11*** (0.02)	0.12*** (0.02)
Observations	18,344	18,344

Baseline category: non-unionized tertiary white-collar workers. Estimates control for respondent gender, age category, region of residence and sector of employment. Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1