Political Action as a Union Revitalization Strategy: A Comparative Study

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As unions in the US, Britain, Germany, Spain and Italy have engaged in revitalization attempts, they all have embraced political action as one of their prominent strategies. We identify six different types of union political action. However, considerable variation exists among the five countries with respect to which ones of these political action strategies have received priority. We explain the variation in the types of political action with differences in economic and political institutions, the need of the government to find allies, as well as union traditions and union leaders’ strategic choices. We conclude that the links between political action and revitalization are tenuous and need to be placed in the context of other strategies pursued by unions.

1. Introduction: Political Action and Union Revitalization

Political action features as one of the most prevalent strategies unions in the US, Britain, Germany, Spain and Italy have pursued in their strife for revitalization. Unions in these countries have sought to acquire and deploy political power resources in order to overcome the limitations of labor process and labor market power. We examine six types of political action – links with political parties, voter mobilization, lobbying, social pacts, political strikes, and legal avenues – in five countries to understand better what drives unions’ use of political action, what specific types of political action they turn to as well as the success of these actions across countries.

2. Conceptualizing the Forms and Outcomes of Political Action
We distinguish six main forms of political action: links with a political party; electoral activity, particularly voter mobilization; lobbying the legislature, executive or bureaucracy; social pacts with governments that unions involve in state policy formation; strikes that target governmental policies; and the strategic use of legal challenges, e.g. to the European Court of Justice (ECJ). While analytically distinct, these forms of political action can be used in conjunction; for example, strikes might be used simultaneously with lobbying. Similarly, there is no clear link between the issues that motivate union action and a particular strategy of political action. For instance, beneficial social policies can be promoted through electoral activity (anticipating specific policies once the preferred party is elected), lobbying, strikes, social pacts, or legal avenues (for instance, when the implementation of EU directives is concerned). One reason for differentiating forms of union political activity is that it allows us to develop explanations and assess outcomes in a more meaningful manner. We distinguish between immediate outcomes, such as voter turnout in elections, and secondary outcomes, viz. union revitalization. We define revitalization along four separate though interconnected dimensions: union membership, union bargaining power, political influence and ‘union vitality’ (Behrens and Hurd 2002). This last notion attempts to capture the degree to which unions have changed their structures and methods in order to become both innovative and adaptive in the face of new pressures and demands.

3. Forms of Political Action in Five Countries

3.1 Links with political parties

There has been some variation in the developments of links between parties and unions in our cases even though overall, the shifts in the relationships approximate that of pragmatic cooperation. That is, in some cases, close links have given way to more autonomy of parties and unions, while in other cases, more confrontational or distant relationships have resulted in a more cooperative relationship.

During the prolonged period of Labour opposition (1979-1997), British unions were left without political allies and without direct access to the policy-making process. The Labour Party restructured itself, reducing the role of unions within its decision-making bodies and enhancing the autonomy of the party leadership at the expense of both the party conference and organized labor (McIlroy 1998). Since the beginning of Blair’s government, the relationship between the party and the unions has become looser and more distant as the government’s Third Way policies have diverged from union goals despite the implementation of some pro-labor policies on union
certification and on the minimum wage. Prior to the late 1980s, Spanish unions used their close ties to leftist political parties to gain access to the policy-making arena. When the relationship between the socialist UGT (General Workers’ Union) and the governing Socialist Party (PSOE) deteriorated in response to the government’s economic and social policies, formal ties between the party and the union were cut in 1989. Based on this new autonomy gained after the separation from the PSOE, the unions were able to redefine their position towards the political parties. Since the mid-1990s, both the UGT and the communist-oriented CC.OO. (Workers’ Commissions) have pursued more pragmatic relationships with all major parties, including the governing conservative Popular Party, while maintaining the unions’ political and organizational autonomy (Hamann 2001a). Ties between unions and parties in Italy changed dramatically between 1992 and 1994, when the party system disintegrated. The disappearance of the Socialist and Christian Democratic parties and the transformation of the Communist Party led each of the three main union confederations to adopt a policy of increased political independence.

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

3.2 Electoral activity
British and American unions have devoted increased resources, both financial and personnel, to electoral activity since the early 1990s. In the UK unions mobilized even more activists in more districts in the 2001 election than in 1997, targeting 146 constituencies in 2001 as compared to 93 constituencies in 1997 (Ludlam and Taylor 2003). In the US, the AFL-CIO voted to spend $35 million in the 1996 congressional elections, in addition to the $65 million that would come from individual unions through Political Action Committees (Dark 1999: 184-185). Union expenditure in the 2000 election appears to have been even higher. Union membership rates have a signifi-
cant positive effect on voter mobilization and turnout in the US (Radcliff 2001). In the last elections in Spain, the unions took an openly partisan stand for leftist parties and thus sent clear signals to their membership concerning voting behavior. In Italy, union endorsement for political parties tends to be more subtle and plays out mostly on the local level where unions provide substantial support in campaigns for parties and candidates. The confederations as such tend to refrain from campaigning for a specific party.

3.3 Legislative lobbying
Legislative lobbying is a strategy primarily used by US unions. For example at the height of the ultimately unsuccessful campaign to reform US healthcare in summer 1994, 53 union organizers worked fulltime on lobbying representatives and senators (Dark 1999: 168). During the mid-1990s debates on free trade the AFL-CIO bolstered its lobbying with threats to cut funds to individual Democrats, a threat rendered credible by their increased dependency on union finance (Shoch 2001: 297-300).
Legislative lobbying is far less developed in Europe. In the UK the TUC appointed its first parliamentary lobbyist as late as 1996 (Heery 1998: 343). Traditionally the TUC and its affiliated unions had sought to exert influence either through links with the Labour Party or directly through government ministries. By contrast Spain’s standing order of parliament mandates party discipline, and parliamentary party groups are very hierarchically structured, which renders parliamentary lobbying a relatively ineffective strategy. Spain’s lobby regime has been characterized as “statist anti-pluralism” where lobbying activity is restricted within parliament and is not highly routinized (Liebert 1995:439). With the increased autonomy of the unions since the late 1980s, lobbying across parties, where unions have contacts of mostly informational character with all major parties, not just those ideologically close to them, has become the rule (interviews with party leaders, Madrid, spring 1999; Liebert 1995:423-424). The overall volume of lobbying activity is higher in Germany. The DGB successfully lobbied for legal extensions to the coverage of works councils in exchange for concessions over pension reforms. Union members (and sometimes, union leaders) are elected to parliamentary seats through their membership in political parties, though, and thus attempt to influence the legislative process through their work inside the legislature. All four European union movements have engaged in lobbying at the level of the European Commission but despite the growth of European regulation, national political institutions remain the dominant focus of union activity. Lobbying the bureaucracy, though, is a much more common strategy in European countries.

3.4 Social Pacts
The 1990s witnessed a resurgence of national-level concertation, or social pacts, as both left- and right-wing governments struggled to contain public spending and government borrowing within the strict limits required for monetary union in 2002. However, the contents and modalities of social pacts exhibit some variation across the cases. Social pacts formed a significant component of Spanish and Italian union strategy in the 1990s covering pension reforms, labor market flexibility and wage restraint (Hamann 2001a). Despite ideological differences with their respective governments, the unions’ continuing autonomy from political parties has allowed them to bargain successfully. This is particularly true for the Spanish case where unions have participated in social pacts with a conservative government. Although many of the reforms agreed through social pacts have not been especially welcome to unions their leaderships have taken the view that it was preferable to be involved in rather than excluded from negotiations when opposition from outside bears little promise of affecting policy changes. The prime example of German unions’ participation in tripartite agreements or processes was the Alliance for Jobs, the
closest approximation to a social pact, which ultimately failed and has not been replaced by other attempts at tripartite agreements. Social pacts have not featured in either the UK or the US even though consultation and participation in commissions increased in both countries during the Labour and Democratic period respectively.

3.5 Strikes
The level of strike activity (working days lost per 1000 employees) fell substantially from the 1980s in all five of our countries – a trend that generally holds despite some variation (Bird 1991:654; Davies 2001: Table 1;). This common experience masks one continuing difference amongst the five. First, while strike rates overall have declined, substantial differences in the level of strike activity persist – Germany lost 3 working days per 1000 employees in all industries and services due to strikes between 1995 and 1999; the UK 21, the USA 38, Italy 78, and Spain 158 (authors’ calculation, based on Rigby and Marco Aledo 2001:290). The high strike rate in Spain might reflect the limited availability of other types of industrial action given the poor lack of union presence in many workplaces (Rigby and Marco Aledo 2001). Second, national, political strikes have been far more frequent in Italy and Spain as a means of trying to influence government policy. Typically the confederations in these countries have called one-day national strikes and demonstrations as an adjunct to consultations with governments over labor market reforms, e.g. in April and October 2002 in Italy and June 2002 in Spain. The use of strikes for influencing social and economic policies in Spain is not new and was used in 1988 and in the early 1990s. By contrast political strikes are rare in Germany, the UK and the US.
3.6 Using legal avenues as political action

The establishment of the European Court of Justice has granted unions in EU member countries access to a new, legal opportunity to affect governmental policies. British unions in particular have used this avenue to gain rights denied to them by the government. In 2001, for example, the ECJ ruled against the Labour government that workers employed on short-term contracts had the right to receive four weeks of paid holidays per year in a test case taken by the television workers’ union BECTU. Howell (1996) argues that the use of legal action in Britain is at least in part driven by the entry of women in particular locations (such as part-time work) of the labor market, where EU regulation has been prominent. Where workers in these positions are not protected by British law, EU regulations become increasingly important and provide a new resource for unions to fight for workers’ rights in areas that are not so well covered by collective bargaining.

In Germany, unions’ use of the legal avenue is less frequent, even though recently the police union has considered suing in an attempt to force the government to comply with the EU directives on working time regulation. Much like medical doctors, members of the police force want the time they spend on call to count as regular working time (Saarbrücker Zeitung, Feb. 19, 2003). Legal services are provided to members by unions and confederations in our other four countries but there is no evidence of the unions’ strategic use of the ECJ comparable to the British case (Sweet and Brunell 1998).

4. Explaining the Different Forms of Political Action

How can we account for the patterns of political action across countries? First, the variety of capitalism, the particular configuration of economic and industrial relations institutions (Hall and Soskice 2001), makes a significant difference, especially to the presence or absence of social pacts. These have emerged (or re-emerged) in the Mediterranean economies of Italy and Spain but have been absent from the liberal market economies in the UK and the US, which lack mechanisms to facilitate the widespread acceptance and implementation of tripartite agreements.

Second, the character of the electoral and party system also affects the way unions attempt to influence politics. Lobbying of individual legislators occurs where they represent individual dis-
tricts or constituencies as in the ‘first-past-the-post’ electoral systems of the UK and the USA. But it is really in the US that lobbying is the most common. This may be due to the fact that party discipline is weaker since the fate of the executive does not hinge on majority support in the legislature the same way it does in parliamentary systems. Moreover, parties are considerably weaker in the US than they are in the UK. Far less lobbying takes place in the multi-member district, proportional representation (PR) electoral system of Spain where the connection between individual legislators and their electoral base is relatively weak (Hamann 2001b). Germany’s modified PR system and Italy’s mixed system\footnote{In Italy, 75\% of the seats are allocated by a plurality system; the other 25\% are elected by PR. Before the 1992 reform of the electoral system, all seats were allocated by PR.} are more difficult to link to institutional incentives and opportunities for parliamentary lobbying.

Third, the politics of union leaderships help account for significant variations in strike propensity between countries. Longstanding leftist traditions in the union movements of Italy and Spain (and indeed of the other Mediterranean economies) continue to be expressed in the form of political mobilizations directed towards the state. Nonetheless, as the Spanish case shows, union leadership can disagree on the use of the strike weapon. Disagreements between the UGT and CC.OO. leaders on calling political strikes show up periodically. In the Spanish case, the use of political strikes is also strengthened by the fact that the unions’ mobilizational potential extends significantly beyond their membership base.

Fourth the strategic choices of party leaders are important. While the organization of the economy may provide incentives or disincentives for tripartite agreements, governments can choose how to respond to these incentives. Thus, Ireland, a liberal market economy, has witnessed a series of social pacts, which have been largely absent from other LMEs. British Labour’s antipathy to social pacts is heavily influenced by its electoral calculation that such close union-government ties would strengthen unions and damage its electoral success. Aznar’s initial propensity to enter into social pact with the Spanish unions was influenced by the party leadership’s desire to reposition his party as a modern conservative force that could work with unions. Finally, the strength of the government also appears to be influential. Where governments command a clear legislative majority, they face less pressure to turn to unions for support, and are less amenable to union lobbying. This argument needs to be qualified, though, since governments might also seek support from other interest groups instead of unions. Here, the strategic position of
organized labor vis-à-vis other potential allies might influence governments’ choices of support groups.

5. Conclusion: The Success of Political Action

5.1 Immediate outcomes
Evidence from the UK and the US suggests that the Labour and Democrat vote is higher where unions mobilize voters. The union effect is significant but not large: some finely balanced contests were turned in a pro-Labour or Democrat direction in recent elections, but without affecting the overall election result. Lobbying has produced significant results for the UK, US and German union movements, e.g. the US ‘living wage’ laws (Luce 2001). Social pacts have been associated with some labor market reforms but also with relatively modest real wage growth. Evidence on legal rulings shows unions can successfully use the ECJ to overturn restrictive interpretations of European law. Links to leftist political parties have proved to be of declining value but have at the same time opened up the opportunity to establish pragmatic relationships with other parties.

5.2 Political action and union revitalization
American unions have continued to lose membership as well as bargaining power despite increased electoral activity and lobbying. British unions experienced a weakening in their ties to the Labour Party and were unable to secure any kind of social pact with the new government, but were still able to push successfully for legal changes that facilitated an upsurge in organizing and a modest recovery in membership. The modest degree of political action by German unions – electioneering and lobbying in particular – helped secure two SPD electoral victories but has not so far translated into a recovery of union membership and political influence nor prevented the continuing erosion of bargaining coverage and social welfare provisions. In Italy and Spain a combination of social pacts and worker mobilization through strike action has helped unions to return to growth and to increase their political influence.

What is also evident is that political action as a strategy has been used to boost various dimensions of union revitalization. For instance, in the UK unions have used political action to heighten membership through union recognition laws and push for the establishment of a minimum wage; in Spain, the primary goal has been to regulate employment conditions; in Italy, wages were the central focus of social pacts; and in Germany, union workplace representation
and employment creation were the most dominant issues of political action. Thus, unions have used political action strategically to strengthen different dimensions of revitalization in our countries; political action is not linked to increasing unions’ political power only, but can be used to increase different dimensions of union revitalization. In terms of union membership and political influence, the Italian and Spanish unions have performed relatively well, the German and American unions least well. Superficially this might seem to argue for the benefits of social pacts and strikes as compared to electioneering and relatively close party ties.

Finally, unions’ engagement in political action in and of itself does not imply that these endeavors are successful, and one has to be careful to separate the processes from the outcomes. This is particularly obvious where these attempts have failed, such as the German Alliance for Work. While the unions’ participation in this alliance may signal a strategic shift indicating incipient union adjustment and revitalization, the ultimate failure of the alliance makes it clear that political action entails a process of political exchange, the success of which depends on other participants in the process, in particular governments. Legal action is slightly different in that it targets the implementation of already existing legislation and as such is not based on a process of political exchange. Therefore, the link between union political action and union revitalization is not straightforward. Other factors, such as unemployment, affect union membership; the behavior of other actors, notably employers, also makes a difference to union outcomes; and it may also be the combination of different forms of political action and other strategies, such as organizing drives or alliances with other social movements that is critical to union success.

References


