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#### **Journal Article**

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Version: Accepted (Refereed)

#### **Citation:**

Kelly, J.; Hamann, K.; Johnston, A. (2013)  
Unions against governments: explaining general strikes in Western Europe, 1980-2006 - *Comparative Political Studies* (Forthcoming, 2013)

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**“Unions against Governments:  
Explaining General Strikes in Western Europe, 1980-2006”**

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**Word count:**

To appear in *Comparative Political Studies*, 2013.

Key words: general strikes, unions, social pacts, Western Europe, policy reforms

**Abstract**

Across Western Europe, unions have increasingly engaged in staging general strikes against governments since 1980. This increase in general strikes is puzzling as it has occurred at the same time as economic strikes have been on the decline. We posit that theories developed to explain economic strikes hold little explanatory power in accounting for variation in general strikes across countries and over time. Instead, we develop a framework based on political variables; in particular, whether governments have included or excluded unions in framing policy reforms; the party position of the government; and the type of government. Our empirical analysis, based on a conditional fixed-effects logit estimation of 84 general strikes between 1980 and 2006, shows that union exclusion from the process of reforming policies, government strength, and the party position of the government can provide an initial explanation for the occurrence of general strikes.

## **Introduction**

Between 1980 and 1989, trade unions staged 18 general strikes against governments in 16 Western European countries (EU 15 plus Norway), a number that increased to 26 in the following decade and to 28 between 2000 and 2006. In addition, unions threatened to stage a general strike a dozen times (see Figure 1 and Table 1). This phenomenon of a rising trend in the number of general strikes is particularly interesting for three reasons: first, the growth in the number of general strikes has coincided with the reemergence of concertation, particularly in the form of social pacts between governments, unions, and employers (Hamann and Kelly 2011; Hassel 2006). These pacts have frequently focused on the design and implementation of contentious reforms to pensions, welfare systems, and employment protection laws, and the inclusion of trade unions might be expected to reduce the level of anti-government protests, such as general strikes, which are often directed against these and similar issues. Second, the rise in general strikes contrasts a sharp decline in strike activity against employers in 12 countries of the EU15 plus Norway: Between 1980 and 1982 an average of 16.6 working days per 10,000 employees were lost to strike action each year; by 1989-91 this figure had dropped to 4.5 days per 10,000 and to 1.1 days per 10,000 by 2004-06 (see Figure 1). At the same time, union density has also declined in a majority of these cases. The discrepant trends in general strikes, trade union density, and strikes against employers challenge some of our conventional ideas about trade union decline and union weakness. Third, although some of the countries with a relatively high level of general strikes also tend to have relatively high levels of economic strike activity (e.g. Greece, Italy, and Spain), general strikes have similarly been called in countries with historically low levels of strike activity, such as Austria and the Netherlands (Table 1). This suggests that theories accounting for economic strikes cannot easily be applied to explain the increase in general strikes.

[Figure 1 about here]

[Table 1 about here]

Based on these observations, we are interested in two related questions: How can we explain the increase in general strikes in Western Europe over time? And which factors can account for the variation in the incidence of general strikes across countries? To explore these questions, we construct a database for 16 Western European countries (EU 15 plus Norway).<sup>1</sup> As general strikes are directed against governments and their (proposed) policies, our argument centers on political variables and the political context surrounding such events. In particular, we examine the degree of union inclusion or exclusion from government policy formation; the party composition of the government; and the strength of the government. We posit that these variables are better suited than economic and industrial relations variables to explain variation in general strikes both across time and across cases.

The next section defines general strikes and provides an overview of empirical patterns of general strikes across Western Europe. We then briefly outline why existing theories of strike action are of limited value in explaining the patterns of general strikes and then present our own framework for analysis. The subsequent section discusses our data and methods, and we then present our results. The final section discusses our findings and concludes.

### **Patterns of General Strikes**

There is no generally agreed definition of the term “general strike” or its various synonyms, such as “political strike” or “protest strike” (see, e.g., Walsh 1983). We therefore revise Hyman’s (1989:17) standard definition of a strike and define a general strike as “a temporary, national stoppage of work by workers from many industries, directed against the executive or legislative arms of government, to enforce a demand or give voice to a grievance.” A general

strike involves the mobilization by one or more national confederations of the whole of its membership, as well as non-union members, typically in protest against a proposed or adopted government policy reform, or following a breakdown in negotiations with the government about policy reform. Given this definition and our focus on the national level, the following actions would *not* count as general strikes: a stoppage by just one group of workers protesting government intervention; a stoppage by public sector employees protesting against the government in its capacity as employer; a national demonstration that did not include a general strike; a general strike occurring in one or several regions of a country. Typically a general strike will be a one-off action on a particular issue or set of issues. However, when a union confederation has called a series of general strikes on the same issue over a short space of time, each strike constitutes a separate mobilization.

The downturn in economic strikes is conventionally dated starting approximately in 1980 (e.g. Edwards and Hyman 1994; Shalev 1992). Consequently, we trace general strikes from January 1980 until December 2006.<sup>2</sup> During that time, a total of 72 general strikes occurred and an additional 12 threats to stage a general strike were issued.<sup>3</sup> Figure 1 displays a general upward trend with peaks in the early 1990s and early to mid-2000s.<sup>4</sup> Because 34 of these strike and strike threats occurred in just one country – Greece – Figure 1 also displays data excluding the Greek case; excluding Greece alters neither the upward trend nor the presence and timing of the peaks. Table 1 reveals the national distribution of general strikes and documents their concentration in the Southern European economies of Greece, France, Italy, Spain, and to a lesser degree Portugal, cases that also tend to rank high in economic strikes. These five countries alone account for 77% (65) of the 84 strikes and strike threats in this period. The remaining strike events (19) were organized in countries that have for many years recorded some of the lowest levels of industrial conflict in Europe: Austria, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Norway, while several countries that have recently ranked

high on economic strikes stand out for their absence of general strikes, e.g. Denmark and Ireland. Five countries experienced no general strikes or strike threats: Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Sweden, and the UK. In some of these cases such actions are unlawful, e.g. in Germany and the UK.

General strikes have been called in response to a wide range of planned or actual policy reforms by national governments. We classified these policies under the following six categories: 1) wages, including basic rates, overtime, and holiday pay; 2) labor market reform, including bargaining structures, legal regulation of dismissals and redundancies, and non-wage issues such as work time; 3) pensions; 4) other welfare issues, including sickness and unemployment benefits; 5) economic policy; 6) a miscellaneous category for issues that did not fit any of the other categories, such as protests against the Iraq War. Many general strikes were organized around one major issue but a substantial minority featured a variety of issues. Figure 2 displays the distribution of the issues that motivated general strikes (including strike threats). If more than one issue led to a strike or a strike threat, each issue was counted separately; consequently, the total number of issues exceeds the total number of strikes and strike threats.

Figure 2 evinces that government intervention to restrain the level of wage settlements has played only a modest part in the genesis of general strikes, particularly in countries other than Greece, where labor market, welfare, and pension reforms have precipitated the majority of general strikes. Furthermore, although numerous general strikes were called to protest against economic policy on issues such as taxation and public expenditure, the overwhelming majority of these have occurred in Greece.

[Figure 2 about here]

Since most general strikes protest against government measures, the next section develops a framework for analysis constructed around political factors to account for the substantial variation in general strikes across countries and over time.

### **General Strikes: A Framework for Analysis**

Existing strike theories were developed to account for variations in the occurrence of strikes launched against employers, i.e. “economic” strikes. Theories of economic strikes can be grouped into four categories depending on their main explanatory variables: economic (business cycle, economic globalization), labor force composition, industrial relations institutions (union structure, bargaining coverage and coordination), and power resources (Brandl and Traxler 2010; Edwards and Hyman 1994; Piazza 2005; Scheuer 2006). These theories address different facets of strike activity (frequency, workers involved, days lost) and are not logically exclusive; therefore, they have sometimes been combined in models of strike activity (e.g. Franzosi 1995). However, theories developed to explain the existence, rise, or decline of economic strikes are poorly equipped to account for general strikes. For one, the empirical patterns displayed in Figure 1 demonstrate that patterns of general strikes diverge sharply from those of economic strikes. Insofar as economic or institutional variables can successfully account for the dramatic decline in levels of strikes against employers in Western Europe since the early 1980s, they cannot therefore explain why another class of strike action has become more frequent. This is perhaps not surprising because general strikes differ fundamentally from economic strikes: the former are directed against governments and their (proposed) policies rather than employers; they are often organized around broad rather than sectional or occupational issues, of concern to large segments of the population beyond those employed in specific firms or sectors; the issues that motivate general strikes, such as welfare benefits, are not generally those that are subject to regular collective bargaining

processes; and general strike mobilizations may well extend beyond the unions' membership and activist base to include many non-union employees. Thus, it makes little sense to expect that explanations developed to account for workplace, company, or even industry-wide strikes will also be able to illuminate the causes and patterns of general strikes.

Under what conditions, then, are unions more likely to react to government policies with a general strike? Theories of general strikes are rare. Existing research draws on social movement theorists (e.g. Tarrow 1994; Tilly 1978). Lindvall (2011) focuses on trade union power, arguing that general strikes are most likely to occur in countries where the union movement is moderately strong: weak movements will be unable to strike against governments while strong movements will not need to strike because governments will factor in union reactions when they formulate policies. Whereas the argument fits the Greek and Italian cases particularly well, it does not easily accommodate general strikes and strike threats in countries with low union density (France, Spain) or with relatively high density (Belgium, Finland). Alternatively, Nam (2006) argues that "protests," a category that includes but is not coterminous with general strikes, should be more likely in countries with a poorly developed political opportunity structure and less likely in countries that offer citizens numerous channels through which they can pursue their demands (see also Tarrow 1994). Measuring opportunity structure by the strength of the legislature in relation to the executive and the judiciary, Nam finds that protests are more widespread in countries with weak legislatures, such as France and Greece. However, several countries with strong legislatures according to Nam's data also have high levels of general strikes (e.g. Belgium, Italy, and Spain).

In addition, specific studies of conflict in some of the most strike-prone countries, such as Greece, identify institutional and political factors that may be associated with trade union protest: poorly developed corporatist structures that limit union influence on

policymaking; a cross-party consensus on welfare and labor market reform that also limits the scope for trade union influence; governments that have been willing to legislate reforms rather than negotiate with the social partners; and unions that are well organized in essential services, especially the public sector, and that therefore have the capacity to mount effective strikes (Featherstone and Papadimitriou 2008; Lavdas 2005; Matsaganis 2007; Pagoulatos 2005). These are potentially valuable insights into particular events in a particular country that have informed our own thinking in developing a framework of analysis applicable to a larger set of cases.

Our framework to explain the patterns of general strikes conceptualizes them as political events as they are directed against governments and their (proposed) policies and therefore based on political variables. We focus on three main factors: whether governments include or exclude trade unions in the formation of policies on contentious issues that affect the interests of their members; the party composition of the government; and the strength and cohesion of the government. We expect other variables, such as the nature of the issue or the strength of the trade union movement, to matter less because theoretically, they are less clearly linked to general strikes. For example, union density is less likely to affect a decision to call a general strike because the target audience extends beyond union membership; similarly, reforms in different areas may be perceived as sufficiently threatening issues to warrant a general strike.

### *Union Inclusion in Shaping Government Policies*

The policies of many governments in Western Europe since the early 1980s have involved downward pressure both on direct wage costs and on indirect costs, such as employers' social security and pension contributions. Welfare and pension reforms have often involved some combination of cutbacks in benefit levels, restricted eligibility, and increased employee

contributions (Immergut et al. 2007). In addition, many governments have also sought to increase labor market flexibility by amending employment protection and working time laws or by adjusting collective bargaining structures. In pursuing such policies governments can choose to include unions in negotiations, for example through social pacts, or to exclude them and attempt to enact reforms through legislation (Hamann and Kelly 2011). Union inclusion may assist in “blame avoidance” (Pierson 1994), a process through which governments try to protect themselves from potential electoral backlash to unpopular reforms, in this case by sharing responsibility with the social partners. Alternatively, parties in government may respond to electoral competition by distancing themselves from unions and enacting reforms unilaterally, excluding trade unions from policy formation.

Unions might criticize and react with general strikes to exclusion from policy making by their country’s government for three reasons: First, the industrial relations systems of many West European countries have institutionalized extensive trade union involvement in the regulation of terms and conditions of employment. Collective bargaining coverage averages approximately 80% in the EU15 plus Norway (although it is much lower in liberal market economies such as the UK). Union leaders in these countries may therefore expect to be involved in discussions on contentious policies that affect their members and may protest when excluded. Second, trade unions have been analyzed as agents of job regulation whose principal objective is to participate in the process of drafting rules to regulate the employment relationship (e.g. Edwards 2003; Flanders 1970). Consequently, unions may protest against their exclusion from processes of rule creation on issues such as pensions or employment protection. Third, social pacts have reemerged in almost every country in Western Europe since the early 1980s (the UK is the exception), arguably reinforcing the role of unions as valuable partners for governments anxious to engage in “blame avoidance” for contentious reforms and reinforcing the role of unions as a participant in policy formation. When these

pact negotiations fail and unions' demands are not met, they may react with general strikes. By provoking the expression of widespread popular support for their criticism of government policies through general strikes, unions hope to affect change in the issue at hand (policy outcome or process, depending on what motivates the strike) either in this particular instance or perhaps in the future. As governments will have to face the same voters that are protesting in a general strike in a future election, unions may consider a general strike as a tool to alter governmental policies.

### *Party Position of Government*

Second, we contend that it matters who governs, in particular, the type of party or parties in government. One line of argument suggests that general strikes overall should be more frequently directed against conservative governments than against leftist governments. Many unions are ideologically and organizationally closer to leftist parties and might be less likely to protest with a national work stoppage against leftist governments (e.g. Allern 2010; Anthonsen et al. 2011). This reasoning is also consistent with the corporatism literature, which asserts that leftist-led governments provide more room for unions to influence governmental policies through both party and governmental channels, making it less likely that unions will protest such governments (Molina and Rhodes 2002).

However, since the 1980s, social-democratic parties in several West European countries have experienced two sets of changes that may be linked to the rise in general strikes and to variation in strike incidence across countries. First, some of these parties have reevaluated their policies on issues such as welfare spending and labor market flexibility and have become more centrist, approximating the policies of their Christian Democrat and conservative competitors (see, e.g., Callaghan 2000; Kitschelt 1994; Piazza 2001). Second, some social-democratic parties have weakened their organizational links with unions as they

have sought to broaden their electoral appeal well beyond the declining ranks of organized unions (Hindley 1997; Howell 2001; Piazza 2001). Together, these processes indicate that as the special relationship between unions and social-democratic parties has atrophied, unions may become just as willing to strike against social-democratic as against conservative governments.

### *Government Composition*

Government composition – single-party or coalitions, minority or majority – may influence unions' propensity to stage a general strike for several reasons. First, coalition governments, common in multi-party systems, may afford unions more access points as they can attempt to negotiate with several parties that, in turn, can influence the governmental agenda. Single-party governments, in comparison, are perhaps more difficult to access for unions, especially if the relationship with the governing party is not cooperative. Second, whether the government commands a majority or minority of legislative seats is closely related to governmental strength, which previous research has shown to influence the likelihood of union inclusion in policy formation through social pacts (Baccaro and Lim 2007; Baccaro and Simoni 2008; Hamann and Kelly 2011). Empirical research on Western Europe has evinced that minority governments have a shorter duration of office than majority governments (both coalition and single-party) (Strom 1990:116). In particular, on average, minority coalitions (372 days) tend to be short-lived compared to surplus majority coalitions (659 days), minimal winning coalitions (610 days), and single-party majority governments (878 days) (Gallagher, Laver, and Mair 2011:447). Consequently, other things equal minority and coalition governments are more likely to include unions in policy formation (Hamann and Kelly 2011) and are therefore likely to face fewer general strikes than single-party majority administrations.

In sum, we propose the following hypotheses:

*H1: General strikes will be positively associated with unilateral reform through legislation, an indicator of union exclusion, compared to situations of no policy change and/or union inclusion.*

*H2: General strikes will be negatively associated with accepted social pacts, an indicator of union inclusion when compared to the benchmark of union exclusion (legislation). Union inclusion may be negatively, or not significantly, associated with general strikes when compared to a benchmark of no policy change (status quo).*

*H3: General strikes will be related to the policy position of the government on a unidimensional left-right scale.*

*H4: General strikes will be positively associated with governmental strength. We operationalize “strong” governments as majority governments and “weak” governments as minority governments.*

*H5: When majority governments rule, general strikes will be less likely for coalition governments than for single-party governments.<sup>5</sup>*

The next sections evaluate these hypotheses to explain variation in the patterns of general strikes across cases and across time.

### **Data, Methods, and Analysis**

As noted earlier, we define a general strike as “a temporary, national stoppage of work by workers from many industries, directed against the executive or legislative arms of government, to enforce a demand or give voice to a grievance.” Working days lost and workers involved per 1,000 employees are the most commonly used measures of strike activity in preference to simple frequency counts (see, e.g., Monger 2005; van der Velden et al. 2007). Concerning general strikes, as with all large, multi-workplace strikes, data on days

lost and workers involved are extremely unreliable (Lyddon 2007). Therefore, we use the frequency of general strikes instead. Data on general strikes are difficult to collect because some countries exclude what they call “political strikes” from their national statistics, e.g. Belgium, France, or the UK, while other countries include them but do not distinguish them from economic strikes directed against employers, e.g. Denmark or Italy (Walsh 1983:50-51). Eastern European strike statistics are not available for the 1980s and post-1990 data are sometimes based on narrow definitions of strike action or supplied by trade union sources whose reliability is unknown (EIRO 2005). We therefore confine our sample to the EU15, i.e. Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the UK, in addition to Norway. We used the monthly *European Industrial Relations Review (EIRR)* and the online *European Industrial Relations Observatory (EIRO)* as our main sources. We also consulted the Protest and Coercion Database at the University of Kansas, which contains daily logs of numerous forms of protest in many West European countries from 1980 to 1995.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, we consulted monographs and edited collections on the types of national policy reforms that often provoke general strikes, e.g. Immergut et al. (2007) on pension reforms in Western Europe. Discrepancies between these different sources occur because the Kansas dataset employs a very broad definition of general strikes, including regional and purely public sector stoppages. We recorded only those strikes that conformed to the definition provided above; if in doubt about a particular action, we erred on the side of caution and excluded it. Given that a general strike is both a rare and dramatic event we are confident that our sources provide comprehensive and complete data.

The data include 84 total general strikes (including strike threats) within 58 individual years in 16 countries (EU15 plus Norway) over a 27-year time span (1980-2006). Of these 58 individual years, strike frequency is greater than 1 in 20 individual years; that is, more than

one general strike occurred in a country in a given year. Given the lack of variation in annual strikes above two (only 4 out of 432 yearly observations witnessed more than two strikes), we chose a time-series logistical regression estimator for our empirical analysis, rather than an OLS or tobit model; hence our dependent variable is whether a strike occurred within a given year, not the number of strikes in one year. We utilize a conditional fixed effects logit model in order to control for possible country specific effects.<sup>7</sup> Because the estimator automatically excludes panels with no variation in the dependent variable over time, our sample was reduced to 11 countries that experienced strike years (our original sample of 16 minus Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Sweden and the UK), which somewhat reduces the zero skew. While strike data are available from 1980 to 2010, data on party position and social pacts (necessary to test our hypotheses) are only available until 2006. Therefore 1980-2006 serves as the time scale. The baseline logit model is:

$$\Pr(y_{i,t} = 1 \mid x_{i,t}) = \Lambda [\beta_1 (PA_{i,t}) + \beta_2(L_{i,t}) + \beta_3(LR_{i,t}) + \beta_4(GC_{i,t}) + \sum_k \beta_k X_{k,i,t} + \varepsilon_{i,t}]$$

where  $\Lambda$  is the logit estimator:  $e^\beta/(1+e^\beta)$ .  $Y_{i,t}$  measures whether a strike has occurred in country  $i$  in year  $t$ . To overcome possible concerns regarding the inclusion of strike threat years in  $y_{i,t}$  and the over-emphasis of Greek strikes we also conducted regressions, presented in Columns I-VI of Table 3, which exclude strike threats from the dependent variable (I-III) and Greek strikes from the sample (IV-VI).

We conducted two series of regressions with our 11-country sample to gauge the *proximate* causes of general strikes. In one series, we examine the proximate impact of government's union exclusion/inclusion on general strikes via two different proxies: accepted social pacts and legislation. We measure union exclusion via legislation rather than rejected social pacts because the latter fails to indicate whether governments proceeded with policy change without unions' consent. On various occasions, rejected pacts were not accompanied by legislation within our sample – hence unions were not *explicitly* excluded from policy

changes as no change occurred.  $PA_{i,t}$  measures whether a proposed (tripartite) social pact was accepted (1=yes, 0=no) and  $L_{i,t}$  measures the presence of (unilateral) legislative reforms without union involvement in country  $i$  in year  $t$  (1=yes, 0=no) – hence, the baseline dummy category is no policy change. Of the 20 strike years that had multiple strikes, 7 had no legislative or pact activity, and therefore did not require the matching of these developments to their respective strikes. In 9 of the 20 multiple strike years, only one legislative/pact development occurred, yet on all 9 occasions, the multiple strikes were related to the same reform issue and thus were connected to the same legislative/pact action. In the remaining 4 of the 20 multiple strike years, 3 of the 4 were repeated strike and legislative/pact developments on the same issue; put otherwise, legislative/pact proposals were followed by a general strike more than once in a given year, yet both developments were related to government's original reform proposals. Only on one occasion, in Spain in 1992, were multiple strike events (one strike and one strike threat) and legislative/pact developments unrelated to each other. To account for these two different types of strikes, both observations were run in separate regressions; the 1992 general strike was included in the model presented in Column I in Table 3 (i.e. a model excluding strike threats), while the 1992 strike threat was included in the models presented in Columns I-II in Table 2. Data on accepted pact proposals and legislation were taken from the Hamann-Kelly pacts database (Hamann and Kelly 2011).<sup>8</sup>

In the second series of regressions, we examine the proximate impact of government *position and composition*, independently of government pacts or legislation.  $LR_{i,t}$  measures the left-right position of the ruling party, based upon its manifesto, in country  $i$  in year  $t$ , and ranges from -40.12 (extreme left) to 51.7 (extreme right). Data on party positions were taken from Budge et al. (2001) and Klingemann et al. (2006).<sup>9</sup>  $GC_{i,t}$ , government composition, which gauges not only government strength (majority vs minority – H4) but government type

(coalition vs single party – H5), in country  $i$  at time  $t$ , is a dummy variable distinguishing between single-party majority governments (those where a single party commands 50%+1 of the seats in the lower house of parliament), multi-party majority coalition governments (coalitions with 50%+1 of the seats in the lower house), and minority governments (comprising single-party minority as well as minority coalition governments); single-party majority governments serve as our benchmark.<sup>10</sup> If the government in power is a coalition, the ruling party is defined as the main coalition partner, i.e. the party from which the prime minister hails. In years containing multiple governments but no general strikes, party position and the government composition dummies were weighted according to each government's (monthly) tenure within that year. In years containing multiple governments and a general strike, we used the party position and the government composition dummy of the government in power at the time of the strike.

$\Sigma_k \beta_k X_{k,i,t}$  is a vector of economic and institutional controls for country  $i$  in year  $t$ . Economic controls used include real GDP growth and the (lagged) unemployment rate. Higher GDP growth is expected to lessen the incidence of strikes, while higher unemployment is expected to increase it; unemployment was run on a one-year lag to avoid multicollinearity problems with real GDP growth. Net government lending was included in our initial regressions, yet, even when run on a lag, it was significantly correlated with the presence of unilateral legislation, ruling party position, GDP growth *and* lagged unemployment not only over the entire dataset, but also within individual panels.<sup>11</sup> Because this multicollinearity problem depressed the significance of all these variables, we excluded it, although its coefficient was significant and performed as expected when included in the regressions. GDP growth and unemployment data were taken from the OECD (n.d., b).

Institutional controls include trade union density, bargaining coverage, centralization, wage coordination, and union confederal authority (Jacobs 2007). While union density is not

trend-stationary within most panels, we included a time trend to control for this, enabling us to examine the impact of trade union density levels (rather than changes) on general strikes.<sup>12</sup> Data on trade union density were obtained from the OECD (n.d., a). Bargaining coverage, centralization and wage coordination were included to examine whether union encompassment, organization, or coordination influences the presence of general strikes. Finally, high union confederal authority, that is the authority of peak confederations over its affiliates, could either increase or decrease general strike incidence. On the one hand, highly encompassing and centralized union confederations will bear the costs of collective action, and are therefore more likely to negotiate agreements without resort to collective action (Olson 1982). On the other hand, social movement theory would predict that centralization of power provides union leadership with the capacity to mobilize its membership and engage in collective action (Tilly 1978). In our sample, confederal authority ranges from 10%, low confederal authority, to 90%, high confederal authority; the measure is time-variant in all countries except the UK. Data on union bargaining coverage, centralization, wage coordination, and confederal authority were taken from Visser's ICTWSS database (2009).<sup>13</sup> Centralization was included in separate regressions given its high correlation with wage coordination, bargaining coverage, and confederal authority, the latter of which is a component in its construction in the Visser database. Finally, we include a time trend to control for the lack of time-stationarity within our dependent variable.

## **Results**

Tables 2 and 3 present results for the baseline conditional fixed-effects model. Beta coefficients have been converted to odds ratios; hence, values greater/less than 1 indicate that the odds of a general strike associated with a change in that particular variable increases/decreases. The ratification of a legislative act, which entails union exclusion,

yielded highly significant results across all models, increasing the odds of a general strike/strike-threat by a factor of roughly 4 to 5, lending some support for hypothesis 1. The accepted pact variable yielded insignificant results, *relative to a benchmark of no policy change*, on all occasions. Separate Wald tests were used to compare the difference in coefficients between unilateral legislation and accepted social pacts (sixth row from bottom, Tables 2 and 3). In all models, the presence of legislation was associated with a significantly higher general strike odds ratio than the presence of accepted social pacts, lending support for hypothesis 2.

Party position is significantly correlated with higher strike odds, showing that the odds of a general strike are significantly higher under a conservative government, substantiating hypothesis 3. The coefficients retain significance when strike threats and Greek strikes are excluded. The minority government dummy is significantly associated with a reduction in the odds of a general strike, relative to single-party majority governments, substantiating hypothesis 4. Wald tests were used to compare the difference in coefficients between minority governments and coalition majority governments (fifth row from bottom, Tables 2 and 3). Results indicate that minority governments are also associated with a significant reduction in general strikes odds relative to coalition majority governments, offering further support of hypothesis 4. Like party position, the minority government results are not sensitive to exclusions. The coalition majority dummy is insignificant relative to a benchmark of a single-party majority government, suggesting that strike activity is not significantly different between the two types of governments, which refutes hypothesis 5.

[Table 2 about here]

[Table 3 about here]

Throughout the regressions, we isolated the pacts/legislation and party position/composition variables due to their significant association with each other.<sup>14</sup> This

prohibits us, however, from examining whether the presence of legislation has different degrees of influence on strike odds across the partisan spectrum (i.e. whether strikes odds increase more prominently when legislation is implemented by left-of-center versus right-of-center governments). Because logit models are, by definition, interactive models due to their non-linear nature (Kam and Franzese 2007:105), we can examine whether the change in probability of a strike in the presence of legislation is different for left-of-center versus right-of-center parties. In order to do so, however, we must include two highly associated variables in the same model (Table 3, Column V) and we therefore interpret the results cautiously. Table 4 provides fitted probabilities of the logit model in Column V to examine the impact of the presence and absence of legislation for three types of governments: left-of-center (party position equal to the lowest 10<sup>th</sup> percentile of the sample), centrist (50<sup>th</sup> percentile), and right-of-center (90<sup>th</sup> percentile) governments. Mean values were inserted for all other variables.

[Table 4 about here]

The probability of a strike is higher for all three governments when unilateral legislation is present. The proportional increase in strike probabilities (dividing the probability of a strike under legislation – Column II in Table 4 – by that in the absence of legislation – Column I), however, is significantly higher for *left-of-center and centrist* governments than right-of-center governments. Likewise, the ratio of strikes probabilities for a right-of-center to a left-of-center government decreases from 6.1 in the absence of legislation to 3.5 in the presence of legislation. Such results could suggest that left-of-center governments suffer more *in proportionate terms* than their right-of-center counterparts when they introduce unilateral legislation. A possible explanation for this finding may be that unions consider government unilateralism a greater breach of trust from their traditional political allies, and hence they may respond with greater (proportionate) threat.

The remaining economic and institutional controls either performed as expected or failed to exhibit significance. Positive GDP growth was significantly associated with reduced strike odds across all models. High (lagged) unemployment was significantly associated with greater strike incidence across most models. All bargaining institution controls were insignificant. When union confederal authority was included in isolation of bargaining coverage and wage coordination, its coefficient was significant at the 90% level, suggesting possible multi-collinearity issues with bargaining coverage and coordination. All other bargaining institutions as well as trade union density failed to exhibit significance when included separately. Lack of significance should not be particularly surprising, given our initial discussion about their failure to explain the upward trend in general strikes, as well as their limited variation over time. Bargaining coverage, for example, exhibits limited variation across Western Europe and has been relatively constant between 1980 and 2006. Finally, in line with our summary data, the inclusion of a linear trend indicates that the odds of a general strike have significantly increased over time.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

General strikes called by trade unions to protest government policy have rarely been systematically analyzed in the political science and industrial relations literatures, even though this form of protest has become increasingly common since the early 1980s. The surge in general strikes has coincided with a growth of contentious governmental reforms of welfare, pensions, and labor markets, and union protests have therefore sometimes been analyzed as a defensive and self-interested response by sectional interest groups (e.g. Matsaganis 2007). Yet the variation in general strike incidence over time and across countries suggests the significance of other factors. Our analysis demonstrates that while in many cases, unions use general strikes to react to governmental policy proposals, a far better (proximate)

predictor of trade union behavior is the exclusion of unions from government policymaking on these issues. Where governments excluded unions by opting for legislation, the odds of strike action significantly increased. Our strike and pacts/legislation datasets contain examples of legislation leading directly to a general strike on various occasions in six countries: Belgium 1984, France 1995 and 2005, Greece (multiple years), Italy 1989 and 2003, Luxembourg 1982, and Spain 1988. At times, governments legislated when social pact negotiations broke down; as our data show, governments followed a breakdown in pact talks with proposed legislation on 27 occasions. On nine of these occasions trade unions responded to the announcement of legislation with a general strike (in Austria 2003, Belgium 1993 and 1996, Greece 2000, Portugal 1988, the Netherlands 1982, and Spain 1985, 1994, and 2002). Even when governments included unions in pact negotiations on contentious reforms, this policy did not eliminate union protests entirely. Indeed on 17 occasions trade unions deployed general strikes as negotiations were under way, mostly to pressure the government into delivering more concessions (Belgium 2005, Finland 1992 and 1996, France 2003, Greece 1996-97, Italy 1991, 1998 and 2001-02, Luxembourg 2001, and Portugal 2002). In several cases the general strike was a direct response to a government threat to abandon talks (Finland 1993, Italy 1990, the Netherlands 1991) or was intended to instigate talks from a government reluctant to open negotiations with the social partners (Italy 1994, Norway 1998, Spain 1992). Overall, our research indicates that union exclusion from the process of policymaking has proved to be at least as contentious as the substantive content of government policies and reforms and is closely correlated with general strikes.

We also found a strong party position effect – the more rightist the government on the left-right policy dimension, the greater the likelihood of general strikes. Focusing on two of the most strike-prone countries, Italy and France, 10 of the 15 general strikes in Italy were against conservative governments, as were six of the seven general strikes in France. In Italy,

for example, the two Berlusconi administrations (1994 and 2001-2007) initially set out to legislate controversial proposals on pensions and on labor law respectively without union consultation. In both cases unions called general strikes, partly to protest the policies themselves, but primarily to force the government into negotiations (Hamann and Kelly 2011:128-9). We also found a strong interaction effect between party position and union exclusion via legislation (Table 4). In proportionate terms, unions respond to exclusion with a general strike to a greater extent if the government in question is center-left rather than center-right, *relative to a scenario where no legislation is presented*. For example, the Greek social-democratic party PASOK was reelected in June 1985 with an overall majority of seats (161 out of 300) but swiftly proceeded to legislate a two-year pay freeze without union consultation. One-day general strikes were held in October and December 1985 to protest this unexpected policy from a government whose first-term (1981-85) policies had often been supported by the unions (Tsakalotos 2001). This case is also interesting because it reveals significant divisions between and within union confederations, a recurrent theme in the countries of Southern Europe.

Turning to other characteristics of government, we noted that the multi-party status of coalition administrations with the possibility of inter-party divisions suggests they would be more willing to include unions and thereby reduce the likelihood of union protests. We find that government strength matters – minority governments tend to be associated with reduced strike incidence relative to both single-party and coalition majority governments. This might be related to the fact that minority governments are more likely to include unions in policy formulation on contentious issues (Hamann and Kelly 2011), which in turn is negatively related to the likelihood of strikes. Coalition majority governments, on the other hand, do not witness lower general strike odds ratios than their single-party counterparts, refuting the

hypothesis that inter-party divisions in multi-party governments make them more open to union influence and therefore less susceptible to general strikes.

Our findings propose some interesting future lines of inquiry. In several countries union movements have protested government policies through demonstrations rather than strikes – Ireland, Denmark, and Sweden, for example (Fajertag and Pochet 2000). The restriction of our analysis to general strikes will certainly lead to an underestimation of union opposition to government policies; whether it has biased the coefficients on our key variables is less clear and would require further research.

Our findings are consistent with Pierson's (1994) argument that governments attempting to enact unpopular reforms in the context of increasingly volatile electorates have strong incentives to pursue policies of "blame avoidance." Social pacts can be interpreted as a classic mechanism of blame avoidance while the exclusion of unions from policy formation could deprive governments of the electoral benefits of blame avoidance strategies. The level and intensity of social unrest generated by a general strike potentially represents a high risk for any government and is consistent with the literature on the difficulties of retrenching popular welfare and pension systems. In light of our data, it would be interesting to explore the degree to which union exclusion and general strikes lead voters to actually punish such governments in subsequent elections.

Finally, our analysis has interesting implications for the literature on trade union decline and revitalization (e.g. Frege and Kelly 2004; Phelan 2007). If we analyze trade unions as agents of collective bargaining and worker representation at the place of work, their capacity to perform these roles effectively appears to have diminished significantly in recent years. Declining trends in union density and strike rates are widespread in Western Europe, although some commentators also note the persistence of high levels of collective bargaining coverage throughout much of Western Europe (the UK and Ireland are the exceptions)

(e.g. Pontusson 2005; Soskice 2007). Yet, if we turn from the extent of the bargaining process to bargaining outcomes, the impression of union resilience is called into question. The wage share in national income, a widely-used measure to proxy union “pushfulness” in collective bargaining, has been declining steadily since the late 1970s (Glyn 2006: 7). A low degree of income inequality, normally measured by the 90:10 ratio, has also been used as a measure of union power on the grounds that it captures the ability of unions to push up wages at the bottom end of the earnings distribution, restrain rises at the top end, and maintain substantial income shares for wage earners at the expense of owners of capital. Yet the 90:10 ratio began to rise significantly in a few countries in the early 1980s and the trend has spread to most of Western Europe since the early 2000s (Glyn 2006: 167-70), consistent with the idea of a decline in unions’ mobilizing capacity and bargaining power. Our findings on general strikes hints that the decline in unions’ mobilizing capacities may have been overestimated because the ability of unions to operate within the political arena in relation to governments has been largely neglected. General strikes are only one means by which unions seek to exercise political influence and are certainly not as frequent as lobbying bureaucrats and legislators or voter mobilization (Hamann and Kelly 2004). Nonetheless the resilience of this mode of action at a time when union influence in collective bargaining appears rather limited underlines the importance of recognizing that union action in the political system may be a significant factor in gauging their strength in addition to collective action within the industrial relations system. Further research on the outcomes of general strikes could explore the effectiveness of general strikes in more detail as well as examining the impact of divisions among unions.

In conclusion, our analysis has provided some novel insights into the reasons for the pattern of increasing frequency of general strikes across Western Europe that stands in sharp relief to the pattern of declining economic strikes in the same set of countries. While

established theories of strikes are poorly equipped to account for the occurrence of general strikes, our comparative longitudinal analysis provides initial evidence that political and institutional factors are better suited to explain the national and temporal patterns of general strikes.

**Figure 1. General and Economic Strikes in Western Europe, 1980-2006**



*Note:* General strikes are reported for the EU15 plus Norway; economic strikes are reported for Norway and the EU15 but exclude Belgium, Greece, and Luxembourg. Consistent strike time series are not available for these countries because of long gaps in data in the 1980s (Belgium and Luxembourg) and since the early 1990s (Greece).

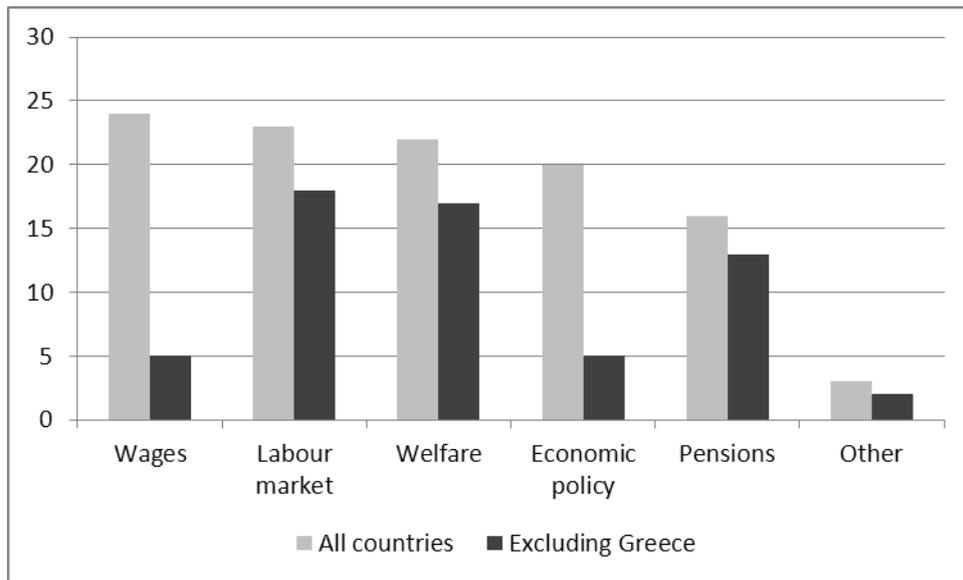
*Sources:* General strikes: author dataset; economic strikes: Bird (1991: Table 1); Davies (2001: Table 1); Hale (2008: Table 1).

**Table 1: General Strikes Descriptive Statistics, 1980-2006**

	<b>Strike Years (including threats)</b>	<b>Strike Years (excluding threats)</b>	<b>Number of Strikes (including threats)</b>	<b>Number of Strikes (excluding threats)</b>
<i>Total Panel</i>	58	50	84	72
<i>Austria</i>	1	1	1	1
<i>Belgium</i>	6	6	8	8
<i>Denmark</i>	0	0	0	0
<i>Finland</i>	3	0	3	0
<i>France</i>	5	5	7	7
<i>Germany</i>	0	0	0	0
<i>Greece</i>	18	18	34	33
<i>Ireland</i>	0	0	0	0
<i>Italy</i>	10	8	15	11
<i>Luxembourg</i>	4	1	4	1
<i>Netherlands</i>	2	2	2	2
<i>Norway</i>	1	1	1	1
<i>Portugal</i>	2	2	2	2
<i>Spain</i>	6	6	7	6
<i>Sweden</i>	0	0	0	0
<i>UK</i>	0	0	0	0

*Note:* Table indicates number of years that contain strikes 1980 and 2006.

*Source:* As for Figure 1.

**Figure 2: General Strikes Issues, 1980-2006**

*Source:* As for Figure 1.

**Table 2: Logit Results for General Strikes Estimation (Odds Ratios)**

Proxy Variable	Exclusion/Inclusion		Gov't Composition	
<i>Proposed Pact Accepted</i> (1=yes; 0=no)	0.984 (0.949)	1.102 (0.715)		
<i>Legislative Acts Passed</i> (1=yes; 0=no)	4.713*** (0.000)	4.429*** (0.000)		
<i>LR Party Position</i>			1.046*** (0.000)	1.034** (0.019)
<i>Minority Government</i> (1=yes; 0=no)			0.103** (0.022)	0.126** (0.016)
<i>Coalition Majority</i> (1=yes; 0=no)			0.808 (0.718)	0.801 (0.720)
<i>GDP Growth</i>	0.592*** (0.000)	0.613*** (0.000)	0.558*** (0.000)	0.606*** (0.000)
<i>Unemployment (Lag)</i>	1.13 (0.132)	1.121 (0.168)	1.292*** (0.001)	1.244*** (0.005)
<i>Time Trend</i>	1.070** (0.045)	1.048* (0.062)	1.055 (0.172)	1.038 (0.130)
<i>Union Density</i>	1.023 (0.749)		1.033 (0.587)	
<i>Confederal Authority</i>	1.025 (0.315)		1.037 (0.142)	
<i>Bargaining Coverage</i>	0.895 (0.298)		0.958 (0.696)	
<i>Wage Coordination</i>	0.846 (0.737)		0.905 (0.851)	
<i>Centralization</i>		1.033 (0.595)		1.075 (0.319)
<i>Wald test of beta diff.</i> <i>b/w pacts and leg.</i>	26.58*** (0.000)	25.33*** (0.000)	NA	NA
<i>Wald test of beta diff.</i> <i>b/w min. and coal. maj. gov'ts</i>	NA	NA	6.44** (0.040)	7.44** (0.024)
<i>Exclusions</i>	None	None	None	None
<i>Pseudo R Squared</i>	0.1765	0.1593	0.1996	0.1634
<i>Observations</i>	229	232	224	227
<i>Number of Countries</i>	11	11	11	11

Estimation Method is conditional fixed-effects logit model with country clustered standard errors. Robust p-values listed below odds ratios. \*, \*\*, and \*\*\* indicate significance on a 90%, 95% and 99% confidence interval

**Table 3: Robustness Checks for Logit Results for General Strikes Estimation (Odds Ratios)**

<b>Proxy Variable</b>	<b>Excl/Incl</b>	<b>Gov't Comp</b>	<b>Excl/Incl</b>	<b>Gov't Comp</b>	<b>Integrated</b>
<i>Proposed Pact Accepted</i> (1=yes; 0=no)	0.865 (0.655)		0.938 (0.810)		1.104 (0.775)
<i>Legislative Acts Passed</i> (1=yes; 0=no)	5.451*** (0.000)		4.789*** (0.000)		4.043*** (0.000)
<i>LR Party Position</i>		1.043*** (0.000)		1.047*** (0.000)	1.045*** (0.000)
<i>Minority Government</i> (1=yes; 0=no)		0.164** (0.018)		0.096** (0.018)	0.119** (0.026)
<i>Coalition Majority</i> (1=yes; 0=no)		0.956 (0.936)		0.755 (0.636)	0.775 (0.620)
<i>GDP Growth</i>	0.575*** (0.000)	0.568*** (0.000)	0.584*** (0.000)	0.547*** (0.000)	0.554*** (0.000)
<i>Unemployment (Lag)</i>	1.035 (0.554)	1.151** (0.044)	1.162 (0.105)	1.310*** (0.000)	1.266*** (0.003)
<i>Time Trend</i>	1.054** (0.048)	1.03 (0.325)	1.083** (0.034)	1.066 (0.158)	1.076** (0.024)
<i>Union Density</i>	0.976 (0.660)	0.981 (0.727)	1.024 (0.738)	1.036 (0.558)	1.062 (0.275)
<i>Confederal Authority</i>	1.02 (0.419)	1.027 (0.338)	1.026 (0.327)	1.039 (0.143)	1.037 (0.172)
<i>Bargaining Coverage</i>	0.925 (0.501)	0.984 (0.885)	0.864 (0.228)	0.928 (0.545)	0.897 (0.281)
<i>Wage Coordination</i>	0.968 (0.949)	1.061 (0.906)	0.806 (0.707)	0.863 (0.807)	0.828 (0.746)
<i>Wald test of beta diff. b/w pacts and Leg.</i>	27.18*** (0.000)	NA	25.02*** (0.000)	NA	15.98*** (0.000)
<i>Wald test of beta diff. b/w min. and coal. maj. gov'ts</i>	NA	7.53** (0.023)	NA	6.89** (0.032)	5.96* (0.051)
<i>Exclusions</i>	Strike Threats	Strike Threats	Greece	Greece	None
<i>Pseudo R Squared</i>	0.1689	0.1612	0.1874	0.2125	0.239
<i>Observations</i>	202	197	222	218	224
<i>Number of Countries</i>	9	9	10	10	11

Estimation Method is conditional fixed-effects logit model with country clustered standard errors. Robust p-values listed below odds ratios. \*, \*\*, and \*\*\* indicate significance on a 90%, 95% and 99% confidence interval

**Table 4: Fitted Probabilities of General Strikes**

	<b>No Legislation</b>	<b>Legislation</b>	<b>Proportional Increase (legislation vis-à-vis no legislation)</b>
<i>Left Government</i> (Position =-21.2)	<b>0.0371</b> (0.0140, 0.0602)	<b>0.177</b> (0.0176, 0.3365)	<b>4.77</b>
<i>Center Government</i> (Position =-3.78)	<b>0.0752</b> (0.0468, 0.1035)	<b>0.3119</b> (0.1108, 0.5130)	<b>4.15</b>
<i>Right Government</i> (Position =26.09)	<b>0.2258</b> (0.0913, 0.3603)	<b>0.6193</b> (0.3626, 0.8761)	<b>2.74</b>

*Fitted probabilities from Model V, Table 3. 95% confidence intervals in parentheses.*

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The database is available from the authors upon request.

<sup>2</sup> While our database of general strikes runs until December 2010, data on most of our independent variables are only available until December 2006. We therefore only report data until 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Sometimes the mere threat of strike action can induce a response from government. Therefore, we also look at general strike threats even when the strike did not actually take place. To count as a “threat” a trade union’s or union confederation’s leadership had to declare its intention to call a general strike on a particular issue(s) and on a given date. Unions issued a total of 12 credible general strike threats, but called off the action in response to fresh government proposals: once during the 1980s, ten times in the 1990s, and once after 2000. Three threats occurred in Finland, where no actual strike was held, and four in Luxembourg, where only one actual general strike was staged. Our measure of strike frequency includes both actual strikes and strike threats (the number of threats is too small to analyze separately) because in almost all of our statistical tests the inclusion or exclusion of strike threats did not alter the patterns of coefficients that were significant. However, where this is not the case we report two sets of results.

<sup>4</sup> More recent data exhibit another strike peak in the late 2000s, with 10 strikes 2007-2009 and 14 strikes in 2010 alone.

<sup>5</sup> The number of minority coalition governments in our dataset is too small to conduct a similar analysis for minority governments.

<sup>6</sup> These sources are available online at [www.eiro.eurofound.ie](http://www.eiro.eurofound.ie) and <http://web.ku.edu/ronfran/data/>.

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<sup>7</sup> A Hausman specification test ( $\text{Chi}^2(8) = 29.67$ ) indicated that we could reject the idea that differences between a random effects and conditional fixed effects estimator were not systematic.

<sup>8</sup> The Hamann/Kelly dataset includes reforms that are potentially unpopular with large parts of the electorate in the areas of welfare reform including pensions, wages, and labor market policies. The dataset codes the government's first option to reform either through legislation or by extending a pact offer to unions; legislation following failed pact negotiations are not included. The dataset also includes information on whether pact negotiations resulted in a successful pact or failed. It comprises the same country cases and years used in this analysis.

<sup>9</sup> We also conducted regressions with Swank's (2006) cabinet and legislative party composition data, which produced similar results as the political data from the manifesto database.

<sup>10</sup> We conducted alternative regressions using ruling party vote share as a measure of government composition (results not shown), which produced similar results in sign and significance to the dummy variables.

<sup>11</sup> Pair-wise correlations between (lagged) net lending and real GDP growth, (lagged) unemployment, ruling party position, and the presence of legislation were 0.27 (p-value = 0.000), -0.51 (p-value = 0.000), -0.15 (p-value = 0.004), and 0.19 (p-value = 0.000), respectively. Within panels, these correlations were markedly higher, exceeding (absolute) values of 0.6 and 0.7 in some cases.

<sup>12</sup> While pair-wise correlations between trade-union density and a time-trend was weakly negative for the sample as a whole, 12 out of 16 countries witnessed pair-wise correlation coefficients of -0.8 or higher, indicating a strong negative trend in union density over time within panels.

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<sup>13</sup> To keep the scale consistent with other institutional variables, confederal authority is reported on a scale of 0-100 rather than 0-1, as in Visser's database.

<sup>14</sup> Pair-wise correlations indicated that right-of-center parties were more likely to introduce unilateral legislation than left-of-center parties, although the coefficient across the 11 countries was low – roughly 0.15. Right-of-center governments did not significantly diverge from their left-of-center counter-parts on proposing (accepted) pacts.