Like worker, like union? Labor market risk exposure, white-collar predominance and trade unions’ policy advocacy

Axel Cronert * and Richard Forsén

Department of Government, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

*Correspondence: axel.cronert@statsvet.uu.se

Abstract

This study seeks to advance the scholarship on trade union heterogeneity. Expanding on previous research, we develop a theoretical framework that distinguishes unions along two dimensions—members’ labor market risk exposure and the predominance of white-collar workers—that help shape their labor market policy preferences and advocacy. The framework is then assessed in a within-country mixed-methods analysis. We first document how members in 35 Swedish unions map onto the two dimensions, using fine-grained survey data, and then qualitatively analyze the advocacy of seven unions with different membership characteristics. Our results confirm the relevance of isolating the two dimensions in analyses of both membership preferences and elite advocacy. These findings contrast with existing accounts of the contemporary Swedish union movement and carry implications for many other countries with fragmented union landscapes. They particularly demonstrate the importance of disaggregating union membership in micro- and macro-level research involving unions and their power resources.

Key words: trade unions, union membership, preferences, labor market institutions, training, knowledge based economy

JEL classification: J51 Trade Unions; Objectives, Structure, Effects, J58 Public Policy, I38 Government Policy; Provision and Effects of Welfare Programs

1. Introduction

In comparative political economy research, the strength of trade unions and the organized working class is often touted as a primary driving force behind the development of encompassing and redistributive welfare states. Among such labor-oriented accounts, the power resources approach, championed by Korpi (1978, 2006), is undoubtedly the most...
influential. In today’s globalized economies, strong trade union movements are still commonly understood as important forces in support of generous public commitment toward the well-being of vulnerable workers, by pressuring governments to ramp up compensation through labor market related programs such as unemployment benefits (e.g. Jensen, 2012a; Engler, 2021).

In the past two decades, however, the power resources approach has been increasingly criticized for being too reliant on an assumption of trade union interest homogeneity across countries, confederations, industries and occupations. In an influential contribution, Nijhuis (2009) questions the existence of uniform redistributive preferences among trade unions, pointing out that not all unionized employees are in a similarly disadvantaged position in the labor market. Instead, which interests and policy positions a given union will promote largely depend on the redistributive preferences of its members, which are in turn determined by the relative predominance of (relatively low-skilled, low-wage) blue-collar and (relatively high-skilled, high-wage) white-collar workers among the membership. In subsequent contributions, others have brought the literature forward by documenting heterogeneous preferences and policy positions among unions and their members (e.g. Becher and Pontusson, 2011; Gordon, 2015; Ibsen and Thelen, 2017; Mosimann and Pontusson, 2017; Arndt, 2018; Ceron and Negri, 2018).

Notwithstanding these advancements, a comprehensive and coherent framework for analyzing variation across unions is still lacking—so far, analyses have typically been framed in one-dimensional terms, distinguishing between unions whose members have stronger or weaker labor market position or are on different sides of a broad sectoral divide (public vs. private, domestic- vs. export-oriented). What is furthermore conspicuously absent is a comprehensive and systematic analysis of how and why trade unions vary in their choices of advocacy focus in the realm of labor market policy.

Against this background, this article seeks to make a two-fold contribution to the literature. The first (presented in Section 2) is to develop a theoretical framework that distinguishes unions along two theoretically and—as we shall see—empirically distinct labor market-based dimensions, which together help determine their preferences and advocacy focus in a number of central labor market policy domains. The first dimension differentiates unions according to the degree to which their members are exposed to labor market-related risk, here operationalized by unemployment. The second parameter differentiates unions with different proportions of blue-collar and white-collar workers.

Second, we apply the framework to the case of Sweden, where—like in many other Nordic, Continental and Eastern European countries—the union movement is fragmented along economically motivated lines, and where all four policy areas considered in our framework—unemployment insurance (UI), employment protection (EP), training rights (TRs) and solidaristic wage setting (SWS)—are placed high on the political agenda.

To put our framework to a rigorous test, we use a mixed-methods approach that allows us to investigate both mass-level preferences and elite action within unions, by combining quantitative and qualitative techniques (Section 3). We begin by using fine-grained survey data to analyze how Sweden’s 35 largest unions map onto the two dimensions, and how their member’s policy preferences vary accordingly (Sections 4 and 5). Based on the results of this mapping, we then closely investigate the policy advocacy of seven unions with different configurations of labor market risk exposure and white-collar predominance, combining elite interviews involving central officials with textual analysis of recent material (Section 6).
Our analyses establish the relevance as well as the limitations of the theoretical framework. Consistent with the framework, they reveal that unions representing workers with higher risk exposure put stronger emphasis on a generous public UI and strong EP, in line with membership preferences. Furthermore, unions representing white-collar workers put weaker emphasis on UI and between-sector wage solidarity, but interestingly not on EP. Noticeably, TRs is the policy area where there is least evidence of systematic differences in emphasis across unions. This is most recently evidenced by a major bipartite bargaining round where, in late 2020, the two largest blue-collar unions joined forces with the white-collar unions and the employers in trading relaxations in EP for strengthened rights to continuing vocational education and training, through an agreement which, in late 2021, was joined also by the blue-collar union confederation Landsorganisationen (LO).

Our findings carry important implications for research on unions and their role in policy reform coalitions in Sweden as well as many other European countries. For Sweden, our results reveal a broad ongoing shift among unions toward what Ibsen and Thelen (2017) call ‘supply-side egalitarianism’, while at the same time documenting that in other important aspects unions’ advocacy focus differ systematically—and more so than recognized in accounts that treat Sweden primarily as a case of comprehensive unionism (Nijhuis, 2009) or focus entirely on the blue-collar/white-collar divide (Arndt, 2018) or the ‘insider/outsider’ divide (Davidsson, 2018).

Yet as elaborated in the concluding discussion (Section 7), the plausible scope conditions for labor market position-based differences to materialize among unions in one or more policy fields—especially so a well-organized union movement which is politically relevant yet fragmented along economically motivated lines—are not unique to Sweden. Indeed, lessons learned here should be relevant also to many other European countries—and increasingly so going forward, considering the trend toward more diversified union landscapes (Ebbinghaus and Visser, 2000, Visser, 2019).

This means that our findings also speak to cross-national union research on both the micro and the macro levels. To the micro-level research concerned with what attitudes union members have toward different policy strategies—such as the tradeoff between ‘social compensation’ and ‘social investment’—or toward redistribution (e.g. Finseraas, 2009; Bledow and Busemeyer, 2021), our results suggest that even within countries, answers are likely to depend on the union. To the macro-level research concerned with the political and socio-economic consequences of unions—past and present—they raise questions about the validity of indicators that focus on the union movement as a whole—such as overall union density—as proxies for working class power resources (e.g. Bradley et al., 2003; Engler, 2021).

2. Union membership characteristics and policy positions: a two-dimensional framework

As mentioned above, scholars have only fairly recently begun to systematically analyze how unions’ memberships differ in ways that shape their labor market policy preferences and positions, and a coherent theoretical framework for such analysis is still lacking. Bringing together previous literature, we identify two theoretically distinct key dimensions: labor market risk exposure and white-collar predominance. Each dimension is used to derive hypotheses (summarized in Table 1) regarding different unions’ preferences and advocacy.
focus with regards to four important social and labor market policies, which unions may need to tradeoff against each other or against wage increases.

In highlighting these two dimensions among unions, our analytical framework provides an alternative to the common practice of distinguishing between (mostly unionized) ‘insiders’ and (mostly non-unionized) ‘outsiders’ in labor market policy analysis (e.g. Rueda, 2007). This is not to deny that ‘outsiders’ may have distinct interests and challenges; the point is rather that the ‘insiders’ are a much more diverse group than sometimes understood (for related arguments, see Häusermann, 2010; Ebbinghaus and Naumann, 2018).

2.1 Labor market risk exposure

We are not the first to argue that worker’s labor market policy preferences are shaped by their labor market risk exposure (Iversen and Soskice, 2001; Rehm et al., 2012). Iversen and Soskice’s theory of skill specificity suggests that at any given level of income, ‘workers with specific skills are more inclined to support a higher level of protection than those with [more] general skills’ (2001, p. 889). Assuming that workers’ labor market risk exposure is inversely related to the transferability of their skills, Iversen and Soskice found those exposed to greater labor market risk to be more favorable to increases in public spending on UI.

In a related contribution, Rehm et al. (2012) argue that individuals’ labor market risk exposure, as measured by their occupational unemployment risk, is a distinct dimension of labor market disadvantage—different from the income level—and, as such, has a positive impact on individual support for public provision of unemployment benefits. Related arguments have been advanced by Jensen (2012b) and Busemeyer and Neimanns (2017), who in this regard distinguish UI from more ‘life course-related’ social programs. Accordingly, given that UI is workers’ primary bulwark against immediate income loss in case of unemployment, we might expect that \( H_{UI: \text{risk}} \) a trade union representing workers that experience a higher degree of labor market risk exposure will be more likely to emphasize generous public UI in their policy advocacy.

Another much-discussed way for unions to mitigate their members’ risk of unemployment is through promoting EP regulation that limits employers’ ability to freely dismiss employees (Rueda, 2007; Davidsson and Emmenegger, 2013). However, it is not obvious that all unions will put equal emphasis on EP. The higher the labor market risk exposure experienced by a worker, the harder it will be for that worker to find new matching employment in the case of unemployment. Thus, following the aforementioned logic of Iversen and Soskice (2001), one might expect that \( H_{EP: \text{risk}} \) a trade union representing members that face a high level of labor market risk is more likely to emphasize the importance of strong EP in its advocacy.

A similar reasoning might be applied to continuing vocational education and training. The continuing transition away from Fordist manufacturing toward the so-called knowledge economy entails shifting labor demands and increasing skill requirements even in the relatively lower-skilled sectors, making skill acquisition and skill maintenance of increasing importance for workers’ standing in the labor market. Accordingly, in many countries, unions are taking a growing interest in continuous education and training to secure the future employability of their members (Cooney and Stuart, 2012; Ibsen and Thelen, 2017).

Yet, there are different ideas about the degree to which interest in rights to training differs across unions. On the one hand, one might expect that the key trends associated with
the knowledge economy, such as the growth of information and communication technology (ICT), trigger a need for skills upgrading across all segments of the labor market, which, thus, should be similarly embraced by all unions (cf. Thelen, 2019 on ICT in Sweden). However, one might also expect that workers who are more at risk of unemployment would be particularly likely to prioritize skills development to strengthen their position in the knowledge economy (Cooney and Stuart, 2012). Thus, from a labor market risk perspective, one might expect that $(HTR_{risk})$ a trade union representing workers that face a high degree of labor market risk will be more likely to emphasize strengthened TRs in their policy advocacy.

2.2 White-collar predominance

The second dimension of interest here concerns the proportions of blue-collar workers—who relatively speaking tend to have shorter education and lower wages—and white-collar workers—generally with longer education and higher wages—among the union’s membership (Nijhuis, 2009; Mosimann and Pontusson, 2017; Arndt, 2018). While there is usually an individual-level correlation between this dimension and labor market risk, in the sense that blue-collar workers often face higher labor market risks, the two dimensions are, as argued by Rehm et al. (2012), both theoretically and empirically distinct. In which ways, then, should unions’ labor market policy preferences vary depending on the extent to which its membership consists of white-collar workers? A number of expectations can be derived based on this group’s general advantage in terms of education and wages.\(^\text{1}\)

The relevance of the blue-collar/white-collar distinction has been most extensively discussed with regards to unions’ support of SWS, which, in a nutshell, concerns the degree to which workers’ wage level should be allowed to differ between and/or within occupations and sectors (Ibsen and Thelen, 2017). Nijhuis (2009) suggests that white-collar unions, which tend to have a narrower craft- and/or occupation-defined member base of higher-skilled workers, should generally oppose efforts to decrease wage differentials. This expectation is based on viewing white-collar union members as losers of redistribution between skilled and lesser-skilled workers, assuming that the costs of redistributive policies are ultimately channeled back to consumers rather than being fully absorbed by employers. With the costs of redistribution ultimately being shouldered by wage-earners, Nijhuis sees the interest divide over redistributive policies as being primarily between more and less skilled and well-paid workers.

As also noted by Nijhuis (2009), to what extent white-collar members’ preferences shape unions’ policy making depends on the organizational structure of the union. In comprehensive unions that also organize lower-skilled, and thus lower-paid, workers—for instance those that aim to encompass all workers in a particular industry or sector—egalitarian norms should be more prevailing, and thus preferences for SWS to ‘keep the low-skill workers in the fold’ should be higher (Ibsen and Thelen, 2017; Mosimann and Pontusson, 2017).

\(^{1}\) We recognize that education and wages are themselves theoretically distinct dimensions that, empirically, are not perfectly correlated across unions (see the scatterplots in Figure A1, Supplementary Material). Among the seven unions of particular interest in our analysis, it proves difficult to disentangle the two. However, future work may want to consider them separately to assess, for instance, whether arguments based on wage differences have less bearing on white-collar unions whose members have a high level of education but only a moderate wage advantage.
Based on this reasoning, we might expect that \( H_{\text{SWS}, \text{w-c}} \) white-collar unions, oriented particularly toward higher-skilled workers, are less likely to emphasize SWS in its advocacy, than blue-collar unions and comprehensive unions.

Nijhuis’s (2009) understanding of white-collar workers as losers of redistribution also has implications for what emphasis we should expect from different unions regarding redistribution through the welfare state, and especially so a publicly financed or subsidized UI. Specifically, we should expect that \( H_{\text{UI}, \text{w-c}} \) a union with a larger share of white-collar workers is less likely to emphasize public subsidization of UI in their policy advocacy. This is because, even in a scenario where a high-wage white-collar worker and a low-wage blue-collar worker would face the same risk of needing to take up unemployment benefits, a proportionally financed subsidization of such benefits would entail a redistribution from the former to the latter—at least as long as the benefit is capped so that the effective income replacement rate is lower for the high-wage earner.

The relative dominance of white-collar and blue-collar workers might also matter for how unions tradeoff EP against labor market flexibility. The stronger wage negotiating position of white-collar workers should translate into higher wage competition between prospective employers. Increased labor market flexibility can thus be expected to disproportionately benefit the wages of the highest-skilled workers in the economy, and these workers will thus have relatively more to gain from exchanging weaker EP legislation for other types of employer concessions. In addition, a more flexible labor market may disproportionately benefit white-collar workers as more frequent consumers of domestic and personal services, by putting downward pressure on wage costs in these industries (Hassel, 2014). Thus, we might expect that \( H_{\text{EP}, \text{w-c}} \) unions dominated by white-collar workers are less likely to emphasize strong EP in their policy advocacy. Having said that, there is also the alternative hypothesis that—according to a simple insurance model with risk-averse actors—workers with higher income and/or education may demand stronger protection (EP and/or UI) because they would face higher absolute losses from losing their employment (Iversen and Soskice, 2001).

Lastly, one might conjecture that \( H_{\text{TR}, \text{w-c}} \) unions representing white-collar workers, with on average longer education, would be more interested in providing strengthened TRs (Jensen, 2020). Labor market training programs generally require a certain amount of pre-existing cognitive or non-cognitive skills, which tends to make them less accessible to workers with shorter education (Bonoli and Liechti, 2018). Accordingly, surveys typically find that people with higher levels of education are also more supportive of further expanding educational opportunities (e.g. Busemeyer and Garritzmann, 2017).

The hypotheses derived from the two-dimensional theoretical framework are summarized in Table 1. Before concluding the section, three caveats about the framework are warranted. First, it is worth mentioning that the two membership dimensions discussed here may not only be relevant for unions’ labor market policy positions, but they may also matter in other areas, such as pension and taxation policy preferences, and organizational strategy (e.g. Marks, 1989; Häusermann, 2010).

Second, as evident from previous research, these two dimensions are not exhaustive in terms of capturing policy-relevant heterogeneity among unions. The two likely most widely analyzed cleavages stand between unions in the private and the public sectors and, relatedly, between unions in export-oriented (exposed) and domestic (sheltered) sectors (e.g. Ebbinghaus and Visser, 2000; Johnston and Hancé, 2009; Ahlquist, 2017; Kim and Margalit, 2017). To some extent, these sectoral cleavages are captured by the labor market
risk exposure dimension outlined above, but other differences in the logic of their organizing and bargaining environments are also likely to contribute to distinct policy priorities across sectors in ways not captured by the present framework.

Third, the hypotheses above rely on what Schmitter and Streeck (1999) call a ‘logic of membership’, whereby based on straightforward assumptions of democratic representation a union’s policy positions will align with the preferences of its members. However, unions’ choices may also follow a ‘logic of influence’, whereby they are guided by what is needed to maintain a long-term position of regulatory power (e.g. Davidsson and Emmenegger, 2013; Ebbinghaus and Naumann, 2018). This would imply that, particularly in contexts where unions are involved in the administration of a policy system, we should not be surprised if their policy advocacy in that realm deviates from the preferences of their members.

### 3. Design considerations

Having outlined the theoretical framework, the remainder of the article will apply it to the union landscape of Sweden. This choice of focus separates us from previous research that mostly compares unions across countries. For our present purposes, however, a within-country design has the key advantage of ensuring that observed variations in unions’ membership preferences and advocacy orientations are not caused by some underlying institutional or cultural confounder. As elaborated in the concluding discussion, our choice of Sweden should furthermore help us provide insight into a larger population of countries (Gerring, 2008). On the one hand, given its consensus-oriented political culture, its (history of) encompassing corporatist and welfare state institutions, and its high unionization rate, Sweden might at first glance be thought of as a least-likely case for observing variations among unions’ members or elites in the first place. On the other hand, in terms of the plausible scope conditions for labor market position-based differences to materialize in one or more policy fields—especially so a well-organized union movement which is politically relevant yet fragmented along economically motivated lines—Sweden appears as a fairly representative case of a substantial population of countries in Northern, Continental and Eastern Europe (Ebbinghaus and Visser, 2000; Visser, 2019).

To deepen our understanding of the framework’s applicability, we apply a mixed methods approach that allows us to investigate unions on both the mass-level and the elite-level, by combining quantitative analysis of union members’ preferences with qualitative analysis of union representatives’ advocacy work (Johnson et al., 2007; Ebbinghaus and Naumann, 2018).
After a short description of the Swedish trade union landscape, we first investigate whether the framework can be used to account for variations in labor market positions and policy preferences among members of Sweden’s 35 largest unions, using fine-grained survey data. Second, based on the results of this quantitative analysis, we apply a diverse case selection strategy (Gerring, 2008) to single out seven unions with different membership composition, the advocacy work of which we then analyze using a combination of qualitative methods (details follow below).

By analyzing both members and elites across unions, we seek to put our hypotheses to a hard test. This is because, arguably, observing similar relationships between labor market positions and policy positions on both levels is a precondition for the implied ‘logic of membership’ to hold. Indeed, if members’ preferences do not vary in line with these two dimensions, they would not be a plausible explanation for any differences that we may observe in elite advocacy. Having said that, we will refrain from making strict causal interpretations of any observed relationships, considering that membership preferences are not necessarily the main determinant of elite positions (Schmitter and Streeck, 1999), and that union elites may also shape members’ opinions (e.g. Kim and Margalit, 2017). Our aim, therefore, is not to establish causality but rather to assess the framework on both levels and to identify commonalities and deviations that warrant further investigation.

4. Overview of the changing Swedish trade union landscape

The Swedish trade union landscape is highly diverse and has seen dramatic changes in recent decades (Ebbinghaus and Visser, 2000). As a whole, it currently comprises around 60 national-level unions, which together organize around 68% of the workforce (Kjellberg, 2020a). The vast majority of these unions belong to one of three central union confederations: the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO), the Swedish Confederation of Professional Employees (TCO, Tjänstemänns centralorganisation) and the Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations (Saco). LO gathers unions that, with few exceptions, are organized vertically (i.e. by industry) and only or predominantly include blue-collar workers. In contrast, TCO and Saco almost exclusively comprise white-collar workers; where the Saco unions are typically organized horizontally (i.e. by profession), the TCO gathers a mix of vertical (e.g. Unionen) and horizontal unions (e.g. the Swedish Police Union).

The ongoing shift in power relations in the union sphere is worth highlighting. Whereas in the 1970s, when the power resources approach was first formulated, the 1.5 million active LO members still made up a comfortable majority—approximately 68%—among the three confederations, LO has since steadily lost ground among active workers. By 2019, LO membership had dropped to 1.2 million, now representing 42% of the total union membership in the three confederations. In other words, with the membership in TCO and Saco having grown to 1.1 million and 550,000 respectively, white-collar unions now represent a clear majority of the active unionized workforce (Kjellberg, 2020b), and if the current trends continue, TCO will have superseded LO as the largest confederation before long.
5. Quantitative analysis of members’ policy preferences

There are reasons to believe that this imminent ‘change of the guard’ will have important consequences for what to expect regarding the policy preferences and advocacy of the Swedish union movement as a whole. Beginning with union members, survey analysis by Arndt (2018) has shown that both labor market positions and policy preferences vary systematically across the three confederations’ memberships. The typical Saco or TCO member has a longer education and a higher wage than the typical LO member. Furthermore, Arndt’s analyses of members’ preferences toward redistribution and state interventionism suggest that the median Saco member has the strongest pro-market attitudes of the three, while the median LO member is most pro-state oriented, and the median TCO member is in between the two.

However, while identifying such heterogeneity across unions is an important advancement of the literature, it would be too much of a simplification to assume that these confederations and their members vary along a single dimension of labor market positions and preferences. In fact, both dimensions outlined in the theoretical framework above are of relevance because among unions, members’ labor market risk exposure is far from perfectly correlated with the proportion of white-collar workers. This point is evidenced by Figure 1,

Figure 1 Labor market position of working-age (20–64) members in the 35 largest unions, by confederation. Circles: LO; diamonds: TCO; triangles: Saco. Based on pooled surveys from 2013 to 2019 (Göteborgs universitet, SOM-institutet 2015–2021). Lines indicate average values for the working-age population. Highlighted unions are those selected for subsequent analysis. For presentational purposes, the right-most observation (Hotel and Restaurant Workers’ Union) has been truncated from 11.9% unemployed.
which analyzes the 35 largest unions, together comprising 97% of total union membership in 2019 (Kjellberg, 2020b). Using data from nationally representative surveys conducted in the years 2013–2019 (Göteborgs universitet, SOM-institutet, 2015–2021), the two panels in the figure position each union according to its working-age members’ average labor market risk2—operationalized by their unemployment rate following Rehm et al. (2012)—and its share of white-collar workers as defined based on its members’ occupational belonging (the classification of occupations is based primarily on their required skill level according to ISCO-88; see the Supplementary Material for details).

With regards to the latter dimension, Figure 1 confirms a sharp divide between the unions in line with their confederation belonging; among the LO unions (circles), the highest white-collar proportion is 24%, whereas among TCO (diamonds) and Saco (triangles) unions the lowest record is 80%. Although the patterns suggest that labor market risk exposure is negatively related to white-collar predominance, it is equally clear that there are a number of blue-collar unions with a low risk of unemployment—such as the Swedish Painters’ Union and the largest LO union, the Swedish Municipal Workers’ Union —while the Swedish Union of Journalists and to a lesser extent Unionen (both TCO) are dominated by white-collar workers with a comparably high risk of unemployment.3

An implication of our theoretical framework is that, based on their placement in this chart, the memberships of different unions should have systematically different labor market policy preferences. To investigate this question, we use the available survey data for working-age members in the 35 unions to test whether the unions’ unemployment risk and white-collar predominance can help predict their members’ approval of four selected statements that, while imperfect, are the best proxies available for capturing preferences regarding the four policy areas of interest here.

Preferences regarding UI are represented by a survey item capturing approval of a proposal to increase the unemployment benefit. Preferences regarding EP are captured by an item gaging approval of a proposal to relax EP regulation. Preferences regarding TRs are proxied by an item asking the respondent whether he or she will need further training to be competitive in the future labor market. Lastly, preferences regarding SWS are approximated by an item indicating approval of a proposal to reduce income differences in society. All variables have five scale-steps and are recoded so as to range between −2 and 2, where 2 indicates the strongest approval. For details on wordings, coding and distributions, see the Supplementary Material.

To be able to distinguish between the two dimensions of our framework in a straightforward manner, we conduct a set of descriptive regression analyses, where each of the preference variables in turn serves as the dependent variable. For ease of interpretation, in these analyses, members’ labor market risk is captured by a set of categorical variables indicating whether their unions have a low (<1%), medium (1–4%) or high (>4%) unemployment risk as reported in Figure 1. Also based on Figure 1, white-collar predominance is indicated by a dichotomous variable that distinguishes members of TCO and Saco unions from

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2 This measure is fairly strongly correlated ($r = 0.70$) with the unemployment risk among all workers (unionized or not) in the most common occupation in the union.

3 Figure A1 in the Online Appendix confirms that similar, albeit slightly more compressed, patterns emerge if we consider education or income levels instead of white-collar predominance on the $y$-axis.
members of LO unions, in line with the observed bifurcated distribution. Table 2 reports the results of these regressions, estimated using ordinary least squares with robust standard errors clustered by union.

The results confirm that the two dimensions are independently, and differently, related to the policy areas of interest. Beginning in Column 1 with the proposal to increase unemployment benefits, members of unions with medium or high labor market risk report—in line with hypothesis (HUI: risk)—a 0.22 or 0.24 scale-step higher average approval than those with low risk, when comparing individuals on the same side of the white-collar/blue-collar divide. At the same time, among individuals in the same risk category, members of white-collar unions report a 0.39 scale-step lower approval than members of blue-collar unions, consistent with hypothesis (HUI: w-c). In contrast, and at odds with hypotheses (HEP: risk) and (HEP: w-c), for the proposal to relax EP regulation in Column 2—which enjoys considerably less support overall—no significant differences can be observed across the groups of unions, and in the case of white-collar predominance the coefficient is unexpectedly negative. Next, Column 3 shows that, in line with hypothesis (HTR: risk), workers in the two higher risk exposure categories report a 0.41–0.66 scale steps higher degree as needing further training; however, at odds with hypothesis (HTR: w-c), no systematic difference is observed here between white-collar and blue-collar workers with similar risk exposure. Column 4, lastly, reports that, consistent with hypothesis (HSWS: w-c), white-collar

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Union unemployment risk</th>
<th>Approval of increasing unemployment benefits</th>
<th>Approval of relaxing employment protection</th>
<th>Perceived need for further training</th>
<th>Approval of reducing income differences</th>
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<td>Low risk (&lt;1%)</td>
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<td>Medium risk (1–4%)</td>
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<td>High risk (&gt;4%)</td>
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<td>Blue-collar predominance</td>
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<tr>
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<td>-0.312**</td>
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Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered by union.*P < 0.10,**P < 0.05,***P < 0.01.
workers report on average 0.30 scale steps lower approval of decreasing income differences than blue-collar workers with similar risk exposure. In contrast, this model expectedly shows little variation across risk categories.

In sum, the four regression analyses confirm the merits as well as the limitations of both labor market position dimensions in accounting for differences in policy preferences across unions. Although, as mentioned above, these are descriptive analyses, it may be of interest to note that the reported differences across unions are only marginally reduced when we add controls for gender, age group, education and unemployment status to the models (Supplementary Material Table A1). Having said that, the generally low Adjusted $R^2$ scores across all of these analyses imply that they leave most of the individual-level variation in policy preferences unexplained.

6. Qualitative analysis of elite advocacy

Next, to assess to what extent the two dimensions can account for unions’ policy advocacy orientation, we select seven unions, highlighted in Figure 1, to explore in a qualitative case analysis. A diverse selection strategy is used to illuminate the full range of variation in our two-dimensional space and ensure that unions in all four quadrants are represented (Gerring, 2008). From the low-risk, white-collar cluster toward the upper-left, we select the Swedish Association of Graduate Engineers (SAGE), the Swedish Teachers’ Union (STU) and the National Union of Teachers in Sweden (NUTS), while the high-risk, white-collar quadrant is represented by the Swedish Union of Journalists (SUJ). From the low-risk, blue-collar cluster we select the Swedish Municipal Workers Union (SMWU). The Union of Commercial Employees (UCE) and (as a less clear-cut case) the metal workers’ union IF Metall (IFM), represent high-risk, blue-collar unions.4

Table 3 reports some key characteristics of the selected unions in each cluster, including their membership size and their sectoral and gender composition. Expectedly, public sector workers are predominant in three out of the four low-risk unions, but it is worth noting that none is a pure public sector union—and that there are male-dominated and female-dominated unions on each side of both divides. The table also reports the average response among working-age members to the four policy statements. Bearing in mind that for some items and unions (especially SUJ) these averages should be interpreted with some caution due to few respondents, the resulting patterns are overall fairly consistent with the full-sample analysis in Table 2. One partial exception is approval of relaxing EP, which is expectedly lower in the high-risk unions than in the low-risk unions, but again leans more toward the negative in the four white-collar unions than in two of the blue-collar unions.

In line with many previous qualitative studies on trade union advocacy (e.g. Häusermann, 2010; Durazzi and Geyer, 2020), the analysis that follows relies on semi-structured elite interviews with union representatives combined with analysis of publicly available documents. The interviewees have been chosen strategically on the basis of their assumed insight into both the unions’ internal political decision-making process and external policy advocacy. Eight interviews involving twelve representatives from the seven unions

4 It is worth noting that the seven selected unions remain in their quadrants also if members’ education or income levels are considered instead of white-collar predominance (cf. Figure A1, Online Appendix).
were conducted in December 2018, all of which were recorded at the permission of the interviewees. Our document analysis includes news stories, commentary from union newspapers, union policy reports and policy programs, as well as minutes from recent national congresses that capture unions’ internal debates and formally adopted policy positions. These documents have been important for triangulating statements made by the interviewees, and they have served as the primary source of information about some important developments occurring after the interviews.

The results of the advocacy analysis are reported policy area by policy area, following a uniform structure. First, we provide a short description of the relevant policy background. Second, we summarize our findings, one union cluster at the time as indicated by the **bold-face**. Lastly, we assess our hypotheses by making comparisons across the four clusters. To isolate the respective role of the two dimensions, these comparisons are systematically made between unions that have different labor market risk exposure but are located on the same side of the blue-collar/white-collar divide, and between white-collar and blue-collar unions that have similar levels of labor market risk exposure. Table 4 summarizes to what extent this analysis supports or challenges the hypotheses outlined above.

### 6.1 Unemployment insurance

#### UI: background

The Swedish UI system is based on a Ghent system of voluntary union-administered UI funds (UIFs) financed by a combination of member fees and state subsidies. Beyond a basic flat-rate unemployment allowance that is also granted to non-members, UIFs insure their members’ previous incomes up to a maximum replacement rate of 80% of their previous...
wages. However, a gradual decrease in the earnings-relatedness of UI benefits since the 1990s has motivated unions to establish supplementary income insurance schemes to provide members a more adequate income replacement (Lindellee, 2018; Gordon, 2019).

SAGE and two other Saco unions introduced the first such schemes in 2003, with additional Saco and TCO unions following suit in subsequent years. In 2007, the liberal-conservative Reinfeldt government imposed a set of new contractionary reforms, including a replacement rate reduction, decreased state subsidization and a differentiation of UIF fees that raised the UI premiums of more unemployment-prone UIFs and lowered those of less unemployment-prone UIFs. Shortly after these reforms, many more unions introduced supplementary income insurances, including several LO unions. Illustrating the importance of labor market risk exposure, negotiations over a common insurance for all LO members broke down due to concerns—primarily within SMWU—that it would have entailed a large redistribution from members with low unemployment risk and low incomes, toward those in unions with higher risk and incomes (Davidsson, 2013; Lindellee, 2018). Instead, each LO union was left to their own devices. Among those studied here, UCE and SMWU established insurances in 2007 and 2008, while IFM did not do so until 2019.

Although the fee differentiation for UIFs was abolished in 2014 and the UI benefit ceiling was raised in 2016, the supplementary income insurances continue to be an important pillar of UI in Sweden, as the maximum monthly wage fully insured by the UIFs (current pandemic measures disregarded) still corresponds to no more than roughly 70% of the average wage. A third source of income protection is provided by so-called Employment Transitional Agreements (ETAs), established through collective bargaining to provide placement services, training and income support primarily for redundant workers (Cronert, 2015; Lindellee, 2018). While such agreements now cover most of the labor market, eligibility is typically restricted to employees with permanent contracts and/or long tenures, and the amount of available resources as well as the proportion devoted to income replacement varies considerably across sectors (Cronert, 2015, table 3.4).

UI: results
As outlined above, we report the results of our analysis one union cluster at a time, beginning with the low-risk white-collar cluster. For all three of these unions, advocacy concerning the replacement rate of the UI is almost non-existent. SAGE and NUTS make no mention of the UI among their prioritized policy issues, while STU’s 2018 program makes only a general plea about social security, emphasizing the role of their ETA and the supplementary insurances (Lärarförbundet, 2018). This lack of emphasis is hardly surprising considering the low premiums paid by these unions’ members in relation to their income, and the adequacy of the protection provided by their supplementary insurances.

Members of high-risk white-collar SUJ face higher unemployment risk than their white-collar peers discussed above, and accordingly pay some of the highest UIF fees of all white-collar workers. Furthermore, as many journalists have part-time temporary positions, many members find themselves outside of the safety net of the sector’s ETA, as well as the income insurance provided by the union. Advocacy-wise, this is reflected in SUJ’s action plan for 2018–2021, which lists strengthened UI as key for reducing members’ insecurity (Journalistförbundet, 2018a).

The high-risk blue-collar unions in our sample put the strongest emphasis on a generous public UI. IFM has for long been the most critical of complementary income insurances;
only reluctantly they established one in 2019. The reason for not doing so earlier has been partly economic—granted the members’ high and business cycle sensitive unemployment risk—and, as explained by one of our IFM interviewees, partly ideological: ‘For us in the industry, it was seen as a responsibility of the society … not individual persons or workplaces.’ Advocacy-wise, IFM aligns with LO in proposing an 80% UI replacement rate for 80% of those becoming unemployed. The highest-risk UCE, however, goes one step further, with the 2016 congress calling for a 90% replacement rate for 90% of beneficiaries (Handelsanställdas förbundet, 2016, p. 32).

Turning lastly to the low-risk blue-collar SMWU, the same ‘90/90’ policy was interestingly rejected by the 2016 congress, having been proposed by a member. The union leadership argued that such a policy would be ‘tremendously costly’ and instead championed the ‘80/80’ policy embraced by the LO (Kommunalarbetareförbundet, 2016). These cost considerations, when paired with the aforementioned redistributive concerns raised by the union in 2007 when opposing an LO-wide risk-pooling of the complementary income insurance, indicate that SMWU views increased generosity of the more redistributive public UI system as somewhat less important than do their higher-risk blue-collar peers in UCE and IFM.

UI: hypothesis assessment
We may now assess our first two hypotheses by making comparisons across the union clusters. First, considering that the high-risk white-collar SUJ also puts considerably stronger emphasis on UI than the low-risk white-collar unions, the analysis as a whole supports hypothesis (H\textsubscript{UI: risk}) that labor market risk exposure does matter for unions’ UI advocacy. At the same time, in line with hypothesis (H\textsubscript{UI: w-c}), the white-collar/blue-collar divide also clearly matters, as evidenced by the low-risk blue-collar SMWU nevertheless putting a stronger emphasis on the matter than the low-risk white-collar NUTS, STU and SAGE. And while SUJ does advocate for a stronger UI, they do not have the same explicit and far-reaching proposal as IFM and UCE.

6.2 Employment protection
EP: background
While this is not the place for a comprehensive review of EP regulation in Sweden, a few remarks are warranted about the Swedish Employment Protection Act—commonly referred to as Lagen om anställningsskydd (LAS, SFS 1982:80)—which regulates employment contracts as well as procedures for termination, dismissals and redundancies. Of particular relevance for the present study is that significant segments of LAS are dispositive, meaning that they can be sidestepped through collective agreements between central unions and employer organizations. Dispositive sections include 5§ LAS, regulating temporary contracts, and 22§ LAS, regulating the so-called last-in–first-out principle that mandates that, with some exemptions, the most recently hired employee will be the first one dismissed in cases of redundancy. With regards to temporary contracts, two 2007 reforms of 5§ LAS introduced the so-called general fixed-term employment contract (Allmän visstidsanställning, ALVA). Employers’ right to use these contracts is time limited, as LAS mandates that open-ended contracts are offered to employees who have been working for them under certain conditions for at least 24 months during the previous 5 years.

5 IFM interview, December 7, 2018.
The most significant reform of EP in decades was initiated in 2020, when the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise (Svenskt Näringsliv, SN), LO and the private sector cartel for salaried workers (Privatjänstemannakartellen, PTK, representing TCO and Saco) reopened bargaining over EP and training. The new round of negotiations was prompted by the center-left governing coalition, who committed in its 2019 coalition agreement to liberalize EP in return for public investments in training, preferably in a way agreed upon by the social partners.

Following months of bargaining, on October 16, SN and PTK announced a deal, which had been rejected by LO. Yet on December 4, in an historic turn of events the two largest LO unions, SMWU and IFM, unilaterally joined the agreement after some modifications had been made to the October version. After almost 12 more months and some additional alterations, in November of 2021, a majority of LO’s member unions voted to make LO a party to the agreement on the confederation level—although several of them, including UCE, declared that they had no intention of joining it themselves (Frisk and Lund, 2021). The deal (henceforth, the 2020–2021 LAS agreement) entails reduced dismissal protection and expanded possibilities for employers to make exemptions from the last-in–first-out principle, in exchange primarily for the replacement of the ALVA contract form with a new kind of temporary contract to be replaced by an open-ended contract after 12 months of employment, as well as substantial investments in TRs (Svenskt Näringsliv, 2020).

EP: results

Our advocacy analysis suggests that the different aspects of EP discussed above are valued differently by the unions in our sample. Beginning with the relatively low-risk white-collar unions, SAGE, STU and NUTS, all lack any mention of EP legislation in the opinion pieces and reports published on their websites. However, for these unions, our interviews suggest that LAS nevertheless fills an important function in defining the power balance of the employer–union relationship, since it helps define the procedure for the rare cases where layoffs are made. As put by the NUTS policy officer,

we do not do any advocacy work concerning LAS because of the shortage of [qualified] teachers; but we are rather interested in things being done properly when the law needs to be applied.6

A related aspect of LAS similarly makes it of great interest for SAGE. As stipulated by 22§ LAS, redundant employees have a right to be relocated to alternative tasks as long as they are deemed sufficiently qualified. However, defining what qualifications are required for a vacant post in the same firm typically needs to be done in collaboration with the union. Since in the rapidly developing tech sector, lay-offs are often made in parallel with recruitment attempts, 22§ LAS is an important guarantor for union influence in the workplace. Indeed, our SAGE interviewee—a public advocacy strategist—described LAS as ‘a bedrock’, and when asked to rank the four policy areas discussed here in accordance with where the greatest challenges lie, she replied that ‘our largest threat is the deterioration of employment protection’.7

6 NUTS interview, December 5, 2018.
7 SAGE interview, December 12, 2018.
Turning next to the **white-collar high-risk** SUJ, the growing use of temporary ALVA contracts in the media industry is increasingly threatening members’ employment security. As put by our interviewee, the SUJ head of communications:

> Everyone realizes that this is a race to the bottom. We have to improve the conditions for those with insecure employment […] otherwise the trend will spread also to those with secure positions.8

Accordingly, ‘fighting insecurity’ is the foremost policy priority of the opinion program passed by the 2018 SUJ national congress, which also explicitly called for a ‘strengthened and expanded’ EP legislation (*Journalistförbundet, 2018a*, p. 1).

The primary EP advocacy focus of the **high-risk blue-collar** UCE also concerns the conditions of ALVA-employed workers. The union’s policy advocacy stresses the importance for retail workers to have full-time permanent positions in order to be able to qualify for unemployment benefits, pensions and other social insurances. Indeed, when asked at the end of our interview to rank the discussed policy areas in order of importance, UCE’s political coordinator specifically singled out employment security, emphasizing that ‘secure jobs are the basis of so darn much else’.9

Compared to UCE, the similarly high-risk blue-collar IFM experiences relatively little problems related to ALVA contracts, but still chose to join the 2020–2021 LAS agreement. To be clear, the lack of advocacy emphasis on ALVA is, however, not to suggest that LAS is unimportant to IFM—quite the opposite, since what is stated in the law is the point of reference when agreements are renegotiated (Nilsson, 2020). Nevertheless, in light of the ongoing international competition, *de facto* employment protection for IFM members—as put by the interviewed head of IFM’s investigative unit—lies in ‘remaining employable over time’, which requires other types of provisions than EP regulation; not least training.10 In the words of IFM’s negotiation secretary when explaining the decision to join the 2020–2021 LAS agreement, ‘when technology leaps occur in the industries, many [members] cannot keep up. In such cases, no priority rules in the world can help’ (Derland, 2020).

For the **low-risk blue-collar** SMWU, the priority rules governing redundancies are also not a key policy advocacy priority, due to the general shortage of nursing staff. However, remarkably often assistant nurses find themselves in fixed-term contracts, which according to our interviewees—a press secretary and a speech writer—has prompted SMWU to call for the dismantling of ALVA.11 As they pointed out, ALVA poses special problems for this occupational group:

> if you are a qualified assistant nurse, you risk not becoming unemployed, but getting sick, where the risk is higher than in other professions […] You find yourself in a pretty bad situation if you get sick and don’t have a permanent position.12

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8 SUJ interview, December 13, 2018.
9 UCE interview, December 11, 2018.
10 IFM interview, December 7, 2018.
11 SMWU interview, December 18, 2018.
12 SMWU Interview, December 18, 2018.
In 2019, SMWU even opened up for a compromise around other aspects of LAS, including the priority rules, in exchange for making ALVA contracts come with a higher wage premium and a faster path to a permanent position (Lindholm, 2019). Given the similarities between that proposal and the final outcome of the 2020–2021 LAS agreement, it is perhaps not surprising that SMWU was among the two LO unions that first joined the agreement.

**EP: hypothesis assessment**

According to the hypothesis ($H_{EP: \text{risk}}$), higher-risk white-collar unions should be more likely to stress the importance of EP than their lower-risk white-collar peers. The stronger emphasis of SUJ on these issues confirms that expectation. While the differences among blue-collar unions are less clear-cut, the fact that the highest-risk UCE did not agree with the EP relaxations concluded in the 2020–2021 LAS agreement, does lend some additional support.

According to the hypothesis ($H_{EP: \text{w-c}}$), white-collar unions should put less emphasis on EP in their advocacy than blue-collar unions with similar labor market risk exposure. In the sample studied, this would mean that the white-collar SAGE, STU and NUTS would put less emphasis on the importance of EP than the blue-collar SMWU, while white-collar SUJ should do so less than blue-collar UCE and IFM. However, at odds with this hypothesis, the analysis suggests that EP is considered of vital importance for safeguarding a strong negotiating position by even the most homogenous of Swedish white-collar unions. We return to this observation in our concluding discussion.

**6.3 Training rights**

**TRs: background**

The lack of universal TRs has long been a subject of debate in Sweden, and at the time of writing a truly universal training regime did not exist (Ibsen and Thelen, 2017). The most important Swedish training regime to date are the employer-funded Transition Funds ($omställningsfonder$)—established by the aforementioned ETAs—which support recently laid-off workers through some combination of income support, placement services and training. Yet, the extent of rights provided by the Transition Funds varies across sectors (Cronert, 2015).

A major breakthrough in this realm was, however, recently reached in the aforementioned negotiations over EP that, in December 2020, resulted in an agreement between SN, PTK, SMWU and IFM, which was later joined by LO and which is now meant to form the basis of new legislation. In return for the reforms to EP legislation described above, the deal provides substantial investments in workers’ rights to transition support ($omställningsstöd$) and continuing education support ($kompetensstöd$) for at most up to 2 years. The support is financed partly by a substantial increase of employer contributions to the Transition Funds in question and partly by government funding. Specifically, a precondition for the agreement is the establishment of a new public study allowance targeted at workers with at least 8 years of work experience, and a new public organization that provides transition support to workers not covered by the services currently provided through the collective agreement (Svenskt Näringsliv, 2020).

Given their previously lukewarm interest in bargaining for TRs—noted by Ibsen and Thelen (2017)—the decision of LO and some of its member unions to join the agreement in return for EP-related concessions may come as a surprise. However, our analysis of material
from the years preceding the agreement suggests that TRs have indeed become an increasingly important topic for most unions, albeit in different ways.

TRs: results
Turning first to the low-risk white-collar unions, the importance of improved TRs for teachers is repeatedly stressed by NUTS and STU. The lack of TRs is explicitly tied by NUTS to the lack of skill-mandated wage increases over the course of a teacher’s career. For instance, the union has strongly emphasized the need for guaranteed wage increases as part of a national system for teacher career advancement, through teaching proficiency and/or the attainment of higher levels of specialized continuous education (Lärarnas Riksförbund, 2018).

The demand for strengthened TRs is also growing amongst the relatively low-risk SAGE graduate engineers. Well before the 2020–2021 LAS agreement, SAGE advocated for extending the right to leave of absence to 12 months, arguing that such a ‘year of innovation’ would give more graduate engineers the opportunity to participate in continuing education or launch new innovations or business ventures (Sveriges Ingenjörer, 2016). The high rate of technological renewal is also cited by the SAGE public advocacy strategist as a primary concern among graduate engineers:

Members do not want to be used as nuclear fuel, where their knowledge is applied until they are no longer relevant and they expire.13

The high-risk white-collar SUJ similarly stresses the demand for strengthened TRs. Given that a large and growing portion of the SUJ membership does not have full-time permanent positions, this group is effectively disqualified from their ETA Transition Fund’s training provision. But the demand is not limited to them. In our interview, the SUJ head of communications explains how many members are increasingly expected to be either ‘multi-journalists’ that can manage every part of the news process, or among the very best within their very specific niche. Accordingly, he describes skills development as ‘super important’ and ranks it as a top priority among the four policy areas along with EP.14 Against this background, it is also not surprising that the 2018 action plan calls for a number of additional measures to promote training, such as workplace competence councils, short courses and grants for continuing education (Journalistförbundet, 2018a).

Turning to the high-risk blue-collar unions, the IFM arguably has the clearest emphasis on the need for continuous education and training among all LO unions. Given the importance of continuing training for staying ‘ahead of the curve’ among international competitors, it is hardly surprising that in our 2018 interview the head of the investigative unit of the IFM criticized the lack of a national uniform system of continuous on-the-job training, of the kind that the 2020–2021 LAS agreement later set out to establish:

This is something we have been fighting over with governments ever since I was hired in 1998—the society must take a larger responsibility for enabling job transitions and skills development.15

13 SAGE interview, December 12, 2018.
14 SUJ interview, December 13, 2018.
15 IFM interview, December 7, 2018.
In line with this, IFM has also for long advocated a system of ‘short-term work’ in combination with parallel training as a way to promote continuing training of blue-collar workers during economic downturns, and it has recently co-developed a system of validation of industrial worker skills as a means to identify training needs (IF Metall, 2017).

UCE has recently participated in establishing a similar skills validation system for the retail sector, where—as pointed out by the interviewed political coordinator—workers’ skills are often harder to define than those of other occupational groups; particularly those with university degrees. While skills validation per se does not guarantee retail workers improved TRs, it aims to provide a better ‘starting block’ for future skills development and strengthen workers’ bargaining position vis-à-vis employers. In 2018, UCE furthermore identified a number of improvements needed for successful skills development in the retail sector, including a study allowance that makes re-training or skills upgrading for experienced workers more feasible (Berggren, 2018). Having said that, UCE’s own rejection of the 2020–2021 LAS agreement (Frisk and Lund, 2021) that specifically included such an allowance, nevertheless corroborates the notion (communicated in our interview referred to above) that secure full-time employment has a special status among the union’s policy issues, and is viewed as a precondition also for advancements in other areas, including training.

For either of our hypotheses to gain support, low-risk blue-collar SMWU should put relatively little emphasis on rights to continuing vocational education and training. However, this seems not to be borne out by the empirical material. For starters, in spite—or rather, partly because—of the acute shortage of assistant nurses, SMWU has put a lot of advocacy focus on demanding national certification requirements for assistant nurses in recent years. Improving their occupational standing and negotiating position vis-à-vis employers is in turn seen as a key prerequisite for guaranteeing them and other blue-collar care workers strengthened TRs in the future (Kommunalarbetareförbundet, 2018). In addition, since the writing of Ibsen and Thelen (2017), the union has entered into a sectoral agreement with employers that provides skills upgrading to help avoid redundancies, in exchange for relaxed EP (Kommunalarbetareförbundet, 2019).

TRs: hypothesis assessment

In conclusion, and at odds with both hypotheses (H_{TR: risk}) and (H_{TR: w-c}), our analysis finds little systematic differences in TRs advocacy among unions with different membership characteristics. Indeed, each union analyzed here appears to largely subscribe to the notion that the increasingly globalized knowledge economy and continued technological advances will warrant more ambitious continuing education and training for workers, and all except one (UCE) are now parties to the 2020–2021 LAS agreement that traded EP relaxations for strengthened TRs. At the same time, the unions’ different starting positions with respect to formal skills have motivated a larger emphasis on skills validation among the blue-collar unions, as a precondition for continued skills development (cf. Cooney and Stuart, 2012).

6.4 Solidaristic wage setting

SWS: background

One of the most important components of the so-called Swedish model of industrial relations is the lack of a statutory minimum wage. Instead, for 90% of workers, wages are
determined through collective bargaining between employers and unions (Kjellberg, 2020a). While collective agreements are traditionally reached through a central bargaining process, central collective agreements can be supplemented by more detailed local agreements, granted that the local agreement does not infringe on the more central agreement (Medlingsinstitutet, 2018). The collective agreement covers all workers at the workplace and is automatically binding for both the members of the trade union and the companies that are members of the employers’ organization concluding the agreement.

Of relevance for the discussions that follow, the Swedish wage-setting norm has for the past two decades mostly followed the so-called industrial agreement (Industriavtalet) established in 1997, in which the export industry first agrees on an annual wage increase, which then comes to define the so-called ‘mark’ that most subsequent wage agreements adhere to.

**SWS: results for between-sector wage solidarity**

Since we have only one hypothesis regarding SWS—about the role of white-collar predominance—we here report our results jointly for high-risk and low-risk unions of each collar type. Importantly, however, our analysis shows the necessity of distinguishing within-sector wage solidarity from between-sector wage solidarity.

This point is most evident from the emphasis put by the three blue-collar unions on the so-called low-wage kitties (lägloesatsningar) in wage agreements, by which employers are to allocate a larger percentage point contribution to the (local or sectoral) wage pool for those (predominantly female) workers whose gross wage is below a certain level. In the four most recent wage bargaining rounds, demands for such low-wage kitties were agreed upon by the entire LO twice—in 2013 and 2017—while twice—in 2016 and 2020—a couple of unions led by SMWU withdrew from the LO coordination and instead, or additionally, called for more specific kittens targeted at certain low-wage welfare sector occupations. Whereas in 2015, IFM sided with SMWU’s more narrowly targeted model, they nowadays champion the type of general low-wage kitty agreed upon by most or all LO unions in 2017 and 2020, and which was also successfully integrated in the industrial agreement said years (IF Metall, 2018, p. 8). UCE too is a strong supporter of the low-wage kitty, which is in line with their advocacy for more equal wages across worker categories (Handelsanställdas förbund, 2016).

It is clear that the white-collar unions in our sample are not advocating for wage solidarity across occupational lines to the same extent as the blue-collar unions. Indeed, in their most recent income policy program, the SAGE specifically calls for a higher skill-wage premium and larger wage differentiation across occupations and sectors (Sveriges Ingenjörer, 2012). Relatedly, in recent years, the two teachers’ unions have strongly questioned the norm of the ‘mark’ with respect to their own members, instead demanding (and receiving) significantly higher wage increases than those defined in the industrial agreement (Nilsson, 2018).

**SWS: results for within-sector wage solidarity**

If we instead consider wage differentials within a particular sector or agreement, there are less signs of a divide between the unions. As to the white-collar unions, SAGE’s aforementioned income policy program also emphasizes the benefits of local wage-setting flexibility and larger within-sector wage differentiation (Sveriges Ingenjörer, 2012). In a similar vein, NUTS and STU want teachers’ wage increases to be more explicitly and transparently
linked to concrete skill and/or seniority requirements (Lärarnas Riksförbund, 2016; Lärarförbundet, 2018). As noted by our NUTS interviewees, the head of press and a policy officer, such a national system of teacher career progression, with associated wage increases, would improve greatly on the current situation where, for many members, a change of employer is seen as ‘the only opportunity to boost their wage’.17 And according to our interviewed STU representative, SWS is less of a concern among teachers:

> Within STU, there are no strong forces driving that issue [...] our wage agreements favor individual and differentiated wages with clear criteria and a possibility to impact one’s own wage.18

As to SUJ, our interviewee did mention wage discrepancies as a topic of some contention among members19 and the union demanded an extra raise for the lowest-paid journalists in the most recent round of wage bargaining (Journalistförbundet, 2020); yet at a more fundamental level, SUJ too emphasizes the role of individual wage setting in collective agreements and policy programs (Journalistförbundet, 2018b).

Turning lastly to the blue-collar unions, IFM is not as opposed to wage differentiation in the workplace as our initial hypothesis would predict; at least where skills development is possible and encouraged, such as for service technicians.20 Accordingly, while the IFM wage policy advocacy does highlight a need for a higher percentual rise for entry-level wages, the union also stresses the need for workers to be able to ‘grow’ and ‘develop’ through shouldering new tasks, and correspondingly to deserve a higher wage raise (IF Metall, 2018, p. 10).

UCE is the union that most fully meets our expectations. Its 2016 congress advocated strongly for SWS, not only in terms of ‘wage harmonization between different categories of workers’ but also in terms of ‘the same wage for the same job’ (Handelsanställdas förbund, 2016, p. 24). Nevertheless, the same congress also expressed support for local wage systems where wage increases at the workplace vary depending on workers’ tasks and skills, as long as such systems are ‘open, clear and perceived as fair’ (Handelsanställdas förbund, 2016, p. 24).

Contrary to the expectations of our framework, SMWU has championed individual wage-setting since 1993 (Lapidus, 2015). While admitting the potential unfairness of actual wage increases due to differences in supervisors’ subjective assessment, the SMWU leadership defended individual wage setting during the 2016 congress, arguing that ‘the union’s members want differentiated wages’ (Kommunalarbetareförbundet, 2016, p. 130). The wage differentiation principle is also put into practice, for example in the 2016 wage agreement between SMWU and The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions.

SWS: hypothesis assessment

In conclusion, our advocacy analysis points to a clear divide between blue-collar and white-collar unions in their emphasis on wage solidarity between sectors and occupations, in line with hypothesis \( H_{\text{SWS: w-c}} \), whereas all unions—albeit UCE slightly less so—are generally permissive of wage differentials within sectors and occupations. Lastly, for the sake of the
symmetry of our investigation, it is also worth noting that we find no systematic difference between high-risk and low-risk unions with regards to these issues.

### 7. Concluding discussion

The two-fold purpose of this study was to propose a theoretical framework for analyzing how trade unions’ labor market policy advocacy focus reflects their members’ labor market risk exposure and whether the union is oriented towards white-collar workers, and to assess its merits in a new application on the contemporary Swedish trade union movement. The results from our analysis are summarized in Table 4.

By lending support to four out of seven hypotheses, the analysis establishes the relevance as well as the limitations of the theoretical framework defined by the two dimensions. For UI and between-sector wage solidarity, both members’ policy preferences and elites’ advocacy orientations mostly corroborate the hypotheses derived from theory. Relaxation of EP is interestingly unpopular among members in all union clusters, and we should therefore perhaps not be surprised that our framework is only partially supported in this realm: EP regulation tends to be prioritized higher by unions whose members have higher exposure to unemployment risk; yet at the same time, even the low-risk white-collar unions care deeply for the Employment Protection Act LAS, not least with reference to the fundamental role that it plays in defining the structural balance of power in the labor market by coaxing employers to the negotiating table in times of cut-backs and dismissals. Using Schmitter and Streeck’s (1999) terminology, our findings regarding EP are thus consistent both with a modified version of the ‘logic of membership’ model where also high-income individuals seek to insure themselves against job loss, and a ‘logic of influence’ model where unions are not exclusively guided by membership interests (cf. Table 2) but also by an organizational interest in defending their institutional roles, such as in the administration of dismissals (Davidsson and Emmenegger, 2013).

Training is the policy field where there is least evidence of systematic differences in emphasis across unions, despite the larger perceived need for training among more risk-exposed workers. Indeed, it appears that all studied unions now largely subscribe to the notion that the increasingly globalized knowledge economy and continued technological advances warrant more generous opportunities for continuous training to help workers maintain ‘employability’. Also, the studied blue-collar unions’ growing interest in skill validation and occupational certifications seems to suggest that unions representing relatively low-skilled workers are attempting to strengthen their members’ skill-motivated

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<th>Observed emphasis in advocacy</th>
<th>Higher risk exposure</th>
<th>Higher white-collar predominance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment Insurance (UI)</td>
<td>Stronger emphasis</td>
<td>Weaker emphasis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment Protection (EP)</td>
<td>Stronger emphasis</td>
<td>No systematic differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training Rights (TRs)</td>
<td>No systematic differences</td>
<td>No systematic differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solidaristic Wage Setting (SWS)</td>
<td>(No systematic differences)</td>
<td>Weaker emphasis on solidarity between—but not within—sectors and occupations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
negotiating position rather than merely questioning the fairness of skill-based wage differentials.

The recent trends in this regard—culminating in the decisions of IFM and SMWU—and later LO\(^{21}\)—to join the 2020–2021 LAS Agreement to ensure strengthened TRs—can arguably be interpreted as a move away from the ‘demand-side’ approach to wage solidarity among Sweden’s blue-collar unions observed by Ibsen and Thelen (2017), toward the kind of training-oriented ‘supply-side egalitarianism’ which has hitherto been associated primarily with those of Denmark. These common trends imply that analytical frameworks that hinge on differences in members’ labor market position cannot provide a complete explanation of unions’ advocacy orientations. Nevertheless, the main takeaway from our analyses is that advocacy orientations do differ in some systematic patterns across unions, and that they differ more than recognized in accounts that treat Sweden primarily as a case of comprehensive unionism (Nijhuis, 2009) or focus exclusively on the blue-collar/white-collar (Arndt, 2018) or ‘insider/outsider’ (Davidsson, 2018) divides.

Still, this all begs the question of whether analyzing such differences among unions is a worthwhile endeavor? We believe that it is, and increasingly will be in the years ahead—in Sweden and elsewhere.

As to Sweden, the trade union landscape has seen shifting power balances and an increasing diversification, and is likely to continue to do so going forward. More fine-grained analyses of unions’ labor market policy preferences and advocacy will thus become increasingly important in research on industrial relations and labor market policy reforms. This point is nicely illustrated by the bargaining process that emanated in the 2020–2021 LAS agreement. Considering that the process resulted in a cross-confederation deal that created a sharp divide among the blue-collar LO unions, the blue-collar/white-collar distinction is clearly insufficient as an analytical tool on its own. Along the same lines, turning attention more towards individual LO unions may prove necessary when analyzing union involvement in policy-making in coming years. Indeed, it was the two initial LO signatories IFM and SMWU—and not LO itself—that were invited by the government to the tripartite concertation regarding the implementation into law of the 2020–2021 LAS agreement.

Our findings carry related implications also for many other countries. As documented in Ebbinghaus and Visser (2000) and Visser (2019), Sweden is not unique in terms of the fragmented structure of its union landscape, and special peak associations representing white-collar employees or other narrower socio-economic groups exist not only in the other Nordic countries but also in large (but not all) parts of Continental and Eastern Europe.\(^{22}\)

Parenthetically, it is interesting to note that when announcing LO’s change of tack, the LO chairwoman emphasized not only the improved content of the LAS agreement, but she also gave a motivation explicitly based on the ‘logic of influence’: ‘We cannot just sit by and watch [the initial parties to the agreement] drive the cart all by themselves, but it is self-evident that LO shall also influence the design of this [. . .] and possible future changes’ (LO, 2021).

Outside of the Nordics, economically motivated divisions among confederations also exist in France, Netherlands, Luxembourg and Switzerland, as well as in Hungary, Lithuania, Romania and Slovenia; and ideologically or sectorally motivated divisions are also common in these regions (Visser, 2019).
Conflicts between associations have for long been observed in many of these countries (Visser, 2019), and even within the white-collar domain, many countries have no single monopolistic association but different unions and confederations compete for members and influence (Ebbinghaus and Visser, 2000, table WE.6). In other words, disagreements in preferences and advocacy between unions with different labor market positions are likely to be as prevalent in many other European contexts.

At the same time, the exact nature and priority order of unions’ advocacy activities are likely to vary across countries and fields, not least because the organization of—and unions’ involvement in—administration of dismissals, unemployment benefits, training systems and wage-setting varies across countries (e.g. Davidsson and Emmenegger (2013); Gordon, 2015; Durazzi and Geyer, 2020). This also implies that the addressee of unions’ advocacy—private employers and their organizations, tripartite bodies, the state as employer or the state as legislator—is bound to vary as well. In future, cross-national applications of the new framework in different policy areas, such variations thus require particular attention.

This brings us to the final and more general implication of our findings, namely the need for increasing theoretical and empirical sophistication in comparative political economy research involving unions. The overall decline of unions’ membership observed in most advanced democracies is not a reason to turn away our theoretical attention from them; quite the opposite (Gordon, 2015). Indeed, unions remain important political and institutional actors in large (but not all) parts of Europe, and in parallel with their overall decline in membership, union movements have tended to shift and grow increasingly diversified—not only with respect to the size of their white-collar membership, but also in terms of the representation of workers in occupations and sectors with different labor market risk (e.g. public vs. private, and domestic vs. export-oriented) (Ebbinghaus and Visser, 2000; Visser, 2019, Jensen, 2020). Once we recognize that these and other membership variations imply that the preferences of unions and confederations are likely to vary across time and space, we should expect that their role in potential reform coalitions, and the consequences of their influence on policy, will vary too.

These circumstances are bound to create validity challenges for cross-national analyses of the political and socio-economic effects of unions, on the micro- as well as the macro-level. Perhaps most importantly, they caution against the use of indicators that focus on the union movement as a whole—such as overall union density—as proxies for working-class power resources. In light of ongoing trends, this caution might be increasingly important going forward—but union heterogeneity as such is not a new phenomenon, which makes it seem pertinent to also re-examine historical accounts provided in this long-standing comparative tradition (e.g. Bradley et al., 2003; Jensen, 2012a; Hooghe and Oser, 2016; Tober, 2019; Engler, 2021). We hope that the framework outlined here may be of help in future theoretical and empirical endeavors to this end.

**Supplementary material**

Supplementary material is available at SOCECO Journal online.
Acknowledgements

The two authors have contributed equally to this study, which is a further development of Forsén’s MSc thesis supervised by Cronert. The authors wish to thank editor Patrick Emmenegger and the three anonymous referees for constructive comments.

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Lagen om anställningsskydd (SFS 1982:80), Arbetsmarknadsdepartementet


