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SPECIAL ISSUE

Political campaigns on YouTube: trade unions' mobilisation in Europe

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Trade unions are called to increase their influence on policy-making by becoming more politically active and use social media, but only a few studies investigate unions' online political activism. We propose that industrial relations regime of a country relates to unions' perceived opportunities for mobilisation and thereby also unions' online political activism. We test this argument with the help of data about European trade union confederations' political mobilisation on YouTube, 2007–2017. The results showed, expectedly, that resource-rich confederations in the organised corporatist regime (Scandinavia) use YouTube for political activism to lesser degree than in other regimes; when these confederations do pursue political activism, such videos are often related to elections and reflect the political party-union relationship. Unexpectedly, the resource-poor confederations in the transitional regime (Central and Eastern Europe) mobilised politically on YouTube to the same extent as have the confederations in the social partnership, liberal and state-centred regimes.

KEYWORDS
trade unions, election campaign, political activism, YouTube, Europe

Katrin Uba and Jenny Jansson equally contributed to this work.

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Introduction

With the advent of social media, political activism in general, as well as the political mobilisation of trade unions in particular, has quickly and thoroughly changed. Social media are cheap, fast, and have the potential to reach many (Earl and Kimport, 2011), so it is unsurprising that social media platforms have become popular for election campaigns and political engagement (Vromen, 2017). Among the different social media platforms, YouTube has come to play an increasingly prominent role in political activism, especially during election campaigns (Rymes, 2012; Stromer-Galley, 2019).

The new campaigning possibilities offered by social media appeal not only to political parties but to anyone trying to influence politics. For trade unions, social media have brought new opportunities for innovative ways of mobilising, recruiting and communicating with members and of conducting political campaigns. The growing literature on trade unions' use of social media has demonstrated that unions are employing a diverse set of social media platforms and that this usage varies across countries and trade unions (Panagiotopoulos, 2012; Rego *et al*., 2014; Geelan, 2015; Hodder and Houghton, 2015; Scaramuzzino and Scaramuzzino, 2017; Barnes *et al*., 2019; Jansson and Uba, 2019; Pasquier *et al*., 2020). Researchers have examined trade unions' social media use for recruitment (Jansson and Uba, 2019), mobilisation in wage negotiations (Wood and Pasquier, 2018) and industrial conflict (Upchurch and Grassman, 2016), and it has been argued that such varying usage is often related to the resources and leadership of trade unions (Panagiotopoulos and Barnett, 2015). However, despite the important role of political activism for the labour movement, little is known of the unions' use of social media in political campaigns.

After decades of decreasing membership numbers, weakening bargaining power and declining political influence for unions all across Europe, scholars of trade union revitalisation have proposed that unions should increase their political activism (Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2010; Murray, 2017) and return to repertoires of contention (Ibsen and Tapia, 2017). One could even argue that by acting more like a political movement and becoming well incorporated to the institutions that govern labour market, unions might compensate for their membership decline (Crouch, 2017). Hence, for unions, political campaigns can be a way of raising awareness as well as demonstrating their broader societal and political relevance to members and the general public. Pursuing political campaigns on social media is one of such options and the following analysis focuses on this issue in the context of European trade unions.

More specifically, we examine cross-national differences in trade unions' political activism on YouTube. Prior research has shown that trade unions' willingness to participate in contentious actions, such as demonstrations, varies significantly across contexts, particularly across industrial relations regimes (Larsson, 2014). The industrial relations regime of a country reflects such variables as the trade union density and collective bargaining system (Visser *et al*., 2009), variables that arguably define unions' opportunities for mobilisation and influencing politics—that is, they constitute political opportunity structures (Tarrow, 2011).

We propose that the same variation also applies in the case of unions' political activism on YouTube. By combing through research on social movements, industrial relations and interest group politics, we analyse more than 13,000 videos uploaded by European trade union confederations to YouTube. Our findings demonstrate that there are some differences, although not as clear as expected, between industrial relations regimes regarding the unions' YouTube videos about political activism.

The reminder of the paper is organised as follows. In the next section, we introduce the literature on unions' political activism and use of social media, as well as propose our hypotheses.

Then, the methods of case selection, data collection, coding and analysis are introduced, followed by the presentation and discussion of the results.

Unions' opportunities for political activism via YouTube

The core of all political activism is attempting to influence political decision-making, and the strategies for doing so are numerous. Trade unions can pursue political influence by mobilising political strikes, cooperating with political parties, using classical corporatist arrangements such as involvement in legislation processes and in implementing legislation, as well as engaging in election campaigns (Hamann and Kelly, 2004; Frege *et al*., 2014: 94). It has been argued that unions' political activism is related to their political, economic and legal contexts (Streeck and Hassel, 2003). In other words, a labour movement's political activism is related to the political opportunity structure (POS) available to it (Tarrow, 2011). The POS can be either open or closed. In a political environment in which movement activists perceive that their collective action would help achieve their desired goals, the POS is considered open (Eisinger, 1973; Klandermans, 1988). Similarly, when activists perceive that their collective action would have no impact, the POS is considered closed. The POS is operationalised as the specific properties of the political system—that is the formal institutional structure and the informal procedures used for facing the challengers of power (Kriesi *et al*., 1992). Moreover, there are also temporal components of political opportunities, such as closeness to elections and changing elite agreements over specific political issues. These factors notify activists of emerging opportunities to influence political decisions (Tarrow, 2011). For example, during election campaigns, it is easier for interest groups to place their own issues of interest on the political agenda. Meyer and Minkoff (2004) called these different configurations of opportunities 'structural' and 'signal' models of political opportunities, and these are highly relevant to our analysis of unions' political online activism.

First, the structural model of political opportunities can be defined by the *trade union's relations with the state*, *employers and political parties*, relations that are well captured by the industrial relations regime (Visser *et al*., 2009). According to Visser *et al*. (2009), existing industrial relations in the European Union can be divided into five distinct regimes: organised corporatism, social partnership, state-centred, liberal and transitional. These categories, which also overlap with specific geographic areas, are based on organisational density, collective bargaining coverage, type of collective bargaining (i.e. decentralised/centralised and number of social partner actors), and interaction between social partners and the state in all EU countries.

Although scholars have questioned the usefulness of these categories (Bechter *et al*., 2012; Lehndorff *et al*., 2017), grouping countries with somewhat similar labour laws, union structures and union densities still has heuristic value (Hyman, 2018). The regimes have been used by the European Commission for more than ten years, and although the countries belonging to the different categories have changed over time, the intra-group heterogeneity is likely less than the differences between the regimes. Furthermore, the regimes have been successfully used in explaining the variation in trade union attitudes towards and participation in contentious transnational actions such as strikes and boycotts (see Larsson, 2014). More specifically, Larsson (2014) found that trade unions belonging to the social partnership and state-centred regimes were more likely to approve of and participate in European-wide demonstrations and boycotts than were unions belonging to the other regimes, especially in organised corporatist countries. The above industrial relations regimes were originally defined to capture the first two relationships, while the unions' relationship with political parties was not one of the variables used when constructing the regimes. Prior research

on political parties' relationships with trade unions (Burns *et al*., 2000; Asher, 2001; Allern *et al*., 2019), however, suggests that the industrial relations regimes tend to coincide with trade unions' relationships with political parties, probably because the regimes define the opportunities not only for political campaigning but also for cooperation with parties. Cooperation here includes the exchange of resources, as trade unions assist political parties in elections and political parties (if they win) implement certain policies in exchange (Streeck and Hassel, 2003; Öberg *et al*., 2011). While in organised corporatist regimes there are close and institutionalised relations between unions and social democratic parties (e.g. unions have official representation in the party organisation), such relations are more ad hoc in the state-centred, liberal and transitional regimes (see Table 1). This

TABLE 1 Industrial relations regimes, their characteristics and associated countries

Regime	Characteristics	Countries
Organised corporatism (Northern Europe)	• High organisational density • High collective bargaining rate • Considerable interaction between social partners and state • Fragmented social partner system • Close relationship with social democratic parties	Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden
Social partnership (Western–Central Europe)	• Medium organisational density • High collective bargaining rate • Considerable interaction between social partners and state • Fragmented social partner system • Semi-close relationship with social democratic parties	Austria, Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Slovenia and Switzerland
State-centred (Southern Europe)	• Medium organisational density • High collective bargaining rate • Little interaction between social partners and state • Low centralisation of collective bargaining • Ad hoc relationship with a diverse set of political parties	Greece, Spain, France, Italy and Portugal
Liberal (the islands)	• Medium organisational density • Low fragmentation of social partners • Little interaction between social partners and state • High collective bargaining coverage but at a very decentralised level • Close to semi-close relationship with labour parties	Cyprus, Ireland, Malta and the UK
Transitional/mixed (Eastern–Central Europe)	• Low organisational density • Few social partner actors • Low collective bargaining coverage • No interaction between social partners and state • Weak, ad hoc relationship with political parties	Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia

Note: The categorisation of countries is based on the Visser *et al*. (2009) and Allern and Bale (2017).

applies even though union–political party cooperation has gradually become more ad hoc and unstable everywhere. Unions are now less likely to support one single political party (Allern and Bale, 2017) and political parties have gradually become reluctant to cooperate with unions because of their weakening powers to mobilise voters on their behalf (Culpepper and Regan, 2014; Jahn, 2014; Binderkrantz, 2015). Nevertheless, we propose that these industrial regimes are relevant to studying unions' online political campaigns. The regimes capture the most important differences in opportunity structures for unions in different countries, defining union access to different state institutions and the presence of political allies such as political parties that support the movement's goals in parliament (Rucht, 1996).

Second, one of the most important temporal characteristics of political opportunity structures and the 'signal' of possible changes in the political environment is a forthcoming election (Meyer and Minkoff, 2004). This also applies to the labour movement's opportunities for online political activism. It is well known that social media in general, and YouTube mobilisations in particular, are actively used in election campaigns (Vesnic-Alujevic and Van Bauwel, 2014; Stromer-Galley, 2019). The timing of national parliamentary and presidential elections varies across countries, so that these temporal openings might increase the intra-industrial regime heterogeneity in political activism. Furthermore, during election campaigns, unions might not only engage in political activism, but also use this 'window of increased public attention to societal issues' for general organising and membership recruitment (Jansson and Uba, 2019). The social movement literature has suggested that, in general, social movement mobilisation increases when activists perceive 'open' opportunities to influence politics (Tarrow, 2011), so the time before elections should be considered a time of more open opportunities for unions as well. Thus, we expect all trade union confederations to increase their online activities during election campaigns (Hypothesis 1).

Third, the structural opening and closing of opportunities does not translate directly to social movement mobilisation, as it is known that the frequency of protests has a curvilinear relationship with political openness (Meyer, 2004: 128). While in a closed context, activists perceive that their mobilisation might not achieve its goals due to repression or lack of interest, in an open context, social movements are more likely to use institutional channels (e.g. lobbying) than publicly visible campaigning to influence politics (Meyer and Minkoff, 2004). The transitional regime in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has such characteristic traits. The regime is characterised by little autonomy of the social partners and decentralised bargaining (Visser *et al*., 2009), leaving the opportunities for political action rather closed. Considering the fragmented character of the unions, there are also few important political allies. On the other hand, the organised corporatist regime (Scandinavia) is characterised by a tradition of social partnership, collective bargaining autonomous from the state (Visser *et al*., 2009), and collaboration between trade unions and social democratic parties, engendering more open opportunities for political activism: these unions have options to influence politics other than online political campaigns. Moreover, Lindvall (2013) has demonstrated an inverted U-shaped relationship between political strikes and union density, strikes being more frequent in contexts with relatively high levels of organisation but neither too high (Scandinavia) nor too low (CEE) union density. Thus, we expect that in countries with open opportunities, that is in organised corporatist regimes, and in countries with closed opportunities, that is in transitional regimes, unions' online political activism should be lower than in the other regimes (Hypothesis 2).

Fourth, the time-varying features of the signalling model might add some variation to this relationship, particularly concerning election-related online political activism. In organised corporatism, in which unions cooperate with political parties more than elsewhere, it would be natural for unions to engage in political campaigning before elections. Although in transitional

states, elections may open opportunities that are closed to unions at other times, this might not be enough to allow them to achieve a level of activism similar to that of organised corporatist countries. Hence, we expect election-related online activism to be more likely in the corporatist rather than transitional regimes (Hypothesis 3).

Finally, the opportunities for political activism via social media are also related to technological development, particularly to access to social media platforms such as YouTube. This factor has, however, been fairly consistent in the examined European countries since the mid-2000s. Although unions need some technological skills to capitalise on the emerging opportunities afforded by social media, YouTube as a platform for uploading videos is very similar to the unions' traditional strategy of producing films (Jönsson and Snickars, 2007; Barber, 2015). Thus, we propose that the variations in trade unions' use of online campaigning would be affected by structural conditions (i.e. industrial relations regimes) and signalling features (i.e. election timing) rather than by the technological opportunities available in different countries.

Research design

We test our three hypotheses about European trade unions' political activism via social media using data about videos uploaded to YouTube by trade union confederations during the 2007–2017 period. We focus on confederations due to their coordinating role for trade unions: they are meta-organisations without individual members, so they are seldom involved in everyday union work such as collective bargaining. Instead, they are responsible for addressing overarching goals and issues important for the union movement, which often involves pursuing political campaigns and lobbying activities. Although not all unions belong to confederations and confederations have varied relationships with political parties (Arndt and Rennwald, 2016), the confederations' political activism on social media is more likely to reflect general trends than is the selected activism of certain specific unions.

We use data comprising 13,289 videos from 26 countries. These videos were collected in the following way: (1) we identified YouTube channels for each trade union confederation in Europe using the YouTube search engine and the YouTube API; (2) we downloaded metadata for the videos uploaded during the 2007–2017 period. Although there are more than one hundred trade union confederations in Europe and some countries have as many as eight (e.g. France), not all these confederations have YouTube channels (e.g. neither of Estonia's two confederations has a channel). In the analysis we do not distinguish between confederations, but rather focus on the total number of videos from each country. The most active confederations were in Italy, where five confederations together uploaded 3761 videos, whereas only five videos were uploaded by the confederation in the Slovak Republic (see Figure 1; Table A1 in Appendix).

This investigation uses metadata data about videos, that is the titles, descriptions and times of uploading (i.e. posting). The data were analysed in two ways. First, to test Hypothesis 1, we used the times when the videos were posted and investigated whether the trade union confederations increased their online activities (i.e. uploaded more videos) during national election campaigns in their countries (all considered elections are listed in Table A2, Appendix).

As not all videos uploaded by confederations are political, we used content analysis to detect unions' online political activism. More specifically, we used automated translation to English of the titles and descriptions of all videos using the online tool 'Google Translate'. The quality of such automated translations is certainly lower than that of any professional translations, but recent studies have suggested that the quality could be acceptable for the comparative analysis

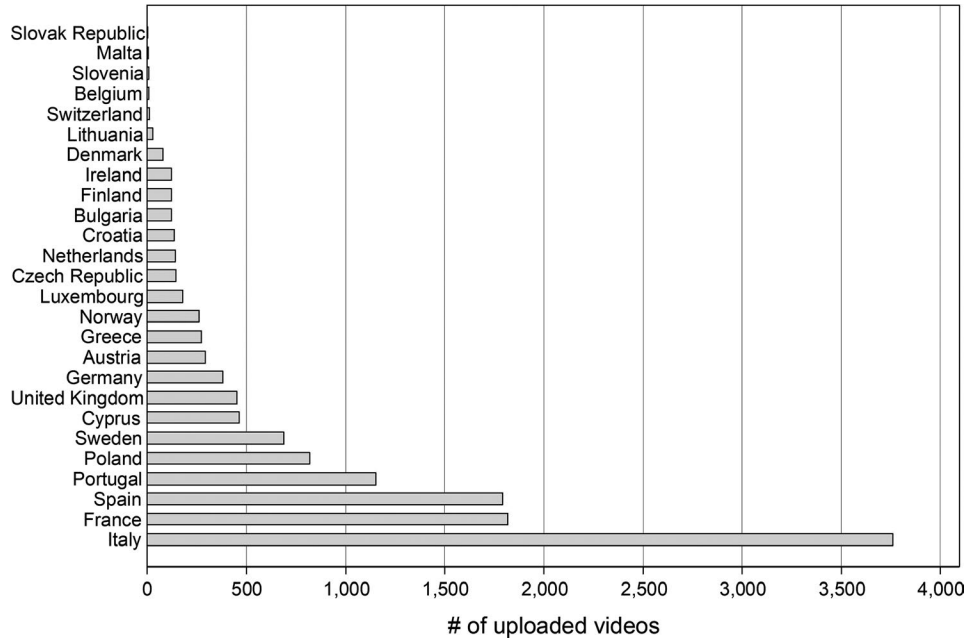

FIGURE 1 Number of videos uploaded by European trade union confederations, 2007–2017

of short texts (de Vries *et al*., 2018). The titles and descriptions of the YouTube videos are usually very short, and in the present case, the average length is about 52 characters for titles and 267 characters for descriptions (in the original language). For control purposes, we also randomly selected 100 video titles and descriptions in German, Finnish, Spanish and Swedish and compared the translations with the originals; in all cases, the translations were accurate enough for our coding purposes. We are aware that Slavic languages and Greek might be less precisely translated by Google, but such videos form only about 8 percent of our sample.

The videos were then coded via automated content analysis by searching for the presence of specific political mobilisation-related words (all words are listed in Table A3, Appendix). We define political action-related videos as those addressing any political action, such as protests (e.g. strikes, demonstrations and flash mobs), Labour Day actions, mobilising to address general political issues (e.g. equal pay, minimum wage, racism or sexism), and encouraging the audience to participate in or report on national or European Parliament elections or national referendums. To evaluate and control this automated process, we randomly selected a set of 100 videos coded as referring to political action and another 100 coded as not about political action. In both cases, the titles and descriptions in English were checked to evaluate the coding accuracy. Of the 100 randomly selected videos automatically coded as not about political action, four were actually about political action (from Austria, France, Italy and Portugal). Of the 100 videos coded as about political action, we found only one false positive referring to internal confederation elections in France. The results of this robustness check allow us to conclude that the automated coding might slightly underestimate the number of political action-related videos, though the error is not large. In sum, out of 13,289 coded videos, we found 4,467 referring to political action, representing about 34 percent of the videos. The rest of the videos often informed viewers about regular trade union activities such as congresses, stated information about the benefits of being a union member, or discussed certain labour-related issues (e.g. wages and working conditions).

Considering that we were also interested in videos about elections, a specific variable was created for videos whose titles and descriptions used words such as elections, vote, parliament and government. Out of the 4,467 political action videos, 35 percent or 1,556 videos referred to elections, that is about 12 percent of all videos.

The measure of the main independent variable—industrial relations regimes—was already introduced and described in Table 1. Here, it suffices to add that we cannot separately investigate the effect of each indicator defining the regimes (e.g. union density, rate of collective bargaining, interaction between social partners, and relationship with political parties) because these are very strongly correlated to one another. Countries with high union density also have strong encompassing collective bargaining and vice versa.[1.]

Analysing the time of video posting across Europe

When analysing European confederations' political activism via YouTube, we started by examining activities over time, more specifically, how confederations mobilised during election years. Hypothesis 1 stated that all trade union confederations would increase their online mobilisation at times of election campaigns. So, we would expect to see an increased number of videos, irrespective of their content, uploaded to YouTube during these periods. To detect any possible change before elections, we counted how many videos the confederations uploaded before and after elections. An election campaign usually starts about a year before the election, but the campaign tends to intensify as the election approaches, with the most crucial phase being the six months before the election. We accordingly focused on activities during these six months, expecting that if unions increased the number of videos uploaded during this period, this would indicate an attempt to increase their visibility in the public debate and engagement in the election campaign.

To detect such a trend, we collected data about the dates of all presidential, national parliament and European Parliament elections as well as the dates of all referenda of national importance in the examined 26 countries during the period from 2007 to 2017. Only in the Swiss case were the referenda not accounted for, because of their significant frequency. While the campaigns for referenda might work differently from those for general elections, we have recorded the issues of the three referenda included in the study (Italy 2011 and 2016 and the UK 2016) and also tested the analysis without these videos.[2.]

Regarding elections, Sweden experienced three elections during the study period, while Austria and the UK had seven elections each. The data about election timing were combined with YouTube metadata from all trade union confederations in the EU, Switzerland and Norway. It should be noted that we only included the elections that occurred after the confederations in a country started to use YouTube. For example, in the Italian case, in which confederations did not start uploading YouTube videos before March 12, 2009, we analysed the national elections of February 25, 2013, and March 18, 2018, the referenda of June 12, 2011, and December 4, 2016, and the European Parliament elections of June 7, 2009, and May 22, 2014. Hence, for the Italian trade union confederations in our sample, there were six election campaigns in which they could actively participate.

By using the date of video uploading, we calculated the time distance from the closest election for each of the 13,289 videos. For comparative purposes and assuming that all elections work rather similarly, all election days were assigned time point 0. If the video was uploaded before the election, the variable denoting the time distance from the election in days was assigned a

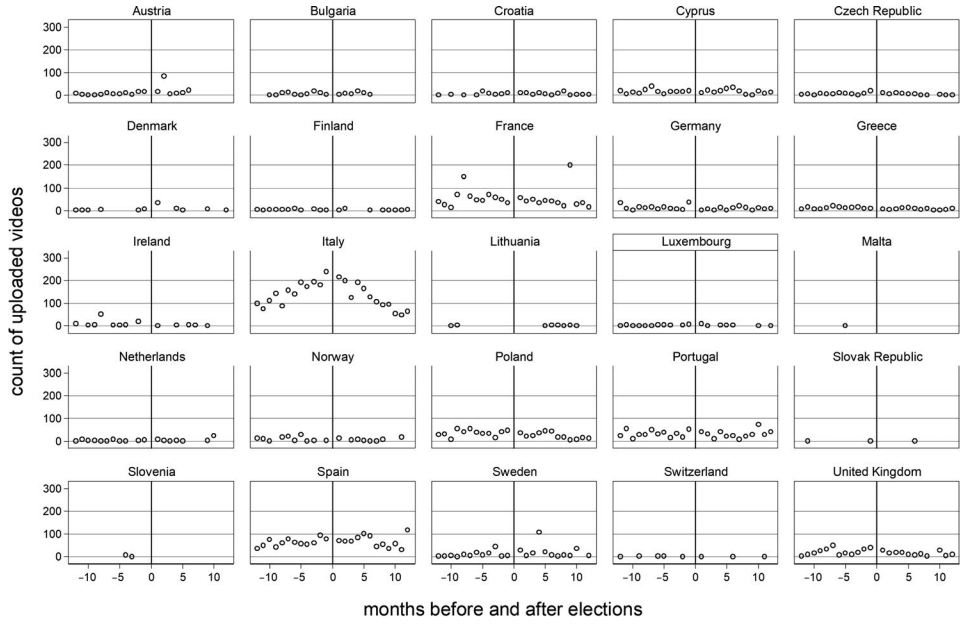

FIGURE 2 Numbers of videos uploaded by confederations 12 months before and after elections

negative sign; if the video was uploaded after the election, the day count was positive. To simplify the analysis, we aggregated the data to form monthly counts. Hence, Figure 2 shows the numbers of videos each confederation uploaded during the 12 months before and after the elections. The counts after elections serve control purposes: if the numbers of videos uploaded after elections are the same as those before elections, we cannot state that the confederations really used the opportunity to mobilise via YouTube. It was expected that if the confederations conducted election campaigning, then they should increase their activities and visibility as the election day (i.e. time point 0) approaches; we accordingly expected the monthly number of uploaded videos to increase.

The results of the timing analysis shown in Figure 2 confirm Hypothesis 1 only in Italy, where the number of videos uploaded to YouTube increased before and decreased after elections. Although in France, Poland, Portugal and Spain many videos were uploaded close to elections, which would indicate somewhat increased political activism, there was no notable decline in the number of uploaded videos *after* the elections. One could partly explain this lack of decline by the fact that forming a new government often takes weeks or even months, and that trade union confederations, like other interest groups, might want to influence the negotiations over government formation. An alternative explanation would be that in all the countries except Italy, trade union confederations simply do not follow the electoral cycle when uploading their videos to YouTube.

This rather exceptional position of Italian unions could be explained by their tendency to combine traditional trade union missions with that of mobilising large parts of the citizenry (Gentile, 2014). There is also ongoing cooperation between Italian centre–left parties and trade unions. Although these party–union ties are not institutionalised and are less structured than those that exist in northern Europe, unions and left parties still cooperate (Ceron and Negri, 2017; Mattina and Carrieri, 2017), and examples of specific labour-related policy decisions beneficial for Italian unions illustrate the government's appeal for union members' votes.

Analysing the content of the videos

A lack of support for Hypothesis 1 does not necessarily mean that trade unions are not using YouTube for political activism. Jansson and Uba (2019) have shown that in the Swedish case the most typical videos trade unions uploaded to YouTube contained information about ordinary trade union work, such as collective bargaining or seminars and conferences reflecting trade unions' everyday work, and that various forms of political activism constitute a substantial part of Swedish unions' YouTube use. Therefore, by following the above-described method of automated content analysis, we estimated the proportion of videos uploaded by the confederations in each examined country referring to political activism.

The results presented in Figure 3 illustrate large differences between the countries: the share of videos containing political messages ranged from 100 percent of all videos in Slovakia, where there were only five videos altogether, to 0 percent in Malta, where all eight uploaded videos were about the ordinary daily work of the trade unions (e.g. workers meeting the union leader, Malta July 3, 2015). Moreover, the results indicate that the Italian confederations, which were very active during election campaigns, now fell under the average of 33 percent, ending up in the same position as the corporatist Scandinavian countries (i.e. Finland, Denmark, Norway and Sweden) and France. The confederations that made the most use of YouTube for political activism can be found mainly in southern and eastern Europe, that is Greece, Portugal, Slovakia and Bulgaria. Besides these countries, Luxembourg's confederations also posted a large proportion of political activism videos, possibly because many other unions come to Luxembourg to protest EU policies and these protests are supported by the local confederations, and because many commuters from neighbouring countries (e.g. France and Germany) also protest in the country.

The confederations from the liberal UK also appear to feature political action in their YouTube videos to a larger than average extent. The content of the videos from the UK indicates that

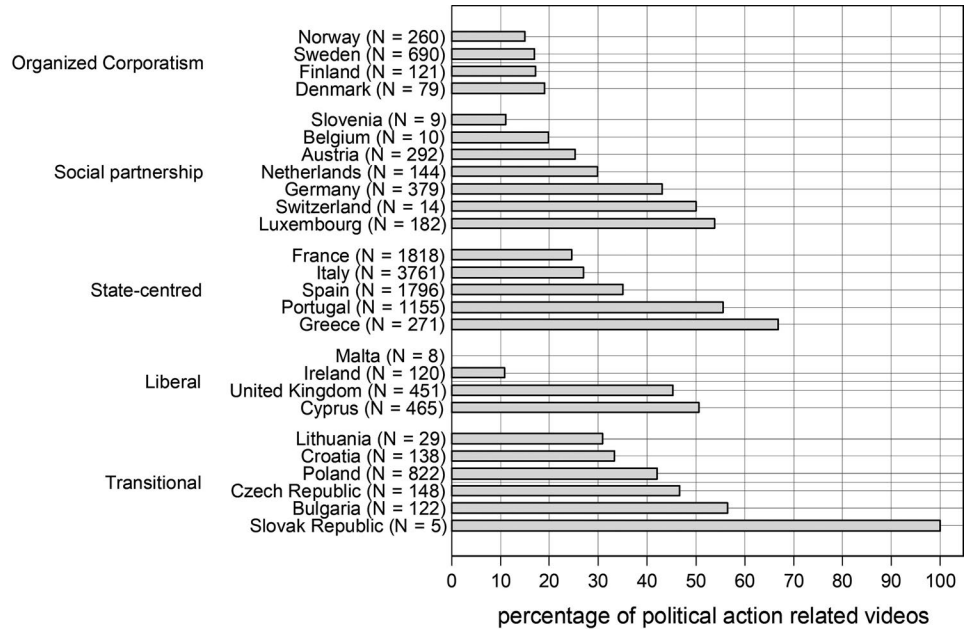

FIGURE 3 Proportion of political action-related videos per country, divided by regime/*Note:N* refers to the total number of YouTube videos uploaded in each country

unions have been posting videos about specific legislation concerning the right to strike (e.g. the Trade Union Act of 2015 and the Health and Social Care Bill of 2012), indicating that the confederations were trying to bring issues that were important for them to the political agenda via YouTube.

From the perspective of Hypothesis 2, it is noteworthy that Figure 3 also illustrates rather significant variation within several of the industrial relations regimes. In the social partnership regime, Luxembourg's confederations clearly have a higher level of political activism via YouTube than do confederations in the Netherlands; in the state-centred regime, confederations in Greece and Portugal have almost twice as large a proportion of political action-related YouTube videos as do French confederations. If one leaves aside Slovakia's confederations with very few videos in general, there is relatively little intra-regime variation in the case of the transitional regime, in which trade unions are generally considered weak and lacking in resources (Ost, 2009). The least intra-regime variation is found in the Nordic countries, where the confederations seem to have adopted similar approaches to using YouTube for political activism.

Hence, these results (see also Figure 4) only partially support the expectation that the confederations in countries with organised corporatism and transitional industrial relations regimes would use YouTube less for political activism than would the confederations in countries with social partnership, state-centred and liberal regimes.

In the countries with an organised corporatism regime, confederations did post smaller proportions of videos containing political messages than did confederations from countries with the other regimes. However, Figures 3 and 4 also clearly show that transitional regime confederations unexpectedly posted large shares of political activism videos, rejecting the idea of a curvilinear relationship between political activism and the industrial relations model. Overall, the degrees of online political activism in the social partnership, state-centred, liberal and transitional regimes are very similar. The fact that there is less intra-regime variation in the organised corporatist regime suggests that the political opportunities for online political activism in this regime are more similar to one another, while in the countries belonging to other regimes these opportunities vary significantly.

The analysis of YouTube videos related to *elections* can be done in two ways. First, if we look at election-related videos as a proportion of all videos (Figure 4), there are only small differences

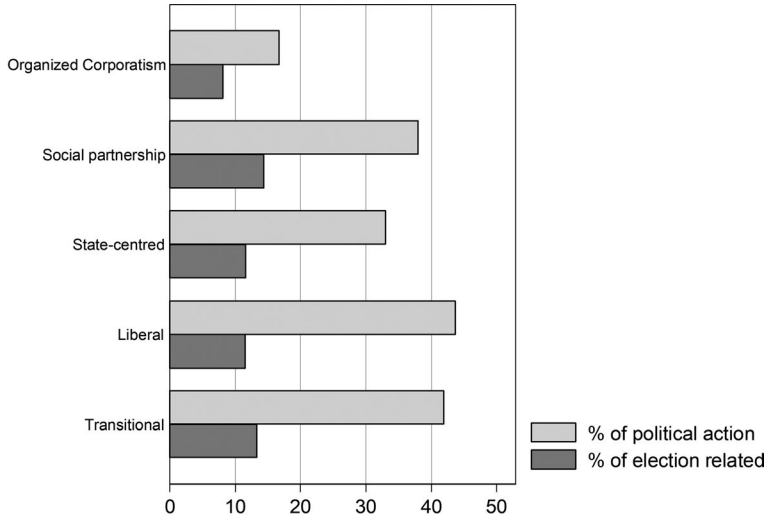

FIGURE 4 Proportion of political and election-related videos per regime (26 countries, 13,289 videos)

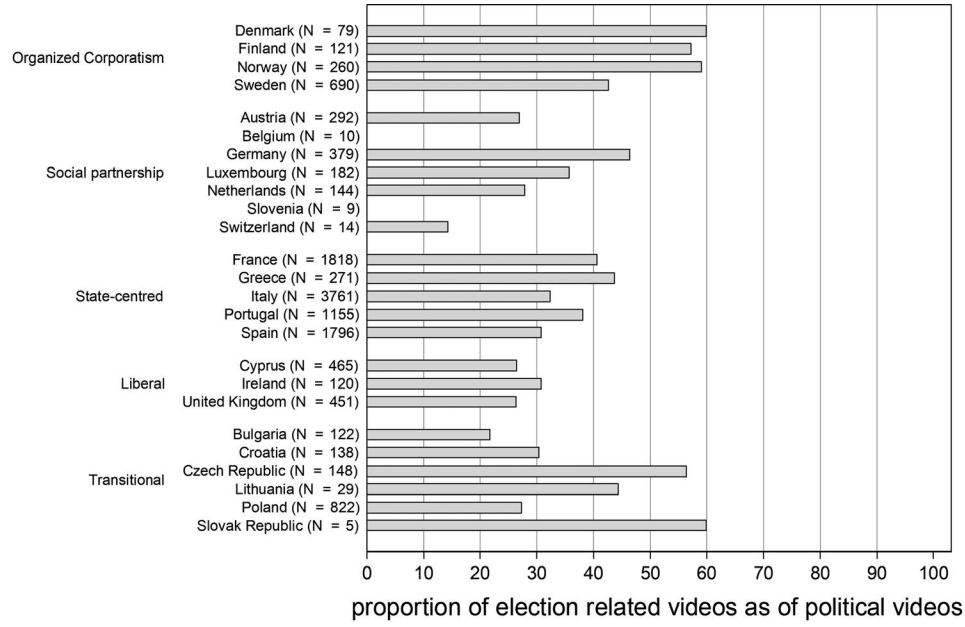

FIGURE 5 Proportion of political activism videos that contain election information

between the industrial relations regimes. Second, if we look at the shares of the videos with political content containing information about elections (Figure 5), yet another interesting pattern emerges. Although the proportion of political action-related videos uploaded by confederations from countries in the organised corporatism regime was rather small in comparison with other regimes (17 percent), the election-related videos form a particularly large proportion of these political videos that they post (about 53 percent). Thus, when the confederations in these countries engage in political activism via YouTube, their videos are likely related to elections. When we look at the videos about elections in transitional regimes, then the share of political action-related videos is expectedly smaller at about 40 percent (there are similar numbers of elections per country in both regimes). This result supports Hypothesis 3, that election-related online activism would be more likely in the corporatist than the transitional regimes.

In addition to small inter-regime differences, the most interesting findings are the unexpected intra-regime variations. Some countries in the transitional regime, particularly the Slovak Republic and Bulgaria, clearly have confederations that actively use YouTube for political activism. Thus, we find only partial support for Hypothesis 2, suggesting that political opportunities for online political activism in these transitional countries are not as closed as expected. Even with low union density, unions may still have some political leverage. Although one might suggest that increased use of social media for political activism is a logical reaction to closed off-line political opportunities, recent research on union reactions to the economic crisis in Central and Eastern Europe provides an alternative explanation. It has been shown that in this region the unions were able to bargain and protect their members' jobs despite rather significant worsening of economic conditions (Ivlevs and Veliziotis, 2017). This crisis experience might explain why the confederations in transitional regime countries perceive their political opportunities as rather open and mobilise politically even online.

The situation was similar in Portugal and Greece—representing the state-centred regime—where trade unions mobilised and managed to have some impact on austerity-period labour

legislation (Zartaloudis and Kornelakis, 2017; Perista and Perista, 2019). Although unions' had less impact on austerity politics in Greece than in Portugal, Greek unions were very active in relation to labour reforms and mobilised 20 general strikes during the 2011–2013 period (Kotouza, 2017). It is therefore unsurprising that there is a significant proportion of political action-related content in YouTube videos uploaded by the Greek confederation at the time. An opposite trend could be found in Ireland (liberal) and Italy (state-centred), where the legitimacy of unions was very low during the austerity period (Culpepper and Regan, 2014). In Ireland, very few unions mobilised protests (Papadopoulos, 2016), and this is also reflected in the small proportion of political action-related videos (10 percent). In the Italian case, where our data showed that confederations were active on YouTube before elections (Figure 2), the proportion of political action-related videos is below average for the state-centred regime.

These results suggest that the aforementioned signalling and time-varying factors interact with these rather rigid political opportunity structures (i.e. industrial relations regimes) and that their interaction is probably the best explanation for unions' varying political activism online. Due to a lack of comparative data about different policy reforms that might similarly mobilise unions against austerity policies in all examined countries, we cannot draw final conclusions about these interaction effects. The question merits further inquiry, as we have already noted some interesting patterns.

Conclusions

The growing importance of social media, has led to an increased use of such platforms by various actors with the ambition to engage in politics (Dimitrova and Matthes, 2018; Stier *et al*., 2018). For unions, using social media to pursue political campaigns is one option to renew the movement. Political campaigning not only demonstrates unions' societal and political relevance, it also reveals the movement's identity. Political positioning has been a crucial characteristic trait of the unions' identities, and a clearly communicated identity has proven to be important for constructing successful unions in the past (Jansson, 2020a), as well as for contemporary unions engaged in revitalisation processes (Gasparri *et al*, 2019; Smale, 2020; Jansson, 2020b). Prior studies have shown that online political mobilisation is common among trade unions (Hodder and Houghton, 2015; Pasquier *et al*., 2020), although little attention has been paid to mobilisation via such widespread platforms as YouTube. When analysing the YouTube postings of trade union confederations in the EU, Norway and Switzerland, we have filled this research gap and found that despite the (theoretical) advantages, online political mobilisation in general and online election campaigning in particular vary significantly across Europe. First, confederations do not seem to increase their general YouTube activity during election campaigns, although this could be expected given the growing importance of this platform for elections. The only country where unions followed the election campaigns to some extent was Italy, where confederations and (left-wing) political parties are known to cooperate in relation to election campaigns. Still, this distinct pattern of using YouTube by Italian confederations requires further analysis.

Second, based on social movement research, it was proposed that the use of YouTube for online political activism is related to the political opportunities available to unions: in contexts where opportunities to influence politics are multifaceted and comprehensive, unions could opt for channels other than YouTube to influence the public debate. This explains why the comparatively resource-rich trade union confederations in the organised corporatist regime in Scandinavia used YouTube for political activism to a lesser degree than did the confederations

in other regimes. However, the presented data also showed that when these Scandinavian confederations do pursue political activism through YouTube videos, such videos are often related to elections. This result reflects the remaining importance of cooperation between political parties and trade unions in this regime.

In the other industrial relations regimes, where opportunities to influence politics are fewer, we expected and found rather large proportions of political action-related videos. Still, our hypothesis that the opportunity structures in the transitional regime countries would be closed, resulting in quiescence and passivity among the unions there, found little support. The resource-poor trade union confederations in the Central and Eastern European transitional regime had as large a proportion of political mobilisation-related videos on YouTube as did the confederations in the social partnership, liberal and state-centred regimes. Considering the relative success of these unions in protecting jobs at times of crisis, one could argue that political activism has compensated for the low membership numbers and collective bargaining levels. While this requires further research, it does support the results of prior studies (Crouch, 2017).

There were also some significant intra-regime variations that, together with our unexpected results, could be explained by the interaction of structural factors and time-varying signals about the emerging windows of opportunity for political impact. In countries where unions were mobilising in relation to specific policy threats such as austerity programmes during the economic crisis of 2008, confederations were also more active in political mobilisation via YouTube. Thus, industrial relations regimes that are rigid and slow to change are only a somewhat useful explanation for trade union confederations' use of YouTube for political activism. Time-varying factors such as closeness of elections or certain proposed policy changes might also play a role. While this argument cannot be fully supported in this study, it could guide future comparative research on unions' political activism.

Furthermore, this study focused solely on YouTube, and this might not be fully representative of unions' general use of social media for political activism. It might well be that other platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, are perceived by unions as more effective for political activism and union revitalisation. The video format may be perceived as more useful for reporting various events or archiving union history, including mobilised protest events, while other platforms may enable more interactive communication with the audience. However, YouTube has great potential that has, with few exceptions, currently been left unexplored by unions. The major audience of YouTube is young people and it is known that young union members prefer communication via social media (Smith and Duxbury, 2020) and use social media platforms (Twitter) for some political activism (Hodder and Houghton, 2020). Making themselves visible and relevant in relation to political issues for a young audience, is important for unions: The union movement has been struggling for decades to mobilise and organise young people (Bailey *et al*., 2010; Simms *et al*., 2018). Using communication platforms relevant to this age group could be the first step in improving youth recruitment to unions. Moreover, YouTube has become increasingly important for mobilisation, and radical groups such as right-wing and populist movements have successfully exploited this platform. Such a development should push unions to counter-mobilise via the same platform.

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NOTES

1. For a robustness check, we also looked at Jahn's (2014) measure of corporatism for the years of interest (i.e. 2007–2010), finding a very weak negative correlation between his general measure of corporatism in a country and the average proportion of political videos per country. Hence, countries with a higher degree of corporatism as defined and operationalised by Jahn (e.g. Austria and Slovenia) also have a smaller proportion of political videos than do countries with a lower degree of corporatism such as the UK or Poland.
2. The Italian 2011 referendum focused on the privatisation of water, phasing out nuclear energy and changing criminal procedures, while the 2016 referendum focused on constitutional change. The referendum in the UK was on Brexit. Excluding the videos related to referenda does not change the main results of the study.

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APPENDIX 1

Table A1: Included confederations

Country	Confederations with YouTube channel
Austria	(ÖGB) Österreichischer Gewerkschaftsbund
Belgium	(ACV-CSC) Algemeen Christelijk Vakverbond/ Confédération des Syndicats Chrétiens
Bulgaria	CITUB/KNSB
Croatia	(URSH) Udruga radničkih sindikata Hrvatske (SSSH) Savez Samostalnih Sindikata Hrvatske
Cyprus	(PEO) Pancyprian Federation of Labour (SEK) Synomospondia Ergaton Kyprou
Czech Republic	(OSČMS) Odborové sdružení Čech, Moravy a Slezska (ASO) Asociace samostatných odborů (ČMKOS) Českomoravská konfederace odborových svazů
Denmark	(LO) Landsorganisationen i Danmark
Finland	(Akava) Korkeasti koulutettujen työmarkkinakeskusjärjestö (SAK) Suomen Ammattiliittojen Keskusjärjestö

Country	Confederations with YouTube channel
France	(CFE-CGC) Confédération Générale des Cadres
	(FO) Force Ouvrière
	(CFTC) Confédération Française des Travailleurs Chrétiens
	(CFDT) Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail
	(CGT) Confédération Générale du Travail
Germany	(DBB) Deutscher Beamtenbund
	(DGB) Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund
	(CGB) Christlicher Gewerkschaftsbund
Greece	(PAME) Panergatiko Agonistiko Metopo
	(GSEE) Geniki Synomospondia Ergaton Ellados
Ireland	(ICTU) Irish Congress of Trade Unions
Italy	(CGIL) Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro
	(CISAL) Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Autonomi Lavoratori
	(CONFSAL) Confederazione Generale dei Sindacati Autonomi dei Lavoratori
	(CISL) Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori
	(UGL) Unione Generale del Lavoro
Lithuania	(LPSK) Lietuvos profesinių sąjungų konfederacija
Luxembourg	(LCGB) Lëtzebuerger Chrëschtleche Gewerkschafts-Bond
	(OGB-L) Confédération Générale du Travail de Luxembourg
Malta	(GWU) General Workers' Union
	(UHM) Malta Workers' Union
Netherlands	(FNV) Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging
Norway	(LO-N) Landsorganisasjonen i Norge
	(UNIO) Utdanningsgruppenes Hovedorganisasjon
	(YS) Yrkesorganisasjonenes Sentralforbund
Poland	(NSZZ) Niezależny Samorządny Związek Zawodowy "Solidarność"
	(OPZZ) Ogólnopolskie Porozumienie Związków Zawodowych
Portugal	(UGT) União Geral dos Trabalhadores
	(CGTP) Confederação Geral dos Trabalhadores Portugueses
Slovak Republic	(KOZSR) Konfederácie odborových zväzov Slovenskej republiky
Slovenia	(ZSSS) Zveza Svobodnih Sindikatov Slovenije
Spain	(UGT) Unión General de Trabajadores
	(USOS) Union Sindical Obrera
	(CNT) Confederación Nacional del Trabajo
	(CC.OO.) Comisiones Obreras
Sweden	(LO) The Swedish Trade Union Confederation
	(TCO) The Swedish Confederation of Professional Employees
	(Saco) The Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations
Switzerland	(SGB/USS) Swiss Federation of Trade Unions

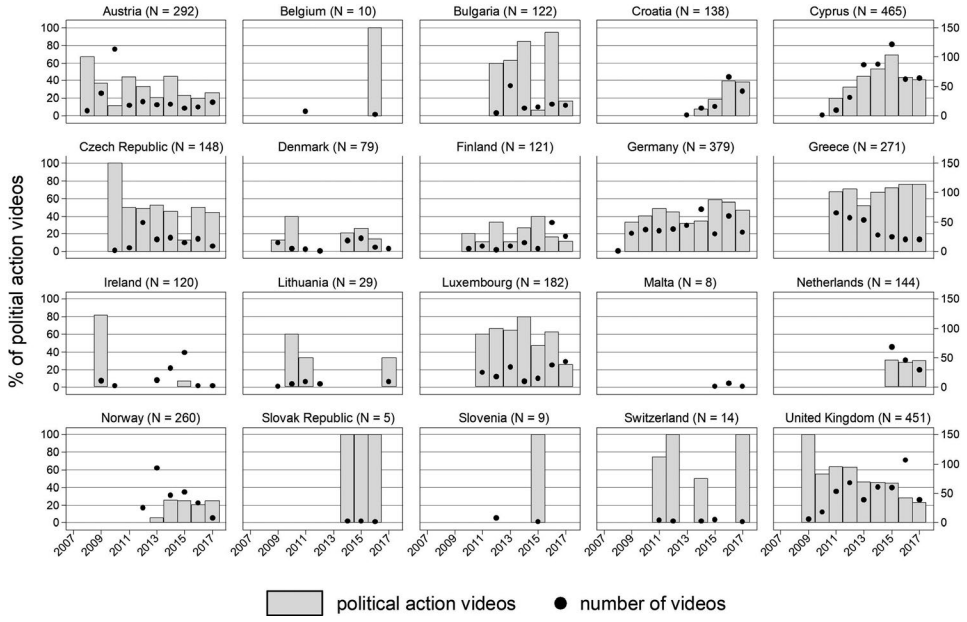

Figure A1 Proportions of political action videos (left axes) and numbers of all uploaded videos per year (right axes) in countries where union confederations post relatively few videos

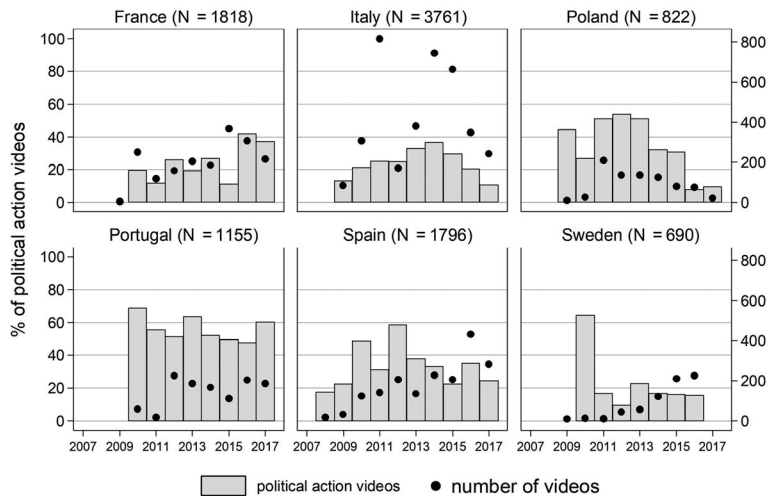

Figure A2 Proportions of political action videos (left axes) and numbers of all uploaded videos per year (right axes) in countries where union confederations post relatively many videos

Country	Confederations with YouTube channel
UK	(STUC) Scottish Trades Union Congress
	(TUC) Trades Union Congress
	(GFTU) General Federation of Trade Unions

Table A2: Elections used in the analysis

Country	Parliamentary elections	Presidential elections/ national referendum	EU Parliament elections
Austria	28/9/2008; 29/09/2013 15/10/2017	25/04/2010 24/04/2016	07/06/2009 22/05/2014
Belgium	25/05/2014		
Bulgaria	12/05/2013; 26/03/2017	06/11/2016	
Croatia	08/11/2015; 11/09/2016		22/05/2014
Cyprus	22/05/2011; 22/05/2016	17/02/2013	22/05/2014
Czech Republic	28/05/2010; 25/10/2013 21/10/2017	12/10/2012 07/10/2016	
Denmark	15/09/2011; 18/06/2015		07/06/2009; 22/05/2014
Finland	17/04/2011; 19/04/2015	28/02/2018	22/05/2014
France	17/06/2012; 18/06/2017		07/06/2009; 22/05/2014
Germany	22/09/2013; 24/09/2017		07/06/2009
Greece	06/05/2012; 25/01/2015 20/09/2015		
Ireland	26/02/2016	25/02/2011	07/06/2009
Italy	25/02/2013	12/06/2011 (referendum) 04/12/2016 (referendum)	07/06/2009; 22/05/2014
Lithuania	14/10/2012; 09/10/2016	07/06/2009	
Luxembourg	20/10/2013; 14/10/2018		
Malta	03/07/2017		
Netherlands	15/03/2017		
Norway	09/09/2013; 11/09/2017		
Poland	09/10/2011; 25/10/2015	20/06/2010	22/05/2014
Portugal	05/06/2011; 04/10/2015	24/01/2016	22/05/2014
Slovak Republic	06/03/2016	22/05/2014	
Slovenia	13/07/2014	11/11/2012	
Spain	09/03/2008; 20/11/2011 20/12/2015; 26/06/2016		07/06/2009; 22/05/2014
Sweden	19/09/2010; 14/09/2014		22/05/2014
Switzerland	23/10/2011; 18/10/2015		
United Kingdom	06/05/2010; 08/06/2017	23/06/2016 (referendum)	07/06/2009; 22/05/2014

Table A3: Words used for detecting political activism

Category	Words (* indicates search for different forms of the word)
Political action	flachmob; demonstr*; manifest*, strik*; rally; protest; dispute*; campaign*; "equal pay"; "minimum wage"; racist; sexist; "labour day"; "May 1*"; parliament*; bill; reform; law; government; election*; vote
Election	parliament*; government; election*; vote