

Political attitudes, participation and union membership in the UK

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Abstract

Unionisation continues to decline in the UK. This paper examines the changes over time in the relationship between politics and union membership, and it is based on European Social Survey data from 2002 to 2018. Political attitudes have been analysed by considering the interest in politics and ideological orientation according to self-placement on the left–right scale, and behaviour looking at political participation. Political orientation (being left-wing) and political participation are determinants of union membership. However, in the UK, a centrist political orientation prevails, and political participation is low. The relationship between political attitudes, behaviour and unionisation over time has been stable.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The decline in union membership and density, which, albeit with differences, has been affecting many countries since the 1980s, has long been studied by industrial relations scholars. The principal causes can be attributed to macro and micro variables (Ebbinghaus & Visser, 1999; Schnabel, 2002, 2013, 2020; Schnabel & Wagner, 2007; Visser, 2002, 2019; Waddington, 2015).

One issue that has tended to be neglected in recent years is the effect of political attitudes and behaviour on union membership. Whereas unionisation was also linked to class identity in the past, this relationship now seems to have weakened. Several reasons explain this. The concept of social class has been the subject of debate for years. One example is the contrast between those who argue that social class is irrelevant because of the individualisation process

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(Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1992; Beck et al., 1994; Giddens, 1991) and those who believe that social classes are changing their features (e.g., Savage, 2015; Savage et al., 2013).

There is also an open debate concerning whether politics is losing its ideological value, as evidenced by the blurring of the traditional distinction between left and right and the fact that voting is also more fluid, less stable and less tied to a class identity (Evans & Tilley, 2017; Mosimann et al., 2019; Rennwald, 2020).

This article aims to examine whether there is a relationship between political attitudes, behaviour and union membership. The causal relationship between these variables is not unilateral. Both can be dependent and independent variables (Hadziabdic & Baccaro, 2020; Kollmeyer, 2013; Schnabel, 2002). For example, political orientation can influence unionisation and vice versa.

In this article, political attitudes and behaviour will be considered independent variables.

As will be seen in Section 3, political attitudes were analysed by considering the interest in politics and ideological orientation according to individuals' self-placement on the left–right scale. Behaviour considering political participation.

The analysis covers the UK from 2002 to 2018 and is based on the European Social Survey (ESS) data. Unlike many cross-sectional studies that focus on cross-national comparisons, one aim is to analyse the changes over time in one country. A topic little addressed in the literature that needs further investigation is how changes in workers' attitudes and values over time have affected unionisation (Schnabel, 2013).

The choice of the UK as the country of study is due to several reasons. First, it is a country where the decline in unionisation has been strong. Moreover, the relationship between trade unions and a left-wing party (the Labour Party) is historically well established (Haugsgjerd Allern & Bale, 2017), although not without tensions. For example, since the mid-1990s, the changes with Blair have distanced Labour Party from the unions in ideology and values. In the years of Corbyn's leadership (2015–2020), there has been a rapprochement between the trade unions and the Labour Party. Finally, there is an ongoing debate (not only among scholars but also in the newspapers) on the relationship between political orientation and electoral behaviour. It has focused mainly on the working-class vote, which, since the mid-1990s, as said, has become more fluid and has not necessarily turned towards the Labour Party (Arndt & Rennwald, 2017; Evans & Tilley, 2017). A trend confirmed according to some pundits by the outcome of the Brexit referendum in 2016¹ and the attractiveness in elections in recent years of right-wing parties, such as UKIP or the Conservative Party. The debate, however, concerned electoral behaviour, not other actions such as union membership.

2 | DOES POLITICS STILL MATTER?

Unionisation is a complex phenomenon to analyse, and generalisation risks lead to simplifications. For example, it is mainly in the advanced industrial countries that there is a trend of declining union membership, albeit with differences concerning the intensity of the decline (Visser, 2019).

A literature review on the determinants of unionisation shows that it is still important to study politics-related variables (attitudes and participation). Union membership is explained by considering various variables, both macro and micro. It is possible to distinguish three main approaches (Ebbinghaus & Visser, 1999; Schnabel, 2002, 2013, 2020; Schnabel & Wagner, 2007; Visser, 2002, 2019; Waddington, 2015): cyclical, structural and institutional.

The first one analyses the relationship between union membership and some business cycle features, such as growth, employment and unemployment, and prices. Unionisation follows a procyclical pattern. It increases in expansion phases and decreases in contraction phases.

The political cycle is important, too (Ebbinghaus & Visser, 1999). The electoral success of pro-union parties usually favours unionisation (and vice versa that of anti-union parties). The macroeconomic policies followed by the government also matter. Neoliberal policies tend to weaken the unions.

The structural approach considers changes in the social structure and values. For example, unionisation is affected by changes in (a) employment resulting from the transition to a post-industrial economy where services are growing, (b) the employment relationship due to the diffusion of non-standard employment and (c) the labour force composition (by age, gender, education level, presence of foreign-born workers and migrant workers). The first two reduce union membership. However, there are differences between private and public services. In many advanced industrial countries, unionisation is quite high in public services (Schnabel, 2020; Visser, 2019).

Trends related to the labour force composition are less clear-cut. In many countries, unionisation follows an inverted U-shaped pattern for age (Blanchflower, 2007). The feminisation of the workforce and higher educational attainment do not necessarily lead to lower unionisation (Visser, 2019). Foreign-born workers and migrant workers tend to be less unionised.

Another structural variable is the size of the workplace, with a positive relationship between size and union membership.

The institutional approach explains unionisation by referring to features of the industrial relations system. For example, union-administered unemployment insurance (the so-called 'Ghent system', Ebbinghaus et al., 2011) and workplace organisation and representation favour unionisation (Waddington, 2015). The effects on unionisation of the collective bargaining structure (centralisation or decentralisation) do not seem unique.

Methodologically, quantitative studies that focus on macro variables use time-series data analysis (Schnabel, 2002, 2013), whereas those on micro variables rely on cross-sectional data and panel studies in some limited cases (Bryson & Davies, 2019; Hadziabdic & Baccaro, 2020).

In cross-sectional studies, of which this study is one, the modelling leads to the consideration of a plurality of variables: individual characteristics (gender, age, education level, occupation, type of employment contract etc.), workplace features (number of employees, work content, presence of trade unions etc.) and the political, social, religious attitudes and so forth of the workers.

In recent studies, individual and workplace characteristics are viewed as the main explanatory variables of union membership.

The lesser attention paid to the relationship between political attitudes, behaviour and union membership marks a shift from the past. At least until the 1970s, ideology (being left-wing) and class identity were among the main determinants of unionisation, especially in some countries.²

The history of the labour movement in the UK shows that, from the late nineteenth/early twentieth century, the Labour Party and trade unions contributed to developing workers' class consciousness and promoting their collective action (Miles & Savage, 1994). However, in the 1960s some authors (e.g., Hobsbawm, Miliband) highlighted the uneasy relationship between the working class and the Labour Party because of its centrist and non-radical positions.

The link between the working class and Labour Party is also intertwined with a classic theme in sociology, that is, the relationship between social stratification and attitudes (Kalmijn & Kraaykamp, 2007). In the 1960s, the debate about the embourgeoisement of the working class maintained that the growth of affluent workers was changing class identity. They

led to a homogenisation of lifestyles, attitudes and values with the middle class, a thesis that Goldthorpe et al. (1968) criticised.

The changes in the economy and labour market since the 1980s, resulting from what can be described as the transition to post-Fordism, have led to discussions on the relevance of the individual's position in social stratification in the development of lifestyles and attitudes (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1992; Beck et al., 1994; Giddens, 1991). The individuals construct their biography more autonomously.

Individualisation has called into question the centrality of social class. Some authors have dealt with the redefinition of the concept of social class, for example, the shift from an occupational-based social class position to one defined by the interplay between economic, social and cultural capital (Savage, 2015; Savage et al., 2013).

These changes also affect the reasons for unionisation. Trade unions are confronted with new challenges generated by a post-Fordist economy in which class boundaries and class identities are blurred (Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013). The working class itself has become more fragmented due to changes in the organisation of work, inspired by flexibility, the growth of non-standard employment and the externalisation of activities. Whether class identity still has an ideological connotation today is a matter of debate (Evans & Tilley, 2017).

The paper aims to examine whether politics is still an important determinant of union membership. Both attitudes and behaviour will be considered. The former is studied by looking at interest in politics and political orientation.

Political orientation recalls the collective reasons that have historically underpinned unionisation. The collective reasons are mainly linked to normative and value aspects, such as mutual support, attitudes towards inequality (Checchi et al., 2010), aspiration to be treated fairly and to be rewarded appropriately and belief in union organisation. Collective reasons also include the so-called 'moral' power resources (Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013); that is, a coherent social vision and the ability to inspire activists are still important to obtain and retain members. The organisational power of the union is not only based on recruitment and membership numbers but also on members' identification with the union, its goals and actions (Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013).

Now, the reasons for joining a trade union are changing. Individual reasons seem to be more important than collective ones. The literature on trade union revitalisation strategies (e.g., Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013; Mundlak, 2020) mentions the need for trade unions to reinvent themselves to provide individual services and benefits to members.

When the unions rethink their strategies for recruiting and retaining members, are collective reasons still important, as Waddington has argued (Waddington, 2015; Waddington & Whitston, 1997)?

The relationship between political attitudes and union membership deserves to be studied because recent research results are not conclusive. In research based on multivariate analyses, political attitudes are often only one of several variables used. It is limited to voting to the left (Checchi & Visser, 2005) or political self-placement on the left-right scale (Ebbinghaus et al., 2011; Kirmanoğlu & Başlevent, 2012; Schnabel & Wagner, 2007).

According to Checchi and Visser (2005) (pool of time-series and cross-section data from different sources, 1950–1996), left voting and unionisation tend to be unrelated over time. According to Schnabel and Wagner (2007) (ESS data 2002/2003), only in a few European countries did a left-wing ideological orientation increase the probability of union membership. Based on a survey of 19 European countries (ESS data 2002/2003), Ebbinghaus et al. (2011) found that political self-placement had a moderate effect on unionisation.

On the other hand, a study of 28 European countries by Kirmanoğlu and Başlevent (2012) (ESS data 2010) showed that being on the left increased the probability of being a trade union member. Looking at some studies that focus on politics, for Kollmeyer (2013) (data World Value Survey [WVS] 2010 of 12 industrialised countries), civic and political participation and left-leaning political orientation are positively correlated with union membership. In Sweden, according to Palm (2020) (data from Society, Public Opinion and Mass Media Survey SOM 1986–2015), the influence on unionisation of aspects related to class identity and ideology is decreasing. However, the trend is not valid for all categories of employees. Blue-collar workers, individuals from blue-collar homes and those with a left-leaning ideology are more likely to be unionised than white-collar workers and those with a right-wing ideology.

The first research question is whether ideological orientation is still an important determinant of unionisation. Furthermore, is the political drift to the right also a challenge for the trade unions?

On this issue, as said, the literature has focused mainly on changes in the electoral behaviour of the working class and the difficulties of left-wing parties in representing it (Arndt & Rennwald, 2017; Evans & Tilley, 2017; Mosimann et al., 2019; Rennwald, 2020; Telford & Wistow, 2020).

To focus only on political attitudes risks being reductive. It is also worth looking at political behaviour. Reference will be made to political participation: Is it a determinant of unions membership?

Political participation recalls the collective reasons for unionisation too. It presupposes civicness, an interest in public affairs, community and an orientation towards collective action (Putnam, 2000), which can be assumed to be conducive to unionisation. The logic of organising, which is increasingly seen as decisive for trade unions, requires a union's mobilising capacity (Frege & Kelly, 2003; Mundlak, 2020). That is, daily practices aimed at fostering the active participation of workers. Therefore, it is interesting to see whether individuals who are inclined towards political action are more likely to unionise.

The final aim of the paper is to examine whether the relationship between political attitudes, behaviour and union membership has changed over time. Changes over time tend to be neglected in cross-sectional studies that focus mainly on cross-national comparisons. Instead, it can be assumed that the relationships between the determinants of unionisation also change over time and not only in space (Machin, 2004).

3 | DATA AND VARIABLES

The analysis concerns the UK and is based on ESS data. The time span goes from 2002 to 2018, and it covers the nine rounds of the UK survey (from 2002, Round 1, to 2018, Round 9).

Only individuals who were employed at the time of the interview, who numbered 20,982,³ were considered.

After the descriptive analysis, the relationship between political attitudes and behaviour and union membership was studied through a multivariate analysis with binomial logistic regression.

The causal relationship between the two variables was not unidirectional (Hadziabdic & Baccaro, 2020; Kollmeyer, 2013; Schnabel, 2002) because political attitudes and behaviour can foster unionisation and vice versa. For example, Turner et al. (2020) studied whether unionisation increases political participation. Through a longitudinal study, Hadziabdic and Baccaro (2020) showed that unionisation is a dynamic process that leads individuals to form

and change their attitudes. Thus, there is a selection effect (unions attract like-minded individuals) and a moulding effect (union membership can change the attitudes of affiliates).

In the research presented here, union membership is the dependent variable. However, we are aware that there is a risk of simplifying complex processes over time that lead to the formation of attitudes and behaviour.

The question was the following: 'Are you or have you ever been a member of a trade union or similar organisation?' It contains ambiguities in the sense that it is not clear what similar organisations are. In the multivariate analysis, the variable was dichotomised, distinguishing between current members and those who were not members or had previously been members.

The main independent variables were related to politics, and two questions were considered for attitudes:

- Where would one place herself on the left–right scale (0 left, 10 right)?
- How interested in politics (very, quite, hardly, not at all interested)?

The behaviour was analysed by looking at political participation. An index ranging from 0 to 8 was constructed to measure political participation, looking at eight questions (yes or no answers) concerning various forms of political participation.⁴ Control variables were the traditional socio-demographic variables (gender, age and years of education), social class, sector and a question on the feeling about the household income (living comfortably on present income, coping on present income vs. difficult/very difficult to live on present income).

Social class was defined with reference to the European Socio-economic Classification (EseC) (Rose & Harrison, 2007), combining the codification of occupations (Isco88 and Isco08) and employment status (employers, self-employed and employees). For reasons of parsimony, the classification into three classes was used: salariat (or service class according to the EGP scheme), intermediate (or middle class) and working class.

Regarding employment, two sectors were identified based on the NACE code: (a) services and (b) industry and agriculture, forestry and fishing. As is typical with pooled cross-section data, time dummy variables (for each year except one, 2002) have been used to analyse change over time. Interactions between time dummies and left–right self-placement and a political participation index have been added. Data analysis was performed using jamovi 1.6.23.

As shown in Table 1, the sample of respondents consisted of 55.7% men and 44.3% women.

The mean age was 41.3 (SD = 12.8, $N = 20,826$, missing 156). The mean for years of education was 14.1 (SD = 3.5, $N = 20,794$, missing 188). The distribution by social classes showed salariat at 13.8%, intermediate at 49.9% and working class at 36.3%; 77.2% were employed in services and 22.8% in industry and agriculture, forestry and fishing (respectively 21.4% and 1.4%). Finally, the feeling about the household income was living comfortably on present income at 43.0%, coping on present income at 44.6%, difficult to live on present income at 10.1% and very difficult on present income at 1.8%.

4 | UNION MEMBERSHIP, POLITICAL ATTITUDES AND PARTICIPATION: SOME TRENDS

Before moving on to multivariate analysis, we present a descriptive analysis of the main variables concerning union membership, political attitudes and behaviour. The union members were 22.2%, previously members 17.5% and non-members 60.2% (0.1% refusal, no answer, do

TABLE 1 The socio-demographic profile of the interviewees (percentage values)

Gender	%
Male	55.7
Female	44.3
Total	100.0
<i>N</i>	20,982
Social class	
Salariat	13.8
Intermediate	49.9
Working class	36.3
Total	100.0
<i>N</i>	20,295
Missing	687
Sector	
Industry and agriculture, forestry and fishing	22.8
Service	77.2
Total	100.0
<i>N</i>	20,465
Missing	517
Feeling about household's income	
Living comfortably on present income	43.0
Coping on present income	44.6
Difficult on present income	10.1
Very difficult on present income	1.8
Refusal, no answer, do not know	0.5
Total	100.0
<i>N</i>	20,982

not know, $N = 20,982$). Because the data concerned only those employed at the time of the interview, the percentage of members coincided with the union density, which is the ratio of union members to wage and salary earners. Based on the ESS survey, union density in the UK is underestimated compared with OECD (administrative data): The average difference over the years considered is -4.08% .

Between 2002 and 2018, the percentage of union members dropped from 26.4% to 17.7% in 2018 (Figure 1). Previously members also declined from 19.1% to 14.7%. Those who had never been union members increased from 54.5% to 67.6%.

The sample was divided concerning interest in politics: Those who said they were very or quite interested (55.7%, respectively 12.8% and 42.9%) prevailed over those who were hardly or not at all interested (44.2%, respectively 28.6% and 15.6%, $N = 20,982$). The value showed variations over the period considered, ranging from 53.3% who said they were very or quite

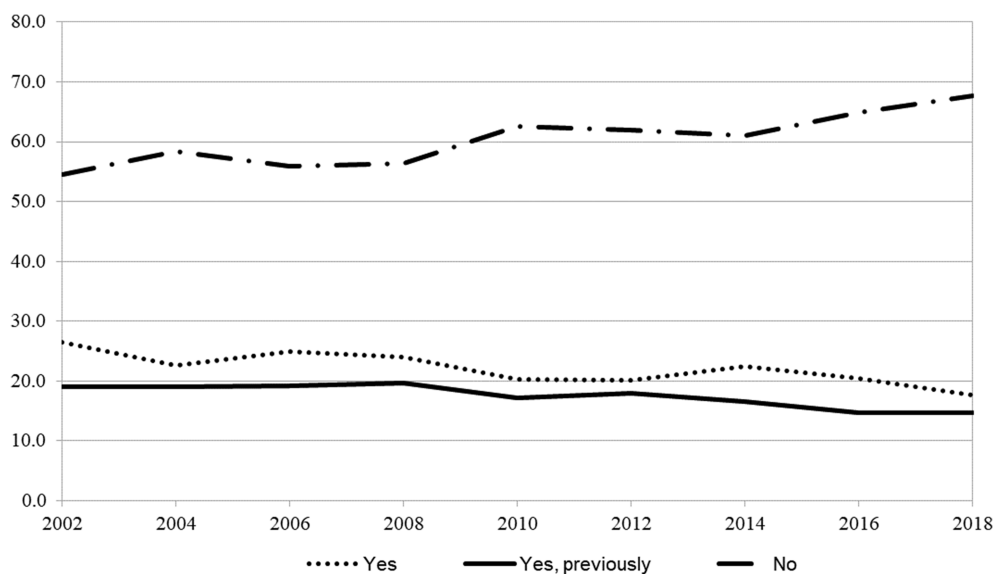


FIGURE 1 Trends in union membership in the UK, 2002–2018 (percentage values)

interested in 2002 to 56.2% in 2018. As expected, it reached the highest value in 2016, the year of the Brexit referendum: 65.5% said they were very or quite interested in politics; the lowest value was 48.7% in 2012.

Political orientation was studied by looking at two variables: score concerning self-placement on the left–right scale; percentage values indicating a left placement score ranged from 0 to 3, centre a score from 4 to 6 and right a score from 7 to 10. On the left–right scale, self-placement had a median⁵ of 5.0 (centre), which remained stable over the time considered ($N = 18,868$, missing 2114). Concerning the percentage values, the centre was at 65.9%, the left at 17.3% and the right at 16.8%.

Unlike the median, which did not change over time, the percentages showed some variation in political orientation between 2002 and 2018 (Figure 2). The centre reached the highest value in 2004 (71.7%), the left in 2018 (23.0%) and the right in 2014 (19.9%). The centre and the right had a lower value in 2018 than in 2002. The left, instead, showed a growing trend. The trend was towards a shift to the left (+10% in 2018 compared with 2002, centre -6.7% and right -3.3%). In the two most recent surveys (2016 and 2018), both those who consider themselves to be left-wing and right-wing were increasing.

The political participation index had a rather low mean value (1.72, $SD = 1.46$, $N = 20,982$). It showed minor variations over time and ranged from 1.85 in 2002 (highest value) to 1.82 in 2018. The lowest value was 1.49 in 2010. The two most practised forms of political participation were voting (67.5%) and signing petitions during the last 12 months (41.2%); the least practised were ‘worked in a political party or action group during last 12 months’ (2.5%) and ‘taken part in a lawful public demonstration during last 12 months’ (5.0%). The index of political participation and the index of political self-placement on the left–right scale were negatively correlated. The value of Spearman’s ρ was -0.061 ($p < 0.001$), which means that those who defined themselves as left-wing tended, albeit slightly, to have a greater propensity for political participation.

Overall, the analysis of the descriptive variables revealed different trends in union membership and political attitudes and behaviour. Union membership declined between 2002 and

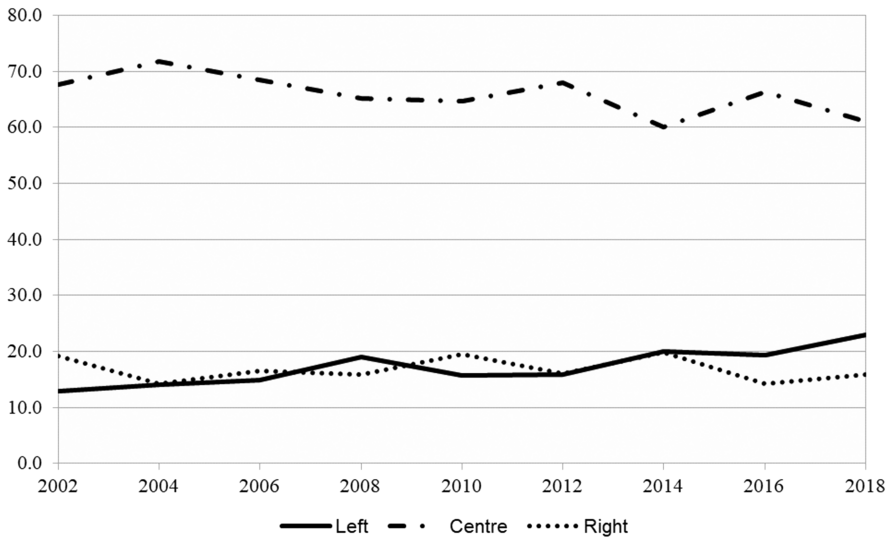


FIGURE 2 Trends in political orientation in the UK, 2002–2018 (percentage values)

2018. The sample of respondents showed a polarisation regarding interest in politics, although those who defined themselves as very/quite interested prevailed. Interest in politics did not translate into political participation, which was rather low and, for many, was limited to voting.

The ideological orientation on the left–right scale indicated a clear prevalence of centrist positions. In looking at the percentage values, the share of those who defined themselves as left-wing and right-wing was similar.

5 | YES, POLITICS STILL MATTERS

Following the descriptive analysis, the relationship between political attitudes and behaviour and unionisation was analysed through multivariate analysis (binomial logistic regression).

As stated, the dependent variable was union membership, dichotomised (yes, member vs. yes, previously member, and no, member). Three models were built. The first one included only variables related to political attitudes and behaviour (interest in politics, self-placement on the left–right scale and political participation index). In the second model, control variables were added: gender, age, age squared to test whether union membership had a quadratic trend with age, years of education, social class, sector and feeling about household income (dummy: 1 difficult/very difficult to live on present income, 0 living comfortably/coping on present income). In the third model, changes over time were analysed through dummy variables (for each year except 2002) and interactions between time dummies and left–right self-placement and political participation index.

Based on AIC (Akaike information criterion), the best model was the third one (Table 2).

Multivariate analysis confirmed that unionisation is a process in which various determinants come into play. Starting from politics-related variables, interest in politics did not affect unionisation. In Model 3, unlike the first two models, interest in politics was not a significant predictor of union membership. Instead, both self-placement on the left–right scale and political participation were.

TABLE 2 Determinants of trade union membership in the UK, 2002–2018 (binary logistic regression)

	Model 1	Exp b	Model 2	Exp b	Model 3	Exp b
Intercept	−1.265***	0.282	−5.594***	0.004	−5.054***	0.006
Left–right placement	−0.103***	0.903	−0.095***	0.910	−0.140***	0.870
Political participation index	0.246***	1.278	0.183***	1.201	0.147***	1.159
Interested in politics (ref. very)						
Quite	0.161**	1.174	0.136*	1.146	0.101	1.106
Hardly	0.167**	1.182	0.151*	1.163	0.111	1.117
Not at all	−0.016	0.984	−0.045	0.956	−0.077	0.926
Age			0.166***	1.181	0.163***	1.778
Age ²			−0.002***	0.998	−0.002***	0.998
Years of education			0.048***	1.049	0.057***	1.058
Gender (ref. male)						
Female			0.311***	1.365	0.307***	1.360
Social class (ref. working class)						
Salarial			−1.089***	0.337	−1.149***	0.317
Intermediate			−0.091*	0.914	−0.085	0.918
Sector (ref. service)						
Industry, agriculture, forestry and fishing			−0.475***	0.622	−0.499***	0.607
Household's income (dummy: 1 difficult/very difficult)			−0.379***	0.684	−0.364***	0.695
Year (dummy)						
2004					−0.051	0.945
2006					−0.612*	0.542
2008					−0.450	0.638
2010					−0.786**	0.456
2012					−0.721*	0.486
2014					−0.456	0.634
2016					−0.953***	0.386
2018					−0.948***	0.387
Left–right placement*2004					0.021	1.021
Left–right placement*2006					0.034	1.034
Left–right placement*2008					0.050	1.052
Left–right placement*2010					0.070	1.072
Left–right placement*2012					2.28e ^{−4}	0.100
Left–right placement*2014					0.005	1.005
Left–right placement*2016					0.111*	1.118
Left–right placement*2018					0.045	1.046
Political participation index*2004					−0.106*	0.900

TABLE 2 (Continued)

	Model 1	Exp <i>b</i>	Model 2	Exp <i>b</i>	Model 3	Exp <i>b</i>
Political participation index*2006					0.154***	1.166
Political participation index*2008					0.045	1.046
Political participation index*2010					0.088	1.092
Political participation index*2012					0.106*	1.112
Political participation index*2014					0.034	1.034
Political participation index*2016					-0.064	0.938
Political participation index*2018					0.020	1.020
AIC	18,808		17,789		17,638	

Abbreviation: AIC, Akaike information criterion.

* $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$.

As is known, interpreting odds ratios (exp *b*) is not intuitive and straightforward. In the first case, the odds ratio had a value of less than 1 (0.87), and, therefore, the relationship was negative. The more the orientation was to the left (0), the greater the probability of joining the union (and vice versa if the orientation was to the right). In the case of political participation, the odds had a value greater than one (1.16), and, therefore, the relationship was positive.⁶

Regarding the changes over time, the declining trend in unionisation was confirmed. As expected, the odds of the dummy year (reference is 2002) were significant apart for three years (2004, 2008 and 2014). The odds were less than 1. Therefore, the trend over time towards a reduction in the odds of being a union membership prevailed.

When looking at the interaction of the year with the self-placement on the left–right scale and the political participation index, stability over time prevailed. In 2016, however, compared with 2002, the odds of joining the union increased the more one moved to the right (exp *b* 1.12). It is a datum that is difficult to interpret as it concerns only one year.

In the case of political participation, the odds were significant in three years only: 2004, 2006 and 2012. In the former, the odds were less than 1 (exp *b* 0.90), and, therefore, political participation reduced the odds of being a union member compared with 2002. In 2006 and 2012, the odds had a value greater than 1 (exp *b* is 1.67 and 1.12, respectively), and, therefore, political participation increased the propensity to be union members. Stability prevailed here too.

The analysis of policy-related variables showed that ideological orientation and political participation were predictors of union membership and not the interest in politics. In the UK, being left-wing increases the odds of union membership. Political participation also has a positive effect on the odds of union membership. Contrary to what one might expect, stability over time prevails for both variables, as shown by the fact that the odds of the interaction between time dummy and left–right self-placement and political participation index were not significant in most cases.

Multivariate analysis confirmed that other variables were also determinants of unionisation.

Starting with the socio-demographic variables, the fact that the age and age squared coefficients were positive and negative confirmed that the relationship between age and unionisation follows an inverted U-shaped pattern (Blanchflower, 2007). Union membership tends to increase with age (Machin, 2004; Visser, 2019). According to ESS data, in the UK, the mean age

of respondents was lower in the case of non-members (38.3, SD = 12.8, $N = 12,533$, missing 97), compared with both members (44.5, SD = 11.2, $N = 4622$, missing 33) and former members (47.5, SD = 11.6, $N = 3642$, missing 24). Although there was an upward trend in the mean age for all three groups between 2002 and 2018, the increase in mean age was lower for non-members (2002: 37.4; 2018–2002: +1.9) than for members (2002: 43.3; 2018–2002: +2.8) and former members (2002: 45.2; 2018–2002: +4.3).

Years of education (exp b 1.06) and being a woman (exp b 1.36) increased the odds of being a union member. In terms of social class, being a salariat (exp b 0.32) reduced the odds of being a union member compared with the working class. The odds of being intermediate compared with the working class were not significant. The trend towards the ‘tertiarisation’ of union membership was confirmed by the odds of industry and agriculture, forestry and fishing versus services, which was less than 1 (exp b 0.61).

The feeling on household income also affected unionisation: Contrary to what one might expect, those who felt it was difficult/very difficult to live on their then present income had lower odds of being unionised (exp b 0.70).

To summarise, the relationship between age and unionisation followed an inverted U-shaped pattern. Being a woman, the number of years of education and being employed in the tertiary sector, that is, variables that can lead to changes in labour force composition in terms of gender, education level and sector, did not seem to hinder the propensity towards union membership.

Recent trends are in line with what happened in the UK at the beginning of the new century (Bryson & Gomez, 2005; Machin, 2004). The rise of women's unionisation seems to be an established phenomenon in the UK. The same can be said about the trend towards a greater propensity to unionise among the better educated.

In terms of social class, the literature has noted that the decline in unionisation in recent years mainly affected the working class in some countries (Palm, 2020; Schnabel & Wagner, 2007). The data analysis has shown that the odds of joining a trade union are lower for the salariat than for the working class in the UK. At the same time, there are no differences in propensity to union membership between the intermediate and the working class. A situation of economic difficulty for the family reduces the propensity to join the union.

6 | CONCLUSIONS

The decline of unionisation has continued in the UK in recent years, making an investigation into the reasons for union membership relevant. The article aimed to analyse whether and how the relationship between politics-related variables (attitudes and participation) linked to the collective reasons for unionisation, and union membership has changed over time (between 2002 and 2018).

Multivariate analysis confirmed that several variables could explain union membership at the micro level (Ebbinghaus & Visser, 1999; Schnabel, 2002, 2013, 2020; Schnabel & Wagner, 2007; Visser, 2002, 2019; Waddington, 2015). They are socio-demographic variables (age, gender and years of education), social class, the sector in which one is employed and the feeling about the household's income. Political attitudes (not the interest in politics but being left-wing) and participation are determinants of unionisation, too. Collective motives are still crucial for union member acquisition and retention.

The relationship between politics and unionisation shows several critical issues. For example, when considering political orientation, in the UK, a centrist political orientation prevails. Political participation (at least in its traditional forms, which are those considered in the ESS survey) is low. The logic of organising (Frege & Kelly, 2003; Mundlak, 2020) also risks being undermined by a low propensity for political participation.

In the UK, politics still matters, but it does not seem to be one of the key determinants of unionisation.

When looking at changes over time, according to ESS data, between 2002 and 2018, stability prevailed in the case of politics-related predictors. Stability concerns the odds of being a union member given the interaction between the time dummy and left–right self-placement and the political participation index.

Stability marks a difference from what emerged from the debate in the UK on ideological orientation and electoral behaviour. It concerns working-class vote (Arndt & Rennwald, 2017; Evans & Tilley, 2017; Rennwald, 2020; Telford & Wistow, 2020). In analyses that often consider a longer time than our research, the emphasis has been on change. The link of the working class with left or centre–left parties has weakened, and its electoral behaviour is described as fluid and subject to change. For Evans and Tilley (2017), left–right ideological positions, based mainly on class, no longer predict vote choices as before.

We can assume that union membership and voting are two different actions. If one looks at the relationship with an organisation, the former has stronger underlying motivations (which can be various, as seen for the trade unions). Membership presupposes a strong sense of belonging and identification with the organisation of which one becomes a member. Conversely, one can also vote for civicism. Moreover, while membership responds to a logic of loyalty to the organisation (Hirschman, 1970), voting (or abstaining) can also be a way of expressing dissent. In the UK, the non-voting of the working class for Labour, according to some authors (Evans & Tilley, 2017; Telford & Wistow, 2020), is a way of expressing dissatisfaction with the political offer, the political positions followed by the party and its inability to represent the interests of the working class. Finally, the difference between union membership and voting can also be due to the different roles of unions and parties (Rennwald, 2020). Unions defend the interests of workers in the workplace and the economy. They can be perceived as being closer to workers. Parties represent a plurality of interests, not just those of workers. They try to broaden consensus by representing different social groups.

Changes over time in the relationship between politics and union membership need to be further explored. An analysis based on pooled cross-sectional data presupposes a static relationship between the variables. It assumes that the union attracts and keeps like-minded individuals. Longitudinal studies may help better investigate the dynamic relationship between political attitudes, behaviour and unionisation (Hadziabdic & Baccaro, 2020).

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Interpreting the vote in the Brexit referendum by looking only at social class may be oversimplified. Other variables seem important, such as age or territory: think of London, Scotland and Northern Ireland where Remain prevailed. Voting in a referendum differs from voting in an election, as it is less linked to allegiance to a party. Furthermore, the Labour Party showed ambiguities despite its official position in favour of Remain.
- ² In several countries (e.g., Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands), some unions' ideological identity has been political and religious, even if it has been attenuated over time (Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013).
- ³ As recommended, data were weighed using anweight (analysis weight). The respondents per year are as follows: 2002: 2728; 2004: 2088; 2006: 2809; 2008: 1910; 2010: 2032; 2012: 2055; 2014: 2312; 2016: 2521; and 2018: 2527.
- ⁴ The forms of participation are the following: voted in last national election, contacted politician or government official during last 12 months, worked in a political party or action group during last 12 months, worked in another organisation or association during last 12 months, worn or displayed campaign badge/sticker during last 12 months, signed petition during last 12 months, have taken part in a lawful public demonstration during last 12 months and boycotted certain products during last 12 months.
- ⁵ The score concerning political self-placement is sometimes considered a cardinal variable. We think it is more accurate to consider it ordinal.
- ⁶ A one-point increase on the left–right scale reduces the odds of being a union member by -13% ($0.87 - 1$)*100, whereas a one-point increase in the political participation index increases the odds of being a union member by 16% ($1.16 - 1$)*100.

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