

Job (Dis)Satisfaction and Voting Behavior. Long-term Trends across Advanced Democracies

Paulus Wagner¹ & Bruno Palier²

¹ European University Institute, ² Science Po Paris

This paper strikes a bridge between labor sociology and political sociology by enquiring how transformations in the world of work impact the political outlook of the employed. The organization of work has undergone tremendous change over the recent decades, yet our understanding of how this impacts on the political outlook of the employed is still incomplete. Extensive literature in political economy shows that globalization, automatization and sectoral change have impacted labor markets and formal working conditions (e.g. contract types), what has led to political feedback effects (e.g. Oesch 2008; Emmenegger et al. 2012; Rovny/Rovny 2017; Schwander 2019; Im et al. 2019; Kurer/Palier 2019; Kurer 2020). This literature has left surprisingly untouched, however, the blackbox of what happens at work, i.e. inside firms and in everyday job experience. This comes as the literature in sociology of work and organization documents major developments, not rarely of detrimental nature, in work organization, management practices, job quality, and wellbeing at work over the recent decades (Fligstein 1993; Cappelli et al. 1997; Kalleberg 2011; Bezes 2020; Ó Riain & Healy 2023; Kelly & Moen 2023; Palier et al. 2023). Work being a site where people spend much of their awake time, gain a sense of social status and recognition, of efficacy, security and fairness – or on the contrary, experience powerlessness, insecurity, and injustice – job experience seems predestined to show a formative impact on political outlooks, including on major political phenomena of our time such as support for populism.

We hence ask: how does job (dis-)satisfaction inform the political outlook of the workforce? Drawing on the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP)'s work orientations modules, which have been repeatedly fielded from the 1980s until the 2010s, we show that the politicization of work-related worries in advanced democracies has considerably transformed in the course of the recent decades. While during the late 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, work dissatisfaction has been a predictor of voting for political parties left of center, in the 2010s, the far right has become a major electoral beneficiary of work dissatisfaction across West European and North America. We develop and test potential explanations of this finding. Contrary to our expectations, we do not find evidence that increasing work dissatisfaction among subgroups has bolstered populist preferences. On the contrary, we find evidence that economic ideologies such as unionism and producerism mediate the politicization of work dissatisfaction. Looking to the political supply- side, we propose that left- and right-wing parties' changing economic ideologies may have driven historical changes in the politicization of work.

Further steps in the development of this paper will include examining country- and institutional- regime specific trajectories. Moreover, while we use job (dis-)satisfaction as a global indicator of job quality and wellbeing at work, we are further going to test the political effects of distinct subdimensions of work satisfaction (e.g. stress, control, recognition, security, etc.).

Overall, our paper aims to make a distinct contribution to the literature on political effects of 'great' socio-economic transformations by enquiring into a hitherto little studied factor of political views: the wellbeing and satisfaction of employees at work.