



*The continuing decline of workers' voice threatens democracy at work."*

# Democracy at work

## Workers' voice continues to weaken in Europe

The 2019 update of the European Participation Index (EPI), a measure of the strength of workers' voice in companies, shows that the overall trend continues to be downward. The ability of workers to voice their opinions and interests collectively vis-à-vis management is a critical element needed for the functioning of democracy at work. A key pillar of the European social model is thus being weakened at a time when it is most needed.

The EPI is a multi-dimensional measure of collective worker representation at a number of levels: at the workplace, through trade union membership and collective bargaining, and in company boards. It is designed to measure the strength of workers' voice through these various channels in different European countries:

- The workplace representation component measures the percentage of workers who have a representative at the establishment level.
- The collective bargaining component measures the percentage of workers who are members of trade unions and who are represented by trade unions in collective bargaining.
- The board-level employee representation (BLER) component measures the strength of workers' rights to be represented on company boards.

This decline is particularly disturbing given that the EU is supposed to guarantee workers' rights to collective representation, and that democracy at work has considerable benefits for workers, companies and society as a whole. As documented in earlier Benchmarking Working Europe reports (ETUC and ETUI 2011, 2017, 2018, 2019) and at various points in this chapter, a high EPI is on average associated with a wide range of positive outcomes, including a greater share of national income for workers (wage share), higher employment levels and productivity, stronger political democracy, and higher expenditure on research and development.

The continued decline in the EPI comes at a time when democracy at work is sorely needed to help companies and societies deal with the key challenges of our time: digitalisation, the transition to a low-carbon economy (see Chapter 3), the Covid-19 crisis, and threats to democracy. In the interests of better coping with these challenges, trade unions and policy-makers should act to strengthen workers' voice at all levels.



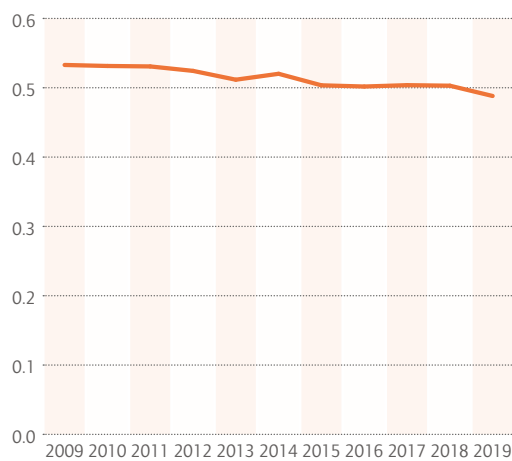
*A key pillar of the European social model is being weakened at a time when it is most needed."*

### The European Participation Index

The EPI is calculated from data from a number of sources. Since the early 2000s, the ETUI has been monitoring workers' rights to board-level employee representation (BLER) and codes countries each year based on the strength of these rights. The percentage of workers belonging to trade unions (trade union density) and the percentage of workers represented by trade unions (collective bargaining coverage) is calculated by the Amsterdam Institute for Advanced Labour Studies (AIAS)(ICTWSS Database version 6.0). The percentage of workers with formal collective representation at the workplace level is derived from large-scale company surveys done by Eurofound (the European Company Survey) and EU-OSHA (the ESENER survey), the latest wave for each survey having been carried out in 2019. For a visualisation of the EPI and its relationship with a number of outcomes.

See [www.europeanparticipationindex.eu](http://www.europeanparticipationindex.eu).

**Figure 6.1** European Participation Index for the EU-28, 2009-2019



Source: Author's own calculations.

As Figure 6.1 above shows, the overall EU-wide EPI has continued to decline in the past few years, to below 0.5 in 2019 for the first time since the EPI has been calculated. The overall trend in the EPI has been downward since 2009. The only exception in this trend was 2014, as a result of France considerably strengthening the right of worker representation in company boards.

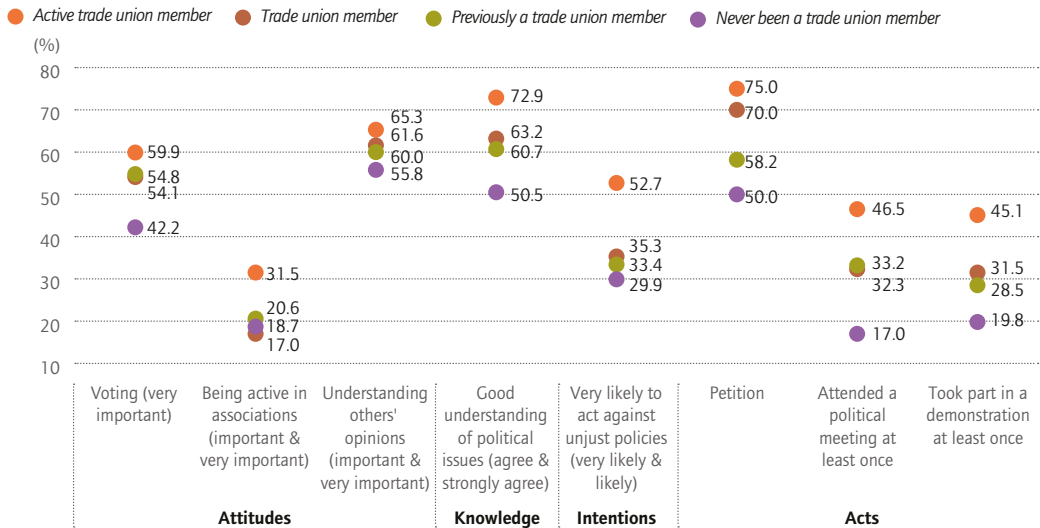
## Trade unions, the schools of democracy

The challenge of getting through and beyond the health, social and economic crises caused by the Covid-19 pandemic will continue to require policymakers to develop measures and solutions that are equitable and inclusive. Measures such as the obligation to wear masks or to shutter businesses have been met with protests and have given rise to important conversations about the balance between public health, personal liberty and entrepreneurial freedom.



Trade union members are more involved in political democracy.”

**Figure 6.2** Active unions, vibrant democracies : Union membership is associated with democratic attitudes, knowledge, intentions and activities



Data source: ISSP 2014 (only EU countries selected plus Norway and Switzerland), unweighted data

Citizens will need to continue to engage with other social actors and governments, and it is here that trade unions and the exercise of democracy at work actually serve to foster the exercise of civic democracy. Political organisations, according to De Tocqueville (2000 [1835-1840], 493) are 'great schools, free of charge' and essential for democratic societies. Through organisations such as trade unions, citizens learn about the importance and practice of democratic decision-making, compromising, and respecting different opinions, but also of the importance of standing up for one's own opinion and view.

Democracy is about more than just voting in the occasional election. Robust democracies are also characterised by critical citizens, active civil societies and public debate about political issues. Unfortunately, recent events show that in some countries, the definition of democracy is being narrowed down to the regular ritual of 'free elections' without the necessary freedom of speech, free press, open debate and freedom of association.

Trade unions are arguably perfect examples of 'great schools' for genuinely democratic societies, as they go hand-in-hand with pro-democracy attitudes, knowledge about political issues, intentions to take political action, and action itself. These associations are illustrated above, using data from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), and more specifically its 2014 wave on citizenship. This survey is conducted in 34 countries, of which 19 were selected for the figure above (Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Sweden, Slovenia, Slovakia and the United Kingdom). The data was also limited to respondents who were employees.

In this survey, the respondents were not only asked whether they were members of a trade union, but also whether they were active members. In total, 6.3% said they were active members, 21.7% that they were members, 25.1% that they used to be

members, and 47% that they had never been a member of a trade union.

Focusing first on the attitudes, the survey asked to which degree the respondents found the following issues important: voting in the elections, being active in social or political associations, and understanding the reasoning of people with other opinions. Comparing trade union members and non-members, it appears that active trade union members attach a higher importance to these three issues than do ordinary members, previous members, and, lastly, non-members. These figures are in line with a range of previous studies which showed that trade union members are more likely to vote and have more pro-democracy attitudes (Hadziabdic and Baccaro, 2020).

Regarding knowledge about political issues, trade unions inform their members (and mostly their active members) directly through their publications and communications, but also indirectly through workplace discussion on political issues (Macdonald 2019). The ISSP data show that active trade union members are more likely to agree that they have a good understanding of political issues compared to ordinary members, previous members and, lastly, non-members.

Having pro-democratic attitudes and a level of knowledge about politics is already something, but the question is also whether citizens are willing to engage in activities to defend their interests and views. In the survey, it was asked whether the respondents were likely to act if their country would pass legislation that was, in their perception, harmful or unjust. Over half of the active union members expressed such an intention to take action. Compared to this, only just over a third of the ordinary union members or previous members had the same intention and even fewer of the non-members did.

Lastly, actual citizen action was surveyed by asking if the respondents ever signed petitions, attended political meetings or joined demonstrations. Again, a clear difference can be observed, with active trade



Active trade union members are more likely to agree that they have a good understanding of political issues compared to ordinary members.”

union members being much more likely to have participated in political activities than were ordinary members, previous members and lastly, again, non-members.

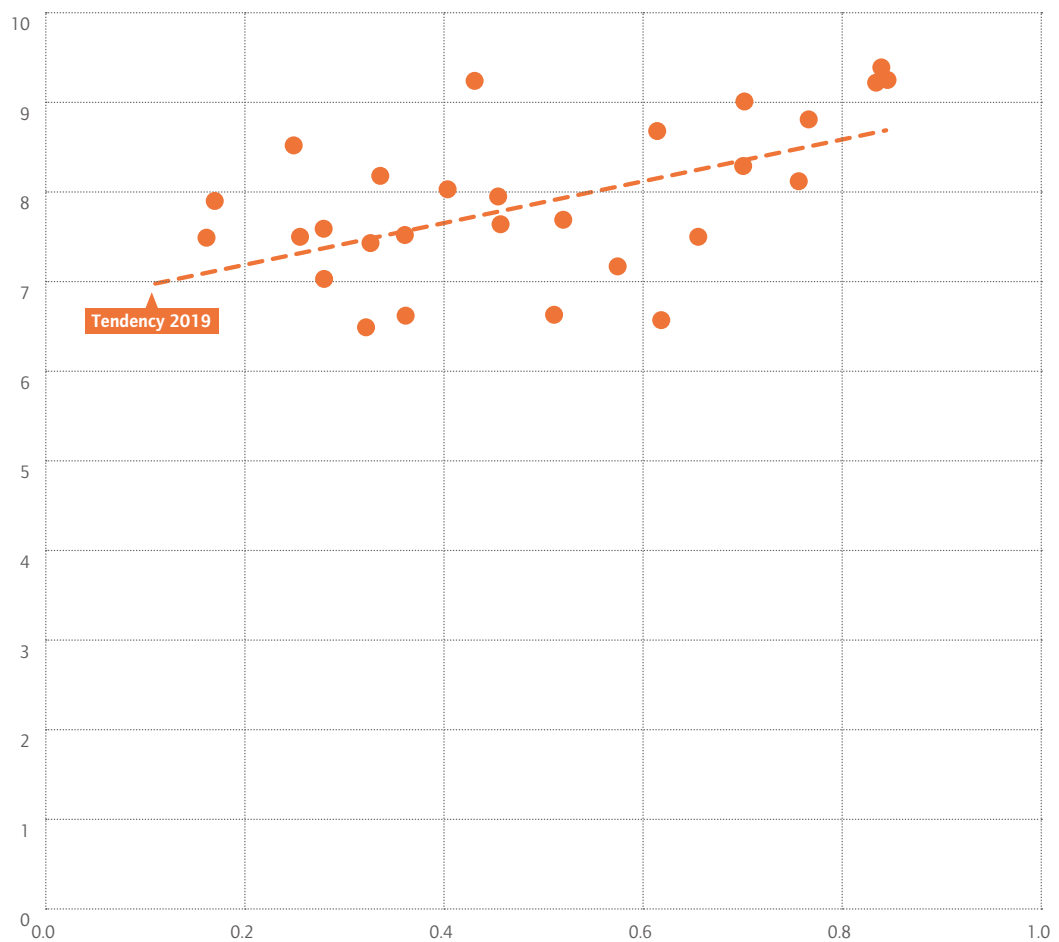
Obviously, the key question is whether trade unions really breed pro-democracy attitudes and actions, or rather they attract people that already have such attitudes. With this data, one cannot establish whether the effect is due to selection only, but other studies have modelled this and concluded that both effects are present, and that trade unions even shape attitudes before people join them (Hadziabdic and Baccaro 2020).

Not only on the individual level is there a relation between trade unionism and political democracy, but also on the national level. On page 140 (Fig 6.1), the European Participation Index (EPI) was introduced as an index reflecting the degree of voice employees have in companies. Figure 6.3 shows that those countries in which employees have a high degree of

voice in companies also score high on the democracy index developed by the periodical *The Economist*. This democracy index reflects the degree to which a country has a majority-based government and free and fair elections, and guarantees protection of minority rights and respect of human rights, among other related indicators.

The observations of De Tocqueville from the 1800s thus continue to have relevance in this context. In those countries where participation is part of the workplace experience, be it through trade unions, collective bargaining, workplace representation or board-level representation, democracies are more robust. Citizens engaged in these organisations also display more pro-democratic attitudes and actions. The gradual decrease in trade union density in Europe (Vandaele 2019 ; see also Chapter 4) should therefore not only be an economic or societal concern, but also a democratic one.

**Figure 6.3** More participation, better democracies



Data source: x-axis: European Participation Index (0-1), y-axis: The Economist Democracy Index (0-10). 2019. Only European countries selected.