



ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Determinants of Social Dialogue in European Countries (1980–2018)

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Received: 27 March 2023 | **Revised:** 12 November 2024 | **Accepted:** 22 November 2024

Keywords: employers | neo-corporatism | social dialogue | socio-economic policy | trade unions

ABSTRACT

This paper provides a quantitative assessment of the political and structural determinants of social dialogue in 25 European countries between 1980 and 2018 using a measure of social dialogue based on an original survey of industrial relations and social policy experts. We assess hypotheses on the role of structural (unionisation, employer organisation) and political (government partisanship, government strength) factors on the extent of cooperation between governments, trade unions and employers in public policymaking. We find a declining trend in the overall extent of social dialogue in the countries surveyed. Using panel regressions, we show that higher levels of social dialogue are more prevalent among governments where there is a balance of power between right-wing and left-wing parties, and thus where unions and employers can act as ‘brokers’ between left and right parties. We find no association between most structural factors (unionisation, collective bargaining coverage, employer organisation) and levels of social dialogue.

Article by an MPIfG researcher

Alexandre Afonso, Maximilian Kiecker, Pedro Goulart: Determinants of Social Dialogue in European Countries (1980-2018).

In: British Journal of Industrial Relations (published online December 1, 2024). Wiley-Blackwell
The original publication is available at the publisher's web site: <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjir.12863>

1 | Introduction

Cooperation between governments, trade unions and employer organisations has played an important role in the design and implementation of social and economic policies in many advanced industrialised countries. *Social dialogue*, defined by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) as ‘all types of negotiation, consultation or simply exchange of information between, or among, representatives of governments, employers and workers, on issues of common interest relating to economic and social policy’ (ILO 2020), can decisively influence social and economic outcomes, such as income inequality (Ahlquist 2017, p. 414), or influence the success or failure of government policy. Hamann, Johnston, and Kelly (2013) show for instance that the exclusion of trade unions from policymaking is an important predictor of political strikes, which can delay or block welfare and labour market reforms. It is thus important to understand why

and when governments involve labour unions and employers in social and economic policymaking, and when they do not.

Since the 1970s, a large body of research has explored the nature and drivers of social dialogue in its various incarnations: ‘neo-corporatism’ (a mode of governance where trade unions and employers are systematically involved in steering labour markets and public policymaking), ‘tripartism’, ‘policy concertation’, ‘social pacts’ (Afonso 2013; Avdagic 2010b; Baccaro 2003; Baccaro and Simoni 2008; Compston 1994; Ebbinghaus and Weishaupt 2021; Schmitter 1974; Siaroff 1999).¹ Yet, besides a few attempts (Baccaro and Simoni 2008; Compston 1994; Visser 2019), there has been scant quantitative evidence on the nature and drivers of social dialogue across countries and across time, especially regarding the processes conducted outside publicised forums (‘social pacts’). Efforts at quantifying trade union and employer involvement in economic governance have tended to focus on its

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structural dimension, namely collective bargaining structures or trade union membership (Kenworthy 2003; Siaroff 1999). Siaroff's (1999) widely cited effort from 25 years ago is one of the most encompassing and focused on these structural dimensions.

While there has been an extensive quantitative literature on 'social pacts' (Ahlquist 2010; Avdagic 2010a; Hamann and Kelly 2007, 2010), namely publicised events where employers, unions and governments formally agree on and advertise a set of explicit measures in labour, welfare or fiscal policy (Fajertag and Pochet 2000), social pacts only constitute a subset of the processes of cooperation between the state, employers and trade unions in policymaking. For instance, there have been no formalised social pacts in countries such as Austria or Denmark, while these are usually considered strongholds of social dialogue (Avdagic 2010a, p. 640).

There are reasons to believe that the driving logic of social dialogue writ large may differ from the logic of social pacts. On the one hand, social pacts may come about—but are not limited to—contexts where organised interests possess limited institutional capacity to coordinate the economy (e.g. in countries such as Ireland or Italy), and where they can act as a functional equivalent (Regini 2003, p. 259). Social dialogue, in contrast, is a staple of countries considered to be highly coordinated, and where the institutionalised embedding of organised interests in policymaking may make social pacts redundant. On the other hand, because of their publicised and public-facing nature, social pacts may be more driven by electoral incentives and signalling strategies besides their economic functions (Hamann and Kelly 2010). Meanwhile, social dialogue may be more driven by direct economic or policy objectives (e.g. bring inflation or unemployment down).

One of the reasons for the lack of a systematic analysis of the drivers of social dialogue over many cases and periods is the lack of an appropriate measure across time and across countries. In contrast to the industrial relations institutions usually associated with social dialogue (union density, union organisation or collective bargaining coverage) which can be measured with the help of various national sources of 'hard' data, the involvement of organised interests in policymaking is a fluid, 'soft' process often happening behind closed doors. If the public and discrete nature of social pacts makes them easier to measure quantitatively, the continuous and opaque nature of social dialogue makes it harder to measure in a way suitable for quantitative analysis.

In this paper, we provide a quantitative analysis of the political and structural determinants of social dialogue in European countries since 1980 using an original indicator of social dialogue based on an expert survey of social policy and industrial relations experts. Because social dialogue is difficult to measure with 'hard' indicators, we rely on expert assessments, drawing on approaches used elsewhere, for instance in the measurement of party positioning (see, e.g. Jolly et al. 2022). We assess the role of political factors, such as the political orientation and strength of government, controlling for economic variables and the structural underlying factors of this phenomenon such as trade union density. In line with existing literature on social pacts, we show that political factors play an important role in shaping the level of dialogue between governments, employers and trade

unions. In contrast, structural factors such as trade union or employer organisation are mostly decoupled from the occurrence and intensity of social dialogue, confirming previous literature (Baccaro 2003).

This paper contributes to the literature on comparative political economy and labour relations in advanced industrialised countries in three ways. First, it provides an original quantitative measure of social dialogue, contrasting it with other measures and testing it against existing theories that have rarely been presented together. Second, using a comparative analysis covering 25 countries over 40 years, it sheds new light on the factors that lead governments to cooperate with trade unions and employers in the making of public policies. Third, the paper draws on a method rarely used in industrial relations scholarship to provide an encompassing picture of the evolution and drivers of social dialogue over the last 40 years. Our measure of social dialogue can be used for further research and is made available for wider use.² In the following sections, we first outline a way to measure social dialogue and then explore possible determinants of its evolution over time.

2 | Measuring the Extent of Social Dialogue

Social dialogue can be defined as a process whereby governments 'share their policy-making prerogatives with trade unions and employer associations, not just informally by incorporating their inputs but also formally by setting up a bargaining table and engaging in negotiations with them over public policy' (Baccaro and Simoni 2008, p. 1). In the literature, the idea of social dialogue has been tightly linked to the older concept of (neo-)corporatism. However, while neo-corporatism primarily designated a type of *structure* of the interest group system—especially those representing the interests of labour and capital—characterised by monopolies of representation and hierarchy (Schmitter 1974; Streeck 1993), social dialogue focuses more on the *political process* of negotiation between these interest groups and the state in the daily routine of policymaking (see Lehmbruch (1984) on the idea of concertation). It must be emphasised that we focus here on policymaking and leave out the whole range of (bipartite) negotiations taking place between employers and unions over wages and collective bargaining. This is obviously a simplification given that many processes of social dialogue involve bilateral agreements supported or enabled by public authorities, but for purposes of clarity and ease of measurement, we adopt the same approach used by Baccaro and Simoni to focus on tripartite processes involving all three actors. We also focus on the stage of *policy formulation* for the sake of simplicity, and leave out the wide array of processes where social partners are involved in the implementation of policy and the management of specific social, employment or training schemes. Finally, we consider social dialogue for all sectors at the national level and do not differentiate across policy areas as Baccaro and Simoni have done for wage and welfare policies. The exercise of quantification that we engage in necessarily requires some level of simplification to be operational, and since we required the cooperation of experts on a voluntary basis to provide assessments, we opted for simplicity at the cost of detail. Further research and a more demanding effort of data collection would be required for a more granular analysis.

Following Falkner and Leiber (2004), we consider that social dialogue in policy formulation can be measured as a continuum defined by the level of autonomy of the government vis-à-vis organised interests in policymaking, ranging from the total autonomy of the government without any involvement of organised interests—at the minimum level—to the required consent of organised interest for policies to happen at all—at the maximal level (Falkner and Leiber 2004, p. 249). We draw on this conceptualisation to elaborate a typology of the extent of social dialogue:

1. **No involvement**—trade unions and employers are not involved: The government makes policy alone.
2. **Consultation**—the government consults organised interests, although without engaging in direct negotiations with them, and remains the sole actor in control of public policymaking.
3. **Concertation**—the government sets up a bargaining table where public officials, employers and trade unions negotiate policy reforms. However, they do not need to find an agreement that is fully backed by participating actors; the government remains free to carry out policy reforms even without the full support of trade unions and employers.
4. **Corporatist compromise**—trade unions, employers and government jointly negotiate policy reforms and reach an agreement that is fully supported by participating actors. Legislation only goes ahead if trade unions and employers agree.

This simple typology can serve as an instrument to empirically capture the routine involvement of social partners in policymaking taking place across countries each year. In our empirical analysis, we have operationalised this index of social dialogue with the help of an expert survey, the details of which are explained in more detail in the data section. While we could have measured the extent of concertation on a wider scale, we opted for categories that could be described conceptually to maintain conceptual validity, in line with Visser (3-point scale) and Baccaro and Simoni (2-point scale). This simple and somewhat restrictive conceptualisation makes it possible to construct an outcome variable that we test against several hypotheses drawn from the literature. We will discuss issues of methodology later in the paper.

3 | Determinants of Social Dialogue

Even if their own ideologies and interests shape the propensity of trade unions and employer organisations to engage in social dialogue or not (see Tassinari, Donaghey, and Galetto 2021), in line with Baccaro and Simoni (2008, p. 1324), we consider that the central actor shaping the extent of social dialogue is the government: Governments can choose to involve trade unions and employers in policymaking, or make policy alone. The extent of social dialogue should be determined by the incentives governments face to include organised interests or not, for instance in relation to the veto power yielded by trade unions (as measured by their membership as a share of the workforce), employer organisations (as measured by the share of employees their members employ) or the internal coordination issues government themselves face (e.g. whether party cabinets

are internally cohesive enough to agree on public policies or not). We review these structural and political determinants in turn.

3.1 | Structural Determinants

3.1.1 | Union Density

From a power resources perspective (Korpi 1983), a primary driver of social dialogue should be the strength yielded by organised interests, and most notably organised labour. The stronger and more organised labour unions are, the greater the incentives for governments to include them in policymaking. For governments, the rationale for engaging in negotiations with employers and trade unions over policy is to rally support from stakeholders in the labour market. This is particularly the case when it comes to trade unions, who can organise strikes and block policy reforms (Hamann, Johnston, and Kelly 2013). One primary objective of social dialogue from the point of view of governments is therefore to gain the acquiescence of workers for certain policies by engaging with trade union leaders commanding control over a significant share of the workforce (Pizzorno 1978). Yet, trade union density has steadily declined across the OECD in the last few decades. While the average share of employees unionised in OECD countries was 38% in 1960, it had declined to 15.8% in 2019 (OECD 2021). This process can be believed to undermine the viability of social dialogue. If the membership base of trade unions shrinks, their capacity to ensure this acquiescence diminishes, reducing the incentives for governments and employers to talk to them in the first place. This is one of the rationales given by Regan and Culpepper (2014) to explain the demise of corporatist policymaking in Italy and Ireland: Organised interests in these two countries are no longer perceived as legitimate and credible interlocutors for governments seeking to build political support for reforms. Along these lines, one should observe a negative relationship between trade union density and the extent of social dialogue. Granted, it may be problematic to use union density alone as an indicator of union strength: French trade unions have a notoriously low membership but are able to regularly mobilise for strikes and rally supporters beyond their base of membership. Nevertheless, union membership is still an indicator of the organisational strength of unions and their ability to yield control of the labour market.

Hypothesis 1. *Higher trade union density is associated with higher levels of social dialogue.*

There is also another way to envisage the relationship between union density and social dialogue, namely that this relationship may not be linear. Powerful trade unions commanding large memberships may not need to engage in social dialogue at the tripartite level because they can regulate significant aspects of the labour market *on their own* via collective bargaining without the need for direct government intervention. This could for instance be the case in the ideal-type version of the Scandinavian model, where state regulation of employment relations is limited and devolved largely to social partners. There are many historical examples of trade union resistance to state intervention (in areas such as minimum wages or working time) because it can lower incentives to join unions in the first place and lead to a loss of autonomy (Kahn-Freund 1972; Trampusch 2010). In

contrast, trade unions with moderate memberships who do not have the capacity to regulate certain areas of labour market governance autonomously may want to engage with governments in order to push legislation. At the lower end, weak unions with low memberships may not be able to enter negotiations with governments and employers over policy in the first place because there is little they can bring to the political exchange from a power perspective, besides perhaps their ideas and expertise (Culpepper 2002). Lindvall (2013) or Avdagic (2010b) document such bell-shaped relationships in other domains, namely political strikes and social pacts. Hence, it may be primarily unions of moderate strength, rather than very weak or strong ones, who engage in policymaking with governments.

Hypothesis 2. *There is a bell-shaped relationship between union density and social dialogue.*

3.1.2 | Employer Organisation

Against the background of the widespread decline of trade union membership in Western Europe alongside the persistence of social dialogue in many European countries, Traxler (2010, p. 151) has argued that the ‘resilience of corporatism strongly hinges on the continued strength of organised business’. In line with the Varieties of Capitalism approach considering firms (rather than labour unions) as the central supporters of non-market arrangements in economic governance (Hall and Soskice 2001), Traxler argued that employers in Europe still have a strong interest in both collective organisation and in the maintenance of channels of institutional influence in policymaking through social dialogue. On the one hand, state-backed regulation of the labour market (for instance through the ability to extend collective bargaining outcomes to outsiders; Paster, Oude Nijhuis, and Kiecker 2020) provides strong incentives for firms to organise and maintain coordinated labour market arrangements (Bulfone and Afonso 2020). On the other hand, social dialogue can constitute a way for employers to maintain a channel of influence in policymaking even when left-wing parties hostile to their preferences are in power (see e.g. Trampusch 2004, p. 542). Based on these assumptions, we could assume social dialogue to be determined by higher levels of employer organisation. Again, measuring employer power is a difficult endeavour, but the membership of employer organisation as a share of the workforce is a reasonable indicator.

Hypothesis 3. *The greater the degree of employer organisation, the higher the level of social dialogue.*

3.1.3 | Political Determinants

Arguing against the persistence of a strong link between structural factors and social dialogue, Baccaro (2003) has argued that the two components of corporatism have become uncoupled. The structures that underpinned corporatism, such as high levels of unionisation and centralised wage bargaining, have been severely undermined in a number of European countries (Baccaro and Howell 2017). Meanwhile, the process of cooperation between government, employers and trade unions has largely persisted. While structural explanations of social dialogue were dominant

in the older literature, more recent approaches have started to focus on political determinants instead. In this section, we review the main drivers of social dialogue discussed in the literature to derive hypotheses on the propensity of governments to involve trade unions and employers in policymaking or not.

3.1.4 | Partisanship

The first and most common expectation about the role of partisanship on social dialogue is that left governments will be more likely to engage in cooperation with trade unions and employers in the design of social and economic policies (Alvarez, Garrett, and Lange 1991; Hicks and Kenworthy 1998, p. 1641). In the past, social democratic governments were in a position to deliver *credible commitments* to trade unions because of their traditionally strong organisational ties (Allern and Bale 2017). Because of the organic connections favouring trust between social democratic parties and trade unions, the latter could promise to deliver wage restraint while the former could promise some form of compensation via welfare protection or fiscal expansion (Pizzorno 1978).

These organic relationships, however, have been weakened in recent decades (Allern and Bale 2017). First, while trade unions have kept their strongholds in industry and the public sector, their membership has considerably declined. Meanwhile, the stronghold of social democratic parties in Western Europe has progressively shifted from the older working class to so-called ‘sociocultural professionals’ in services (Oesch and Rennwald 2018). The preferences of these two constituencies have come to diverge on a number of issues. For instance, social-democratic parties have developed a greater emphasis on issues of gender equality and social investment, while the male, older clientele of trade unions has not supported these developments to the same extent (Häusermann 2009). Besides, left-wing governments, notably under the Third Way umbrella, have also pursued austerity measures against the interests of trade unions (Bremer 2023). Based on these developments, the ‘natural’ connection and potential for cooperation between social democratic governments and trade unions have become more tenuous.

Another theoretical argument can be made *against* the idea that social democratic governments will be more likely to engage in social dialogue than right-wing governments. Anthonsen, Lindvall, and Schmidt-Hanse (2010) show that social democratic dominance in the Swedish context coexisted with a decline in the use of neo-corporatist arenas in policymaking because of the strong connections between the dominant trade union confederation and the Social-Democratic party. Since these connections were strong, it made more sense for trade unions to lobby the social democrats in power directly in a bilateral exchange rather than engaging in structured tripartite negotiations with employers. While we do not possess a systematic indicator of party-union links (see however Allern and Bale 2017), the lack of confirmation of the hypothesis below would possibly hint at such mechanisms being at play.

Hypothesis 4. *Left-wing governments are more likely to engage in social dialogue than right-wing or centrist governments.*

3.1.5 | Political Determinants: Government Coordination and Support

Aside from the ideological orientation of governments, the other political factor believed to foster social dialogue has been government weakness (Afonso 2013; Baccaro and Lim 2007; Baccaro and Simoni 2008; Hamann and Kelly 2010; Rathgeb 2018). Government weakness here can be operationalised as the coordination problems faced by governments who lack parliamentary support or are constituted by parties with heterogeneous preferences, that is, for which decision making faces high transaction costs (Afonso and Papadopoulos 2013). We use here a fairly narrow definition of government strength, not to be confused with state-or governance capacity. We differentiate between parliamentary support and coordination costs.

Using parliamentary support as an indicator of strength, Baccaro and Simoni (2008) argue for instance that social dialogue is used strategically by weak governments to build consensus in contexts where they cannot draw on a parliamentary majority; one could think of minority or caretaker governments in parliamentary systems (Baccaro and Lim 2007). Because they lack support within the parliamentary arena, such governments are more likely to seek extra-parliamentary support for policy reforms by building alliances with organised interests. Rathgeb (2018) draws on a similar argument to argue that weak governments may be more likely to improve the situation of labour market ‘outsiders’ because they are compelled to involve trade unions in labour market reforms.

Focusing more on coordination problems as a form of weakness, Afonso (2013) and Afonso and Papadopoulos (2013) show how broad party coalitions uniting left-wing and right-wing parties with relative equal power may want to delegate more policymaking to interest groups. In a context of party polarisation, it has become ever more difficult for political parties of different ideological persuasions to agree on policies in a manner that satisfies their electoral constituencies and avoids electoral sanctions. In these contexts, organised interests may be in a better position to agree on policies because they are partially insulated from such electoral and polarising constraints (Afonso 2013, p. 173). In contrast, cohesive cabinets composed of a small number of ideologically close parties commanding disciplined parliamentary majorities should find it easier to agree on policies, and therefore be less likely to seek support from unions and employers. Here we should expect left-right coalitions to be the most likely to engage in social dialogue.

Drawing on this, we can expect different types of governments to face different incentives to engage with organised interests: Minority governments and governments uniting parties on the right and the left would be more willing to involve trade unions and employers in policymaking than majority governments.

Hypothesis 5. *Social dialogue will be more extensive among cabinets uniting left- and right-wing parties.*

Hypothesis 6. *Social dialogue will be more extensive among governments enjoying a smaller base of support in parliament.*

4 | Data and Methods

To test our hypotheses, we use a time-series cross-sectional (TSCS) research design to investigate the determinants of social dialogue in 25 countries between 1980 and 2018. Our unit of analysis is country-years. We designed an expert survey to capture the extent of social dialogue across time, and merged it with widely used datasets compiling comparative political and industrial relations data (Armingeon et al. 2020; Visser 2019).

4.1 | Dependent Variable

The most important empirical challenge in our analysis is the measurement of the dependent variable. As argued above, social dialogue is a fluid process that often happens behind closed doors. It does not lend itself easily to quantitative measurement across time and space. Baccaro and Simoni (2008), one of the few existing attempts to measure it quantitatively, rely on a coding of the specialised literature, but they adopt a slightly different conceptualisation (government demand for social dialogue). Older measures, such as that developed by Compston (1994) focus on union participation and relied on a coding by the author. Siaroff (1999), drawing on Lehbruch (1984), uses a conceptualisation drawing on a broad characterisation that does not vary over time. Visser (2019) coded this phenomenon in his widely used the Institutional Characteristics of Trade Unions, Wage Setting, State Intervention and Social Pacts (ICTWSS) dataset in an indicator of ‘routine involvement in policymaking’. His data are based again on coding by the author on a 3-point scale.

In this paper, we adopted a different approach relying on the ‘crowdsourcing’ of the measurement of social dialogue among academic industrial relations and social policy experts in many countries. Our approach draws on an expanding political science literature using expert judgements to measure complex phenomena, such as the importance of ministerial portfolios (Druckman and Warwick 2005), the effectiveness of trade agreements (Gray and Slapin 2012) or, most prominently, the ideological positioning of political parties (Ferreira da Silva et al. 2023; Jolly et al. 2022). The basic principle of this method is to glean information on a phenomenon of interest by aggregating the opinions of individuals who have expertise in the field.

It is worth discussing possible trade-offs here. To measure levels of social dialogue, there are two possible methodological routes. The first involves collecting and coding a comprehensive ‘objective’ text-based source of industrial relations developments; this was the approach used by Baccaro and Simoni (2008). The source that they used, however, the European Industrial Relations Review, has been discontinued and is not able to go back as far back in time. One other possible source, the European Foundation for Working Conditions’ European Industrial Relations Observatory (EIRO), has also been interrupted and is no longer available in an accessible format.³ Coding from public media accounts is problematic precisely because of the rather confidential nature of social dialogue. Media reports may tend to emphasise conflict between labour and capital, and organised interests may adopt a more antagonistic position in media forums visible to their own clientele than in arenas insulated from public scrutiny (e.g. Häusermann, Mach, and Papadopoulos 2004, p. 38 ff.).

Thus, in the absence of a widely available ‘objective’ source that could be coded, we must rely on expert judgements. Ideally, these experts would be actors directly involved in the policymaking process, such as government, employer and trade union representatives. However, this would face two major problems. The first is the accessibility of these experts and readiness to provide answers. Besides, because of their direct involvement, they could be subject to a possible bias to overplay or downplay their own influence and involvement. Moreover, it would be difficult to construct longitudinal data: Actors involved now may not be able to provide assessments of involvement in the past. In this context, we opted to use expert opinions, but of academics, similarly to the Chapel Hill Expert Survey for party positions. These may be more suited to provide assessments that are based both on the academic and specialised literature (to assess social dialogue in the past) and an informed reading of current events for the present.

Academic expert judgements are of course not free of bias (Ferreira da Silva et al. 2023, p. 156). The first one may be a *retrospective bias*, namely that expert assessments on the past may be done in light of the present: Experts may for instance overestimate consensus in the past and underestimate it in the present. Related to this, the second is that assessments, especially those on past levels of social dialogue, may not be independent and tinted by the consensus in the existing literature. Finally, expert assessments may be subject to projection bias, that is, their judgements may be affected by their (political) preferences (Curini 2010). In the absence of a perfect method, we opted for this latter approach, acknowledging that other methods could be used in further research. We assess the reliability of our method against existing measures in the Supporting Information.

Against this background, we constructed an index based on the aggregate results of an expert survey on social dialogue covering 25 countries over nearly 40 years.⁴ The data were collected between June 2018 and July 2021. National experts were identified based on the SASE (*Society for the Advancement of Socio-Economics*) network on political economy and welfare states, combined with a search of country-specific industrial relations literature in order to cover different countries and time periods. Respondents were contacted by email and asked to evaluate the level of involvement of unions and employers in policymaking for each year between 1980 and 2018 in their respective country of expertise utilising the scale of social dialogue outlined above (no involvement; consultation; concertation; corporatist compromise; see the [Supporting Information](#) for questionnaire). Because experts may have different periods of expertise, they were instructed to only respond for the years that they felt reasonably confident about. Of the 465 contacted experts, 109 provided usable answers, providing 2751 country-year assessments for 867 country-years (see the [Supporting Information](#) for breakdown by country). Because we asked experts to only assess country-years they felt confident enough about, about a quarter (23.6%) of country-years were only assessed by one expert. The mean number of experts per country-year is 3.17, the maximum 17 and the median 3. Experts were not remunerated, and we opted for a short survey to ensure completion, not asking for substantial documentation of the answers.

The next step was the aggregation of expert assessments for each country-year. The traditional default option has been the mean

response per unit; this is the method used for instance in the widely used Chapel Hill expert Survey on party positions (Jolly et al. 2022). In the light of recent critical discussions of this mode of aggregation (see, e.g. Lindstädt, Proksch, and Slapin 2020), we use the median response (rounded), which should limit the impact of extreme assessments. For ease of interpretation, we use it as a continuous variable. In the Supporting Information, we provide some simple measures of intercoder agreement.

4.2 | Independent Variables

In order to investigate the impact of structural and political variables on patterns of social dialogue, we use data from a widely used dataset in comparative politics, the comparative political dataset (CPDS; Armingeon et al. 2020), which draws on a number of OECD and other datasets, as well as the ICTWSS (Visser 2019). *Trade union strength* is measured by net union membership as a percentage of all employees, while *employer organisation* is measured by the number of employees in firms organised in employer organisations as a percentage of all employees. Both measures come from ICTWSS. The gaps in the data, which in some cases are based on surveys collected every 2 years (e.g. from the European Social Survey) are filled using linear interpolation. This is a reasonable method considering the inertia that underpins union membership. *Government partisanship* is proxied by a cabinet composition index as devised by Schmidt in CPDS, collapsed into three categories: dominance of right-wing parties, balance between left and right and dominance of left-wing parties. *Government weakness* is measured by a variable capturing the share of seats in parliament controlled by government parties. We include several *controls* in our analysis. To control for business cycle, we use the unemployment rate, as well as budget deficits as a share of GDP. Fiscal space may impact the ability of governments to deliver concessions to trade unions and employers, and therefore for social dialogue to occur in the first place. These are often thought to influence social dialogue either negatively or positively. The traditional trade openness indicator (the summation of exports and imports, over GDP) is used to proxy for the intensified exchange of goods (globalisation). We also control for EU (European Union) and EMU (Economic and Monetary Union) membership, as well as for whether a country has a communist past or not.

4.3 | Estimation Strategy

To understand the determinants of social dialogue, we rely on a TSCS regression analysis. More precisely, we use fixed-effects ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions with panel-corrected standard errors, a lagged dependent variable and an ARI auto-correlation structure as our main model. This is a widely used estimation strategy in comparative political economy (Beck and Katz 2011). We test for the stationarity of data checking for unit roots, and co-integration. We also run robustness checks using different methods of aggregation as well as similar analyses using the Baccaro and Simoni and Visser indicators, but results do not vary substantially with these different specifications. As outlined above, we model social concertation as a function of political, economic and institutional variables. We do not use time lags in our main models; unlike, for example, the relationship between

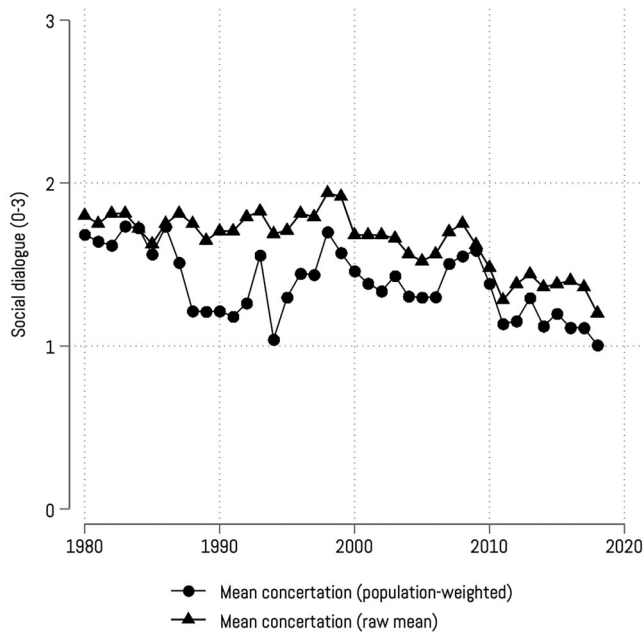


FIGURE 1 | Evolution of mean level of social dialogue (raw mean and population-weighted mean). *Source:* Own elaboration based on expert survey data.

partisanship and social spending, we do not have a theoretical reason to expect social dialogue to occur with a significant time lag in relation to independent variables.

Panel data present several potential estimation issues. The first is panel heteroscedasticity (or residuals not being identically distributed) and spatial autocorrelation. To mitigate this problem, we follow the advice of Beck and Katz and use panel-corrected standard errors. Secondly, the time-series properties of our data may lead to problems of serial correlation of errors if future dialogue depends on past practices. Because we can assume patterns of social dialogue to be highly path-dependent, this problem warrants special attention. One way to address it is to use the de facto Beck and Katz standard and include a lagged dependent variable in our models. Our main models use country fixed effects to control for unobserved variable bias across countries, notably regarding the institutional structure.

5 | Trends in Social Dialogue

We begin by presenting some trends in the measure of social dialogue captured through the expert survey. Figure 1 shows the evolution of social dialogue over the period of study in all countries in the sample, both as raw mean and a population-weighted mean. Based on expert assessments, we can observe a declining trend overall in the mean level of social dialogue in Europe between 1980 and 2019. In line with some of the literature, it is possible to identify a few time-specific trends, notably the increase in social dialogue in the second half of the 1990s in the run-up to EMU (Fajertag and Pochet 2000; Hancke and Rhodes 2005), followed by a slow erosion in the early 2000s. Around the 2008 financial crisis, there was a short upsurge of ‘crisis corporatism’ (Ebbinghaus and Weishaupt 2021) followed by a clear decline as many countries struggled to reconcile social

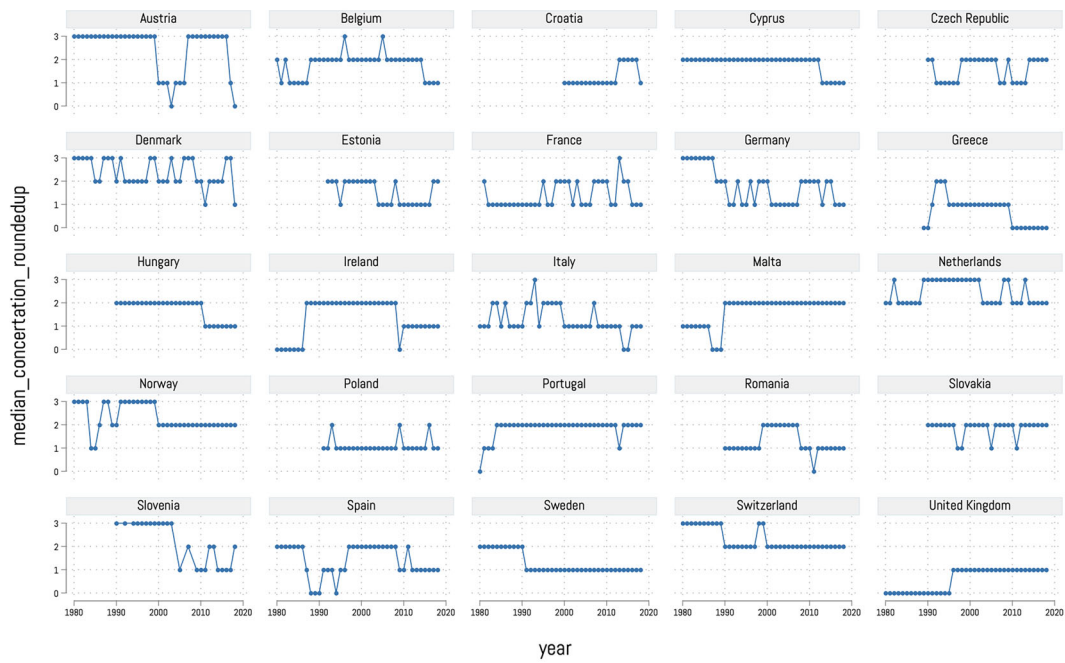
partner involvement and harsh austerity measures, particularly in Southern Europe (Afonso 2013, 2019; Culpepper and Regan 2014). The series ends before the Covid pandemic, but extant research on social dialogue in the recent pandemic so far does not point to a significant break with previous trends (Meardi and Tassinari 2022).

Figure 2 shows the median level of social dialogue per country for the whole period under study for 25 countries. At first sight, the trends for specific countries correspond to what we know on a qualitative level: In Austria, drops in social dialogue essentially correspond to the periods of right-wing government with radical right participation (Obinger 2008); in Sweden the drop corresponds to the retreat of employer organisation from tripartite institutions in the early 1990s (Pontusson and Swenson 1996), and in Ireland, Spain or Greece we can see drops following the austerity measures adopted in the aftermath of the Eurozone crisis (Afonso et al. 2022). In Portugal, this level was maintained, however (Tassinari 2019, p. 154ff.). In Hungary, the decline corresponds to the rise of Victor Orbán’s *Fidesz* in power. While some countries display high levels of stability at high levels (Switzerland, Netherlands, Norway), some other countries seem to show higher volatility.

If we compare our measure of social dialogue to the one developed by Visser (measuring ‘routine involvement in policymaking’), we can see a good degree of correspondence, even if there are some differences between Visser’s own coding and our measure based on the assessment of multiple experts. Figure 3 shows the mean value per country of both measures for the period 1980–2019. On the one hand, we have a group of countries (Austria, Denmark, Norway Switzerland, the Netherlands) that rank very high on both measures, while the United Kingdom ranks lowest on both measures. Greece and Sweden rank lower in our index than in Visser’s. In the Supporting Information, we also compare our measure to Visser’s and Baccaro and Simoni’s, showing that it tends to indicate a mid-way trend between the two.

6 | Drivers of Social Dialogue—Regression Results and Discussion

We now proceed to the regression analysis of the drivers of social dialogue. Each model presented in Table 1 tests the hypotheses presented above successively. Statistically significant coefficients are in bold. Models 1–3 test the relationship between social dialogue and structural determinants (trade union and employer density). We find no relationship across models between union density and levels of social dialogue, confirming the lack of relationship between the structures and processes of corporatism put forward by Baccaro and Howell (Baccaro 2003; Baccaro and Howell 2017). Similarly, we do not find evidence of a U-shaped relationship between union density and social dialogue in the analysis, undermining the idea that moderate levels of union density foster social dialogue. It is important to emphasise that we use country fixed effects here, so inferences are only valid within countries over time.⁵ Employer organisation also seems unrelated to social dialogue, unlike unemployment, the only control that systematically correlates with social dialogue across models. Theoretically, it makes sense that economic downturns



Graphs by Country

FIGURE 2 | Median level of social dialogue across time per country according to expert survey, 25 countries. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

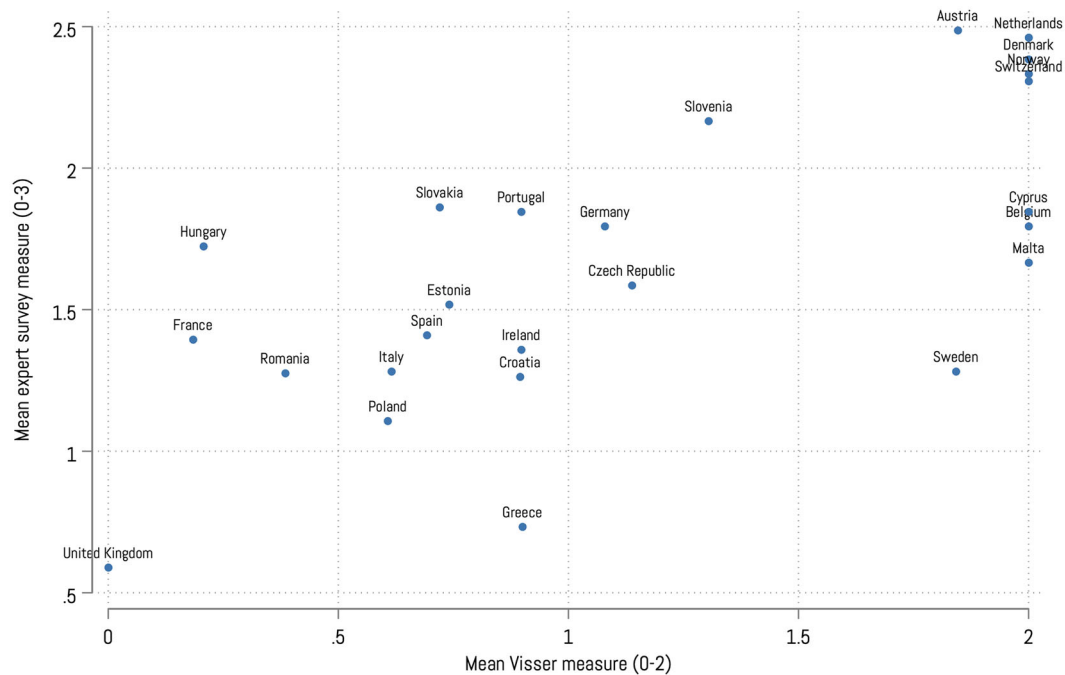


FIGURE 3 | Mean level of social dialogue per country \times Visser's measure of routine involvement in policymaking (ICTWSS). *Source:* Own data, Visser (2019). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

make it more difficult for employers and trade unions to reach compromises with governments, as resources to be distributed become scarce. This pattern is notably visible in the cases of countries affected by the Eurozone crisis such as Ireland, Spain or Greece as visible in Figure 1, where unemployment increased and where social dialogue collapsed dramatically in some cases.

Turning to political determinants in Models 4 and 5, while we find in Model 4 that both left-wing and 'balanced' governments are more likely to engage in social dialogue, the former effect disappears once we control for all other variables in the last model. In fact, the association between higher levels of social dialogue and a balance of power between left and right in government is one of the few effects that appears consistent and

TABLE 1 | Regression results, median concertation, PCSE, lagged DV, country fixed-effects.

	M1: Union density	M2: Union density squared	M3: Employer organisation	M4: Government party	M5: Government support	M6: Full model
Bargaining coverage	−0.00138 (0.00169)	−0.00123 (0.00171)	−0.00251 (0.00173)	0.00000719 (0.00144)	−0.00113 (0.00150)	−0.00313 (0.00188)
Unemployment rate	−0.0263*** (0.00629)	−0.0259*** (0.00650)	−0.0272*** (0.00667)	−0.0283*** (0.00582)	−0.0261*** (0.00606)	−0.0298*** (0.00670)
Openness of the economy	−0.00195 (0.00120)	−0.00202 (0.00122)	−0.00343* (0.00152)	−0.00211 (0.00108)	−0.00209 (0.00114)	−0.00324* (0.00165)
Inflation	0.00489 (0.00508)	0.00538 (0.00536)	−0.000746 (0.00620)	0.00414 (0.00419)	0.00561 (0.00434)	−0.0000568 (0.00677)
Budget deficit	0.000298 (0.00558)	0.000650 (0.00568)	−0.0000956 (0.00521)	−0.00218 (0.00541)	0.000298 (0.00550)	−0.00226 (0.00550)
EMU membership	−0.0719 (0.0545)	−0.0747 (0.0549)	−0.0612 (0.0587)	−0.0592 (0.0517)	−0.0734 (0.0543)	−0.0347 (0.0557)
Lagged DV	0.604*** (0.0394)	0.603*** (0.0394)	0.610*** (0.0427)	0.577*** (0.0377)	0.603*** (0.0392)	0.583*** (0.0407)
Union density	0.000971 (0.00354)	−0.00255 (0.00736)				0.00176 (0.00953)
Union density ²		0.0000385 (0.0000613)				0.0000176 (0.0000743)
Employer organisation			0.00646 (0.00479)			0.00954 (0.00491)
Government: Right				0 (.)		0 (.)
Government: Left–right balance				0.285*** (0.0535)		0.307*** (0.0595)
Government: Left				0.113** (0.0409)		0.0719 (0.0442)
Government support (seat share of all parties in government)					−0.000442 (0.00234)	−0.00380 (0.00248)
Constant	1.338*** (0.276)	1.406*** (0.311)	0.947* (0.443)	1.122*** (0.234)	1.393*** (0.291)	0.675 (0.435)
Observations	716	716	617	725	725	614
R ²	0.691	0.691	0.715	0.708	0.690	0.736

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses.

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

robust across models. However, we do not find a relationship between the base of support of government parties in parliament and levels of social dialogue. Looking at specific cases, we can see some evidence of this pattern in countries such as Austria, where governments composed of both SPÖ (left) and ÖVP (right; until display higher levels of social dialogue than the alternative ÖVP–FPÖ right-wing coalitions; Afonso 2013, p. 173; Obinger and Talos 2006). In Norway, social dialogue declined at in the early 2000s, at the time a new coalition of Conservatives, Liberals and Christian Democrats (a cabinet dominated by the right) replaced

a Social-Democratic–led government (Rommetvedt et al. 2013, p. 466).

Figure 4 gives a sense of effect sizes using an ordered logit regression including all the variables in the full model, showing the probability of each level of social dialogue for the three types of government partisanship controlling for all other factors. This shows that concertation is the most likely form of social dialogue across all three government types, and governments comprising both right and left are less likely to either only consult social

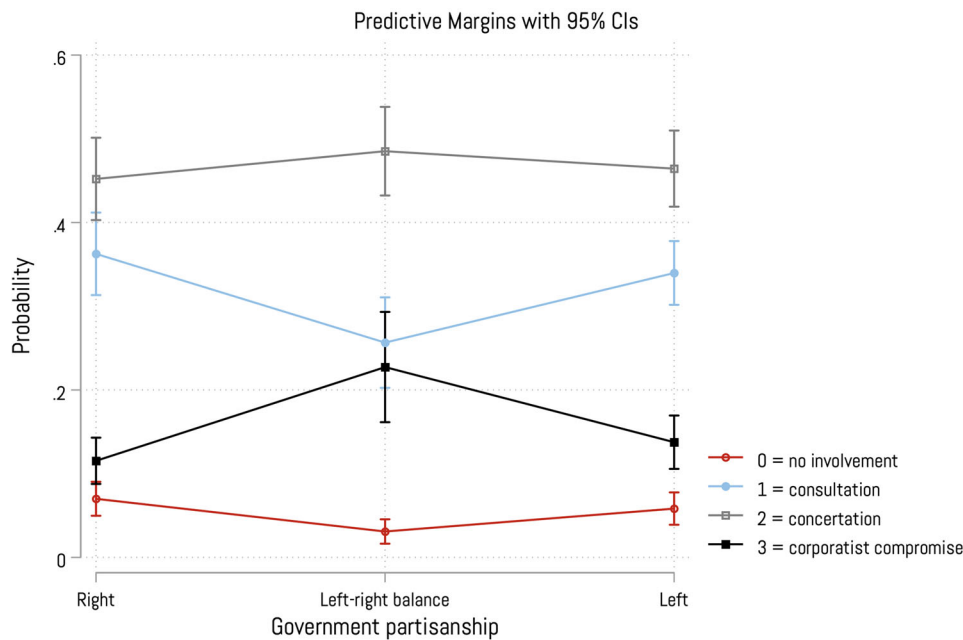


FIGURE 4 | Probability of types of social dialogue by government partisanship (ordered logit regression). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

partners or ignore them altogether. The model that underpins these predicted levels is included in the Supporting Information (A4).

6.1 | Robustness Tests

We ran several robustness tests to assess whether the results stay similar across different specifications. First, while we ran our main model using the median of expert assessments, we also ran similar models using the mean. The median is the more conservative measure as it tends to move less due to differences in assessment between experts. The results of this model (A1 in the Supporting Information) are similar, with the impact of unemployment and government balance of power staying significant at the maximum level, and left-wing governments showing a greater propensity towards social dialogue at a lower level of significance. Next, we ran a model (A2 in the Supporting Information) also using the median only using cases where at least three experts had given a judgement. Results, again, stay similar, with the exception of EMU membership that becomes negative, significant at the 0.05 level. Because the inclusion of a lagged dependent variable may create a bias when combined with fixed effects, we also ran a model (A3) without a lagged dependent variable and including only the AR1 correlation structure, again with similar results. Finally, we ran a model (A4) using ordered logit regressions and robust standard errors on the rounded median of expert assessment to consider the ordinal nature of the dependent variable, which is the approach underpinning Figure 4. This is not a widely used model in the field, notably because of the difficulty in interpretation, which is why we opted for the PCSE as our main model, but it shows similar results as well. The findings on the negative impact of unemployment and the positive impact of governments with a balance of power are particularly robust to different specifications. Finally, we ran models using the Visser

indicator (A5). Most variables do not reach significance in this model. This is probably due to the fact that the Visser indicator varies very little over time, which perhaps relates to the wording of Visser's indicator as routine involvement and is therefore less aimed at capturing short-term fluctuations.

7 | Conclusion

This paper has provided two main contributions. First, it has provided a measure of the extent of social dialogue between governments, trade unions and employers in a sample of 25 European countries over a period of nearly 40 years. Second, it has investigated the political and structural drivers of social dialogue across Europe. Our findings are broadly in line with recent arguments emphasising political factors as a primary driver of social dialogue: Government coalitions facing high internal transaction costs because they are ideologically diverse are more likely to engage in social dialogue as a way to build legitimacy and support. In contrast, we find no relationship between power resources as measured by union membership and the probability of social dialogue, or employer organisation. Social dialogue nowadays is driven mostly by other drivers than organisational power and the will to secure the acquiescence of union members. Admittedly, union membership is not the only power resource yielded by trade unions. On the one hand, weak unions in terms of membership may have a strong mobilisation capacity to organise strikes, protests and demonstrations to trigger negotiations with governments. France is a case in point here (Andolfatto and Labbé 2021). On the other hand, even large trade unions with many members may not use this resource to orient it towards political influence, but delivering services to members instead. Alternative measures of union strength may be useful here for further research.

Our study is to our knowledge the first to examine the drivers of social dialogue in a quantitative manner over such a long period and over so many countries, although it faces a number of methodological limitations. First, the approach using an expert survey of academics is subject to different possible forms of bias. Academics working on social, labour market policy or industrial relations may naturally have theoretical frameworks in their minds that they may apply to judge the level of social dialogue in any given year. It may be that the dominant frameworks in the literature (e.g. government weakness) are used to estimate the level of dialogue, causing a form of confirmation bias. For reasons of space, we have not run models with interactions, but future research should explore conditional arguments. Different types of governments may possibly react differently to different levels of trade union organisation and vice versa. As mentioned above, we have only included trade union membership as an indicator of union strength, but this is clearly not the only factor that determines the ability of organised labour to trigger negotiations with governments and achieve influence. Other power resources that are more difficult to measure (e.g. media influence and lobbying capacity, ability to organise strikes and demonstrations) may also play a role in shaping social dialogue. Finally, one important organisational characteristic that may play a role in social dialogue is the organic link between political parties and organised interests (Allern 2010; Allern and Bale 2017). Earlier research has shown that the strength of these links may provide different incentives for institutionalised social dialogue: It may be more expedient for trade unions with strong links to left parties (or employer organisations with links to right-wing parties) to lobby them directly when they are in government rather than engage in institutionalised social dialogue.

Ethics Statement

All participants in the expert survey provided their informed consent. See the Supporting Information for questionnaire.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in OSF at https://osf.io/7rksw/?view_only=63aeb416f76b4129aed0f5f027dd2eef

Endnotes

¹ In this paper, we use the term ‘social dialogue’ rather than its alternatives (e.g. concertation) because it is the one used by the ILO and is much more widely used by policymakers. For comparison, a Google search for ‘social dialogue’ on 6.11.2024 yielded 2,210,000 results, while ‘social concertation’ yielded only 18,300. The definitions provided here can refer both to concertation or social dialogue.

² The data are available at <https://osf.io/7rksw/>.

³ Coding it would require a website scraping endeavour that entails significant technical challenges.

⁴ Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom. We did not obtain usable responses for Finland.

⁵ Arguably, for the hypothesis on a U-shaped pattern, country fixed effects are somewhat problematic because the level of trade union membership trends unidirectionally downwards (there is no U-shaped pattern

in union membership *within countries*), but a regression conducted without country fixed effects including this variable does not find an association either.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.