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VICI Project proposal
“Linking the Discontented Employee and the Discontented Citizen. Suppression of Workplace Voice and Spillovers to Political Behavior.”

Summary

Currently, at least three important developments in labor relations pose vital challenges to employees’ voice at the work floor: (a) labor migration; (b) flexibilization of work contracts; and (c) a trend of restricting collective forms of labor voice and representation. These developments are radically changing traditional forms of employee participation and the ways people express discontent at work. The responses to this containment of employee voice may be more serious and far-reaching than we currently anticipate – severely affecting political behavior outside the workplace.

a) Since the creation of the internal EU market, the free flow of labor has facilitated labor migration across EU member state borders. Given their (initial) language disadvantages, lack of union representation and frequent relocation, labor migrants have a vulnerable position at the labor market and examples of exploitation of labor migrants are many (SCP 2013).

b) Moreover, employment relations have been witnessing a change from traditional permanent contracts to temporary contracts (flexible and fixed contracts, pay-rolling, temporary agent hiring). Traditional vehicles for collective expressions of discontent, e.g., union representation or works councils are less suitable for temporary workers. Individual opportunities to voice discontent are more costly and often less effective, particularly because workers who individually express their dissatisfaction are more visible and therefore more vulnerable to retaliation.

c) Finally, adding to the already declining power of trade unions, the financial-economic crisis appears to have intensified the containment of employees’ voice. E.g., the Wisconsin state legislature imposed legal restrictions on public unions in 2011, sparking off mass political demonstrations. Conservatives announced strike bans in the public sector in Britain (The Independent 2015; BBC 2015). In addition, the European Commission’s reforms of the EU wage bargaining framework include measures to reduce union power in wage setting and collective bargaining coverage (European Commission 2012; Schulten & Muller 2013).

These societal developments fundamentally change employees’ position in the organization and reduce their ability to express, and effectively suppress their voice at work. This has triggered debates on how employment relation institutions should adapt (The Guardian 2015). Employers, unions, and governmental stakeholders explicitly call for more modern forms of voice and representation (e.g., Social Economic Council (Netherlands) (SER 2013) or the Department of Labor (2015) (United States)). Meanwhile, alarming consequences become apparent: increasing levels of burn out among, especially, young flex workers (CBS 2013); exploitation of migrant workers (SCP 2013); and mounting levels of anti-organizational behaviors as alternative channels of expressing discontent (Hebdon & Stern 1998; Hebdon 2005; Marsden 2013; Forth, Dix & Sisson 2008; Akkerman et al. 2015; Financieel Dagblad 2015). While we thus already witness the direct consequences of
restrictions to employee voice in day to day employment relations, its long term, deeper societal impact is not recognized yet, let alone understood.

I argue that the effects of these restrictions to workers’ voice spill over to workers’ political behavior. My project aims to establish the theoretical-empirical connection between suppression of people’s voice at work and their political lives. My core hypotheses are that (1) the effects of suppression of workers’ voice spill over to workers’ political behavior; (2) co-workers’ reactions to voice suppression trigger the mechanisms by which voice spills over to political behavior and political preferences outside the workplace. My project explains why some people respond by becoming politically active, whereas others abstain from political participation.

Establishing the theoretical-empirical connection between conflict in organizations and political participation and political preference formation generates a new research line into political and institutional change through indirect feedback loops that bypass established (democratic) institutions for conflict resolution. My micro-level search for the conditions under which such indirect feedback processes evolve—transforming discontent in the workplace into political voice and institutional change— will provide a significant new direction in the study of political behavior and institutional change.

I combine qualitative interviews, vignette studies and (field) experiments with a longitudinal large N survey for studying (a) variations and manifestations of suppression of employee voice; and (b) when and how suppression affects workers’ behavior both inside and outside the organization.