

# The Politicization Effect of the Environment Issue in Labour Claim-Making: The case of Italy

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## Abstract

Drawing on the Italian case, this article demonstrates how labour organizations strategically leverage environmental issues to politicize their claims when necessary. Italy serves as a critical case due to its strong tradition of trade union protest mobilization. This study argues that, given the rising prominence of environmental concerns in public debate, environmental issues have not only revitalized environmental movements but have also reignited labour conflicts, with some stemming from the adverse consequences of the environmental transition paradigm. The article combines the recent perspective of social movement unionism with the older “political exchange” theory developed by Alessandro Pizzorno and proceeds in two phases. First, through a protest event analysis based on an original dataset, it statistically demonstrates that the use of environmental issues in claim-making is associated with four indicators of politicized claims: coalitional coordination, social inclusion, a repertoire of actions extending beyond striking, and the generalization of claims. In the second phase, the study reconstructs a case of labour conflict in the automotive sector, offering a qualitative examination of the underlying mechanisms that drive this association.

## 1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, environmental concerns have steadily ascended to the forefront of public consciousness, becoming a pivotal issue in political discourse worldwide (Leiserowitz et al. 2022, Antronico et al. 2020, Beltrame, Bucchi and Loner 2017). The increasing visibility of climate change effects, such as extreme weather events and rising sea and river levels, has elevated public concern for the health of our planet. This surge in ecological awareness is reflected in the growing demand for sustainable practices and policies (Bumann 2021).

The politicization of climate and environmental concerns has advanced through various avenues: growing public concern over climate change, heightened focus in public discourse, political party agendas increasingly oriented towards ecological issues, and state-led collaborative efforts towards environmental transition. At the heart of this shift, social movements have been pivotal, advocating at the grassroots level for an immediate and equitable ecological transition (Imperatore and Leonardi 2023; Reichel, Plüschke-Altöf and Plaan 2022, Hoberg 2021).

Many social movement scholars have focused their analyses on climate justice movements like Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion, Last Generation, and other similar youth movements (della Porta and Portos 2023, Skovdal and Benwell 2021,

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Reichel, Plüschke-Altöf and Plaan 2022). However, it is only occasionally (Andretta and Imperatore 2024, Imperatore and Leonardi 2023, Velicu and Barca 2020), and particularly when considering the Global South (Almeida, González Márquez and Fonsah 2023, Imperatore and Leonardi 2023, Bell 2020), that authors acknowledge the significant role of workers and labour organizations in environmental struggles.

This article focuses on workers' protest mobilization to illustrate how the politicization of the climate crisis has not only revitalized the environmental movement but also has the potential to rekindle labour conflicts, some of them arising from the negative consequences of the environmental transitions paradigm (Kleinheisterkamp-González 2023, Bell 2020, Velicu and Barca 2020). In this article, I will demonstrate that in the last two decades, worker protest mobilizations in Italy have contributed to the politicization of environmental issues by strategically framing part of their struggles as environmentally concerned.

In the first part of this article, I will sketch the theoretical framework on which I will draw my empirical analysis. I argue that the prevailing literature, which often highlights a conflict between labour and environmental concerns (Kalt 2021), and, by extension, between workers and environmentalists (Nebbia 2012), predominantly addresses conflicts of interest that surface during standard bargaining interactions within industrial relations. On the contrary, shifting attention from industrial relations to protest mobilization often reveals the emergence of a distinct 'working class environmentalism', sometimes even based on a radical transformative and democratic vision.

To fill this gap, I advocate for a synthesis of the industrial relations framework with social movement studies, drawing particularly on Alessandro Pizzorno's 'political exchange' theory (1978) and the concept of 'social movement unionism' (Trongone 2022), as already proposed by other authors (Pilati and Perra 2023, della Porta et al. 2023). This integrated approach leads to what I call the 'politicization' hypothesis of the environmental issue. I will, then, outline the methodological approach of the analysis, which employs a mix of quantitative and qualitative tools, and dedicate two sections to the empirical analysis.

In the first section, utilizing a unique dataset of protest events from 1994 to 2021, I test the 'politicization' hypothesis and demonstrate that trade unions, when incorporating environmental issues into their protest claims, are more likely to act as socially inclusive social movement unions. In the second part, I will delve into the in-depth case study analysis to illustrate this politicization mechanism. I will do so by examining a specific workers' mobilization in the automotive sector in Italy: the GKN workers mobilization against collective layoffs in Campi Bisenzio, Florence. Here, I seek to show that - due to the central role of the climate crisis frame in public opinion and in the social movement landscape - workers grappling with collective layoffs justified in terms of costly production adaptations to ecological transition standards may strategically choose to transcend the environmental/job dilemma. This strategy not only serves as a means to mobilize structures, people, and public opinion to achieve the immediate goal of job preservation but also plays a crucial role in a profound symbolic and meaning-making effort aimed at constructing a new collective identity and integrating environmental concerns into a broader framework of justice. The mobilization of GKN workers serves as a compelling example of how workers, faced with insufficient power within the

industrial relations system, leverage the environmental issue to politicize their claims effectively. GKN workers engaged with the local territory and civil society organizations, expanding their network by collaborating with other labour disputes and social movements, including students and ecological groups. Initiatives such as the “Insorgiamo tour” and participation in national strikes and demonstrations were instrumental in this effort. Furthermore, they played a key role in forging a new collective identity that integrates social and environmental concerns. In the conclusions, I will summarize the empirical evidences of the article, elaborate on their theoretical and political implications and suggest some venues for future research.

## **2. Environmentalism and workers: between collective bargaining and social movements**

### **2.1. Workers against environmentalists or environmentalist workers?**

Many scholars have pointed to the systematic recurrence of the labour/environment conflict: “the history of 20th-century environmentalism is riddled with conflicts between environmental activists and workers, which have compromised any possibility for political alliance in many cases” (Barca 2019, p. 5). Applying a rational choice perspective, the conflict at hand can be attributed to the competing interests of various actors and the high stakes involved in the transition and reindustrialization policies that are necessary to adapt production systems and address the pressing need to mitigate environmental degradation and contrast climate change. Companies can use their power to opt out to strongly influence the workers’ perception of their interests, by forcing them to choose between job security and reducing the environmental and health impact of their production (Barca 2012).

In this context, trade union strategies regarding environmental policies depend on the costs that workers would face, determined by the level of exposure of their sector to industrial restructuring, and can range from open opposition to green policies to a more collaborative approach with institutions aimed at achieving a “just transition” (Kalt 2021; Snell 2018).

Recent studies seem to confirm that claims about just transition in labour and environmental movements are pitted against each other, with important consequences on transition policies (Kalt 2021).

However, when scholars describe labour as resistant to changes in production and their work in view of more general interests, such as the environment or future generations, they are actually referring to the positions of trade unions within the framework of collective negotiations, as required by or requested for the governance of the ecological transition (Andretta and Imperatore 2024). In such bargaining processes, the rule is the mutual adjustment of partisan interests (Lindblom 1959), and the interests at play in this bargaining structure range from “those of decent and fairly paid work [...], to ‘ecological’ interests, [...] [such as] do not poison the population through productive activities,” to those of entrepreneurs “to derive a profit from the money invested in producing goods through human labour” (Nebbia 2012).

## 2.2. Environmentalism and the politicization of labour claim-making

Despite this interests-based proposed analysis and its implication for the labour-environment relations, the contribution of workers to the ‘ecological spring’ has been observed at all levels worldwide (Obach 2002; Rätzzel and Uzzell 2013; Wang and Lo 2021). Starting from the 1960s and 1970s, in parallel with the explosion of consumption production and the expansion of the industrial districts which led to unprecedented levels of environmental degradation and pollution, workers and labour organizations did begin to actively question the relationship between production and reproduction, between labour and nature in many western industrialized countries (Bell 2020, Andretta and Imperatore 2024).

Examples of how workers and working-class communities have mobilized beyond their ‘natural’ interests in job safety and reproduction, overcoming ecological versus distributive conflicts, can be traced back to that period (Imperatore and Leonardi 2023).

The struggle of residents—primarily workers—in the Love Canal neighbourhood in 1972 is one of such efforts. They mobilized against the toxic waste deposited by the Hooker Chemical Company, a crisis that escalated after a flood which forced the evacuation of 800 families. Additionally, multiple mobilizations against the siting of hazardous waste disposal landfills in predominantly Black working-class communities contributed to the coining of the term *environmental racism*. Similarly, the concerted efforts of workers and trade unions in heavily polluting industries, such as the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers’ Union (OCAW), have aimed to protect both workplace conditions and environmental well-being, ultimately leading to the emergence of the concept of a “just transition.”

The case of Italy is very interesting in this respect, as it represented an important laboratory, with struggles and practices connected with the ecology-labour nexus in highly noxious and labour-intensive production plants such as those in the automotive sector (in particular in major automotive industries, e.g. former Fiat), in the chemical-pharmaceutical industry (e.g. Farmitalia, close to Turin) or in the petrochemical sector (e.g. Montedison in Porto Marghera, near Venice). In these contexts, the workers started a radical mobilization against the harm understood both as the capitalist authoritarian organization of work (Feltrin and Sacchetto 2021) and the negative externalities coming from production, and achieved important outcomes such as the improvement of living conditions in the workplace, the *Statuto dei Lavoratori* (Workers’ Statute, Act 300/1970), the reform of the national health system (Marchetto 2014) and a partial democratization of the industrial relations.

The link between workers’ interests and ecology was also found evident in the Global Justice Movement – emerged worldwide in the late 1990s (della Porta et al. 2006), in parallel with the acceleration of environmental devastation as a function of the globalization process (Rätzzel and Uzzell 2013). This transnational movement, questioning neoliberal globalization, integrating North and South countries’ struggles and claiming for a more democratic ‘glocal’ governance of the socio-economic processes, has – in fact – put at the core of its master frame the link between environmental, social justice and democracy (Andretta 2005). Again, in Italy, the Global Justice Movement was notable for its comparatively more effective integration of social and environmental concerns through a network that bridges trade unions and environmental movements, making it

a recognized model for social movements across Europe and globally (della Porta et al. 2006).

Although the economic crisis has compelled Italian trade unions to focus their mobilization mostly on social concerns (Andretta 2018, 2022), the subsequent decade saw the climate issue becoming central in public discourse (Imperatore and Leonardi, 2023), providing labour movements with new opportunities to politicize their mobilization efforts around environmental issues.

The most recent and arguably significant example is the mobilization of GKN workers in Campi Bisenzio, who since July 2022 have been protesting against the collective layoffs proposed by the plant's owner. They have effectively linked their job insecurity issues with broader concerns about social and climate insecurities, incorporating both aspects into their demands (Andretta and Imperatore 2024).

By acting as social movements, then, sometimes workers expand their utility function to include additional elements that could potentially conflict with their established interests, somehow solidified or 'frozen' within the system of industrial relations, and – or because they are - 'protected' by trade union organizations through bargaining exchanges. According to Alessandro Pizzorno (1978, p. 279), this is more likely to happen when workers need to "threat the withdraw of the wider consensus or social order" because they cannot "threat the withdraw of continuity of work" or find it insufficient to acquire "the goods they need". In this case, workers politicize their actions by connecting their economic demands with broader societal concerns, expanding their range of actions, and collaborating with non-labour organizations (Pilati and Perra 2023). As a consequence, "the structure of occupations and of productions" is not necessarily any longer the sole "criteria by which collective identities may be identified" (Pizzorno 1978, p. 280). New collective identities may emerge, which challenge or transform labour organizational identity and "this will constitute another factor distorting the simple pursuit of the maximisation of immediate gains for the members by the union apparatus" (ibid.).

### 2.3. A social movement unionism approach: argument and hypotheses

In the previous two sections, I presented the argument that:

- a) The perceived conflict between labour and the environment arises within the established patterns of worker's claim-making in industrial relations, particularly when workers' interests are perceived to be at odds with environmental policies and their advocates.
- b) Conversely, a form of 'working class environmentalism' develops when labour mobilization evolves into a social movement, which then redefines workers' interests through the process of collective identity (tras)formation.

By drawing on Alessandro Pizzorno's political exchange theory, I interpret the second scenario as being driven by a politicization mechanism, resulting from a shift of workers' claim-making from the realm of 'collective bargaining' to the broader 'political market.' (for a similar interpretation see Pilati and Perra 2023 and della Porta et al. 2023). This shift redirects the traditional labour action from ceasing work (strike) to challenging the overall social order through expanded forms of protest (extra-strike protest).

The mechanism of politicization is intertwined with the dynamics of social movements, a connection that is clarified when industrial relations are considered in tandem with social movement studies. From this ‘bridging’ perspective, scholars have increasingly focused on how unions are adapting to the new challenges of neoliberal globalization by revitalizing labour struggles and adopting a social movement posture (see Trongone 2022 for a recent review). This literature underscores trade unions’ efforts to mobilize in coalitions with other civil society and social movement organizations to enhance their influence over both the political system and industrial relations (Baccaro et al., 2003).

Fairbrother (2008, p. 214, emphasis added) has reported four characteristics of social movement unionism: a) inclusive ‘rank and file mobilization’; b) ‘experimenting with collective actions, that go beyond the strike, or workplace limited activities’; c) ‘building alliances, coalition building, and extending into the community and beyond’; and d) ‘embracing emancipatory politics, framing demands politically, and formulating transformative visions’.

The concept can be used to identify a specific mode of unions coordination similar to social movements (Diani 2018, Pilati and Perra 2023).

My argument is that, given the prominent place of the climate crisis in public discourse and within the realm of social movements, trade unions shifting their claim-making focus from collective bargaining to the political arena is increasingly likely to integrate environmental issues into their demands. To check the empirical validity of this argument, I will test the following hypotheses by drawing on specific dimensions of social movement unionism:

H1: The use of environmental issues is associated with a coalitional mode of coordination that transcends the labour movement.

H2: The use of environmental issues is associated with socially more inclusive protest mobilization (peripheral actors other than workers themselves are present in the protest event).

H3: The use of environmental issues is associated with forms of mobilization that transcend striking (extra-strike forms of action).

H4: The use of environmental issues is associated with a generalized frame that transcends domestic boundaries by also targeting international institutions.

However, this argument ought to be controlled for by the well-established ‘politicization’ argument prevalent in social movement studies, which emphasizes the role of political opportunity structures (see della Porta and Diani 2020, cha. 8, for a detailed review).

Political opportunities are reported to influence social movements in various ways: through the availability (or lack) of allies, the inclusiveness (or exclusiveness) of institutional channels, and historical patterns that favour either more responsive or repressive state strategies toward “challengers”. Stable factors like political regimes and state centralization tend to explain cross-country protest variations but not changes over time within a single country. More dynamic elements, such as shifts in political power and the influence of allies and adversaries in the political system, are more useful for the purpose of this article. The stance of political allies and opponents plays a significant role in how protest groups act. For instance, leftist parties often ally with progressive movements,

while right-wing parties usually oppose them. When opponents are in power, these groups are more likely to ramp up protest activities, as institutional access is limited. The involvement of political parties in protests is thus contingent on their status within the political system. The counter-argument is then that workers politicize their claim-making either when political parties are involved or in presence of ‘hostile’ right-wings governments. All the hypotheses will then be checked by considering the presence of political parties in the protest event and the presence of a center-right government at the time of the protest event.

### 3. Method

In this article, I will employ a dual-method approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative analyses. The initial phase will involve testing the article’s central hypotheses through quantitative methods. Subsequently, I will delve into a qualitative case study to elucidate the mechanisms that support the validated hypotheses.

The quantitative component of my analysis utilizes Protest Event Analysis (PEA), a methodology recognized in the social movements literature for its ability to facilitate cross-temporal and cross-spatial comparisons of protest mobilization. PEA has become an established approach within the fields of social movement and protest studies, providing a systematic framework for comparative research (see Hutter 2014 for a review). Despite the potential biases associated with using newspapers as a source, scholars often rely on them to gather data on protests, especially when studying events over extended periods.<sup>2</sup> Newspaper coverage yields critical information on protest events (PEs), such as the organizing entities, the types of participants involved, the nature and content of their claims, the forms of action employed, protest targets, the scope of the protest, and other pertinent details. This data is categorized using a codebook that specifies variables and coding labels for each attribute of a protest<sup>3</sup>. The collected data are then entered into a matrix, forming the basis for subsequent statistical analysis.

By operatively defining a PE as *a protest episode in which five or more people mobilize through political direct and contentious actions to influence elites decisions and decision making with their claims*, the quantitative analysis of this article is based on data from articles selected from the online version of the daily newspaper *La Repubblica* using the keyword ‘protest\*’. Among all the articles with ‘protest\*’ in the text or the title, only those referring to PE carried out by more than five people were selected<sup>4</sup>.

According to the data gathered between 1994 and 2021, *La Repubblica.it* reported on 6,311 protests in Italy. About one third (2,217) of PE identified have been coordinated by trade unions organization.

Since my goal is to assess the extent to which trade unions use the environmental issue to politicize their claim-making, this analysis will be based solely on trade union protest events. This includes each protest event in which at least one trade union was present as an initiator or co-organizer. I will analyse these data synchronically and test the hypotheses elaborated by means of binary logistic regressions. Information on the variables included in the models is reported in Table 1 below.

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<sup>2</sup> For further details, see the methodological note in the appendix section.

<sup>3</sup> The codebook is available upon request to the author.

<sup>4</sup> For further details, see the methodological note in the appendix section.

For the coalitional mode of coordination in H1, I created a dummy variable that is assigned a value of 1 when trade unions protested alongside other civil society or social movement organizations, and 0 otherwise. Regarding social inclusion in H2, I initially differentiated between employed workers with stable employment relationships (insiders) and precarious workers (outsiders) (refer to Pilati and Perra 2023). Subsequently, I created a dummy variable to indicate whether in addition to insiders, outsiders, women, students (or other youth), unemployed individuals, or immigrants were mobilizing in the same protest event. This occurred in 21% of the cases.

For the extra-strike forms of action in H3, the dependent variable scores 1 if other demonstrative forms of action (marches, symbolic actions, sit-ins, or direct actions) are used either in the presence or in absence of a strike (45% of the cases).

Finally, for H4, the dummy variable scores 1 when an international institution or actor is also addressed by the protest (8% of the protest events).

The environmental and democratic issue, the main factor in my hypotheses, is an original variable found to be present in 11% of the protests. Protests on this issue included workers mobilizing against perceived environmental degradation in their workplaces or living areas, targeting pollutants such as asbestos or chemical agents, opposing incinerators and nuclear plants, and advocating for democratic control over their environment.

My control variables include the presence of political parties, which were present in 5% of the trade union protests, and the timing of the protests, with 44% of the trade union protest events in my database occurring during a government supported by right-wing parties (Berlusconi I/1994-1996, II/2001-2005, III/2008-2011, Conte I/2018-2019)<sup>5</sup>.

In the following section of the empirical analysis, I will illustrate a detailed case study to explicate the politicization mechanism at play. This will involve a close examination of the mobilization by automotive workers at GKN in Campi Bisenzio (Florence), who were protesting collective layoffs.

The case-study is based on fifteen in-depth interviews with key actors, Facebook posts from the worker's organization, and self-produced political documents. Interviews were reviewed, and extracts related to main themes were manually selected. All Facebook posts from July 9, 2021, to February 2, 2023 (749 posts), were downloaded using the Facebook Graph API. Automatic coding with selected keywords (environment, transition, convergence, conversion) was followed by manual analysis of over 200 posts to identify relevant theoretical aspects. Additionally, self-produced documents on the convergence between workers' struggles and climate justice were collected.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Table 1A, located in the appendix, presents the bivariate correlations among the independent variables. The correlation coefficients are sufficiently low, mitigating any concerns regarding multicollinearity (Hair et al. 2019, Chapter 9). Table 2A, on the other hand, presents the correlations between the dependent variables. The significant Pearson's scores demonstrate that the four hypotheses primarily address the same theoretical argument.

<sup>6</sup> For a more comprehensive analysis of the GKN mobilization and its implications for workers' approach toward environmental concerns and the struggle for a green transition, refer to Andretta et al. (2023) and Andretta and Imperatore (2024).



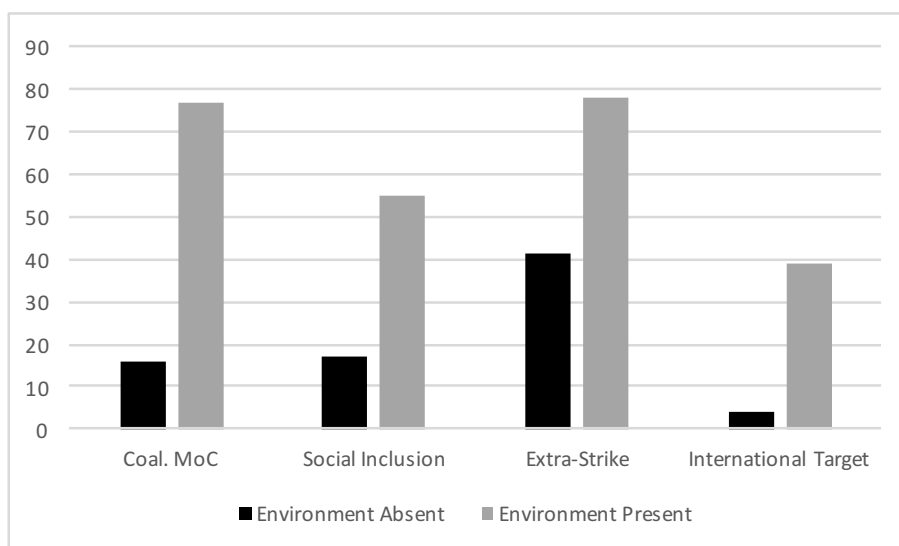
**Table 1.** Dependent, Independent and control variables included in the logistic regressions<sup>7</sup>

| Variables Name                   | Variables operationalisation  | Means and (standard deviations) |
|----------------------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| <b>Dependent variables</b>       |   |                                 |
| Coalitional mode of coordination | 1 if besides trade unions other civil society or social movement organizations are present; 0 other   | 0.22 (0.41)                     |
| Social inclusion                 | 1 if besides workers other peripheral social actors are present (women or precarious workers or students or young or immigrants or unemployed); 0 other | 0.21 (0.41)                     |
| Extra-Strike forms of action     | 1 if other demonstrative forms of action are used (marches or symbolic actions or sit-ins or direct actions); 0 other                                   | 0.45 (0.50)                     |
| International target             | 1 if an international target is present; 0 other  | 0.08 (0.26)                     |
| <b>Main independent variable</b> |   |                                 |
| Environmental issue              | 1 if an environmental issue is present; 0 other   | 0.11 (0.30)                     |
| <b>Controlling variables</b>     |   |                                 |
| Political parties                | 1 if a political parties is present; 0 other  | 0.05 (0.22)                     |
| Centre-right government          | 1 if PE happened when a centre-right government was present (including the first Conte government); 0 other   | 0.44 (0.50)                     |

Source: own elaboration.

#### 4. Testing the politicization hypotheses of the environmental issue

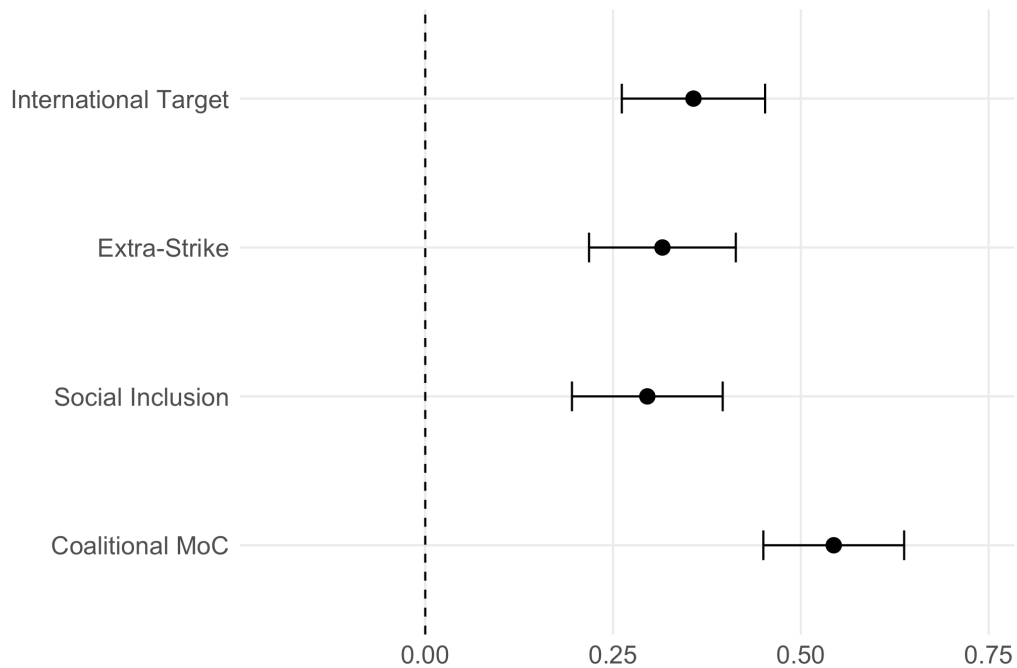
When the hypotheses that environmental issue contributes to political mobilization are preliminarily examined, it appears that approximately 77% of the protest events that included these claims were coalition-coordinated (compared to only 16.2% of protests not focused on environmental issues). Furthermore, around 55% of these events involved other social actors (compared to 17%), 78% featured at least one extra-strike action (compared to 42%), and 39% targeted international institutions (compared to 3.4%) (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** The Impact of Environmental Issue on Indicators of the Politicization of Trade Union Claim-Making (Percentage Presence of Indicators)

Source: own elaboration.

<sup>7</sup> Information on the original dataset variables is shown in Table 3A, located in the appendix.

**Figure 2.** Change in the predicted probabilities of the politicization of labour claim-making when the environmental issue is part of the claim with 95% CIs (full models in the Appendix, Table 4A)



Source: own elaboration.

The analysis of the politicizing effect of the environmental issue is controlled by accounting for two indicators of the political opportunity structure. Actually, when political parties are present, trade unions tend to coordinate actions with other civil society or social movement organizations more frequently (82% vs. 19% when political parties are absent); their protests are more socially inclusive (62% vs. 19%), less strike-oriented (85% vs. 43%), and more likely to target international actors (25% vs. 6%).

On the contrary, centre-right governments do not seem to trigger a politicizing effect: 24% of trade union protests occur during their periods (compared to 22% otherwise); 25% of these protests are more socially inclusive (compared to 18%); 48% include extra-strike forms of action (compared to 44%), and there are no differences at all in international targeting (about 7%).

To summarise the key findings from the binary logistic regressions, Figure 2 illustrates the changes in the predicted probabilities of the environmental issue as driver of politicization.

Overall, the results support the stated hypotheses: the controlled presence of the environmental issue has a significant impact on trade unions' coalitional mode of coordination (H1), as the predicted probabilities of a labour coalitional mode of coordination are more than four times higher when the environmental issue is present compared to its absence. Similarly, the probability of social inclusion (H2) is nearly three times higher, the use of extra-strike forms of mobilization (H3) is about 1.75 times higher, and the likelihood of targeting international institutions (H4) is more than 11

times higher when the environmental issue is present (see also Table 4A and 5A in the Appendix).

When considering the control variables based on the political opportunity structure approach only for the involvement of political parties similar changes in the predicted probabilities are observed, with the notable exception of targeting international institutions, while, the presence of centre-right governments has a minor, yet only occasionally significant, overall effect (Table 4A and 5A in the Appendix).

## 5. The GKN mobilization: a case of workers' environmentalism

### 5.1. The GKN campaign

The GKN workers' mobilization in Campi Bisenzio, Florence, serves as a distinct example of labour organizations harnessing environmentalism to give a political edge to their claims.<sup>8</sup>

On July 9, 2021, the GKN trade union representatives, operating under the name *Collettivo di Fabbrica* and affiliated with FIOM-CGIL, were informed via email about the immediate dismissal of all 422 employees and the subsequent closure of the plant scheduled for the following day. An opinion piece in *Econopoly*, a blog hosted by *IlSole24Ore*, characterized these mass layoffs and the plant's closure as typical occurrences in the ecological transition within the automotive industry (*Econopoly*, 2021).

Initially owned by FIAT and subsequently acquired by GKN, which was itself taken over by Melrose Industries in 2018, the plant specialized in manufacturing car axles. Its history is marked by a series of substantial labour conflicts in the early 20th century, which resulted in enhanced safety and environmental standards at the workplace (Int. 4 and 12).

The July 9, 2021, announcement of layoffs at the GKN plant became a pivotal moment. Workers, traditionally reliant on trade unions and institutions for dispute resolution, faced job insecurity and felt ecological demands were at odds with labour needs (Int. 4, 9 and 10).

Instead of merely operating within the mechanisms provided by industrial relations and initiating a classic union dispute, the *Collettivo di Fabbrica* responded to the mass layoffs by establishing a permanent assembly that continues to operate today. The assembly has enabled workers to collaborate effectively with civil society organizations, informal groups, and environmental activists, coordinating numerous collective protest actions nationwide (Int. 1, 2, 3, 7 and 13), which have raised the profile of their campaign for a just society based on social and environmental concerns.

By building a large social movement network and mobilizing the support of public opinion, the GKN workers have so far been able to block the collective layoffs and secure an exemption from the redundancy fund.

If observers have tried to explain the factory's closure with the restructuring processes of the automotive sector within the ecological transition, rather than mobilize the well-known conflict between environment and labour, GKN workers have developed

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<sup>8</sup> The information presented herein draws from the following sources (Andretta and Imperatore 2024, GKN 2022, Cini 2021).

over these two years of mobilization a transition project that would transform the factory into an innovative model of green production controlled by the workers and the local community (Andretta et al. 2023, Andretta and Imperatore 2024, Imperatore and Leonardi 2023).

This case vividly illustrates how integrating environmental concerns into labour demands activates a process of politicization through collective action coordinated via social movement modes. This involves expanding the repertoire of collective actions and coordinating with other civil society and social movements to redefine collective identities and thereby the interests around which labour mobilizes.

## 5.2. From strike to inclusive protest

The GKN mobilization is a clear case of shifting the locus of labour conflict from collective bargaining to the political market. The workers could rely on the mechanisms of the social dialogue governing labour disputes in case of collective layoffs. And indeed in parallel with their protest mobilization, the FIOM-CGIL continued to play a significant role in that respect (Int. 11). But the GKN workers decided a different, ‘political’, pathway which called workers, students, citizens for protest collective actions under the motto ‘Insorgiamo!’ (‘raise up!’), an *inclusive grassroots mobilization*.

The range of protest tactics employed by the Collettivo di Fabbrica, including sit-ins, marches, symbolic actions, and blitzes, are characteristic of social movement unionism. While it is not feasible to detail every initiative undertaken by the GKN workers, an examination of the early stages of their mobilization can provide a clear illustration of their approach.

Only 10 days after the e-mail, the GKN workers were able to mobilize about 10 thousand people in Piazza Santa Croce in Florence with the participation of workers involved in other labour disputes and many Florentine citizens. Eventually, a 2 hours’ general strike was called by the main Tuscany’s metalworkers trade unions; on 24<sup>th</sup> July a demonstration in the streets of Campi Bisenzio brought together 8,000 people; and on 18<sup>th</sup> September a demonstration with the participation of 40 thousand people – an important symbolic number in the Italian workers movement history<sup>9</sup> – took place in Florence (GKN2022, 52, Int. 4 and 8). In 2022, they launched the ‘Insorgiamo tour’, where delegates from the GKN plant travelled around Italy to meet workers involved in similar labour disputes or other territorial struggles (Int. 4, 5, 8). They participated in the general strike called for by grassroots unions on October 11<sup>th</sup>, prepared a workers’ section of the anti-G20 ecologist demonstration march in Rome and were also protagonists of the unitary mobilization of workers and students in Florence (Int. 1, 2, and 8). Finally, it is important to mention a joint demonstration with the climate justice movement in Bologna, which saw the participation of about 30 thousand people from all over the country.

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<sup>9</sup> On 14<sup>th</sup> October 1980, 40 thousand FIAT managers and white-collar workers marched in support of the company’s proprietors, counteracting the trade unions’ mobilization against the planned collective layoffs of 15 thousand metalworkers. The ‘March of the 40 thousand’ is recognized as a pivotal event marking the decline of the workers’ movement in Italy (Ginsborg 1990, 902).

### 5.3. Coalition building

Protest mobilization is central to the workers' strategy for creating a collective entity capable of altering the political landscape that permitted their firm's relocation and is obstructing its shift toward environmentally sustainable production:

An overall change can be achieved only through a large movement. ... For this very reason we also call for the unity of the workers' movement with all social movements, starting from the climate justice movement (Int. 4).

From its inception, the Collettivo di Fabbrica engaged the local community, which they refer to as the 'territory,' to support their campaign (Int. 2, 6, 7 and 8). The GKN permanent assembly quickly evolved into a nexus for social movement activity, fostering the development of strategies and visions, as well as organizing events to promote broader unification (Int. 8). Since their intention was to overcome the job-environment dilemma and they wanted to elaborate an ecological transition plan for their plant (Int. 3 and 7), they "had to start seeking support in environmental mobilization networks, looking for organizations that were willing to dismantle that narrative first and then ... to join our fight" (FB 11/01/22; Int. 4). In this perspective, they have considered the *strategy of coalition building* as fundamental for the future of the conversion: "outside of this convergence we have no future. Because the publicly owned and socially integrated factory, in this system, in this context, with these power relations, cannot be realized" (FB 22/10/22).

### 5.4. Ecological transformative vision

The coalition built by the GKN workers' served not just to share and allocate resources for collective action, but also to engage in a process of collective identity redefinition. Participants in the mobilization report that the GKN workers successfully forged a substantial network by advocating for a rebellious (Insorgente) identity (Int. 1, 2, 6, 7). The redefinition of collective identity among the GKN workers is anchored in a radical eco-social critique of the "system of production" (Int. 1). They contend that "sustainability will become the arena of conflict and class struggle" (Int. 6), indicating a necessity to integrate environmental, democratic and labour concerns.

Once the utility function is redefined through a process of collective identity building, it appears clear that workers' interests are ultimately and naturally 'environmentalist':

To resist the many processes of exploitation of natural resources, ecosystems and living species, we recognize the importance of the intersection of environmental struggles and struggles for labour rights. *The reduction of working hours for equal pay and the introduction of a minimum wage system are environmental struggles; rethinking the production model from below is an ecological struggle; putting the living, care and regeneration back at the core, freeing ourselves from the environment (health)/job blackmail is an ecological struggle.* (Doc. 2)

The development of an alternative plan for industrial conversion suggests a radical restructuring process for both plant activities and the automotive industry's future: "a social, political and *environmental experiment to improve our country by creating a sustainable mobility hub*" (FB post 14/11/2021).

## 5.5. The conditions of the GKN 'class environmentalism'

If the GKN case illustrates how labour groups address environmental issues to politicize their claim-making, several specific factors may explain its workers' radical environmentalism.

The GKN factory in Campi Bisenzio is one of the most heavily unionized plants in Italy. Not only did unionization facilitate the rapid mobilization of workers at the time of layoffs, but it also facilitated the convergence with environmental movements based on a workers' ecological tradition. The most prominent labour union at the plant is by far the FIOM-CGIL, which has a strong leftist political orientation and was originally affiliated with the Italian Communist Party. This organization was strongly involved in the mobilization of the 70s, which took the ecological stance I mentioned above, and the memory of these struggles is part of the memory repertoire of the Collettivo (Int.1, 2, 4 and 7).

Moreover, the very organizational model of the Collettivo is based on the more informal work councils of that period, eventually formalized in what is known now as the union representative unit (RSU). This explains also the workers' ability to mobilize independently of the dominant category union in the factory and their ability to engage with the local community and various organized structures of civil society. The workers' need to overcome the main federal and confederal trade unions strategies in the case of collective layoffs - based on compensations and labour market repositioning - pushed them to elaborate on the past Italian trade unionism to recuperate its radicality of proposal and action.

Last, but surely not least, the area between Florence and Campi Bisenzio, is indeed a potential 'rebellious territory', characterized by hubs of activism deeply rooted in a political subculture that extends beyond mere party affiliation (della Porta and del Panta 2024). The Collettivo found it relatively straightforward to mobilize in this culturally rich territory shaped by past struggles against fascism and worker movements. This sub-cultural context facilitated their action for a just, equal, and green society, reactivating latent tensions between institutionalized elements like trade unions, political parties, and local institutions, and the subculture's rebellious nature:

[Florence] [...] we know that one of your characteristics is that of a rebellious city, never tamed. Capable of challenging popes, kings, resisting sieges, rising up with your own plebeians whether it was the time of the Ciompi or 1944. [...] For this reason, Florence, we call on you once again to amaze us. Let's push together. Let's fearlessly defeat every maneuver, unmask every rhetorical and formal stance, bring fresh air into these places filled with stale air." (FB 1/09/21)

## 6. The politicization effect of the environment in labour claim-making: concluding remarks

The relationship between workers and environmental concerns is complex and demands urgent attention. Workers are often the first to face the social impact of transition policies, which they may resist. Simultaneously, as they stand to incur many of the costs, their viewpoints and approaches to ecological transition are critically important. In this article, I challenged the predominant notion that labour is largely resistant to

environmental issues. This view often arises from an analytical focus on the conflicting interests present in the bargaining processes within transition policy arenas.

Yet, when examining workers' protest mobilizations, many scholars acknowledge that workers have consistently struggled against environment degradations of recent decades, with Italy being no exception in this regard. Workers and trade unions engaged in social movement-style mobilizations appear more inclined to incorporate environmental concerns into their claims. I have proposed a synthesis of the industrial relations framework with the social movement perspective as a means to reconcile these diverse and contradictory findings. While this integrative approach is not unprecedented, the 'social movement union' concept often used in such efforts typically falls short in theoretical precision, failing to adequately identify when there is a transformative process of collective identity redefinition among workers. I contended that the concept of social movement unionism ought to be situated into Alessandro Pizzorno's 'political exchange' theory. Following this perspective, a prototypical form of social movement unionism tends to emerge when workers enter the 'political market' to challenge the existing social order through their claims; and it is characterized by socially inclusive grassroots mobilization that employs a diverse array of protest tactics beyond traditional strikes, aimed at cultivating widespread, transformative visions for societal change.

I examined the 'politicizing effect' of environmental issue within a substantial dataset of Italian trade union protest events from 1994 to 2021. The analysis found that all markers of politicization — which include social inclusion, coalition-based coordination, the use of non-strike protest tactics, and the broadening of claims — are statistically linked to the integration of environmental and democratic concerns into the workers' advocacy. The study also documents the 'politicizing effect' of political parties' involvement, which, while not contradicting the hypothesis, suggests an area for further research to investigate how political opportunities and the prominence of environmental concerns interplay within the dynamics of social movement unionism.

In the final section of this article, I presented a detailed case study that illuminates the dynamics by which an ecological vision influences and is influenced by workers' political mobilization. The case of the GKN workers, who faced collective layoffs, exemplifies how workers, amidst the heightened public and social movement focus on the climate crisis, navigate the conflict between environmental standards and job security. Rather than simply overcoming the environmental versus job dilemma, these workers crafted a distinctive form of 'class environmentalism'. This emerged through a redefinition of collective identity during their coordinated social movement unionism efforts.

In concluding, it's important to recognize that examining how the climate crisis influences workers' struggles is to observe just one aspect of a multifaceted issue. The case study suggests that the incorporation of environmental concerns into workers' advocacy cannot be simply viewed as an 'independent variable'. While the GKN workers initially cantered their mobilization against layoffs around an ecological narrative, it becomes apparent that this focus evolved dynamically through their involvement in the coalitional processes characteristic of social movement unionism. Furthermore, the findings from both the statistical analysis and the case study indicate a reciprocal relationship: while environmental issues can politicize workers' claims, workers' ecological struggles also

appear to amplify the political dimensions of the climate crisis. Future research should aim to elucidate the mechanisms underlying this dual politicization process and the factors that enable such outcomes. In this endeavor, a comparative study of negative and positive cases would be particularly illuminating.

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## Appendix

### Notes on methods

Newspaper articles serve as a valuable source for collecting detailed information about protest events (PE). These articles can provide insights into various aspects of protests, including the organizations staging the protest, the social players involved, the claims and issues being protested, the forms of action used, the targets of the protest, its scope, and other relevant details.

This information is systematically organized using a codebook that defines the variables and labels for each property of the protest. The resulting data are then compiled into a matrix for statistical analysis.

However, it is important to acknowledge at least two types of biases associated with using media and newspapers as sources. Firstly, there is bias related to the type of protest itself. Newspapers are more likely to report on and provide details about large-scale or radical protests that address issues already at the forefront of media attention (McCarthy, McPhail et al. 1996). Secondly, there is bias related to the type of newspapers selected. Local and liberal or leftist newspapers tend to cover more protest events compared to other types of newspapers (Rucht and Neidhart 1998).

Despite these significant biases, there are four reasons to support the use of this research strategy:

1. Inevitability of Bias: Every source produces biases, which political and social scientists must acknowledge and work with.
2. Consistency in Comparative Research: In comparative and longitudinal research, the primary objective is to keep biases as constant as possible to ensure reliable comparisons over time.
3. Feasibility of Large-Scale Data Collection: This strategy enables the collection of a large amount of data, which would otherwise be impossible or too labour-intensive to gather through other means.
4. Impact on Public Debate: Protests are more likely to enter public debate, become known to the public, and ultimately influence elites and decision-makers if they receive media attention (Hutter 2014).

The selection of *La Repubblica* as a source is justified by the accessibility and diffusion of the newspaper (della Porta et al. 2015) and by its liberal editorial profile, which has been considered more sensitive and receptive to protest mobilizations (della Porta and Diani 2004). To identify potential biases in this source compared to other journalistic outlets, a study following the same protocols was conducted using *Corriere della Sera* for selected months in 2009 and 2010. In 2009, *La Repubblica* reported 93 events while *Corriere della Sera* reported 89. In 2010, *Corriere della Sera* reported 128 events compared to *La Repubblica*'s 108. Both newspapers covered institutional or party organizations in 37% of events. *Corriere della Sera* reported on trade unions in 52.5% of events, compared to 38% by *La Repubblica*. *La Repubblica* gave more attention to associations and formal movement organizations (55% vs. 46%), whereas *Corriere della Sera* focused more on informal actors (19% vs. 14%). Regarding forms of action, *La Repubblica* reported on conventional actions in 60% of events, non-conventional forms in 63%, and

violent actions in 9%. *Corriere della Sera* reported on conventional actions in 51% of events, non-conventional forms in 72%, and violent actions in 10% (Andretta 2017).

The operational definition of a protest event and the use of the keyword 'protest' are based on previous research using the same method of analysis, source, and procedures (della Porta et al. 2015; della Porta et al. 2017; Andretta 2018; Andretta 2022). Since my database extends and integrates that original database, to avoid additional biases, I adhered to the same operational procedures. Although the use of a list of terms for specific forms of action would be more effective, the term 'protest' in Italian is frequently associated with most of them. To assess the bias introduced by using this keyword, I report the number of items sorted by the *Repubblica.it* research tools with specific forms of action as keywords and the number of items sorted when specific forms of action are searched in combination with 'protest' for the year 2021: 'strike' 499, 'strike and protest' 162; 'march (corteo)' 117, 'march and protest' 108; 'sit in' 167, 'sit in and protest' 65. Additionally, while in Italian some forms of action are strictly associated with specific terms (strike, march, sit in), others are much less so (occupation, violence, symbolic action, assembly). For the same year, 'assembly' produced 1,593 items, while 'assembly and protest' produced only 55; 'violence' produced 2,566 items, while 'violence and protest' produced 211 (mostly world news).

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**Table 1A.** Correlations between independent variables

|                    | <b>Parties</b> | <b>Centre-right gov.</b> |
|--------------------|----------------|--------------------------|
| <b>Environment</b> | .31***         | .09***                   |
| <b>Parties</b>     | -              | .06***                   |

Source: own elaboration.

**Table 2A.** Correlations between dependent variables

|                         | <b>Social inclusion</b> | <b>Extra-strike</b> | <b>International target</b> |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|
| <b>Coalitional MoC</b>  | .49***                  | .28***              | .26***                      |
| <b>Social Inclusion</b> | -                       | .31***              | .20***                      |
| <b>Extra-Strike</b>     | -                       | -                   | .21***                      |

Source: own elaboration.

**Table 3A.** Trade unions' protest events' features (percent, N=2,217)

| <b>Trade unions</b>                       | <b>%</b> | <b>N</b> |
|---|----------|----------|
| CGIL                                      | 58.7     | 1,302    |
| CISL                                      | 42.1     | 934      |
| UIL                                       | 40.6     | 900      |
| Grass Roots (together)                    | 45.2     | 1,002    |
| UGL                                       | 3,7      | 81       |
| Other organizations                       |          |          |
| Informal groups                           | 14.3     | 317      |
| CSOs                                      | 13.5     | 296      |
| Political parties                         | 5.1      | 113      |
| Institutions                              | 2.2      | 48       |
| <b>Social actors (other than workers)</b> | <b>%</b> | <b>N</b> |
| Students                                  | 14.1     | 312      |
| General citizens                          | 13.0     | 288      |
| Precarious workers                        | 7.0      | 155      |
| Journalists, politicians,..               | 3.5      | 78       |
| Immigrants                                | 1.3      | 29       |
| Women                                     | 1.0      | 20       |
| <b>Action Repertoire</b>                  | <b>%</b> | <b>N</b> |
| Strike                                    | 54.6     | 1,210    |
| Perturbative                              | 30.4     | 675      |
| March/rally                               | 29.9     | 663      |
| Conventional                              | 11.5     | 254      |
| Symbolic and Sit-ins                      | 10.0     | 221      |
| Violent                                   | 2.9      | 64       |
| <b>Claims</b>                             | <b>%</b> | <b>N</b> |
| Labour                                    | 70.4     | 657      |
| Anti-austerity                            | 21.1     | 467      |
| Welfare                                   | 18.9     | 418      |
| Environment and democracy                 | 10.6     | 236      |
| Culture                                   | 2.4      | 54       |
| Immigration                               | 1.2      | 26       |
| Gender                                    | 1.2      | 24       |
| Other                                     | 5,7      | 127      |
| <b>Targets</b>                            | <b>%</b> | <b>N</b> |
| National Governments                      | 58.5     | 1,298    |
| Economic Institutions                     | 36.9     | 817      |
| Local Governments                         | 22.1     | 489      |
| Regional Governments                      | 14.3     | 316      |
| International Institutions                | 7.2      | 160      |
| State Agencies                            | 1.8      | 41       |

Source: own elaboration.

**Table 4A.** Binary Logistic Regression: Full Models

|                          | Coalitional MoC      | Social Inclusion     | Extra-Strike         | International Targets |
|--------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
|                          | (1)                  | (2)                  | (3)                  | (4)                   |
| <b>Environment</b>       | 2.626***<br>(0.173)  | 1.476***<br>(0.153)  | 1.374***<br>(0.169)  | 2.919***<br>(0.197)   |
| <b>Center-Right Gov.</b> | -0.152<br>(0.119)    | 0.370***<br>(0.111)  | 0.029<br>(0.089)     | -0.529***<br>(0.190)  |
| <b>Parties</b>           | 2.471***<br>(0.275)  | 1.434***<br>(0.220)  | 1.554***<br>(0.277)  | 0.279<br>(0.281)      |
| <b>Constant</b>          | -1.690***<br>(0.079) | -1.811***<br>(0.081) | -0.394***<br>(0.059) | -3.154***<br>(0.137)  |
| <b>Observations</b>      | 2,217                | 2,217                | 2,217                | 2,217                 |
| <b>Log Likelihood</b>    | -957.836             | -1,036.880           | -1,449.135           | -449.521              |
| <b>Akaike Inf. Crit.</b> | 1,923.671            | 2,081.760            | 2,906.270            | 907.043               |

Source: own elaboration. Significance levels: \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

**Table 5A.** Binary Logistic Regression: Changes in predicted probabilities

|                          |         | Coalitional MoC | Social inclusion | Extra-Strike | International Target |
|--------------------------|---------|-----------------|------------------|--------------|----------------------|
| <b>Environment</b>       | Absent  | .162 (.085)     | .169 (.053)      | .415 (.059)  | .034 (.009)          |
|                          | Present | .766 (.115)     | .546 (.143)      | .779 (.085)  | .389 (.079)          |
| <b>Parties</b>           | Absent  | .194 (.153)     | .187 (.088)      | .432 (.090)  | .062 (.097)          |
|                          | Present | .823 (.149)     | .628 (.168)      | .849 (.081)  | .247 (.206)          |
| <b>Centre-Right Gov.</b> | Absent  | .216 (.184)     | .175 (.110)      | .435 (.113)  | .077 (.118)          |
|                          | Present | .238 (.230)     | .252 (.151)      | .478 (.141)  | .064 (.105)          |

Source: own elaboration.