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## **Trade Unions and Lobbying: Fighting Private Interests While Defending the Public Interest?**

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Although framing theory has been extensively studied in strategic communication comparatively, little is known about how trade unions, as a specific type of organization, use framing strategies to achieve their organizational goals. Trade unions frequently aim to present themselves as *cause* groups, campaigning for broader societal benefits and values. A key communicative challenge for them is to argue that the interest of their members equates to the public interest. How do trade unions communicatively construct links between union interests and the public interest? How is this strategy reconciled with the more conflict-oriented framing found in much traditional union discourse? This study reports the results of a qualitative three-case comparison of purposively selected trade union lobbying campaigns in Italy, Norway, and the United Kingdom. The analysis shows the versatility of public interest framing across different political systems and union trajectories, and illustrates how such a framing strategy is communicatively constructed and translated into specific symbolisms.

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More and more organizations today are contributing to public debates through communication campaigns and advocating their own values (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Polonsky, 2017), and many have tried to influence policy formulation by building public support with advocacy campaigns (Bsumek, Schneider, Schwarze, & Peeples, 2014; Gulbrandsen, 2009; Ihlen et al., 2018). Although there is a considerable research literature on strategic communication and lobbying that focuses on how business and interest groups affect policy formulation, create coalitions, and negotiate alternatives (Baumgartner, Berry, Hojnacki, Kimball, & Leech, 2009; Mahoney & Baumgartner, 2008; Tresch & Fischer, 2015), there is one specific actor—trade unions—that is active in lobbying but is often neglected in such research. In Western societies with high levels of activism, trade unions have historically played a central role in promoting societal equality, achieving better conditions and fairer wages for workers, and overall developing a more moral economy by exerting pressure on legislative bodies (Western & Rosenfeld, 2011). Hence, unions have positioned themselves as promoters of the public interest. To achieve this goal, trade unions must constantly leverage their internal legitimacy to push for social changes and to maximize their influence in the political sphere through a mix of communication and noncommunication activities (Binderkrantz & Krøyer, 2012). Literature on trade unions' strategic communications is, however, limited despite the fact that communication plays a strategic role not just for the achievement of these organizations' goals, but, above all, for shaping societies and democracies where unions operate. Unions are also an important social actor contributing to public discussions on matters that have societal and policy-related implications. Their strategic communication can thus influence what people think is relevant to discuss and even regulate, and what course of actions political leaders should take.

To get a better understanding of how such influence is exercised, this study explores the strategic communication efforts of trade unions by focusing on how trade unions' goals are communicatively framed to emphasize the public interest. Much of the lobbying literature on businesses and interest groups argues that building alliances and claiming that a proposal serves the public interest will help these organizations gain influence. But is the same true for trade unions? How do they communicatively handle their interests with broader societal benefits and values? Because of the specific organizational nature and function of trade unions in societies, that is, to represent "the self-interest of a particular economic or social group" (Coxall, 2001, p. 5), we would expect that a key communicative challenge for unions is to argue that the interest of their members equates to the public interest.

In this study, we explore this challenge by investigating how trade unions communicatively construct the notion of public interest to influence political and public spheres. Essentially, this study explores the framing strategies of trade unions when campaigning (Zarefsky, 2008), and how such strategic communication choices resonate with democratic values such as working for the public interest. It is argued that, to understand the power and influence of organizations in society, it is paramount to explore how organizations through communication gain such power and influence. To this end, we posed the following research questions:

*RQ1: How do trade unions communicatively construct links between union interests and the public interest?*

*RQ2: How is this strategy reconciled with the more conflict-oriented framing found in much traditional union discourse?*

To answer these research questions, we employed framing theory and relied on a multiple case study approach to explore public lobbying campaigns promoted by Italian, Norwegian, and UK trade unions. The comparative approach is well suited here given that the chosen unions, as we elaborate later in the article, have different traditions and historical trajectories and different starting points and opportunities for framing the public interest. Overall, this study contributes to framing theory by showing how contextual and historical elements (political systems and trade union histories) influence the framing-building process in these organizations and the strategic communication and lobbying literatures by exploring how the notion of the “public interest” is central to their framing strategies in aiding trade unions to achieve their strategic goals.

## **Literature Review**

### ***The Public Interest***

The public interest is a concept that has been debated for a long time within political science and lately in strategic communication (e.g., see, Cochran, 1974; Johnston, 2016; Lippmann, 1955). In strategic communication, the public interest is often considered a normative ideal for conducting persuasive communications in an ethical manner (Messina, 2007), for raising professionals’ values and standards (Bivins, 1993), and even for broadening the purposes of the profession (Johnston, 2016) beyond those of serving the private interests of powerful entities. Yet, the term is still considered too elusive to guide the practice of strategic communication (Messina, 2007).

Walter Lippmann (1955) suggests that the public interest is “what men would choose if they saw clearly, thought rationally, acted disinterestedly and benevolently” (p. 50). It is certainly a notion that is seen as a counterpart to private interests, that is, interests that only benefit a few. Still, the concept of public interest is highly problematic, and a number of epistemic issues are involved in defining the idea. How precisely can it be known and how can we decide on the matter? Are we to rely on procedural approaches: “The public interest is what emerges from deliberative processes that occur within democratically legitimated institutions” (Anthony, 2013, p. 128)? Others have attempted to define it as “those outcomes best serving the long-run survival and well-being of a social collective construed as a ‘public’” (Bozeman, 2007, p. 17). However, at the same time, it must be recognized that contemporary society is constructed from conflicting values and divergent interests. This also means that the public interest is always contingent in the sense that no one definition of the public interest can ever be viewed as final. The public interest must always be considered in the context of time and space: “It only comes into existence and is consequently defined when we voice and debate our concerns and views” (Simm, 2011, p. 560). Indeed, it has been argued that the debate about the public interest is part and parcel of “the democratic game itself” (Bitonti, 2017, p. 161). This means that the democratic process is one in which several political actors will present often contradictory claims that their proposals will serve the public interest best. It has been argued that because the concept is frequently invoked but seldom defined in practical discourse, it is “an empty vessel, waiting to be filled with whatever values the user wishes. This lack of definition renders

the concept vulnerable to capture by interest groups" (Feintuck, 2004, p. 2). This points to the importance of evaluating such claims, and one way of unpacking a public interest argument is to look at how it is framed.

### ***Framing Theory and Lobbying***

Framing denotes the activity of highlighting "some aspects of a perceived reality and [making] them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Frames are important for the analysis of power and the treatment of political issues (Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Vliegenthart & van Zoonen, 2011); thus, they can be employed in political contests to define the scope of issues, who is responsible for or affected by the issue, and which enduring values are relevant (Pan & Kosicki, 2001).

Framing studies have been characterized by two macro traditions: The social science tradition has focused on identifying and counting the presence of specific frames and their impact on those exposed to them, and the rhetorical tradition views framing as a communication strategy employed by a communicator to achieve a specific goal. The rhetorical tradition is thus concerned with investigating how and why a communicator employs specific frames in his or her communication (Kuypers, 2010; Souders & Dillard, 2014). Most framing literature has focused on media frames; studies on frames adopted by other social actors have been limited (Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Ihlen et al., 2018; Lock, Stachel, & Seele, 2020; Tsetsura, 2013), despite the fact that the public sphere is characterized by a multitude of frames produced by different social actors. These social actors' strategic communication efforts are important because they potentially shape frames used by news media and other actors (cf. Entman, 2004; Lock et al., 2020). Frames from different actors compete for media and public attention (Baumgartner et al., 2009); thus, understanding frame competition has become an important and relevant research area in communication studies, including investigating how opposing frames are presented together (Sniderman & Theriault, 2004) and how certain ones gain influence (Baumgartner et al., 2009).

In the context of public affairs, framing theory has been applied to specific studies on frame competition by different interest groups (e.g., Boräng et al., 2014; Lock et al., 2020), in EU policy framing (e.g., Daviter, 2007), and in relation to interest groups' lobbying efforts toward the European Commission (e.g., Klüver, Mahoney, & Opper, 2015). Frame production and the strategic choices of different actors that impact policy are seldom discussed from a public interest point of view. Lobbyists, as organizational communicators, are in the business of using strategic communication to achieve a specific political goal (Kuypers, 2010); thus, they are likely to attempt to construct frames showing how their proposal addresses a public policy that has certain causes and has to be addressed in a way that serves the public interest. However, the ability lobbyists have to use appeals to the public interest is contingent on a number of factors. Businesses typically stand accused of only pursuing a profit motive with little regard for the public interest. Unions, on the other hand, are frequently labeled as representing sectorial interests (Coxall, 2001) or faulted for only pursuing the interests of their members. In general, it has been argued that "we know remarkably little about how interest groups choose their frames" (Klüver et al., 2015, p. 481). This and other lobbying studies using framing theory mostly stop short of looking at the communicative construction of the frames and the strategic communication choices made by lobbyists. Instead, studies typically perceive frames as more or less discrete, stable entities that you choose from, for instance, whether or not an issue is framed

individually or collectively, creating an individual or a collective frame (e.g., Mahoney & Baumgartner, 2008). To understand the different starting points, it is thus necessary to study “the specific social, legal, cultural and time contexts” (Johnston, 2016, p. 1). The next section deals with the historical background and position of unions in the countries focused on in the current study.

### ***Unions: Among Market, Society, and Class***

As noted, much has been written about the political “ends” of lobbying and less about the communicative “means” to achieve these political ends. This article contributes to the latter. In this study, three trade unions from three European countries (Italy, Norway, and the United Kingdom) were chosen. Table 1 summarizes the main characteristics of these three countries from political and trade union points of view.

***Table 1. Overview of the Main Characteristics of Trade Unions in the Selected Countries.***

Main characteristic	Country		
	Italy	Norway	United Kingdom
Type of democracy	Consensual	Consensual	Majoritarian
Executive parties dimension	High	High	Low
Federal unitary dimension	Low	Low	Low
Interest group pluralism	Medium	Low	High
Type of unionism	Class-oriented	Civil society-oriented	Market-oriented

According to Lijphart’s (2012) democracy classification, the United Kingdom is a good example of a majoritarian democracy, scoring low on the executive parties dimension (e.g., low values indicate single-party dominance in cabinets, majoritarian electoral systems), as well as the federal unitary dimension (e.g., low values indicate centralized government, flexible constitutions). Norway and Italy score high on the first, but low on the second. In terms of interest group pluralism, however, there is a huge difference between the two latter countries. Italy scores medium-high, although not as high as the United Kingdom. Norway scores lowest of all. Norway, for instance, has been characterized as a corporatist country and has used a tripartite model in which unions have been negotiating with employers’ associations and the state (Kjelstadli, 1998).

Within these political systems, trade unions have developed different trajectories and influencing roles as they have faced different forms of interplay among market, society, and class, which influence their identity (Hyman, 2001). Yet, three macro ideal types can be found: market-oriented unionism, civil society unionism, and class-oriented unionism (Hyman, 2001).

The United Kingdom is considered the prime example of market-oriented unionism in which unions first and foremost are labor market institutions engaged in collective bargaining. The history of trade unionism in the United Kingdom is largely one of strife with government and confrontation with big business. Since the Industrial Revolution, British governments have legislated to prohibit trade unions and collective bargaining by British workers. Nevertheless, by the 1970s, trade union power was at its zenith and membership had reached its highest-ever figure of 13 million, more than 55% of the British workforce (McIlroy, Fishman, & Campbell, 1999). One result of a range of antitrade union legislation in the 1980s and 1990s was that membership declined steeply in the period (Moylan, 2012). Whereas the decline of heavy

manufacturing industry and the casualization of the workforce have impacted greatly trade union membership, in some sectors, it remains strong, such as in the railway industry.

Norway is an example of civil society unionism. Here, unions focus on improving workers' conditions and status in society more generally and are part of a broader struggle for social justice and equality. The civil society orientation of Norwegian unionism has led to a more cooperative and consensual form of unionism than in Italy and the United Kingdom. The idea of cooperation has been crucial in balancing relations between management and employees in Norway (Kjelstadli, 1998). In the period before the 1980s, the system was characterized by extensive public-private cooperation, particularly with regard to industrial policy. Several new unions were established that were not part of the corporative setup; hence, these new actors had to rely on lobbying (Gulbrandsen, 2009, p. 390). A key take-away point is that the Norwegian political establishment has been union-friendly.

Finally, Italy is the major example of class-oriented unionism in which the struggle between capital and labor takes the front stage. Traditionally, Italian unions were associated with a particular political party. Changes in the political structure and changes within the union federations mean that this political categorization is no longer fitting (Regalia, 2012). The first union was established during the fascist regime and represented all workers in the overall economy. Post-World War II and the Cold War destabilized this union endeavor and paved the way for a split and the creation of other unions (Regalia, 2012), such as Italian Confederation of Workers' Unions (CISL) and the Italian Union of Labor. Unlike many European countries, Italy has no labor code or specific industrial relation laws. Unionism is governed by a complex system of collective agreements, pacts, workplace agreements, laws, decrees, and regulations. Italian trade unions still lack institutionalization and have had weak influence in several collective bargaining situations (Regalia, 2012).

### **Method**

This study used a qualitative approach to explore how trade unions invoke the public interest to advance their strategic objectives. Specifically, three campaigns (see short case descriptions in the Analysis section) that took place in Italy, Norway, and the United Kingdom were selected because they are distinctive examples of framing organizational goals in the public interest. Moreover, these campaigns received media coverage and the unions argued their cases publicly. Although it is not possible to generalize, the campaigns are illustrative of how trade unions use the public interest frame in their strategic communication initiatives and permit us to study these organizations' communicative efforts in action (Stake, 2005). To compile the case description and gain insights on each campaign's milestones, we sought media coverage of the cases via national media archives (subscription based) in the leading national newspapers in each country. Searches were conducted in the native languages and were built around a string involving the name of the trade union and keywords for the campaign's main issues. After having gained important insights into the campaigns' core messages, we conducted semi-structured elite interviews with representatives who had been deeply involved in the chosen campaigns. We chose to conduct elite interviews because we were interested in understanding the strategic communication choices of trade unions when framing their organizational goals under the public interest notion rather than studying different perspectives and views on the campaigns. As other scholars have noted (Baker & Edwards, 2012; Bogner, Littig, & Menz, 2009), when "the interviewees are of less interest as a person than their capacities as experts for a certain field of

activity” (Flick, 2009, p. 165), a few key interviews are “an effective means of quickly obtaining results” and “practical insider knowledge” (Bogner et al., 2009, p. 2). Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes, and was taped and transcribed by research assistants. Consent forms were given and data collection and storage followed General Data Protection Regulation guidelines for good ethical and privacy-related practices in research. The interviewees read and approved the transcripts and no changes were required. Relevant quotes from Italian and Norwegian interviewees and written material were translated into English by the authors. To triangulate the interview data, we collected official publications on the campaign produced and made available online by each trade union in their association’s websites. We also gained access to internal strategy documents from the unions, and looked at public relations material in the form of text on websites and ads in news media outlets (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Overview of Data Collected.**

Source	Country		
	Italy	Norway	United Kingdom
Unions in focus	Confederation of Trade Unions (CISL)	The Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO)	UK National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT)
Interviewees	1 CISL communication manager responsible for the campaign	LO head of public relations and strategy + communication advisor	1 RMT senior lobbyist and policy officer
Official documents	3 strategy documents+ 1 policy proposal + 96 press releases and event updates	2 strategy documents + 1 memo on arguments + 1 speech + 1 placard	8 public reports + 1 written report to the UK Parliament Select Committee for Transport + 1 transcript of oral evidence presented to the select committee + 76 press releases
Official Web pages	Campaign URL page: <a href="http://www.fisco.cisl.it/">http://www.fisco.cisl.it/</a> , containing 5 URL pages entirely on the proposal and campaign initiatives	Campaign URL page: <a href="http://mittarbeidsliv.no/">http://mittarbeidsliv.no/</a> , containing 6 stories from the future	RMT site: <a href="https://www.rmt.org.uk/home/">https://www.rmt.org.uk/home/</a> +campaign URL page: <a href="http://actionforrail.org/resources/">http://actionforrail.org/resources/</a>
Media material	1 official video ad + 1 official audio ad, +15 news stories	18 news stories + 2 opinion editorials + 1 editorial	29 news stories



In analyzing our data set, we chose an inductive approach that consisted of a close reading of the material in light of our research questions and theoretical framework. Our approach was in line with the rhetorical tradition in framing analysis (Kuypers, 2010), which intends "to understand how a rhetor wanted to frame his/her message, how it was executed and how it might plausibly have impacted the audience" (Souders & Dillard, 2014, p. 1009). In this regard, we were interested in the "meaning shaping nature of frames" (Souders & Dillard, 2014, p. 1009) and specifically the public interest frame. We thus paid particular attention to the four elements of Entman's (1993) framing definition: problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation, and how these were discursively represented in our data set. As Souders and Dillard (2014) note, most framing studies focus on the transferring agent such as the news media and their impact on the consumers, such as public opinions, but overlook the original messaging strategies of rhetors, which is the focus of this study. This qualitative approach allowed us to explore the how and why of the campaign messages without reducing the findings to quantifiable data that can say little about the strategic thinking and the role of communication in constructing a specific understanding of an organization's position (Reese, 2007).

### **Analysis**

#### ***The Italian Case: "Carer for All Italians"***

Several Italian governments from the left and right have tried to reform the country's tax policy. Since the 1990s, personal income tax has strongly increased, becoming one of the main sources of revenue for the state, but also a great burden to workers (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2005). Reforms have mostly benefitted individuals in high-income brackets. In February 2015, CISL, under the slogan "For a More Equal and Fairer Taxation!" proposed a revision of tax policy and launched a grassroots campaign. The campaign was built around the argument that economic growth had to resume to avoid social conflict, strengthen income, and thus consumption of workers and pensioners. The campaign was mostly about promoting these objectives with a political initiative that sought the involvement of all citizens with a petition. CISL's legislative proposal had five main political objectives: (1) extending the 80-euro bonus to all tax-liable persons with an annual income below 40,000 euros, (2) removing any tax on the first house, (3) developing new family allowances to support families at risk of poverty, (4) reducing local taxes, and (5) introducing a "mini-capital-tax" for those with assets worth more than 500,000 euros.

The crucial objective was to shake the economy of the country through a legislative proposal that we asked citizens to endorse with their signatures. . . . The campaign aimed at informing and educating people about our objectives, and at the same time make them support our specific proposal. (CISL communication manager, personal interview, March 8, 2017)

To gain collective benefits, CISL used an anticipatory, value creation strategy combined with direct and indirect lobbying tactics (Olson, 1965). The campaign lasted approximately six months (February–July 2015) and approximately 500,000 signatures were submitted to the Italian Parliament during Fall 2015. According to CISL, this campaign was very ambitious because it did not seek just the support of workers and pensioners, but anyone, the "whole universe of publics" (CISL communication manager, personal interview, March 8, 2017). Hence, it had to deliver messages that appealed to a wide group of people and via multichannel means. The campaign was visible on the CISL website, across traditional mass media, and

also in social media, including Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Google+. Seven digital mobilizations, all under the hashtag #firmalacrescita (#signforgrowth), were implemented. CISL also used flash mobs and booths in the cities' main squares to reach out to local publics. To keep the message simple and clear, CISL visual material consistently reminded people of the proposal objectives through the illustration of a hand and five fingers, one finger for each objective:

We chose to depict a hand and the five fingers . . . for a need of simplicity. We chose it because we wanted to speak in a simple way to the citizens. Isn't it easier to explain our campaign objectives through the fingers of a hand? (CISL communication manager, personal interview, March 8, 2017)

According to the communication manager, CISL used a proactive, nonantagonistic strategy, in line with participatory principles and dialogic approaches.

We realized a *vox populi* action. We travelled around Italy and directly asked citizens to tell us what they thought about our proposal and initiatives. We then recorded them and made them available in the Web, mostly on YouTube. We then called our delegates and supporters to virally diffuse these videos across channels. (CISL communication manager, personal interview, March 8, 2017)

The proposal was also written in a clear, actionable manner addressing the current situation of many people: "It was a concrete proposal with concrete actions not a political stunt" (CISL communication manager, personal interview, March 8, 2017). Although not directly referring to the public interest, the communication strategy was built around the idea that the solution for the current nationwide economic problems lay in changes in taxation and social welfare policies. Hence, CISL communicatively articulated a message of caring for all Italians, for better policies and conditions while using an argument that a more equal society coupled with more state interventions could improve Italians' conditions. Communicatively, CISL wanted to present itself as an "carer" of the majority of Italians, those, at least, who have been suffering the most because of an unbalanced tax system. Still, because of subsequent political turmoil, the political elections, and the change of political leadership in Spring 2018, this issue has moved toward a broader discussion on whether or not to introduce a guaranteed minimum income.

### ***The Norwegian Case: "Relevance for All Workers"***

When a conservative/right-wing coalition government took power in Norway in October 2013, it had already announced that it would propose changes to the Working Environment Act. The changes would, for instance, make it easier to hire people on short contracts and would ease the regulations against work on Sundays (Øverbye, 2017). The changes were proposed before Summer 2014 and an alliance was forged among three of the largest unions, including the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO), to combat the proposal.

LO talked about how the Government's proposed amendments to the Working Environment Act would mean increased uncertainty and a less inclusive workplace (Nielsen, 2015, January 14). In February 2015, the unions called a strike and 1.5 million of Norway's 2.6 million workers participated in a two-hour general strike to protest the government proposal. In a rally speech in front of the Norwegian Parliament, the LO leader

explicitly framed the issue as being for and not against something: "I think it is more important to say what we are fighting for! We are fighting for dignity, security, freedom and decency in working life. . . . Good friends—we are the ones that stand for justice" (speech manuscript, excerpt in internal document). Thus, the LO leader was attempting to take back an important keyword for politicians on the other side of the political spectrum. She also made references to "the Norwegian model" that builds on a strong three-part cooperation:

To weaken a party undermines the Norwegian model. It is a gigantic experiment with the safety and freedom of workers. Our model of society is fought for by the unions. Those of us standing here. And not at least, the generations ahead of us. They have given us a legacy. Good friends—we will never give that legacy away! (speech manuscript, excerpt in internal document)

The strategy material we were given access to pointed out that "this issue can be framed in a number of different ways" (internal document). Five examples were mentioned: "The 'female' perspective, the 'youth is losing' perspective, the 'working life crime will increase' perspective, the 'more bureaucracy when the labor inspection authority will be increased' perspective, and the 'health/safety' perspective. This means that we can keep the pressure up with constant new angles" (internal document).

The strategist behind the union campaign acknowledged the conflict between fighting for the interests of their members and what could be considered as the public interest. To forge a connection here, they relied on moving the debate to a more general system level:

The challenge is to reconcile self-interest and common interest. . . . You must communicate about a larger concern: the development of working life. . . . How the situation can be for your nephew that is tired of school. (Union strategist, personal interview, April 27, 2016)

First, they wanted to address the problem on the system level and then add cases and examples for illustration, recognizing that "anecdotes eat statistics for breakfast. Every time" (Union strategist, personal interview, April 27, 2016). At the same time, the LO's head of public relations and strategy was adamant that the union's large membership base made it possible for them to argue that they did largely represent the public interest. The major rhetorical strategy then was to choose the tactical topic of work security as a shared political value and locate this on a national level, in other words, to make it relevant for all workers. It was argued that the proposed changes would create insecurity. The union strategists created a link to the public interest, but did not expect this argument to carry the weight in the short term. As anticipated, the changes were agreed to by the Parliament in March 2015. This particular campaign was forged with a long-term perspective and the message "Do not mess with us again."

### ***The UK Case: "A Service for Everybody"***

The UK case focuses on the ongoing lobbying campaign surrounding rail policy in the United Kingdom. In the early 1990s, the national rail system was broken into regional segments to enable those segments to be franchised and put under the control of private companies. Ever since this privatization of rail services, at regular intervals, the wisdom of this policy has been publicly debated. We investigated the

public lobbying campaign of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) and the umbrella organization Action for Rail (AFR), which the RMT uses to maximize the voice of a range of trade union actors. The RMT is very explicit that its aim is to renationalize Britain's railway transport system: "Our goal is to bring the whole [rail] industry back into public ownership and run it as a public service" (RMT policy officer, personal interview, June 13, 2017). The trade union position is that the privatized rail companies are not serving the public interest in relation to transport. The public interest in their view is the provision of an affordable, safe, and efficient public transport system. In their narrative, the injection of the profit motive into the rail system has created incentives that work against the public interest (e.g., the withdrawal of staff from ticket offices and trains), thereby increasing potential safety risks to passengers. They also focus on claims that train fares in the privatized system have consistently increased faster than the rate of general wage growth, making rail transport increasingly less affordable for citizens. The RMT says that the general public is not benefitting; only a few shareholders gain, who benefit doubly from government subsidies and any profits made on rail networks. The trade union puts forward the public interest arguments centered on accountability and transparency of systems. A key RMT frame is to portray any public funds used to write off debts to make the franchising process viable as a misuse of public money. Equally, any dividend payments to shareholders are juxtaposed against areas of the rail service that clearly require additional investment:

Passengers are paying more but getting less. Trains are often cancelled, delayed, overcrowded, and understaffed. While passengers pay more for the rail services, the dividends paid to rail company shareholders was £222M in 2014/15—a whopping increase of 21% on the previous year. Instead of reinvesting the money back into the railways—to ensure the trains run on time, the rail network is properly staffed, and passengers' fares are affordable—your money is lining the pockets of shareholders. (AFR statement, January 2017).

The RMT policy officer noted that although the public interest argument is central to the union's lobbying strategy, they had to lobby different audiences slightly differently:

[W]e've tried to build support amongst passengers on the railway, who aren't decision makers but we want them to try and influence their MP or write to the chief executive or do things; we'll pitch things slightly different than we would if we were going direct to an MP. If we're trying to lobby journalists and get journalists to understand a story and why it's important, again you adopt a different approach with a journalist. (RMT policy officer, personal interview, June 13, 2017)

In a UK media environment where most of the press is virulently antiunion, the RMT has used the AFR network as a "softer campaigning body" (RMT policy officer, personal interview, June 13, 2017) to lobby for renationalization. The policy officer explained that one must emphasize the public interest argument to ensure that there is seen to be a broad alliance in any lobbying and media campaign.

As noted, the RMT uses its resources to help form an umbrella group AFR and is constantly reaching out to a range of consumer groups and environmental groups. It has even been prepared to form alliances with organizations, such as the Campaign for Better Transport, that only see partial renationalization of railways as a solution:

We work regularly with Freight for Rail [and] the Campaign for Better Transport is a partner you would want to be involved with because you know we each have our own different reaches and can talk to different people; [it] is a natural ally and there is no point in not being seen to have a common platform that reflects an agenda where we can all get to where we want to get to. (RMT policy officer, personal interview, June 13, 2017)

After several decades of union "bashing" from successive UK governments and the British press, the RMT union is now acutely conscious that it must present itself as part of a campaigning coalition involving many societal groups pressing for rail reform in the public interest.

### **Discussion**

Our analysis of the three campaign's framing strategies shows that despite historical union differences and differences in the political systems, unions relied on the notion of public interest in their campaigns' framing strategies to achieve similar goals, that is, to bring public support to the union positions on the issue. Yet, the construction of the frames was slightly different. Specifically, in the Italian and UK cases, the campaigns' purposes were to gain public support (lobbying for change) for a legislative proposal (Italy) and for a reversal of privatization (UK). In the Norwegian case, the campaign's purpose was to block the government's proposed changes to the Working Environment Act (lobbying for no change). Applying Entman's (1993) framing definition elements (see Table 3), we can see that all three unions communicatively constructed the problem as something that was preventing achievement of the public interest, that is, preventing an equal society for Italy, job security for Norway, and reliable and safe transportation for the United Kingdom. They discursively constructed responsibility claims for not achieving the public interest to their respective governments, and they communicated a clear solution that was in line with the historical trajectories of these unions' relations with their political systems.

For instance, both Italy and Norway are considered consensus-oriented democracies (Lijphart, 2012); thus, their chosen frames revolved around building consensus on their own problems, albeit in different manners. The Norwegian union discursively constructed the problem as a general one, affecting the whole society. The Norwegian union LO argued that the proposed changes to the Working Environment Act would hurt all Norwegian employees and also the Norwegian model. Thus, the union attempted to raise the issue to a more general system level, namely, that of the general conditions of working life and the assumed common wish of having a steady job. Given the history and position of the LO in the Norwegian political system, taking on the role as a defender of the public interest might come easier than for unions that have class struggle as their main motive (Hyman, 2001). The Norwegian unions form an important part of the political and social fabric through their participation in the tripartite model that is the basis of Norwegian society.

**Table 3. Public Interest Frames in the Union Lobbying Campaigns.**

Frame	Country		
	Italy	Norway	United Kingdom
Problem	There are increased social inequalities due to persistent low economic growth coupled with an unbalanced taxation system	Proposed changes in the Working Environment Act threaten job security and inclusiveness	Railway services are too expensive and overcrowded public money misspent on debt write-offs for private companies and dividends for shareholders
Causality	The current taxation system favors high-income people and increases income gaps and class separation	The changes will make it easier to hire people on short contracts and ease regulations against work on Sundays	Privatization of railway services creates uneven service, decreases safety, and increases expenses for the public
Public interest evaluation	A more equal society will decrease income gap and class separation	Everyone needs job security and all Norwegian employees will be affected by the proposed changes	There is a need for improved public accountability; profit motive may lead to cost cutting and risks to passenger safety
Treatment	The union proposal on a new taxation system and increasing social welfare policies will make society more equal	The proposed changes to the Working Environment Act should be abandoned	A centrally coordinated railway system under public ownership is best for the public

The Italian union, on the other hand, constructed the problem as a class-oriented one, that is, an income-based inequality problem between social classes. This, arguably, illustrates the historical struggle between capital and labor of Italian unions as a type of class-oriented unionism (Hyman, 2001). Like the Norwegian union, CISL aimed at working collaboratively with all interested social partners, in line with its consensus-oriented democratic system (Lijphart, 2012). The approach toward the political elite was proactive and supportive to the extent that CISL wanted to offer concrete solutions to real problems that politicians could take up. The public interest frame was used in this campaign purposively to address CISL's great focus on policy concertation. Compston (2003) defines concertation as "national level discussions between government representatives and representatives of peak employer and/or trade union confederations that lead to agreements on public policy" (p. 791). The public lobbying campaign was not a battle field of different interests, but rather was used as a common ground to construct legislative propositions that could actually be implemented. The campaign and the petition were thus instrumental to

make the specific issues of changing taxation policy and increasing social welfare “hot-issue topics” for the political agenda. The issues presented in this public campaign are illustrative examples of what Regalia (2012) notes about Italian trade unions’ latest trends on societal roles.

As for the UK case, it is possible to note a different approach, contrasting in part its historical trajectory. The campaign was not built around a market notion as expressed in market-oriented unionism (Hyman, 2001), but through a broad-based coalition with other social actors expressing a “majoritarian view.” This was a strategic choice that can be explained in part because of the historical loss of power and influence of unions in today’s political context. In the United Kingdom, the RMT trade union and the umbrella organization it supports, the AFR, are always keen to avoid any impression that they are going “*public with a narrow, self-serving issue*” (Mack, 1997, cited in McGrath, 2007, p. 271). They consistently frame the transport problems in Britain as stemming from, and being perpetuated by, the narrow self-interests that privatization has served. In recent years, in particular, there has been a significant increase of industrial disputes over attempts by privatized rail companies to shed staff. The unions have repeatedly deployed the public interest frame of “rail safety” to try to combat these job reductions. The trade unions are lobbying for a return to a centrally controlled public railway system run for the public’s benefit and underpinned by “people before profit.” Historically, this can be seen as a departure for UK trade unionism that in the past tended to fight its battles as unions, but legislative changes and declining membership have forced different strategies on them and seeking out broad-based coalitions is clearly key to their claim in promoting the public interest in relation to rail transport.

Overall, our findings show that contextual and historical elements influenced these organizations’ rhetorical choices when framing their messages, as they have influenced their overall strategic communication choices (consensus-building vs. confrontational approach) of their public lobbying campaigns. How these three organizations employed framing strategy and constructed the problem, causality, treatment, and solution in their campaign messages are largely similar, but they also show micro-level communicative differences that can be explained by the organizations’ history and their relations to their respective political systems and political contexts (Hyman, 2001; Lijphart, 2012). These findings are particularly relevant when taking into consideration recent theoretical developments in framing theory within the context of public affairs. Departing from de Vreese’s (2005) work, Lock and colleagues (2020) propose a revised framing process model for public affairs, which takes into consideration the different nature and purpose of framing—to influence decision making and policy formulation—in public affairs activities. This model, however, does not account for the influence of contextual and historical elements in the framing-building or -setting processes, which, our study shows to be important elements to understand frame building efforts.

### **Conclusions and Limitations**

This comparative case study contributes to framing theory by (a) empirically studying a sociopolitical actor, trade unions, that has not been studied much (cf. Carragee & Roefs, 2004) within the context of public affairs; and (b) showing how contextual and historical elements (political systems and trade union histories) influence the framing-building process in these organizations. It does so by unfolding how these organizations create messages constructed around specific meanings and interpretations of the problem in focus via the use of the public interest notion. This can be considered a contribution to the rhetorical tradition in framing studies (Kuypers, 2010; Souders & Dillard, 2014) aimed at illustrating how trade unions’ rhetorical choices help them

achieve organizational goals that have an impact on society and the general public. The trade union lobbying campaigns reveal how these organizations approach advocating for one's own interests through a public interest frame. This comparative study is unique in that it is one of the few empirical works illustrating how strategic communication and the public interest argument serve the purpose of union advocacy.

The findings, although limited to one specific campaign in each case, show that the communication strategy of using appeals to the public interest and common values as suggested by the literature on lobbying (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Rommetvedt, 2011) is also used among sectional organizations such as unions. Given that the campaigns were designed to be media friendly and attention-grabbing public efforts, a framing around this motive seems an "obvious" solution for trade unions.

This study also contributes to the literature on strategic communication and unions by showing (a) the specificities of employing a framing strategy in the context of unions; (b) the communicative construction of the frames (how unions translate their ideas into illustrations, symbols, and narratives that resonate with the general public); and (c) the versatility of the public interest notion, which was communicatively adjusted and culturally entrenched to serve similar, general union interests, yet different unions' communication purposes. Overall, this case study documents the important communicative function of appealing to the public interest as a framing strategy for endorsing unions' sociopolitical position and the importance of contextual and historical elements in the framing-building process.

Given the qualitative nature of this comparative study and the peculiarities of the selected campaigns, the investigation has some limits. Given the focus on specific countries and specific campaigns, it is not possible to generalize. Furthermore, the analysis unfolds the unions' perspective (framing-building process) and, particularly, how the strategists in charge of the campaigns saw and reflected on the actual activities. Hence, their view on how the public interest notion was communicatively used within the campaign is highly subjective. Despite these limitations, this comparative study on the strategic use of framing can offer some preliminary and valuable insights for theory building purposes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), particularly in relation to the use of the public interest frame in strategic communication and lobbying studies.

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