

Labor Union Solidarity, Occupational Risks, and Demand for Redistribution in Europe

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The puzzle

Political economy explains redistributive support through **self-interest**: people want redistribution when their income is low, or when they expect to need insurance against losing it.

- *Why, then, do union members support redistribution most where their own need for insurance is weakest?*

Recent work adds **other-regarding motives** and finds altruism strongest among the affluent, who have least to gain themselves. This paper carries that logic from **income** to **risk**.

Risk-dependent altruism

Concern for more exposed workers can sustain redistributive support among those with little personal need for insurance. **Affording** to contribute and **expecting** to need protection are different dimensions of material interest. Whether that concern is sustained depends on **whom the movement organizes**.

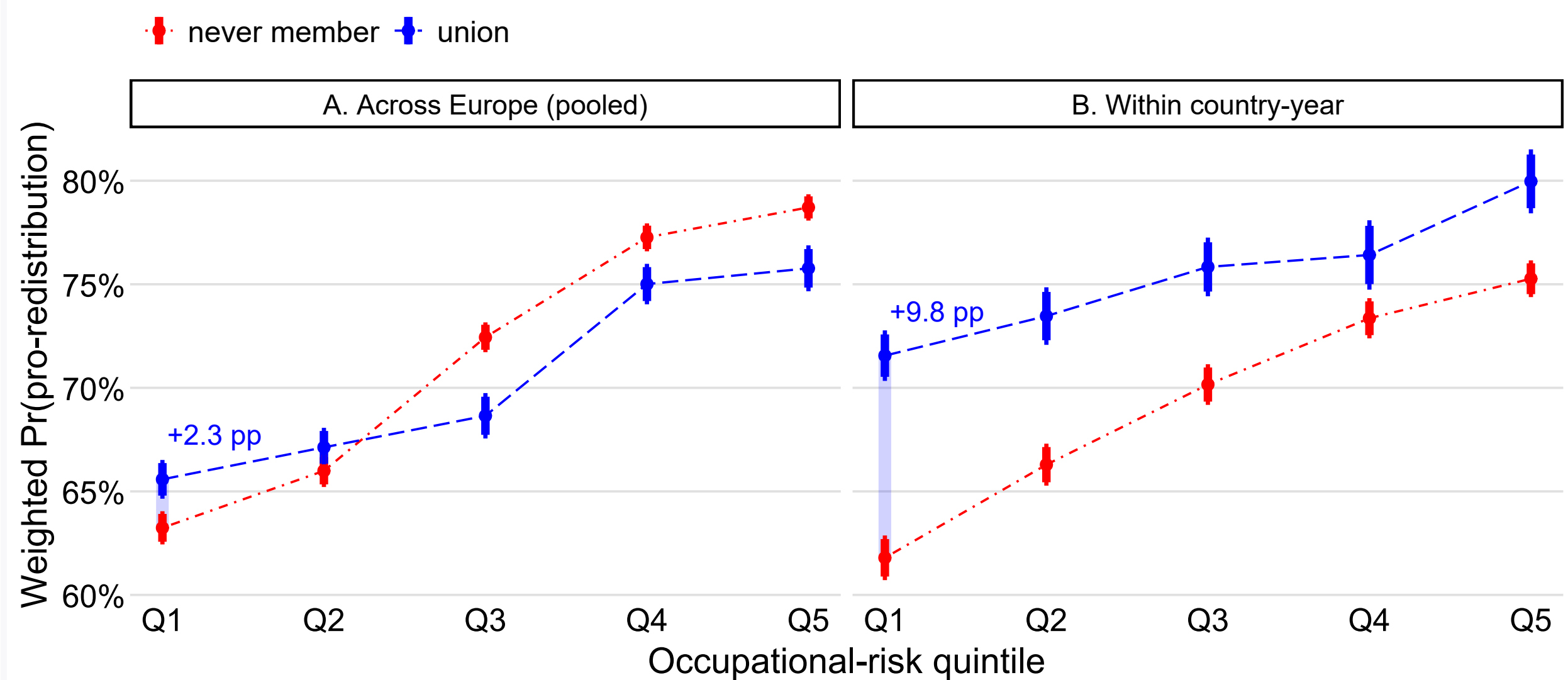
H1 The difference is **largest at the lowest occupational risk**.

H2 It **widens with inclusiveness**.

H3 The same pattern appears in **fairness beliefs**.

The pattern that motivates the paper

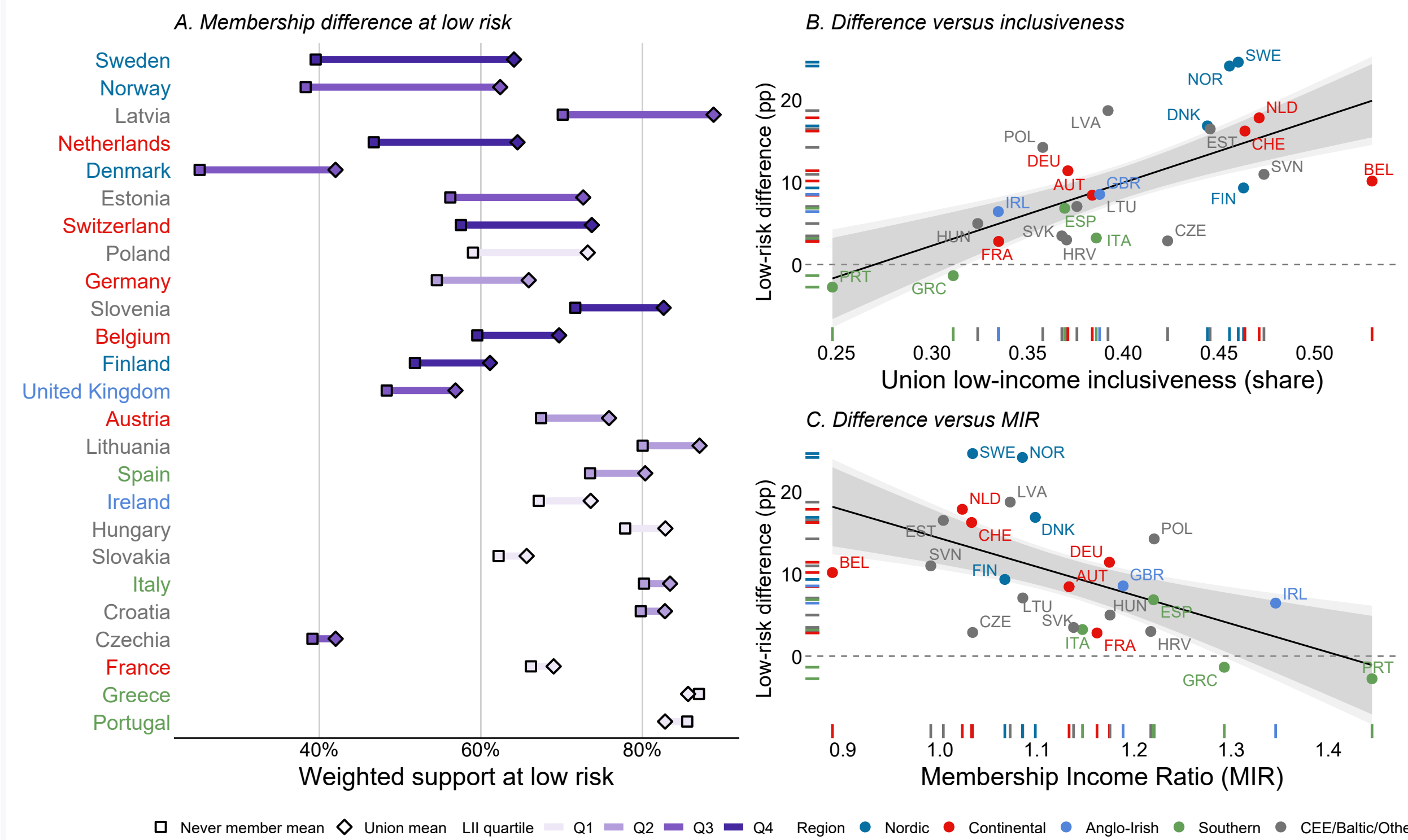
Membership differences across occupational risk



Support among **current members** and **workers who never joined**, by occupational unemployment risk. Panel A pools quintiles; panel B builds them within each country-year, so the comparison is never across labor markets.

The gap does not close as exposure falls. It is widest exactly where the insurance account predicts it should vanish.

Country by country: the exploratory pattern



Panel A: support in the lowest within-country-year risk quintile among **current members** and **never members** across twenty-five countries, ordered by their difference and shaded by **inclusiveness quartile**. Panels B and C plot that difference against each composition measure, with least-squares fits and nested 90 and 95 percent bands.

The difference is positive in **nearly every country**, and the countries where it is largest are those whose movements reach further down the income distribution. This is the descriptive pattern the models in column 2 then estimate under adjustment. Iceland is omitted: its lowest quintile holds fewer than twenty-five never members.

Solidarity is strongest where self-interest is weakest, peaking among workers whose own unemployment risk is lowest.

Design: data, models, and inference

European Social Survey, rounds 1 to 9 and 11, **2002 to 2023**, **twenty-six countries**, **140,773** current and never members. Round 10 is excluded: its fieldwork ran under pandemic conditions. **Current members** are compared with **workers who never joined**, so former membership never enters the reference group.

The estimand is the adjusted difference in the probability of an egalitarian response between comparable members and never members. Every model carries country and round effects, individual and contextual controls, and continuous risk:

$$\pi_{ijt} = \alpha_j + \eta_t + \mathbf{x}'_{ijt}\beta_x + \mathbf{c}'_{it}\beta_c + \beta_1\rho_{ijt}.$$

Stakes models add one moderator each, income distance in M1 and risk zones in M2:

$$p_{ijt} = \pi_{ijt} + \beta_2\tilde{w}_{ijt} + \beta_5m_{ijt} + \beta_7m_{ijt}\tilde{w}_{ijt} \quad (\text{M1})$$

$$p_{ijt} = \pi_{ijt} + \beta_{3,z} + \beta_{5,z}m_{ijt}, \quad z = z(\rho_{ijt}) \quad (\text{M2})$$

Composition models give each risk zone its own baseline and composition slope, and interact membership with both:

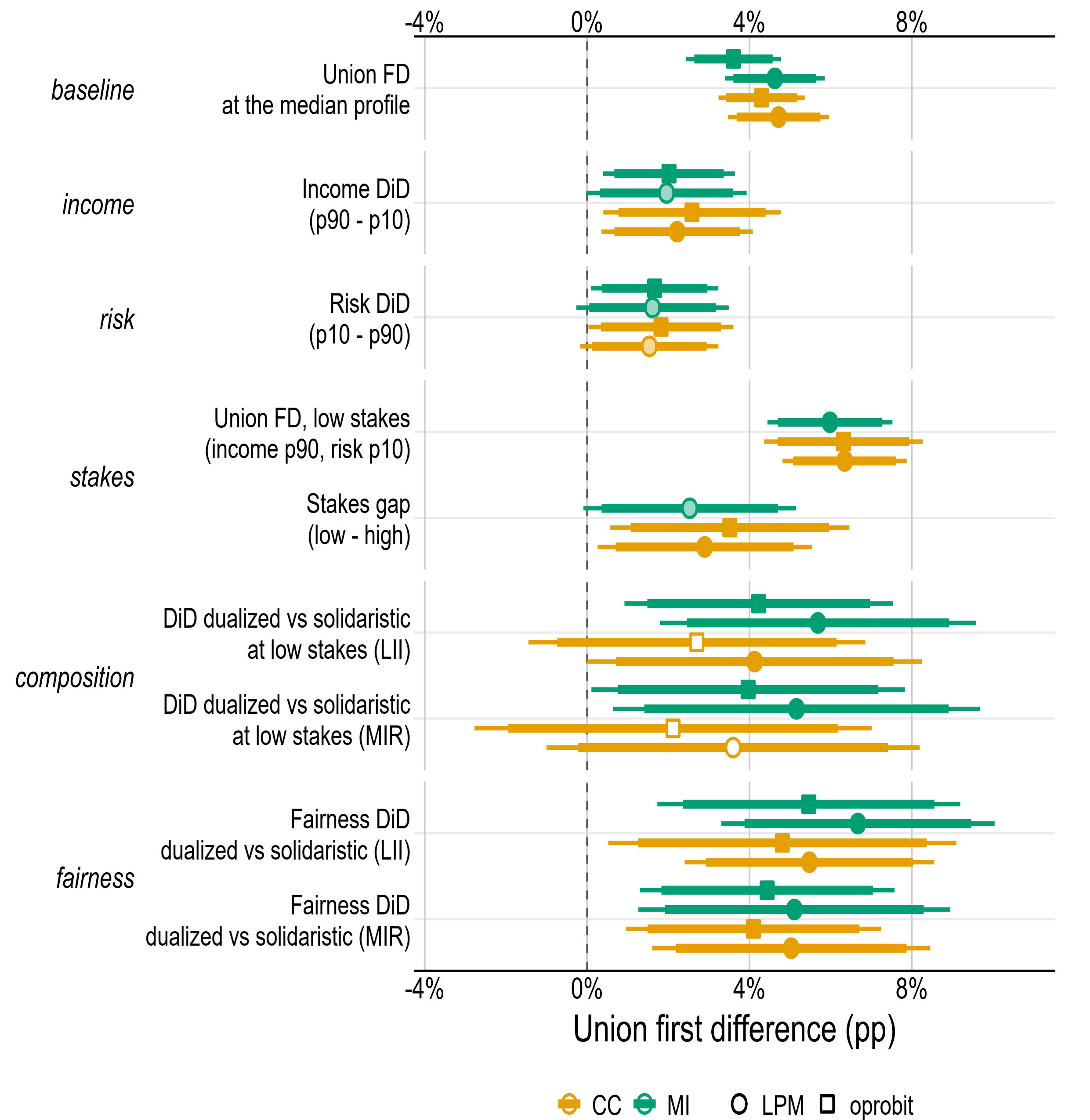
$$p_{ijt} = \pi_{ijt} + \beta_{3,z} + \beta_{4,z}s_{jt} + \beta_2\tilde{w}_{ijt} + \underbrace{\beta_{5,z}m_{ijt} + \beta_{6,z}m_{ijt}s_{jt} + \beta_7m_{ijt}\tilde{w}_{ijt}}_{m_{ijt}\Delta_z^{\mathcal{U}}(\tilde{w}, s)}.$$

m is current membership, $\tilde{w}$ income distance, ρ occupational risk, z its zone, and s the scaled composition measure: **LII** in M3 and M5, **MIR** in M4 and M6. **M5**, **M6** add income moderation; **A** and **S** cross three risk zones with income terciles, additively and freely; **F1**, **F2** carry the same composition interaction into fairness beliefs.

Inference: leave-one-country-out. With twenty-six countries, asymptotics in the country dimension are not credible. Each estimate is recomputed **deleting one country at a time**, and its variance is $(J-1)/J$ times the squared deviations of the $J=26$ deletion estimates. Across $L=20$ imputed datasets the total is $\hat{V} = \frac{1}{L}\sum_{\ell}\hat{V}_{\text{JK},\ell} + (1 + \frac{1}{L})\hat{V}_{\text{MI}}$, so **no single country can carry a result**.

H1: the difference is largest where insurance incentives are weakest

First differences by estimator and sample

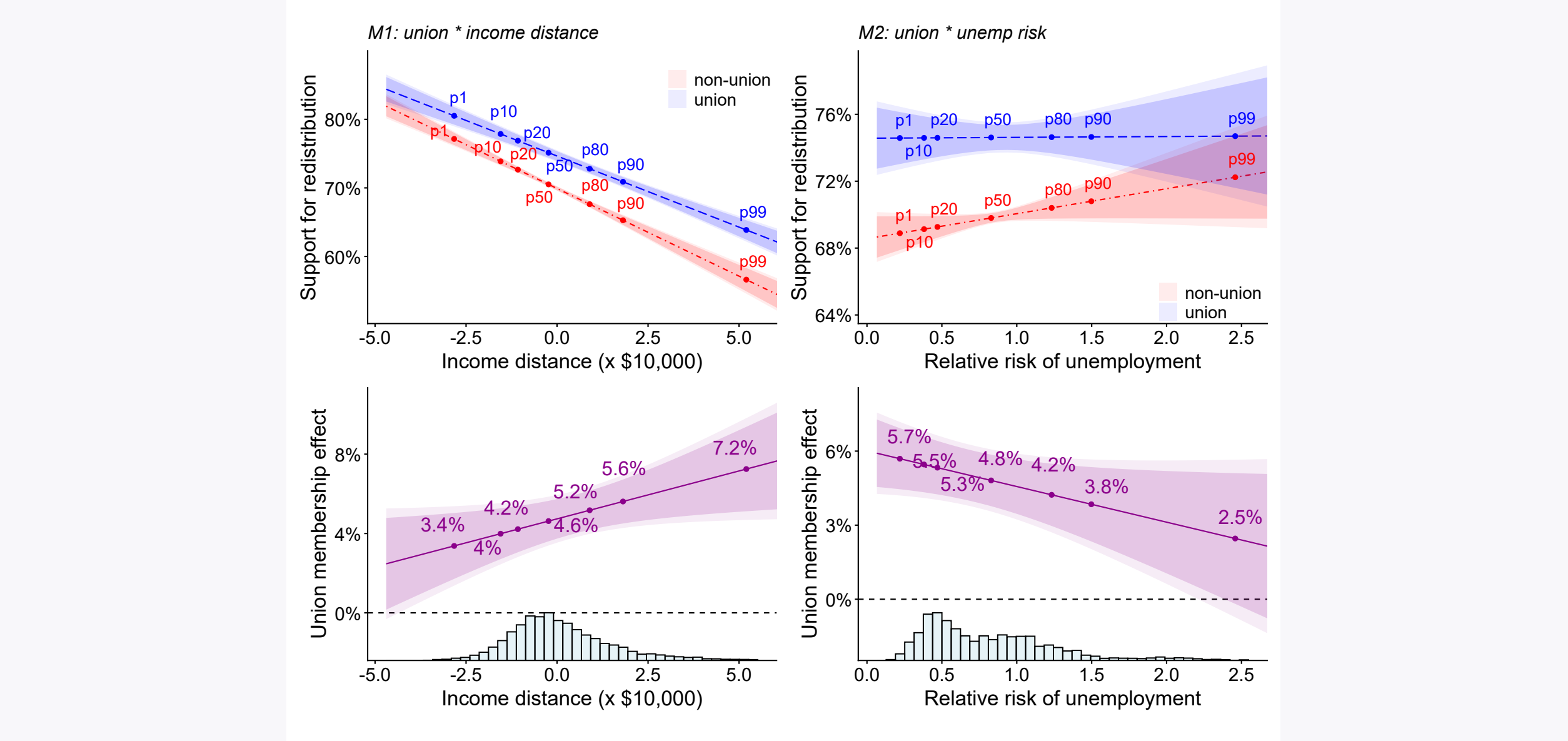


Adjusted membership differences and moderation contrasts, in percentage points, across every specification. Circles are linear probability models, squares ordered probits; orange is complete-case and green multiply imputed; bars are 90 and 95 percent country-jackknife intervals.

Across M2 to M6 the difference runs **6.26 to 6.52 points** in the **lowest-risk quintile** against **3.41 to 3.88** in the higher-risk group. The **lowest-risk premium** is **2.55 to 3.11 points**, above zero in every specification.

Composition is the condition. Broader representation of low-income workers accompanies a wider difference, in policy support and in fairness beliefs alike.

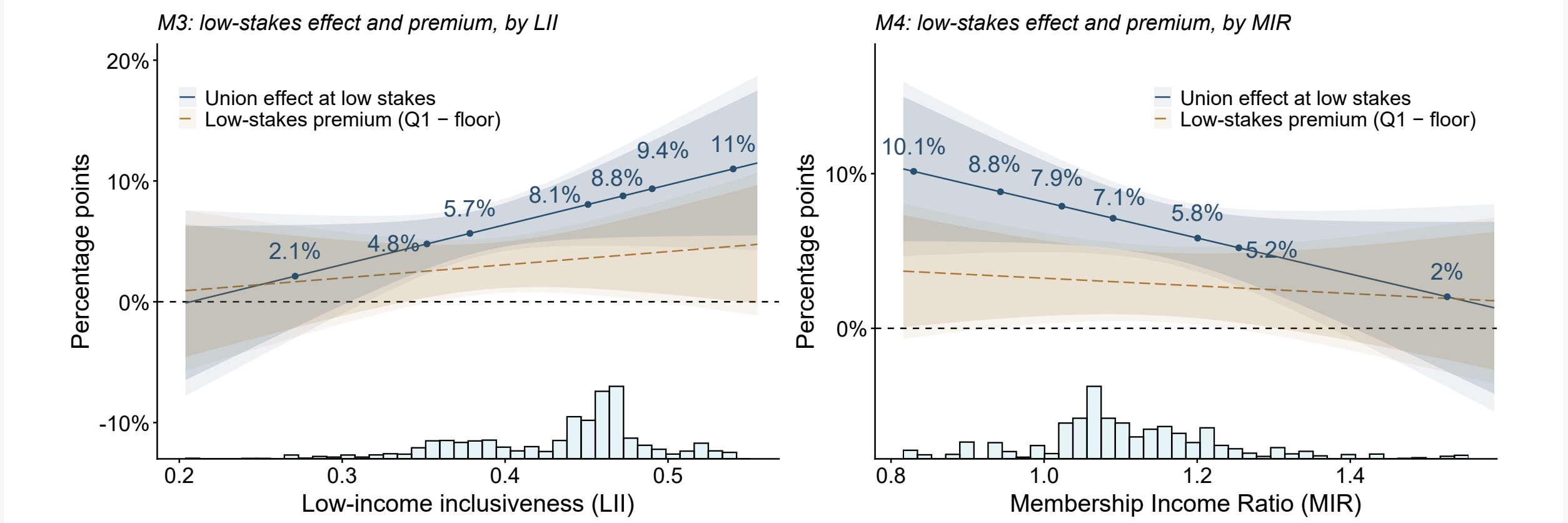
Income- and risk-dependent altruism



Predicted support with **membership** at one and **zero**, over income distance (left) and risk (right); lower panels show the **difference**.

Taking both stakes at once, the difference reaches **6.92 points** among high-income, low-risk workers against **3.21** among low-income, higher-risk workers: a contrast of **3.71**, interval [0.36, 7.06], with **all nine** cells positive.

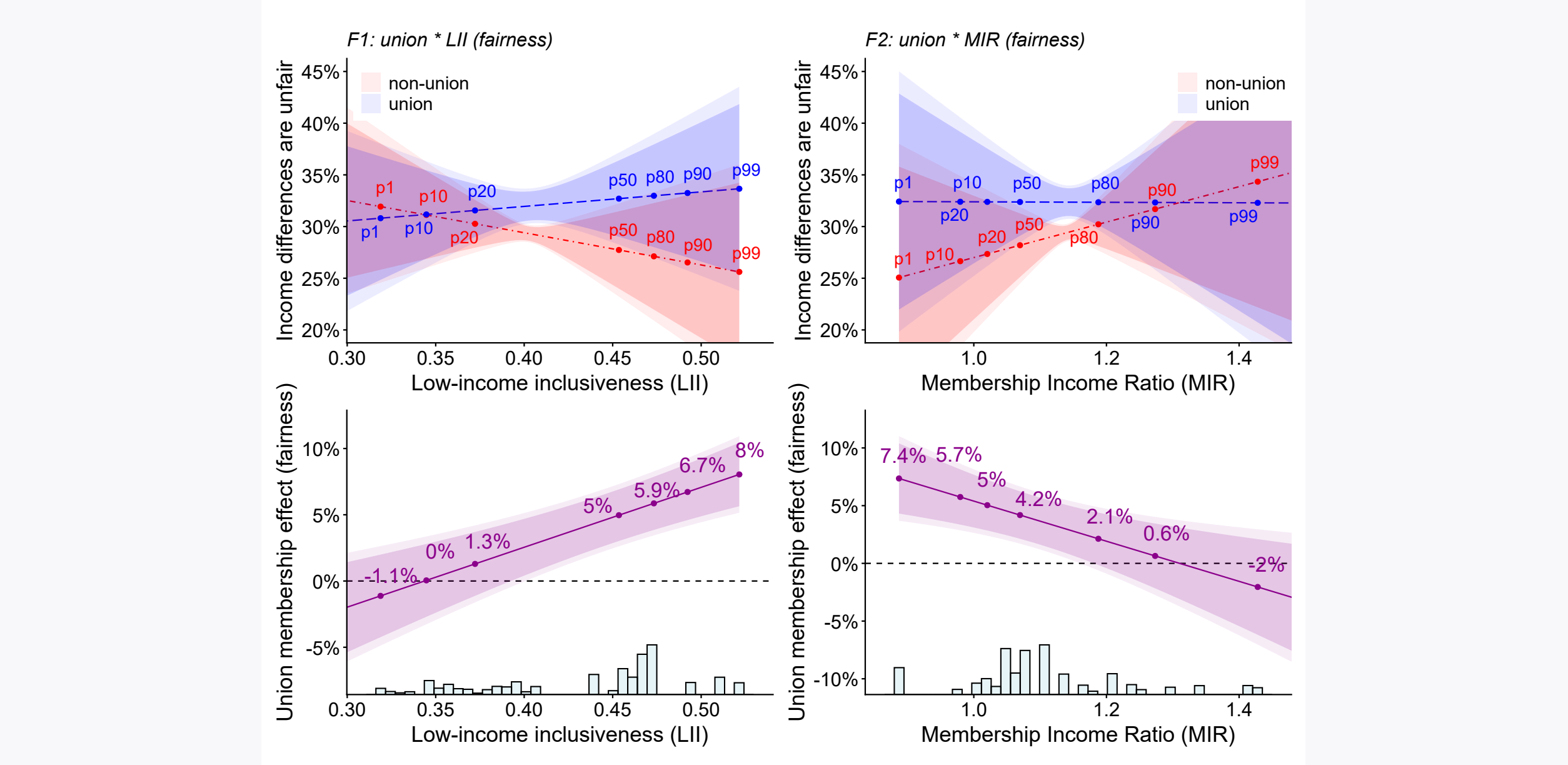
H2: solidarity tracks whom the movement organizes



The difference in the lowest-risk quintile across movement composition: **inclusiveness** (left) and members' median income relative to nonmembers (right). Solid lines are the difference, dashed its premium over the higher-risk group.

Across members' tenth-to-ninetieth percentile range, the gap **increases by 4.50 to 5.08 points** toward **greater inclusion** ($p = .018$ to $.024$), and the reading survives income moderation in M5 and M6.

H3: the same pattern in what members think is fair



Rejection of large income differences as fair rewards for talent and effort, among current members and never members, across inclusiveness (left) and the income ratio (right). **Rounds 2008 and 2016 carry this item.**

The difference **widens by 6.67 points** across the inclusiveness range, interval [3.31, 10.04], $p < .001$; across the income ratio it changes by **-5.11 points**, interval [-8.95, -1.26], $p = .011$. Near the **dualized** end it sits close to zero.

What organizations do

Survey associations cannot show the mechanism, so the paper reads organizational cases for the internal bargaining the argument requires.

- **Germany**, the **statutory minimum wage**. NGG and ver.di carried low-paid members' claims into a confederal position binding higher-paid sectors.
- **Belgium**. The confederation ACV accommodated a privileged affiliate, then reformed without requiring it to surrender that advantage.
- **Italy**. Confederal institutions extended protection to agency workers.
- **Britain**. Unite Community organized beyond the employment relationship.

What this is not. Membership is not randomly assigned: these are conditional associations, not evidence on selection into unions.