

Whose side are you on? Ideology and support for educational strikes in England

Economic and Industrial Democracy

1–19

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DOI: 10.1177/0143831X261464376

journals.sagepub.com/home/eid

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Abstract

Public support plays a key role in determining the success of strike action, particularly in the public sector where disputes affect taxpayers and essential services. This article examines public attitudes towards strike action by school teachers and university lecturers in England using seven waves of YouGov survey data collected between 2022 and 2023 ($N = 3839$). We analyse how demographic, socioeconomic and political factors shape support for educational strikes. Results show that political orientation is the strongest and most consistent predictor: right-leaning and Conservative-voting respondents are substantially less supportive of strike action than those on the left. Education level and age also influence attitudes, though to a lesser extent. Strikingly, parenthood has no measurable effect. These findings highlight the deep politicisation of industrial relations in the education sector and the strategic challenge unions face in mobilising support across an increasingly divided public.

Keywords

strikes, trade unions, wage bargaining

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Introduction

Strikes are designed to disrupt. Their goal is to shift the balance of power in favour of those taking action, by placing their employers on the defensive. Yet not all strikes generate the same effects. Some create widespread disruption for those uninvolved in the dispute, while others barely register outside the workplace. Regardless of the scale, however, a key factor in any strike's success is public support: whether the public endorses the workers' demands for higher pay, improved benefits or better working conditions. While historically most strike action occurred between private sector workers and employers, recent decades have witnessed a marked rise in labour disputes involving public sector employees and the government, whether local or national. Public sector workers provide essential services, such as healthcare and education, and when they strike, the effects ripple through entire communities. In these disputes, unions advocate on behalf of workers, while the government, as employer, must balance fiscal responsibility with service delivery on behalf of taxpayers.

Once rare, strike action in the public sector, and particularly in education, has become more common globally (Gindin et al., 2025; Hertel-Fernandez et al., 2021; Jansson and Uba, 2023; Rakowska, 2025; Robert and Tyssens, 2008; Sobhy, 2025). Britain is no exception. Over the past decade, industrial action across the education sector has increased. In primary and secondary education, the sector faces acute pressures: high staff turnover, deteriorating infrastructure, frequent reforms to teacher training, and pay that has not kept pace with inflation. In further and higher education, university staff, most prominently represented by the University and College Union (UCU), have staged repeated strikes in response to stagnating wages, pension cuts and growing precariousness. These disputes have increasingly been interpreted not as isolated conflicts over remuneration, but as forms of resistance to marketisation, managerialism and precarity within the neoliberal university (Ross et al., 2020). What unites these actions, despite sectoral differences, is a shared uncertainty; we know remarkably little about how the public perceives them.

This article investigates public opinion towards two forms of educational strike action in England: those by school teachers and those by university lecturers. Drawing on multiple waves of survey data, we examine the extent to which support for strike action is shaped by political, demographic and socioeconomic factors. Our findings suggest that political orientation, especially ideological leaning and Conservative Party support, is the strongest predictor of attitudes. At the same time, education level also plays a role. These insights are critical not just for unions seeking to mobilise public backing, but for understanding how education itself is situated within the broader political culture. Ultimately, the findings point to significant challenges ahead for the education sector. Yet they also hint at the possibility that shifts in political sentiment may reshape public perceptions of strike action in the future.

Strike action in the public and educational sector

It is well recognised that certain public sector professions face a tension between their professional commitment and the structural and economic pressures of the workplace.

This is evident in areas such as healthcare (Briskin, 2011), but is equally pronounced in the education sector (Causarano, 2012). Gender dynamics add further complexity. In primary and secondary education, around 75% of teachers are women, whereas in universities this figure is closer to 46%. Research from the United States has shown that gendered attitudes shape public views on education policy, with sexist beliefs being associated with reduced support for funding and resources in the sector (Bracic et al., 2020). In modern welfare states, the public sector is central to service provision, with education forming one of its most visible pillars. It is therefore unsurprising that industrial action within the education sector draws considerable attention from policymakers and the public alike. This is especially true given that public sector strikes tend to differ in their nature and consequences from those in the private sector (Hall and Soskice, 2001; Jansson and Uba, 2023).

Strike action in education affects both students and parents, although not equally. For example, Belot and Webbink (2010) showed that teacher strikes in the French-speaking parts of Belgium reduced educational attainment, with students less prepared for university and more likely to pursue further education instead. Baker (2013) found that teacher strikes in Ontario, Canada, had a significant negative effect on student test scores. Similarly, Jaume and Willén (2019), studying Argentina, identified a long-term impact on labour market outcomes, with those affected by strikes earning up to 3.2% less as adults. Alvarado et al. (2021) reported a substantial decline in academic achievement following strikes at both primary and secondary levels. The effect on students, however, is only part of the story. Parental disruption is another important factor, especially at the primary and secondary levels. Jaume and Willén (2021) found that in Argentina, strikes led to a reduction in parental earnings and that women were more likely to leave the workforce to care for children during school closures. However, this effect was mitigated where alternative childcare options existed. These impacts underscore an important point: the consequences of strike action depend heavily on the political and social context in which they take place, and this, in turn, may shape public attitudes towards such actions.

In the United Kingdom, education faces a range of longstanding challenges. Investment in schools, colleges and universities has remained low. Teachers and lecturers face sustained pressure and student outcomes are often the subject of government criticism. These conditions reflect deeper systemic issues dating back to the 1980s, when public education policy shifted towards market-oriented reforms associated with new public management and broader 'neoliberal' governance. Comparative work on teacher unionism illustrates how such long-term institutional pressures can transform education workers into explicitly political actors, with sustained industrial action emerging as part of broader struggles over public sector reform and professional autonomy (Hanson, 2021). These reforms have intensified the link between industrial action and left-wing politics, a relationship historically grounded in the labour movement (Hall and Soskice, 2001). In the UK, this link is particularly strong, with trade unions traditionally aligned with the political left and advocating for improved workers' rights and conditions. Globally, unions and labour action are still seen as effective mechanisms for highlighting labour market inequality (Dorigatti and Pedersini, 2021). Such alignments can enhance the visibility of strikes, transforming them from workplace disputes into broader political

events. This is particularly evident when unions are formally affiliated with left-wing parties. However, such affiliations are rarely seamless, since unions may pursue goals that do not fully align with party agendas (Otjes and Green-Pedersen, 2021). This can create tensions when left-wing parties are in government and must balance the demands of unions with broader political or fiscal priorities (Lisi, 2022). Alternatively, strong left-wing representation can create an environment where industrial action is part of a broader mobilisation strategy that includes legislative and media campaigns (Voncken and Otjes, 2024). The corollary is that right-leaning citizens may be especially opposed to such strikes, particularly in contexts like the UK, where labour politics and union membership are historically intertwined. This suggests that support for strike action is likely to vary not only by political affiliation but also by the specific institutional and professional context in which the strike occurs.

The educational workforce in the UK is fragmented, with considerable variation between sectors. There are distinct differences between primary, secondary and tertiary education, and further differences between further education colleges and universities. These institutional divisions are reflected in a complex trade union landscape. The largest education unions in primary and secondary education are the National Education Union (NEU) and the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT). In tertiary education, the University and College Union (UCU) represents the majority of staff. Over the last decade, strike activity has become increasingly frequent. At the university level, UCU-led industrial action has occurred repeatedly since 2018, primarily in response to disputes over pensions and pay (Bergfeld, 2018). More recently, this activity has overlapped with strikes in schools. For example, the NEU undertook strike action during the first half of 2023, while NASUWT initially failed to meet the legal threshold for industrial action and therefore engaged in action short of strike. By March 2024, both unions had begun indicative balloting for potential further strike action over pay and school funding, with formal ballots likely to follow. Across these cases, one commonality stands out: unions are acutely aware that public support is crucial. As such, understanding the nature of strike action and how it is viewed by the public is essential.

Industrial action and public opinion

Industrial action is often viewed as a measure of last resort, typically taken when negotiations between employees and employers have broken down. Once this threshold is crossed, the conflict moves into the public sphere, where both sides seek legitimacy for their positions: that is, public recognition and justification of their claims as appropriate and acceptable within a wider political community. Recent work on the 2018–19 wave of teacher strikes in the United States illustrates the importance of distinguishing between the emergence of strike action and its subsequent public evaluation. Although large-scale mobilisation occurred in politically conservative states with weak unions and formal strike bans (Blanc, 2019), the conditions that give rise to strike activity are analytically distinct from the ways in which such action is interpreted, legitimised or opposed by the broader public. In this context, gaining public support becomes crucial. Workers and their unions attempt to persuade the public that their actions are justified, whether the

goals are wage increases in response to inflation, improved safety conditions or, as in many educational strikes, greater investment in underfunded sectors. This battle for public opinion is essentially a struggle over narrative and legitimacy (öVesper and Knig, 2022). Increasingly, this struggle plays out through digital platforms, as social media become a powerful tool for mobilising support and reframing disputes (Blanc, 2022). At the same time, traditional forms of protest remain important, not only to express dissent but also to channel pressure onto political actors who might be compelled to intervene (Orazani et al., 2021). Successful framing in the public domain can therefore generate both social and political leverage, increasing the pressure on employers to return to the negotiating table with a more favourable offer (Jansson and Uba, 2023).

However, the effects of public opinion are not always supportive. Strikes perceived as unjustified, unnecessarily disruptive or poorly timed may alienate the public and weaken the bargaining position of employees (Kelloway et al., 2008). Indeed, when public opinion turns against a strike, employers may be emboldened to adopt a more confrontational strategy, believing they have societal backing (Orazani et al., 2023). In some cases, negative public sentiment can even lead to government intervention aimed at curtailing industrial action. In the United Kingdom, for instance, the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act 2023 empowered the government to introduce minimum service levels in certain services, including education. Such legislative interventions are not unique to the UK. In Germany, for example, teachers are not legally permitted to strike, and many other countries impose legal constraints on public sector workers involved in essential services such as healthcare or law enforcement (Novitz, 2016).

These dynamics make public opinion especially critical in public sector disputes. Unlike private sector strikes, where disputes tend to be contained within specific firms or industries, public sector strikes often invite broader public engagement. This is partly because the employer is the government, acting on the one hand as the steward of taxpayer funds and on the other hand having to consider the broader political context in which they find themselves (Hamann et al., 2016). In effect, these conflicts become disputes between public employees and the broader taxpaying public, with the government positioned as an institutional broker: simultaneously employer, funder and political actor, rather than a neutral third party. As noted by Jansson and Uba (2023) as well as Szabó (2024), public sector strikes are distinct in that they often involve direct appeals to the public, creating a different set of expectations and vulnerabilities compared to private sector actions – not least when there appears to be a penalty for the political parties in government at the time of strike action (Hamann et al., 2016). Such dynamics contribute to a frequent polarisation in opinion around public sector strikes (Kelloway et al., 2008). Despite their significance, however, there remains a lack of up-to-date empirical work focused on public attitudes towards strikes (Vesper and König, 2022). One exception is recent work by Hansen and Pickering (2024) and Pickering and Hansen (2026), who examine support for industrial action among healthcare workers and transport workers in the UK respectively. Still, this empirical gap is striking, particularly given the potential for public opinion to shape policy outcomes in the midst of labour disputes (Kane and Newman, 2019). Evidence from higher education disputes reinforces this point, showing that public and student support for university strikes is shaped less by immediate

disruption than by broader attitudes towards organised labour and collective action (Herbert and Apkarian, 2019).

From a strategic standpoint, gauging public support is essential for all actors involved. It can shape campaign strategies, media messaging and decisions about whether or how to escalate a dispute (Blanc, 2022). In certain contexts, the public can function as an informal third party to the dispute, shaping incentives and constraints faced by both sides. This is particularly evident when essential services are disrupted. Here, the perceptions of those who depend on these services, such as parents during teacher strikes, can become pivotal in determining the wider success or failure of industrial action (Hertel-Fernandez et al., 2021).

The way in which the public receives and interprets information about strike action is rarely neutral. Media narratives play a critical role in shaping public sentiment. In the UK, for example, news outlets may choose to highlight stories of working parents forced to take unpaid leave due to school closures, portraying strikers as insensitive to everyday struggles. Such portrayals can severely undermine public sympathy for the strike. Media framing thus serves as a powerful intervening variable in the relationship between industrial action and public opinion (Naughton, 2022). All parties to a labour dispute are acutely aware of this dynamic. Carefully managed public relations strategies are now a core part of union and employer playbooks, designed to shape the narrative and attract favourable public judgement.

In less democratic or semi-authoritarian contexts, the role of the public may be mediated by civil society organisations, which act as intermediaries between citizens and the state (Della Porta, 2020); this dynamic is less pronounced in consolidated democracies but serves as a useful contrast for understanding how public opinion enters labour disputes. Yet even in consolidated democracies, the political salience of public opinion means that industrial action can quickly become politicised. This is especially true when strikes are framed in relation to broader ideological or policy debates, or when they align with existing political cleavages (Johnston et al., 2022). Public opinion should not be treated as a passive backdrop to strike activity. It is a key component of the strategic landscape in which disputes unfold, shaping both the tactics used and the likelihood of success. As Orazani et al. (2021) argue, public opinion can function either as a legitimating force or as a barrier to action. Understanding how it is formed, manipulated and responded to remains essential for analysing industrial conflict in a political context.

Data and methods

Our analysis draws on a series of survey waves administered by the polling company YouGov. The survey was fielded exclusively in England, with respondents ranging in age from 18 to 91. Data collection took place in monthly waves between December 2022 and May 2023, with an additional round conducted in October 2023. The final dataset comprises responses from 3839 individuals. All replication data and accompanying code are available through the Harvard Dataverse, at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/KMSYIN>. The use of multiple survey waves allows for a broader snapshot of public attitudes during

a period of heightened industrial activity in the education sector, while also strengthening the robustness of the results.

The analysis focuses on two dependent variables, each capturing public support for strike action within a specific segment of the education workforce. The first dependent variable measures support for strike action taken by school teachers, while the second captures support for strike action by university lecturers. Respondents were presented with the following survey prompt:

As you may have heard, there are a number of public sector trade unions taking or considering strike action. For each group of workers, please indicate how much you support or oppose strike action.

Participants were then given a list of occupational groups, including 'Primary and secondary school teachers' and 'University lecturers'. They were asked to rate each group on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 ('Strongly support') to 7 ('Strongly oppose'). For ease of interpretation, we reverse-coded the scale such that higher values indicate greater support for strike action, while lower values reflect stronger opposition. This coding decision facilitates intuitive interpretation of regression coefficients and helps maintain consistency across visual and tabular presentations.

In line with common practice in public opinion research, we include a set of independent variables that fall into two broad categories: socioeconomic characteristics and political attitudes. The socioeconomic variables comprise age (entered as a continuous measure), university education (binary), ethnic minority status (binary), gender (binary, coded as woman or man) and whether the respondent has any children currently living at home (binary). These variables capture key dimensions of social stratification and personal experience that are often associated with support for collective action and redistributive policies.

To examine the political roots of public support, we incorporate three variables that tap into ideology and trust. First, we use a self-placement measure on a left–right scale ranging from 0 (most left-wing) to 10 (most right-wing). Second, we include a binary variable indicating whether the respondent voted for the Conservative Party in the 2019 UK General Election. Third, we include a generalised trust variable measuring interpersonal trust, commonly understood as a proxy for social capital and civic orientation, measured on a 7-point scale, from low to high. This political and attitudinal battery allows us to test hypotheses about whether support for education-sector strikes reflects broader ideological alignments and trust in society, or whether it is shaped primarily by life circumstances and demographic factors.

Descriptive statistics for all dependent and independent variables are presented in Table 1. This summary offers an overview of the sample and provides a foundation for interpreting the results that follow. While the sample broadly reflects the adult population in England across key demographic characteristics, some groups, particularly ethnic minority respondents, are underrepresented, a limitation we return to below.

As is shown in Table 1, the sample exhibits a modest gender imbalance, with women comprising just under 55% of respondents. This slight overrepresentation is consistent with established patterns in survey research, where women are often more likely to

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

Category	Measure	Value
Age	Minimum	18
	Maximum	91
	Mean	50.42
	SD	17.28
Gender	Women	54.96%
	Men	45.04%
Ethnicity	Ethnic minority	9.56%
Education	University educated	36.05%
Children	Children living at home	28.00%
Left-right	Left-wing (<5)	33.49%
	Centre (=5)	35.62%
	Right-wing (>5)	30.88%
Vote 2019	Conservative	46.40%
General trust	Trust other people (>4)	32.40%
Support strike action	Strikes by teachers (>4)	48.95%
	Strikes by lecturers (>4)	35.76%
N	Respondents	3,839

Percentages are calculated from valid responses. Left-wing, centre and right-wing correspond to scores below 5, equal to 5 and above 5, respectively, on the 0–10 left–right scale. Trust and strike support percentages indicate scores above the midpoint of their respective seven-point scales. Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

participate (Becker, 2022). The ethnic composition of the sample also reflects a limitation familiar to many public opinion surveys. Just under 10% of respondents identify as belonging to a non-white ethnic minority group, which is lower than the national average of 19.0% in England (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2022). This underrepresentation has been widely documented in the literature and is frequently attributed to structural barriers to participation (Redwood and Gill, 2013). In our study, the binary ethnic variable used (white versus ethnic minority) is necessarily reductive, but was dictated by sample size constraints. With a larger sample, it would be preferable to distinguish between more specific ethnic categories. Nevertheless, the inclusion of 367 respondents identifying as non-white provides a sufficient basis for statistical analysis and for exploring group-level variation in attitudes towards strike action.

The measure of generalised trust is derived from the commonly used survey question: ‘Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?’ This item was presented on a 7-point scale, where 1 indicated ‘Not at all’ and 7 indicated ‘Completely’. For the descriptive statistics in Table 1, we dichotomised the responses, classifying as ‘trusting’ those respondents who selected a score above the mid-point (i.e. greater than 4) to aid interpretability at the descriptive level. In our regression models, however, we retain the full 7-point scale to preserve variation and avoid unnecessary loss of information. The same recoding logic applies to our two dependent variables. Respondents were asked how much they

supported or opposed strike action by school teachers and university lecturers, using a 7-point scale where 1 indicated ‘Strongly support’ and 7 indicated ‘Strongly oppose’. As noted above, we reversed the scale in our analyses so that higher values denote greater support for strike action. This transformation improves clarity of interpretation in both the regression models and the accompanying visual outputs.

Results

Figure 1 illustrates levels of public support for strike action by school teachers and university lecturers across the different survey waves. Support for teachers is plotted in the upper part, while support for lecturers is shown in the lower graph. The shaded grey region represents months for which we have no survey data. The black vertical lines indicate the dates on which strike action took place, capturing key moments in the wider industrial dispute. The figure highlights both the persistence of differences in support between the two groups and the relative stability of attitudes over time.

As the figure shows, support for strike action by school teachers consistently exceeds support for university lecturers. In every wave of the survey, support for teachers is at least 10 percentage points higher than for lecturers, a gap that remains remarkably stable over time. While there is some variation in the overall level of support across waves – including a visible increase in February 2023 and a drop-off thereafter – the relative ordering of the two groups remains constant. This suggests that, at the aggregate level, strike action in schools attracts greater public sympathy than equivalent action in the university sector. One possible explanation often suggested in public debate is the different role these institutions play in everyday family life, especially for households with school-age children. The figure also suggests that the occurrence of strike action itself (marked by the black lines) does not systematically reduce support. On the contrary, support appears to rebound slightly in the months following the initial strike peaks.

This descriptive analysis provides a useful baseline for the more detailed modelling that follows. It highlights the durability of public attitudes and the gap in support between different education sectors. While Figure 1 is not intended to establish causality, it provides an empirical backdrop for understanding how individual-level characteristics may explain the broader public divide.

To move beyond descriptive trends and explore the predictors of support for strike action in more detail, we estimate a series of linear regression models. While the dependent variables are technically ordinal, measured on a 7-point scale, we opt for linear models due to the ease of interpretation and widespread use in survey-based political science research. To assess robustness, we also estimated ordered logistic regression models. These alternative specifications yield consistent results in both the direction and significance of coefficients across both outcome variables, which strengthens confidence in the linear model estimates. Full results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 shows six models in total: three for strike action by school teachers (Models 1–3) and three for strike action by university lecturers (Models 4–6). Each successive model includes additional covariates, beginning with a core model including demographic characteristics, ideology and generalised trust, then adding a child-at-home variable, and finally incorporating vote choice in the 2019 General Election. Across all

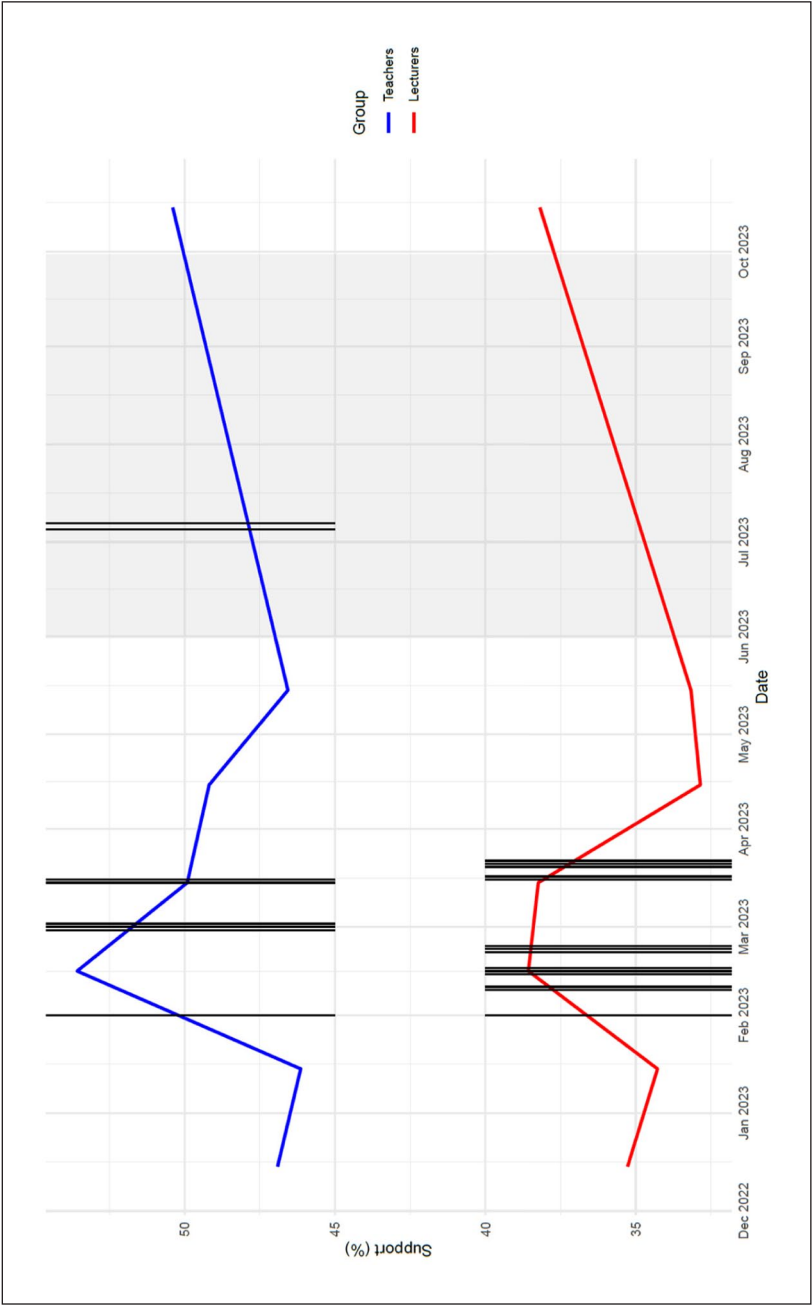


Figure 1. Support over time for strike action by school teachers and university lecturers.

Table 2. Regressions on strikes by teachers and lecturers.

	Dependent variable					
	Strikes by teachers			Strikes by lecturers		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
General trust	0.103** (0.019)	0.103** (0.019)	0.068** (0.020)	0.109** (0.018)	0.106** (0.018)	0.076** (0.019)
Left–right	–0.462** (0.014)	–0.461** (0.015)	–0.364** (0.018)	–0.431** (0.014)	–0.436** (0.014)	–0.339** (0.017)
Age	–0.019** (0.002)	–0.018** (0.002)	–0.015** (0.002)	–0.016** (0.002)	–0.014** (0.002)	–0.010** (0.002)
University	0.473** (0.063)	0.488** (0.064)	0.247** (0.070)	0.376** (0.060)	0.376** (0.060)	0.217** (0.066)
Women	–0.154** (0.059)	–0.161** (0.060)	–0.115* (0.064)	–0.189** (0.056)	–0.190** (0.056)	–0.149** (0.061)
Ethnic minority	0.186* (0.103)	0.185* (0.105)	0.045 (0.128)	0.273** (0.098)	0.273** (0.099)	0.024 (0.121)
Children		0.074 (0.070)	0.079 (0.080)		0.106 (0.066)	0.057 (0.076)
Conservative vote 2019			–1.216** (0.078)			–1.204** (0.074)
Constant	7.015** (0.138)	6.960** (0.147)	7.141** (0.170)	6.254** (0.131)	6.183** (0.139)	6.183** (0.161)
Observations	3796	3757	2953	3796	3757	2953
R ²	0.300	0.300	0.394	0.287	0.289	0.382
Adjusted R ²	0.299	0.299	0.392	0.286	0.287	0.381

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

specifications and both outcome variables, the findings are striking in their consistency and their implications for understanding public opinion on industrial action. Most notably, ideological self-placement and Conservative Party support are by far the strongest predictors of attitudes towards strike action, dwarfing the effects of demographic characteristics.

Political orientation emerges as the most powerful and consistent predictor. In all six models, respondents who place themselves further to the right on the left–right ideological scale are significantly less likely to support strike action. The size of this effect is substantial: in Model 1, for instance, each unit increase in right-leaning self-placement reduces support for school strikes by 0.46 points on the 7-point scale. The magnitude is similar for university strikes (Model 4: –0.43). When Conservative vote choice is added in Models 3 and 6, its impact is even more pronounced. Conservative voters are, on average, more than a full point less supportive of strike action than those who did not vote Conservative (Model 3: –1.22 for teachers; Model 6: –1.20 for lecturers). These findings point to the highly politicised nature of industrial action in the British education sector, with voting behaviour and ideological self-placement serving as key divides.

Other individual-level characteristics play a role, although their effects are generally smaller. Age is negatively associated with support in all models, suggesting that older respondents tend to be less sympathetic towards strike action. The coefficient is statistically significant and consistent across all six models, though the size of the effect is modest. University education is positively associated with support for strikes. Respondents who have completed university are significantly more supportive of both teacher and lecturer strikes than those without a university degree, an effect that persists across model specifications. Gender also plays a role, though in the opposite direction: women are significantly less supportive of strike action than men, controlling for other factors in the model. The size of the gender gap is smaller than that of ideology or education but remains statistically significant throughout.

Ethnic minority respondents are more likely to support strike action than white respondents in the base models. For instance, in Model 1, the coefficient for ethnic minority status is +0.19 ($p < 0.1$) in the teacher strike model and +0.27 ($p < 0.01$) in the lecturer strike model (Model 4). However, this relationship diminishes in Models 3 and 6 once Conservative vote choice is added, suggesting that part of the observed effect may reflect underlying differences in political alignment. This points to the importance of accounting for political behaviour when examining sociodemographic predictors of support for collective action.

Contrary to expectations, having children living at home does not significantly affect attitudes towards strike action. The variable is introduced in Models 2 and 5 and retained in Models 3 and 6, but is not statistically significant in any specification. This is somewhat surprising, particularly in the context of teacher strikes, where parents of school-age children might be expected to feel more directly affected. The absence of any clear difference is noteworthy and is taken up in the Discussion.

Taken together, the results in Table 2 highlight the strong politicisation of attitudes towards strike action in education. Ideological alignment and party vote remain the most powerful predictors, overshadowing sociodemographic characteristics such as age, gender or parenthood. These findings align with earlier research on public sector industrial action, including Hansen and Pickering's (2024) work on support for strikes among nurses and junior doctors. The pattern suggests that public reactions to strike activity in the education sector are not simply a function of individual burden or exposure, but rather appear to reflect deeper ideological divides and patterns of partisan cue-taking.

The broader context in which these attitudes have developed is also important. Since 2010, successive Conservative-led governments have pursued austerity measures and enacted a series of reforms across the education sector. These include major changes to secondary education, cuts to further education budgets, the introduction of high tuition fees for university students, and a general decline in public investment in school and university infrastructure. In parallel, there has been an often-noted shift in public narratives about the education system, often characterised by scepticism towards academic institutions and criticism of the teaching profession. Within this climate, it is consistent with our findings that Conservative voters would be less sympathetic to labour actions within education, especially when these are framed as political or oppositional in nature.

Looking ahead, these findings have important implications for the strategic decisions of education-sector unions. In 2024, teacher unions were actively considering formal

ballots for strike action, and many universities were grappling with significant financial deficits, prompting further rounds of redundancies. Against this backdrop, union efforts to build broad-based support for strike action may be constrained by entrenched political attitudes. Understanding these divisions is therefore important for analysing the constraints under which communication strategies aimed at securing public legitimacy and maintaining pressure during future disputes must operate.

Discussion

Engaging in strike action is rarely a straightforward decision for any trade union. It carries clear risks for members, who may face lost income, reputational damage and long-term consequences for workplace relations. Nor is the outcome guaranteed. In the United Kingdom, the legal threshold for authorising strike action imposed an additional barrier. For a strike to proceed, at least 50% of eligible union members had to participate in the ballot, and a majority of those voting had to vote in favour. Electronic balloting was not permitted, which may have further depressed turnout. Legislative developments during the study made industrial action riskier still. Under the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act 2023, the government was given the power to impose minimum service requirements during strikes in certain services, including education (see also Pérez-Muñoz, 2023). These developments highlight the importance of public opinion, not only for legitimacy, but also for the practical viability of strike campaigns.

Hamann et al. (2016) argued that an electoral penalty is likely for a government experiencing strike action. This might well have been a contributing factor to the electoral defeat of the Conservative government in Britain in 2024. The government had faced widespread dissatisfaction for most of its tenure, during which it experienced several large-scale public sector strikes. However, while there is a likely penalty for governments, our results suggest that public support for industrial action in the education sector is shaped less by direct personal experience or demographic characteristics, and more by political orientation. This is a critical finding. Support for strike action remained sharply divided along partisan lines, with Conservative voters, including those who may have become disillusioned with the party's broader performance, still significantly less likely to support teacher or lecturer strikes. This pattern highlights an important constraint facing education-sector unions: while their grievances may be widely shared, their actions risk alienating a substantial segment of the public whose support could be consequential for political or policy outcomes.

An instructive illustration of this pattern is the absence of any measurable effect of parenthood on support for strike action. Despite frequent media narratives that emphasise parental disruption during school strikes, having children living at home does not significantly shape attitudes towards either teacher or lecturer strikes. This differs from findings in similar studies from the United States, where Hertel-Fernandez et al. (2021) report that, for parents exposed to educational strikes, support for teachers taking action increases. Our findings suggest that direct exposure to disruption in the United Kingdom is less important than broader ideological orientations when individuals evaluate industrial action. In this sense, parental status does not operate as a counterweight to partisan or ideological cues, reinforcing the conclusion that attitudes towards education-sector

strikes in Britain are structured primarily by political identity rather than lived experience. We should nevertheless note that it is unclear whether it is the UK or the US which is diverging from the norm. There is limited work available on non-US examples to allow for this judgement to be made. For instance, a recent review of labour unions notes the literature's near-exclusive focus on the United States, reflecting both data availability and the existing literature base, while also acknowledging that the US is a distinctive case, especially when compared with European welfare states (see Kaplan and Naidu, 2025).

It is also worth acknowledging the limitations of the present study. Our data capture public opinion across seven waves of surveys during 2022 and 2023, but this represents a repeated, cross-sectional snapshot rather than a fully longitudinal perspective. Public attitudes are not static. They may evolve in response to policy developments, media framing or the performance of political elites. Nonetheless, our findings represent one of the few empirical studies of public attitudes towards strike action in the education sector, and provide important insights into how political alignment interacts with support for collective action.

Importantly, our research is certainly not the last word on this important topic. We believe that there are several further ways to explore this area. For instance, while political identity appears to be associated with support for strike action, it is also possible that a related explanation lies in how unions are perceived. Although our data do not directly capture public perceptions of the NEU, NASUWT or UCU, it is plausible that partisan cues extend beyond the substance of the disputes themselves. Research from other contexts suggests broader support for unions where they work for general goals (McGrane and Berdahl, 2015). Likewise, Szabó et al. (2022) highlight the challenges, and possible successes, of labour alliances raising issues that transcend borders. How unions are perceived, and whether there are issues they can engage with that might shape such perceptions, could be a valuable topic for further research, especially when connected to assessments of their political legitimacy in relation to their industrial campaigns. The ability of unions to build alliances with other unions and stakeholders outside the labour movement is also regarded as important in both the short- and long-term (Navrátil, 2026). A second topic for further research is on the extent to which it is possible for educational unions to frame labour disputes in such a way that they resonate with individuals not already sharing the perceived ideological outlook of the union (see also Cake, 2024, 2025; Hansen, 2024). Overall, the results presented in this article can be seen as a point of departure for future research on the importance of broad coalition-building for sustaining pressure and shaping the future direction of education policy in a politically divided environment.

Conclusion

This study has shown that public support for strike action in the British education sector is deeply politicised. Across all models and both outcome variables, political orientation – measured through left–right self-placement and vote choice in the 2019 General Election – emerges as the strongest predictor of attitudes. Conservative voters and those identifying with the political right are significantly less likely to support strikes by either

teachers or university lecturers. These effects persist even when controlling for demographic and socioeconomic factors such as age, gender, education and parenthood. This suggests that support for industrial action in education is shaped less by exposure to disruption or proximity to affected institutions, and more by broader ideological commitments and partisan identities.

This pattern is consistent with a wider polarisation in British political culture. In an era marked by austerity, public sector reform and increasing distrust in institutions, education has become a symbolic as well as a practical battleground. Strikes increasingly appear to be interpreted not only through the lens of pay and conditions, but also as statements about competing visions of the role of the government, the value of public services and the legitimacy of organised labour. Education unions are caught in this dynamic. They must advocate for their members while navigating a hostile media environment, legal restrictions on industrial action and a divided public. The task of securing support across ideological lines is therefore both politically urgent and practically difficult.

For unions, these findings raise important strategic questions. If partisan identities strongly structure public opinion, an open question is whether labour organisations can broaden their appeal beyond their traditional base, or whether support for strike action will remain largely confined to ideologically aligned audiences. The results also suggest that attempts to mobilise public backing may be interpreted differently by sceptical or disengaged groups, for whom strike action may be viewed as political overreach rather than a response to material conditions. Understanding how these dynamics operate will be critical for analysing future rounds of industrial conflict, particularly as financial pressures on schools and universities continue to intensify.

At the same time, the study points to several directions for future research. More work is needed to understand how unions themselves are perceived by the public, and whether these perceptions vary by political affiliation, media consumption or institutional trust. It is also important to examine the role of media framing in shaping public attitudes towards industrial action. Experimental designs or content analysis could shed light on how strike coverage influences public opinion, particularly when disputes involve services perceived as essential. Finally, longitudinal research could explore whether the partisan divide in strike support is stable over time or subject to change in response to political or economic shocks.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a growing body of political science research on the intersection between public opinion, political identity and industrial relations. By bringing new data to bear on an understudied topic, it highlights the extent to which attitudes towards strike action are embedded in wider political cleavages. In doing so, it sheds light on the shared challenges facing unions, policymakers and educators in a deeply divided political landscape.

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Ethical considerations

The Ethical Review Committee of Brunel University of London approved this research, reference number 35290-LR-Jan/2022-37313-1.

Funding

This research is sponsored by the UK Research and Innovation's Economic and Social Research Council (UKRI-ESRC, grant reference ES/W011913/1) and the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS, grant reference JPJSJRP 20211704).

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Replication data

Full replication data and code are available through the Harvard Dataverse, at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/KMSYIN>.

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