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THE DIFFERENTIATED POLITICISATION OF EUROPEAN GOVERNANCE

EDITED BY
PIETER DE WILDE, ANNA LEUPOLD
AND HENNING SCHMIDTKE



The Differentiated Politicisation of European Governance

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Henning Schmidtke

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Beyond authority transfer: explaining the politicisation of Europe
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Introduction: the differentiated politicisation of European governance

Pieter de Wilde, Anna Leupold and Henning Schmidtke

ABSTRACT

The politicisation of European governance has become an important subject in debates about the institutional design, day-to-day decision-making and democratic legitimacy of the European Union. This special issue takes stock of this development of politicisation research, including the theoretical development as well as the rapidly expanding body of empirical evidence. It synergises the various perspectives on politicisation of European governance, building on a common understanding of politicisation as a three-dimensional process involving increasing salience, polarisation of opinion and the expansion of actors and audiences involved in EU issues. The introduction outlines the central theoretical and conceptual questions concerning the politicisation of European governance and provides a guiding framework for the contributions to this special issue. The contributions document that a differentiated Europe leads to differentiated politicisation across times, countries and settings. The differentiated patterns, particularly across countries, present profound challenges to the future trajectory of European integration and its democratic legitimacy.

The 2017 referendum on United Kingdom membership of the European Union and its central role in the 2015 UK general elections (Startin 2015) testifies to five fundamental characteristics of European integration and politics within its member states: *First*, questions related to European governance generate fundamental controversy among EU citizens, in media debates and in party political competition (Marks and Steenbergen 2004; Risse 2015). *Second*, these questions concern both constitutional issues, such as whether a particular country wants to be a member of the EU and what powers EU institutions should have, and more specific policy questions, like the right to free movement within the Schengen area. *Third*, the degree and nature of this controversy vary across time, space and settings as other member states do not feature such a referendum, and it is the first referendum on the EU within the UK since 1975 (Hobolt 2009; Hutter and Grande 2014). Many argue that the political climate

in which European integration unfolds since the early 1990s can no longer be characterised as a 'permissive consensus' in which citizens allow elites to shape the nature, direction and speed of integration (Hooghe and Marks 2009; Risse 2015). Others challenge whether there really is a fundamental break with the period before the 1990s (Hutter and Grande 2014; Schrag Sternberg 2013). *Fourth*, while referenda obviously function as catalysts for paramount and manifest controversy, deeper causes account for the more enduring and widespread existence of such controversy (De Wilde and Zürn 2012; Statham and Trenz 2015). *Fifth*, the prospect of such tests of public legitimacy of the EU drives a renegotiation of the terms of European integration and the outcome of these tests carry profound consequences for the EU (Rauh 2012; Schimmelfennig *et al.* 2015).

This special issue sets out to investigate the process of 'politicisation' of European governance (De Wilde 2011; De Wilde and Zürn 2012; Hooghe and Marks 2009; Statham and Trenz 2013). Different understandings exist of what exactly politicisation entails, somewhat dependent on the disciplinary background of scholarship, dominated by comparative politics, political sociology, international relations, public administration and communication science. Furthermore, what is understood as politicisation depends on the empirical focus of study. An emphasis on party politics, public opinion or mass media coverage, and the use of the respective data sources leads to slightly different understandings of politicisation (for an overview, see De Wilde 2011). Still, a convergence in recent years is noticeable. Most students of politicisation refer to a component of importance (societal actors consider EU issues more important for their interests or values), a behavioural component (societal actors spend more resources on contesting or influencing EU issues), a preference component (opinions diverge about what the EU should be and do) and a socialisation component (more societal actors become attentive and/or engaged in EU affairs). While these components show up in many studies of politicisation, the way they are labelled, conceptualised and aggregated varies depending on the focus of the study at hand.

We condense these components into a three-dimensional concept to facilitate the analysis of politicisation in a wide variety of settings. We posit that politicisation can be empirically observed in (a) the growing *salience* of European governance, involving (b) a *polarisation of opinion*, and (c) an *expansion of actors and audiences* engaged in monitoring EU affairs (cf. De Wilde 2011; De Wilde and Zürn 2012; Green-Pedersen 2012; Hutter and Grande 2014; Statham and Trenz 2013; Zürn *et al.* 2012). The latter dimension especially directs most studies of politicisation to the public sphere as the infrastructure through which more actors and audiences become involved in European governance. In fact, whereas European integration was invariably contested among executive politicians and bureaucrats, the changes brought about by

politicisation are unthinkable without the broader resonance of EU issues in the public sphere.

The contributions to this volume start out from this three-dimensional understanding of politicisation. This allows us to address three specific sets of questions in a detailed fashion. First, we ask a descriptive question: is there just one pattern of politicisation of which there can be 'more' or 'less', 'increasing' or 'decreasing', or are we rather confronted with differentiated politicisation? More specifically, we ask how and to what extent the politicisation of European governance manifests itself empirically. That is, how salient and polarised is European governance? How many and which individual and collective actors are involved in EU affairs? And, in which settings can we locate politicisation?

Second, we ask how the observed variance of different patterns of politicisation can be explained. Is there a single underlying cause of politicisation, which translates into different patterns due to varying contextual conditions? Or do different settings, times and locations feature a plurality of causes? The hypothesis that the increasing authority of the EU fuels politicisation would predict the first. An explanatory focus on elite cueing, identity or contestation driven by economic interests points to variations in patterns of politicisation.

Finally, we turn to the still largely unexplored normative and empirical consequences of politicisation. Do different patterns of politicisation empower some actors over others? Do they affect the course of the integration process towards more or less sovereignty transfer and/or membership enlargement (see Schimmelfennig *et al.* 2015 for a recent contribution to this research agenda)? Does politicisation enhance the democratic quality of European governance or does it inhibit the efficiency of supranational decision-making?

Dimensions of variation in politicisation

European integration was long perceived to be the prerogative of state executives, bureaucrats and lawyers. The permissive consensus narrative argued that major initial decisions that set the process of integration in motion were taken in closed circles, outside the spotlight of public scrutiny. The vast majority of citizens did not care about European integration, and to the limited extent that they did, they provided latent support (Lindberg and Scheingold 1970). In fact, the historical trajectory of European integration is more complex. A first episode of politicisation could already be observed in 1954 during the failed ratification of the European Defence Community in the French parliament. Long-term analyses by Grande and Hutter (2015), Hoeglinger (2015) and Schmidtke (2015) demonstrate that the politicisation of European governance is not an entirely new feature of the post-Maastricht period. Rather, it appears to follow more cyclical trajectories, which have intensified considerably over the past decades.

These cycles can also be traced in the scholarly literature explaining the logics of European integration. Early thinkers, such as Haas (2004) and Schmitter (1969)

considered politicisation an important force. Yet many of their neofunctionalist and intergovernmentalist successors (Hoffmann 1964; Milward 2000; Moravcsik 1998) did not ascribe a major influence to societal actors, like political parties, mass media or citizens. More recently, Schmitter's (1969: 166) expectation that one day in the future, the '*controversiality of joint decision making*' would rise and in turn lead to '*a widening of the audience or clientèle interested and active in integration*' (italics in original) enjoys a growing scholarly popularity. The concept and its three core dimensions of *salience*, *polarisation* and *expansion of actors and audiences* have regained attention the latest after the rejection of the constitutional treaty in France and the Netherlands in 2005. Reviewing the early literature, De Wilde (2011: 560) highlights the public sphere as the primary locus of politicisation and defines politicisation as 'an increase in polarisation of opinions, interests or values and the extent to which they are publicly advanced towards the process of policy formulation within the EU'. This understanding implies that a multitude of actors engages with issues of European governance via direct participation, public debate or protest. These manifestations of actor engagement are time and place specific. They result in different patterns of politicisation with respect to the relative strength of salience and polarisation in various settings, the specific constellation of actors and audiences, the behavioural manifestations of politicisation and its substantive content (see also De Wilde and Zürn 2012; Hurrelmann *et al.* 2013).

Yet, contrary to Schmitter's expectation that the higher salience of European integration would lead to more support, recent politicisation research has shown that increasing salience does not result in invariable support for European governance (Hobolt and Tilley 2014). Rising levels of Euroscepticism, as manifested in the electoral success of populist right-wing parties, and mounting public criticism uttered by a growing set of actors indicate that politicisation is driven primarily by those critical of the integration process rather than by those who are supportive.

To address these controversial expectations and empirical observations, the contributions to this volume build on the multidimensional concept of politicisation. We understand *salience* as the importance attributed to the EU and European integration. It may be indicated by the number of newspaper articles reporting on European governance (e.g. Grande and Hutter 2015; Hoeglinger 2015; Leupold 2015; Schmidtke 2015), how 'aware' citizens are of the existence of the EU, its institutions and policies and how worried they are about EU politics (Baglioni and Hurrelmann 2015), by the amount of public statements party representatives dedicate to EU issues in national election campaigns (Hoeglinger 2015) or by the number of parliamentary questions devoted to EU issues (Wonka 2015).

Polarisation signifies an occupation of more extreme positions – either in favour of or against different aspects of EU governance – and/or a depletion of neutral, ambivalent or indifferent attitudes. The ultimate polarised

scenario would feature diametrically opposed coalitions of societal groups at extreme positions with neutral voices having been crowded out. In politicisation research, polarisation has been often operationalised as polarisation of a country's party system (Kriesi *et al.* 2008: 364; 2012: 113). More recently, the concept is also increasingly used as an indicator for the positions of other agents of politicisation and in measuring disagreement about European governance in public opinion surveys (Van Ingelgom 2014).

Finally, *actor and audience expansion* captures the growing number of citizens and collective actors who dedicate resources in the form of time and money to follow and engage with EU governance. In the mass media, this largely takes the shape of *actor* expansion of predominantly elite and collective actors (Hutter and Grande 2014), since those who engage with EU governance must actively communicate to make it to the news. However, online and social media are increasingly dominated by direct citizens' voices (De Wilde *et al.* 2014). Among citizens, *audience* expansion may take more passive forms. Here, increasing public resonance in the form of the numbers of citizens regularly following EU events and the respective news signifies politicisation. One way in which audience expansion may be manifest is in the travelling of debate from one setting to the next – for instance from parliamentary plenaries to newspaper coverage to social media.

In our understanding, all three elements listed above need to be present for politicisation. Thus, the contributions to this special issue investigate the salience, polarisation and expansion of actors and audiences surrounding EU governance over time, across space and in different settings, even if differences remain about empirical indicators and the relative importance of these dimensions.

Settings

Patterns of politicisation as well as developments over time are crucially dependent on the settings in which politicisation takes place (De Wilde 2014: 6; Kriesi *et al.* 2012). Settings constitute frameworks or environments in which politicisation becomes publicly manifest. We distinguish between three central political settings as particularly important to politicisation: *parliaments*, *public spheres* and *public opinion*. The main focus of this volume is on domestic arenas. While a growing literature argues that a stronger politicisation of the European Parliament (EP) and the respective elections might help to alleviate the EU's alleged democratic deficit (Follesdal and Hix 2006; Hix 2008; Mair 2007; Statham and Trenz 2015), transnational politicisation remains relatively weak. Even Euro crisis protest events have remained largely confined to national borders (Pianta 2013: 157) and EP elections are still of secondary importance to voters (Clark and Rohrschneider 2009; Hobolt and Spoon 2012). In line with these findings, the politicisation of European governance proceeds mainly

in nationally segmented publics instead of transnationally integrated settings (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2014b; Risse 2010; but see Risse 2015 for a more optimistic perspective on future developments). The main reasons for this segmentation seem to be structural barriers, such as nationally structured media systems (Wessler *et al.* 2008).

National parliaments are often considered to be at the core of the European polity, understood as a system of institutions linked through relationships of delegation and accountability and based on the principles of representative democracy (Lord and Pollak 2010). Recent studies of politicisation in parliamentary debates show that European governance is indeed becoming more salient and controversial among parliamentarians (Closa and Maatsch 2014; Rauh 2015; Wendler 2014). In many national parliaments, the era of the permissive consensus – if it ever fully existed – is over and they aim to play a more crucial role in European politics not only since the Euro crisis. Although parliaments' engagement with European governance remains selective and is conditioned by institutional factors, issue salience and party politics, there seems to be a more general politicisation trend (Auel and Christiansen 2015). Wonka (2015) illustrates this development for the German *Bundestag* during the Euro crisis.

With its key interlinking function between politicians and citizens, the (*mass mediated*) *public sphere* connects political decision-making processes to preference formation, articulation and aggregation among the citizenry (Koopmans and Statham 2010: 54). Populated by journalists, party representatives, interest groups and an increasing number of non-professionals interested in European governance, this setting constitutes a transmission belt between European institutions and citizens (Castells 2008: 78; Habermas 1996: 360; Pfetsch *et al.* 2010). Respective research shows that a broad variety of actors voice positions on European governance in the mass media. This setting is thus often considered to play a crucial role in the politicisation process (Kleinen-von Königslöw 2012; Koopmans and Statham 2010; Kriesi *et al.* 2012; Risse 2010; Statham and Trenz 2013, 2015). The majority of the contributions to this volume draw on mass media data to study politicisation, albeit for different reasons: while some consider mass media as the primary setting of democratic politics due to its communicative and connecting functions (De Wilde and Lord 2015; Leupold 2015), others consider it a data source for the analysis of politicisation more generally (Grande and Hutter 2015; Hoeglenger 2015; Schmidtke 2015).

The contributions to this special issue indicate considerable variance of the politicisation patterns of European governance in media debates: Schmidtke provides evidence in support of a growing politicisation of European governance in mass media over time. The study by Grande and Hutter shows that country-specific levels of politicisation are largely shaped by political events related to authority transfer to the EU, such as the question of EU membership or whether a referendum is held. Yet Hoeglenger warns against an overestimation of the level of politicisation. His analysis demonstrates that national

election campaigns are still dominated by other issues than European governance (see also Kriesi *et al.* 2012). While media debates about European governance may be generally on the rise, attention strongly fluctuates in cycles, differs across countries and often lags behind other issues.

These findings are underlined with a view to the politicisation of European governance among European *citizens* in Baglioni and Hurrelmann's (2015) study of laypeople – a perspective largely understudied in the current literature (but see Stoeckel 2013; Van Ingelgom 2014). While parliamentarians and actors present in mass media seem to have picked up European governance as a controversial issue, citizens do not appear to follow this development swiftly. Drawing on survey and protest data as well as focus group interviews, the authors demonstrate that the mobilisation of individual citizens to engage with European governance is still considerably lower than the politicisation literature suggests for parliaments and mass media. Overall, the contributions show that there is no universal pattern and no simple linear trend of politicisation. Rather, we are confronted with a differentiated politicisation of European governance, in which patterns vary substantially across settings and time.

Objects

In a well-cited article, Mair (2007) differentiates between different forms of opposition to the EU, which in turn have varying implications for the EU's empirical legitimacy (for related arguments about global governance, see Zürn and Ecker-Ehrhardt 2013). While opposition to individual policies is constitutive of the democratic process (Norris 1999), opposition to the polity questions the legitimacy of a political system (Easton 1965). Mair's main contention is that the European polity hardly allows for opposition to policies due to the weak accountability of key decision-makers in the European Commission and the European Council, which are relatively shielded from public scrutiny. Lacking the opportunity to 'throw the rascals out', critical parliamentarians, interest groups and citizens redirect their discontent toward the polity itself. Mair's argument implies that the lack of electoral accountability directly fuels a specific pattern of politicisation, which denounces the European polity as the *object* of politicisation.

The current literature on the politicisation of European governance, however, rarely distinguishes between different objects of politicisation and can thus only provide limited insights into the consequences of politicisation. Only if we know whether conflict is organised around the legitimacy of the Union itself or around day-to-day EU decision-making does it become possible to gauge the effects of politicisation. The contributions to this volume reveal that politicisation objects vary substantially across settings: Baglioni and Hurrelmann (2015) and Hoeglinger (2015) show that citizens as well as parties in electoral campaigns focus mainly on the polity as politicisation object. For these settings,

Mair might be right because politicisation appears to be mainly organised in terms of principled opposition to or support for the EU as a whole.

Yet parliamentary debates do not solely address the legitimacy of the European polity. Wonka (2015) shows that the European measures to tackle the financial crisis became a major object of politicisation in the German parliament. Similarly, Wendler's (2014: 563) comparative analysis of parliamentary debates demonstrates that constitutive issues of EU Treaty reform are quickly linked to redistributive concerns. Admittedly, the empirical distinction between policy and polity as objects of politicisation is sometimes hard to make, either because agents of politicisation underspecify what they support or oppose, or because the EU has constitutionalised certain policies. The Economic and Monetary Union is a case in point, in which macroeconomic policies have been constitutionalised in the Stability and Growth Pact. Grande's and Hutter's (2015) analysis of different types of polity politicisation shows that matters are even more complicated. The authors demonstrate that public debates about Treaty revision and the respective empowerment of EU institutions, one's home country's membership and the accession of other countries vary strongly. They find that the issue of membership generates much more politicisation than Treaty revision or accession.

Unpacking EU policies, Leupold (2015) and Schmidtke (2015) analyse issue-specific politicisation processes. They show that mass media do not only feature controversy over the European polity but that, under specific conditions, EU day-to-day policy-making and policies also become objects of politicisation. It thus seems that concerns about the polity are particularly dominant among citizens, whereas both parliamentary debate and mass media coverage feature a broader array of politicisation objects.

In sum, the empirical analyses presented in this volume demonstrate that the politicisation of European governance is more differentiated than the current literature expects. Politicisation is not equal to the rising prominence of Euroscepticism or unconditional support, nor are patterns of politicisation stable across settings. Politicisation among citizens appears to be much weaker than in mass media and parliaments, and to focus more on the EU polity than on day-to-day policy-making.

Drivers of politicisation and conditions of variance

Following Schmitter's (1969) initial theorising, De Wilde and Zürn (2012) argue that the politicisation of European governance is here to stay as long as its driving force – the increasing authority of the EU itself – remains in place. This *authority transfer hypothesis* is based on two assumptions. First, citizens and collective political actors are expected to care about who decides about their living conditions. Second, they are assumed to be capable of identifying the political institutions that make important decisions for them. Accordingly,

they direct their demands and objections to these institutions. The contributions to this volume demonstrate that the authority transfer hypothesis needs modification: patterns of authority transfer and politicisation only match to a limited extent. EU authority has steadily increased over time and has become particularly strong in the core member states that are full members of the Eurozone, Schengen, the Area of Freedom and Justice and EU foreign policy (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2014a; Leuffen *et al.* 2013). Yet we do not observe a steady increase of politicisation over time and politicisation levels vary by country and integration step. At the same time, we document that the authority of the EU is one of the dominant objects of politicisation. Of utmost concern is the question of membership: shall we be a member of the EU and/or the Eurozone mobilises people much more than treaty revisions or the accession of other countries (Grande and Hutter 2015). However, we also demonstrate that the day-to-day exercise of formal authority spurs politicisation (Leupold 2015; Schmidtke 2015; Wonka 2015).

Overall, these results indicate that the explanatory power of intermediating variables should not be underestimated. Authority transfer does not automatically translate into uniform patterns of politicisation in all EU member states. To understand the differentiated patterns of politicisation, we need to consider the interactive relationship between authority transfer and country-specific relationships with the EU, different political and economic systems and different opportunities in the form of elections and referenda.

The *strategic competition hypothesis* argues that politicisation is largely driven by strategically competing party officials (Sitter 2008; Taggart 1998). Our contributions, however, find only limited support for this argument. Although empirical studies show that political parties are indeed central actors in shaping politicisation patterns and that public opinion is moulded through cueing by elites in a top-down direction (Hooghe and Marks 2009; Steenbergen *et al.* 2007), parties operate less strategically than expected. Rather, Hoeglinger's (2015) contribution highlights that political parties competing for office tend to shy away from strong EU politicisation as the complex nature of European integration does not allow for simple position-taking irrespective of party ideology.

In support of the *cleavage transformation hypothesis* (Hooghe *et al.* 2004; Kriesi *et al.* 2008, 2012; Marks and Wilson 2000), we show in different contexts that party competition is constrained by ideology (Hoeglinger 2015; Schmidtke 2015; Wonka 2015). These ideational preferences of constituencies are considered to be shaped by macro-processes like globalisation and migration (Kriesi *et al.* 2008, 2012), dominant policies enacted by the EU, i.e. neoliberal market-making up until the early 1990s, and subsequent market regulation (Hooghe *et al.* 2004).

Additionally, the *institutional misfit hypothesis* (cf. Börzel and Risse 2000) argues that the greater the discrepancy between the national economic and political system and the EU system, the higher the potential for politicisation