

The Politicization of Europe

Contesting the Constitution
in the mass media

**Paul Statham and
Hans-Jörg Trenz**



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THE POLITICIZATION OF EUROPE

This book examines how mass media debates have contributed to the politicization of the European Union. The public controversies over the EU's attempted Constitution-making (and its failure) sowed the seeds for a process of politicization that has advanced ever since: an increasing visibility for the EU in mass-mediated public debates that is combined with a growing public contestation over Europe within national politics. The book presents an original systematic study of the emerging field of political discourse carried by the mass media in France, Germany and Britain to examine the performance of Europe's public sphere. Whilst the EU's increasing politicization can be seen as beneficial to European democracy, potentially 'normalizing' the EU-level within national politics, the same developments can also be a threat to democracy, leading to populist and xenophobic responses and a decline in political trust. Such discussions are key to understanding the EU's legitimacy and how its democratic politics can work in an era of mediated politics.

The Politicization of Europe will be of interest to students and scholars of comparative politics, media studies, communication, sociology and European studies.

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Contesting the Constitution in the mass media

Paul Statham and Hans-Jörg Trenz

*Wäre es da
Nicht doch einfacher, die Regierung
Löste das Volk auf und
Wählte ein anderes?*

[Would it not be easier
In that case for the government
To dissolve the people
And elect another?]

Bertolt Brecht, 'The Solution', translated by John Willett and Ralph Manheim

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In some ways writing this book has been as much the result of unexpected outcomes and unintended consequences as its topic, the EU's politicization through its Constitution-making. At the proposal stage the international research collaboration was initiated in 2004 by John Erik Fossum (ARENA, Centre for European Studies at the University of Oslo) and Hans-Jörg (then, at the Humboldt University, Berlin) with six partners in Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain and Britain. We targeted a scheme shaped by the European Science Foundation, which required each national team to seek funding from their respective national domestic funding bodies. Only three national teams from the initial collaboration received funding, the British, the German, and the Spanish, and in addition we lost our proposed coordinator John Erik. Significant delays by the funding bodies in reaching a decision and supplying the funds then also meant that the French and Dutch referendums had transformed the subject material before we had even started. Initially, the idea behind the research project was to see whether events would follow the path predicted by the plentiful theories about how the Constitution would resolve the EU's search for a public, not least that of public sphere scholar Jürgen Habermas. Although the tidal wave of optimism with which the academic community had greeted the initiation of the EU's Constitutional moment soon shifted to pessimism in the wake of the referendum results, it was still clear to us as social scientists that trying to explain the role of the public sphere in shaping the actual outcomes, and providing supporting evidence, was a worthwhile endeavour, and, if anything, a more challenging project.

The first publications from the project were mainly written as national case studies. These were collected and published in a Spanish-language volume edited by Hans-Jörg, Agustín José Menéndez and Fernando Losada in 2009. When discussions started on how best to publish the collected findings in English, most of the researchers in the national teams had moved on career-wise, onto new projects,

or lifestyle changes. At that stage Paul and Hans-Jörg decided to take on a new challenge and re-analyse the data we had gathered on Britain, France and Germany in a systematic, comparative way, across the event, and across three countries. We were inspired to take on what was effectively a new project by the upsurge of debates in the academic community about the EU's politicization. We felt that we could make a contribution, theoretically, by advancing a public sphere approach, and empirically, by studying public and media contestation in response to the EU's Constitution-making. In some ways it felt natural that we should finally write together after pursuing almost parallel careers, institutionally, geographically, and topically, as well as having the same 'Doktorvater' Klaus Eder at the European University Institute in Florence more than 20 years ago, and since then sharing a continuing passion for Italian cinema. As Klaus entered the 'Festschrift' zone last year, we would like to take this opportunity to thank him for his inspiration and generosity with ideas down the years.

Thanks are due to members of our respective teams. In the British team, Julie Firmstone conducted the interviews and managed our coders as well as writing reports, and completing her doctoral thesis on journalism, when the project was located at the University of Leeds, and then Asimina Michailidou conducted the research on the EU communication policies, after the project had switched to the University of Bristol. Asimina subsequently moved to a new post at ARENA. In addition, Paul received significant moral and institutional support while at Leeds from David Morrison and Manlio Cinalli, and from Marta Bolognani at Bristol. The contribution of his longstanding collaboration with friend and colleague Ruud Koopmans in previous projects on the public sphere also deserves a special mention. In the German team at the Humboldt University, Erik Jentges and Regina Vettters coordinated the sampling and coding of the German and French debates. Both became co-authors in previous publications and finished their doctoral theses in the project period. Nadine Bernhard joined in 2008, and together with Erik Jentges, coordinated the interviews with German civil society activists. At ARENA, Maximilian Conrad, Guri Rosén and Geir Olaf Løken helped with the organization of a small study on editorials and journalism as well as conducting related case studies on the Scandinavian cases (Norway, Sweden and Denmark) that were completed and published separately in 2008. Pieter de Wilde, while at ARENA, wrote his doctoral thesis on politicization and provided inspiring critical comments on our project that have continued since his move to the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin (WZB).

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newspaper comments. In addition, we used some data from a forerunner project on the European public sphere, the EUROPUB.COM collaboration, funded by the European Commission (HPSE-CT 2001-00046), to examine public debates prior to the Constitution. Here Paul would like to thank the other 'Europub' Principal Investigators who saw that project through to completion and on whose endeavour we were able to build: Ruud Koopmans, Jos de Beus, Juan Díez Medrano, Hans-peter Kriesi, and Barbara Pfetsch.

This book appears in a series on 'democratizing Europe' edited by Erik Oddvar Eriksen and John Erik Fossum (ARENA). Erik and John Erik have been exceptionally supportive in providing the platform to launch this book. Earlier versions of our research were discussed on numerous occasions at workshops and conferences in the framework of the RECON, Reconstituting Democracy in Europe, FP6 project. Hans-Jörg, who together with Ulrike Liebert coordinated the 'Public sphere and civil society' part, would like to thank all the RECON partners and, in particular, Carlos Closa, Ben Crum, Francois Foiret, Magdalena Gora, Petra Guasti, Maria Heller, Justine Lacroix, Ulrike Liebert, Christopher Lord, Zdzislaw Mach, Zdenka Mansfeldova, Agustín José Menéndez, Monika Mokre, Johannes Pollack, Helene Sjørnsen, and, last but not least, the project administrators Marit Eldholm and Geir Kvaerk at ARENA for their invaluable support and friendship. In addition, the civil society chapter profited significantly from comments by Emanuela Bozzini, Beate Kohler-Koch, Carlo Ruzza and Stijn Smismans.

Finally, we would like to thank our wives, Sarah and Patrizia, for putting up with us during the whole process. We imagine they may have heard enough about the European public sphere. And we promise to enter a phase of de-politicization.

Paul and Hans-Jörg
London and Copenhagen
March 2012

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INTRODUCTION

The politicization of Europe A public sphere perspective

Today, the politicization of the European Union seems obvious and its advance inevitable, even if no one is quite sure where it will lead. From a vantage point in the early 2010s, when the Eurozone's monetary policy is publicly debated and challenged across the region on a daily basis, it seems strange that less than a decade ago a primary concern of European elites was a lack of attention from citizens, political parties, and voters to the integration project. However, back in 2001, when at Laeken the EU's elite embarked on a new Constitution-making process, their intention was to make the European Union into a meaningful political community by bringing the EU to the people in a way that had previously eluded them. In the end, these good intentions failed to lead to the promised land of a new EU democratic polity, not least because the elites' plans were famously rejected by the French and Dutch people in referendums in 2005. Nonetheless, the controversies over the EU's attempted Constitution-making, its failure, and subsequent fallout, sowed the seed for a process that occurs outside the control of elites and has advanced ever since: an increasing visibility for EU decisions in public debates in the mass media; and a growing contestation over EU decisions within the national politics of member states.

In this book, we want to examine how this process of the public politicization of the EU unfolded in the case of the EU's Constitution-making. Our aim is not to re-tell the story of the Constitutional failure, but to study how the EU's attempted Constitution-making provided an impetus that contributed to Europe becoming a normal topic for political contestation within the public debates carried by the mass media of the member states. Such discussions are central to understanding how the EU's democratic politics can potentially work in an era of mediated politics carried by national media. How did we arrive at this point, and is politicization a good or a bad thing?

From one side, an increase in the public politicization can be seen as beneficial to European democracy: it heralds a 'normalization' of EU-level decisions through

2 Introduction

their incorporation within national politics. From the other, the same development can be viewed as a threat to democracy by leading to an increase in populist, reactionary, and, in some cases, xenophobic responses – a nationalist politics built on people's fears and insecurities – and an overall decline in political trust among the community. The important question for the future of European integration is: what kind of Europe will this politicization lead to? Does the European Union risk being torn apart by new identity conflicts, along national lines, or will it finally enter the world of contentious democratic politics, party competition and elections? Will dissensus become so strong that it breaks apart the elite's agenda, replacing it with Eurosceptic re-nationalized agendas? Or will dissensus remain constrained within a set of norms that on balance remain constructively critical of the EU, so that politics expands beyond elites and starts to include inputs from other public actors, thereby enhancing the democratic legitimacy of the project? Alternatively, will the EU remain permanently incomplete as a multi-level polity, wedged somewhere in between these scenarios?

As social scientists, we think it is still too early to predict outcomes, when we are in the middle of an incomplete – some would say incompletable – process of interconnected institutional and public transformations that cut across national boundaries. Indeed history tells us that the European Union tends to face crises and muddle through, in a process of making and re-making. So perhaps more interesting than the 'endgame' are the lessons we can learn from how Europe arrived where it is today. This means moving beyond questions of why politicization has occurred, and beyond accounts of where it will lead the EU, and towards providing a perspective on the conditions and mechanisms for 'how' the EU's politicization takes place.

In the research project which has resulted in this book,¹ we set out to theorize and study the EU's politicization process, in particular by looking at how the public process was unfolding in mass media debates, and by examining the contextual factors that were conducive to it. To approach this *public dimension* of the EU's politicization, we empirically studied the hitherto most prominent case, which was also recognized as a catalyst and a critical event, in determining the overall degree and form of the EU's politicization: the public debates over the Constitutional Treaty. The idea was that by examining the emergence of European politicization at its attempted genesis, we would be able to reach a better understanding of the conditions which brought it about, and the mechanisms which could drive it forward. We basically treated the EU's Constitution-making attempt as a quasi-experimental setting for the emergence of a public sphere, which in a sense, it was.

The public politicization of Europe was given a strong impetus by the EU's Constitution-making efforts, even though these did not turn out in the EU-supportive way intended by the elite architects. The French and Dutch peoples' rejection of the Constitution in the 2005 referendums dealt a fatal blow to an idea that was already in decline: that political elites could simply proceed by building the EU in the absence of Europeans. However, this failure of the Constitutional project also brought the public back into all considerations of the European Union. In response,