

Politicization

Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks

VU Amsterdam

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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Politicization refers to the increasing contentiousness of decision making in the process of regional integration. Research has focussed on the conditions under which regional integration becomes politicized; how contestation over regional integration connects to domestic conflict; and the consequences of politicization for the speed and direction of regional integration

The early neofunctionalists, who invented the term, believed that politicization would lead to more regional integration. A federal polity, or something like it, would result. According to Schmitter, “Politicization . . . refers initially to a process whereby the *controversiality* of joint decision making goes up. This in turn is likely to lead to a *widening of the audience or clientele* interested and active in integration. Somewhere along the line a *manifest redefinition of mutual objectives* will probably occur. . . . Ultimately, . . . there will be a *shift in actor expectations and loyalty* toward the new regional center.”¹ Haas argued that “even though supranationality in practice has developed into a hybrid in which neither the federal nor the intergovernmental tendency has clearly triumphed, these relationships have sufficed to create expectations and shape attitudes which will undoubtedly work themselves out in the direction of more integration.”²

After the debacle of Charles de Gaulle’s opposition to supranationalism and the empty chair crisis of 1965-66, neofunctionalist predictions appeared too rosy. The most influential alternative approach—intergovernmentalism—conceived regional integration as an outcome of bargaining among national states.³ Neofunctionalists and intergovernmentalists engaged in a decades-long debate about whether the impetus for regional integration came from supra- or transnational actors or from national governments, whether supranational institutions such as the European Commission are autonomous from national governments, and whether regional integration transforms national states.

However, beyond their much-publicized disagreements, neofunctionalists and intergovernmentalists shared an economic conception of regional integration. They conceived its politics as distributional, and hence dominated by functional interest groups. Neofunctionalists hypothesized that such groups would operate at the supranational, as well as at the national level. Intergovernmentalists conceived interest group pressures within discrete national arenas.

This elite conception of European integration survived the creation of a European Parliament and even direct elections from 1979. European elections were merely popularity tests for national governments. European integration remained a non-issue for the general public.⁴

This view rests on three assumptions, none of which now hold. First, the public's attitudes toward European integration are superficial, and therefore incapable of providing a stable structure of electoral incentives for party positioning. Second, European integration is a low salience issue for the general public (in contrast to its high salience for business groups), and therefore has little influence on party competition. And third, the issues raised by European integration are *sui generis*, and therefore unrelated to the basic conflicts that structure political competition.

The experience of the past 15 years—and the research it generated—has dismantled each of these assumptions. Public opinion on European integration is rather well structured,⁵ affects national voting,⁶ and is connected to the basic dimensions that structure contestation in European societies.⁷

With the Maastricht Accord of 1991, decision making on European integration entered the contentious world of party competition, elections, and referendums.⁸ Content analysis of media in France, the Netherlands, Germany, Britain, Switzerland, and Austria, reveals that the proportion of statements devoted to European issues in national electoral

campaigns increased from 2.5 percent in the 1970s to seven percent in the 1990s.⁹ In the 1990s, between one tenth and one eighth of all policy statements in a sample of British and Swiss media contained references to Europe.¹⁰

Analyzing a dataset of 9,872 protests from 1984 through 1997, Imig concludes that “European integration is highly salient to a growing range of citizens across the continent.”¹¹ On conservative assumptions, the proportion of social movement protest oriented to Europe has risen from the five to ten percent range in the 1980s to between 20 and 30 percent in the second half of the 1990s.

An expert survey conducted by Benoit and Laver finds that European integration was the third most important issue in national party competition in Western Europe in 2003, behind taxes vs. spending and deregulation/privatization, but ahead of immigration.¹² European integration topped the list in Britain, France, Cyprus and Malta. In Eastern Europe, joining the European Union was typically the most salient issue.

Left/right conflict and politicization

When researchers first tried to make sense of the politicization of European integration after the tumultuous response to the Maastricht Accord, they asked a simple question: How do European issues connect (or fail to connect) to the existing pattern of domestic conflict? An initial hunch was that contestation about the EU would map on left vs. right, which structures political conflict in most European countries.¹³ The logic of coalition building would then be distributional, pitting parties representing economic factors (mainly labor versus capital) against each other. Coalitions would have to be broad to meet supermajoritarian hurdles within and across EU institutions. One coalition would encompass Christian democrats supporting social market capitalism and social democrats advocating market correcting measures at the European level while seeking to preserve national spaces for redistribution .

An opposing coalition would have conservatives and economic liberals as its core, and a Europe-wide (or wider) deregulated market as its goal. Labour and most social movements would undergird the first coalition, business and finance the second.¹⁴

Evidence has accumulated for this conception of European politics. Left/right contestation structures competition on Europe among national political parties,¹⁵ roll call voting in the European Parliament,¹⁶ social movement contention,¹⁷ interest groups,¹⁸ European Commission officials,¹⁹ the positions adopted by member states in the Council of Ministers,²⁰ and treaty bargaining.²¹

However, left/right conflict over European issues is not the same as left/right conflict over national policies because the scope for economic redistribution is throttled in Europe. Convergence to a single European model would impose a dead-weight cost on diverse national welfare systems.²²

Moreover, redistribution at the European level is not only from the rich to the poor, but from the rich north and west to the poorer south and east. That is to say, redistribution at the individual level involves redistribution across member states – a large impediment to reform. If this were not enough, the left is faced with the challenge of cultural diversity which has increased considerably with enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe. Citizens are loathe to redistribute income to individuals who are not perceived to belong to the same community.²³ Currently the European Union redistributes 0.75 percent of its total economic product through its agricultural and cohesion policies. This is a small proportion when compared to European states, though it is larger than that redistributed by any other international organization. Given the great and growing cultural diversity of the EU, how much higher could this proportion go?

Consequently, left/right conflict at the European level is about social regulation, rather than redistribution. This alienates the radical left which regards the EU as a one-sided

capitalist project endangering social protection at the national level. Social democrats also wish to protect national welfare regimes from a European joint-decision trap, but see virtues in coordinating fiscal policy at the European level and in building a “citizens Europe.” Social democratic parties, which formed governments or governing coalitions in thirteen of fifteen member states in 1997, pushed through the Amsterdam Treaty which extended EU competence in employment, social regulation, women’s rights, human rights, and the environment.²⁴ The Amsterdam Treaty led to the Lisbon process (2000) with the goal of coordinating policies to combat poverty, raise employment rates, modernize education and training systems, and reform pensions.²⁵

In early 2000, the authors of this article were looking at new data on the positioning of national political parties across the European Union. They expected to see a strong association between the *left/right* position of a party and its stance on European integration, but to their surprise, this was eclipsed by a *non-economic* left/right dimension, ranging from green/alternative/libertarian (or *gal*) to traditionalism/authority/nationalism (or *tan*). It became clear that their prior analysis of politicization as a conflict between regulated capitalism and market liberalism was seriously incomplete.²⁶

The association between *gal/tan* and support for European integration is particularly strong for parties located on the *tan* side of this dimension. *Tan* parties, such as the French *Front National*, the Austrian *Freiheitliche Partei* or the British Independence Party, reject European integration because they believe it weakens national sovereignty, diffuses self-rule, and introduces foreign ideas. They oppose European integration for the same reasons that they oppose immigration: it undermines national community. These parties attract voters primarily on the basis of their *tan* views, of which their scepticism towards European integration is an integral part, and they downplay their stances on redistribution and the role of government.²⁷

Conservative parties are also influenced by their location on the moderate *tan* side of the *gal/tan* dimension. They too defend national culture and national sovereignty against immigrants, against international regimes, and against multiple territorial identities. In conservative parties, however, nationalism competes with neoliberalism. Nationalists resist dilution of national sovereignty in principle, while neoliberals are prepared to pool it to achieve economic integration. The clash between nationalism and neoliberalism has dominated the internal politics of the British Conservative party since the Maastricht Treaty, alienating the party from its traditional constituency—affluent, educated, middle-class voters—whose pragmatic pro-Europeanism fits uncomfortably with the party's Euroskepticism.²⁸ Similar disagreements in the Gaullist *Rassemblement pour la République* propelled two anti-Europeanist factions to break away in the early 1990s.²⁹ In Germany, Angela Merkel, leader of the traditionally pro-European Christian democrats (CDU), has had her hands full with Euroskeptics in the *Christlich Soziale Union* (CSU). The CDU recently adopted the CSU's opposition to Turkish membership on the grounds that a Muslim country is not European.

The result is that the line-up of supporters and opponents of European integration has changed. In 1984, two years before the single market, the main source of opposition was social-democratic and radical left.³⁰ By the late 1990s, the largest reservoir of opposition was among radical *tan* parties.³¹

The association between *gal/tan* attitudes and attitudes toward European integration is weaker on the *gal* side. However, the success of *tan* parties in connecting European integration to their core concerns has spurred their opponents. Green parties have come to consider European integration as part of their project for a multicultural European society—notwithstanding their misgivings about the EU's democratic deficit and central bureaucracy. For *left-gal* parties, the European Union remains a difficult proposition because it combines

gal policies with market-liberalism. *Les Verts* and *Groenlinks* came out in favor of the Constitutional Treaty in the 2005 French and Dutch referendums, and paid a price in terms of internal dissent and defection of their voters to the no-camp.³² In the most recent 2009 EP elections, the European green party championed more EU competence in economic regulation, in sustainable development, and asylum policy, favored giving the European Parliament the power of legislative initiative, and called for transnational party lists to “allow citizens to vote for candidates that represent the whole of the EU, rather than just their national or local constituency.”³³

Party conflict on European integration is simpler and more polarized in Central and Eastern Europe because *gal/tan* and *left/right* positions are mutually reinforcing rather than crosscutting. The axis of party competition that emerged after the collapse of communism runs from *left-tan* to *right-gal*, pitting market and cultural liberals against social protectionists and nationalists.³⁴ Hence the two sources of Euroskepticism in Western Europe—*tan* and *left*—go together in the East. Left parties, including unreformed communist parties, tend to be *tan*, and *tan* parties, including agrarian and populist parties, tend to be left. In Western Europe, the mobilization of national identity and of left concerns about the loss of national protection are expressed in different parties, whereas in Eastern Europe they are fused.³⁵

When does an issue become politicized?

As European integration has grown in scope and depth, it has proven ripe for politicization. But there is nothing inevitable about this. Whether an issue enters mass politics depends not on its intrinsic importance, but on whether a political party picks it up.

Political parties bundle issues along two dimensions to create distinctive electoral profiles. One is concerned with issues of authority and community, and engages the tension between national autonomy and European integration. A second reflects the basic division

between left support for collective allocation of resources and right support for market allocation. This dimension captures the debate between European regulated capitalism and market liberalism. When political parties align themselves on these dimensions in competing for political support, they are making commitments on European decision making. But what does this mean?

Figure 1 conceives a pyramid of connections among dimensions of conflict, EU issues and EU decisions. There is more structure here than in the preferences of most politically sophisticated individuals, let alone relatively uninformed citizens. When preferences are aggregated over large numbers, idiosyncratic features fall away and we are left with underlying structure. The number of issues in a society is almost infinite, so figure 1 would have to be greatly enlarged if it were to be comprehensive.

[Figure 1 about here]

Only a few issues at any one time energize the basic dimensions of conflict in a society. Referendums require dichotomous response. Elections allow citizens to express preferences only on issues associated with the dimensions on which political parties compete.

Mass politics trumps interest group politics when both come into play. Interest groups are most effective when they have the field to themselves. When the spotlight of politicization is turned on an issue, when political parties and the public are focused on an issue, interest group lobbying may actually be counter-productive. Public debate in the context of elections and referendums preempts the efforts of small, highly motivated, groups to control outcomes.³⁶

Issues that are *not* connected with the main dimensions of conflict in a society are decided by government officials and interest groups of diverse kinds, often with little media or public attention. Interest groups are far more effective in influencing this kind of decision making than they are in elections and party competition. So, when it comes to the price of

corn, pharmaceutical product labeling, or the regulation of banking secrecy, the relevant interest groups can be expected to exert significant leverage. On the great issues of the day, e.g. the constitutional treaty or monetary union, narrow interests have vastly less influence.

Connections among issues are a human contrivance. Most issues have both communal (*gal/tan*) and distributional (*left/right*) consequences. EU enlargement, for example, increases immigration into Western Europe from societies to the East: it therefore affects the ethnic make-up of local communities, and it affects labor markets. The debate concerning how much authority should be exercised by the European Parliament involves the authority of national institutions, but it also has indirect implications for market regulation.

To understand which issues are politicized and which remain below the horizon of partisan competition, one needs to investigate strategic interaction among political parties.

- The greater a party's potential electoral popularity on an issue, the more it is induced to inject it into competition with other parties. The key term here is "potential," for party leaders strategize under uncertainty. How will opinion shift on an issue when it is debated? Will voters come to perceive the issue as salient, if they do not already?

Elections are contests about what issues are important, and a party's decision to raise an issue in party competition rests on its strategic calculation that the issue will count, and will count in a particular direction.

- The ability of party leaders to chase votes by strategic positioning is constrained by reputational considerations and the ideological commitment of party activists. Political parties are not simply machines for aggregating the votes necessary to catapult ambitious individuals into government. Parties are membership organizations with fairly durable programmatic commitments. These commitments constrain strategic positioning.

Moreover, a party must strive to convince voters that it will actually do what it says it will do.

- Leaders are reluctant to raise the heat on an issue that threatens to divide their party. Party dissent arises as European integration activates historically rooted tensions.³⁷ Disunity not only reduces a party's electoral popularity; it is a frequent cause of party death.

Notwithstanding the general reluctance of elites to politicize European integration, some interesting exceptions arose when societies were confronted with basic decisions related to joining, enlarging, or deepening the regime. The sheer existence of constitutional issues that cut against the axis of party competition is both a constant irritation and a standing temptation for party leaders. The flash point is the referendum. Referendums are elite-initiated events which can have elite-defying consequences.³⁸ They are used for immediate effect, but their institutional impact has a considerable half-life. Referendums are not easily forgotten.

The process of legitimating the Maastricht Accord (1992) was a turning point in the causal underpinnings of European integration. It opened a complex elite bargain to public inspection, and precipitated referendums and a series of national debates that alerted publics to the fact that European integration was diluting national sovereignty. The rejection of the Maastricht Accord in Denmark and its near rejection in France revealed an elite/public gap and sustained the populist notion that important EU decisions could no longer be legitimized by the executive and legislature operating in the normal way—direct popular approval was required.

Most mainstream parties continued to resist politicizing the issue. But a number of populist, non-governing, parties . Their instinctual Euroskepticism was closer to the pulse of public opinion. On the far left, opposition to European integration expressed antipathy to capitalism; on the populist right, it expressed defense of national community.

The populist demand for national referendums on the so-called grand treaties has shaped popular participation in the European Union.³⁹ Governments in one country after

another have come to believe that they need the formal acquiescence of their publics in referendums to go ahead with basic European reform. Parliamentary votes are not deemed sufficient. Public referenda are required even in countries, such as the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, where the legislature is formally supreme. Since the negotiation of the Maastricht Treaty, 29 referendums on Europe have been held in 20 EU countries. The only EU countries never to have held a referendum on Europe are Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Portugal, and Romania. Referendums have blocked the entry of Denmark and Sweden into European monetary union, forced renegotiation of the Maastricht Treaty and the Nice Treaty, derailed the Constitutional Treaty, and have blocked the Lisbon Treaty. Several reforms, such as the entry of the UK into European monetary union, have been taken off the agenda because governments fear that they would be defeated in popular referendum.

Identity and politicization

The jurisdictional shape of Europe has been transformed, but the way in which citizens conceive their identities has not. Since 1992, when the European Union's public opinion instrument, *Eurobarometer*, began to ask questions about identity, the proportion of EU citizens who describe themselves as exclusively national, e.g. British, French or Czech only, rather than national and European, European and national, or European only, has varied between 33 and 46 percent, with no discernable trend. Fligstein argues that the experience of mobility and transnational social interaction spurs European identity, but the pace of such change is much slower than that of jurisdictional reform.⁴⁰ Younger people tend to interact across national borders more than older people and, on average, they attest stronger European identity, but there is no evidence of an aggregate shift towards less exclusive national identities since the early 1990s, the period for which we have reasonably good data. Until generational change kicks in, Europe is faced with a tension between rapid jurisdictional change and relatively stable identities.

Two things would have to happen to politically activate such a tension, and both *have* happened. First, the tension must be salient. The scope and depth of European integration have perceptibly increased,⁴¹ and their effects have been magnified because they are part of a broader breakdown of national barriers giving rise to mass immigration and intensified economic competition.

Second, political entrepreneurs must mobilize the tension. Connections between national identity, cultural and economic insecurity, and issues such as EU enlargement, cannot be induced directly from experience, but have to be constructed. Such construction is most influential for individuals who do not have strong prior attitudes and for attitudes towards distant, abstract, or new political objects.⁴² Hence, public opinion on Europe is particularly susceptible to construction: i.e. priming (making a consideration salient), framing (connecting a particular consideration to a political object), and cueing (instilling a bias).⁴³

It is not unusual for an individual to have a strong national attachment and yet be positively oriented to European integration.⁴⁴ What matters is whether a person conceives of her national identity as *exclusive* or *inclusive* of other territorial identities. Individuals with exclusive national identities are predisposed to Euroskepticism if they are cued to believe that love of their country and its institutions is incompatible with European integration. Recent research by De Vries and Edwards suggests that radical populist parties are decisive in this regard.⁴⁵ The stronger the party, the more likely it is that individuals with an exclusive national identity are Euroskeptic. The association indicates the limits as well as the power of framing, for individuals with *inclusive* identities are apparently not affected by either the existence or strength of a populist right party.

This has pushed Europe into national politics and national politics into decision making on Europe. But this has not led to homogenization. Public responses to Europe are refracted through national institutions and patterns of discourse that reflect distinct historical

trajectories. Risse observes that “Europeanness or ‘becoming European’ is gradually being embedded in understandings of national identities”.⁴⁶ Public opinion researchers have hypothesized the effects of Catholic *versus* Protestant beliefs; of civic *versus* ethnic citizenship models; of coordinated *versus* market-liberal economic governance; of the communist legacy in Central and Eastern Europe; of distinctive imperial experiences.⁴⁷ National peculiarities are more pronounced among publics than elites because publics are more nationally rooted and are more dependent on information filtered by national media.⁴⁸

European politics has become multilevel in a way that few, if any, anticipated. The EU is no longer insulated from domestic politics; domestic politics is no longer insulated from Europe.⁴⁹ EU decisions are no longer the exclusive terrain of elites; EU decisions now also engage political parties, social movements, and public opinion. The result is greater divergence of politically relevant perceptions and a correspondingly constricted scope of agreement. A *permissive consensus* has been transformed into a *constraining dissensus*.

Endnotes

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