

Editorial

Introduction to “Out of the Shadows, Into the Limelight: Parliaments and Politicisation”

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Abstract

The Lisbon Treaty gave the European Parliament extensive new powers and its consent is now required for the vast majority of EU international agreements. At the same time, national parliaments—and even regional ones—are increasingly asserting their powers over areas of European governance that were traditionally dominated by the executive. Exerting influence and conducting oversight is time-consuming, however. Particularly at the EU-level parliaments cannot influence or scrutinise every policy dossier with equal rigour. A key factor directing parliamentary attention seems to be the ‘politicisation’ of an issue. In other words, the amount of contestation and attention given to a particular issue seems to affect parliamentary activity. This thematic issue seeks to assess *how* politicisation affects the role parliaments play within the system of EU governance. In particular, the contributions aim to answer the over-arching question of whether politicisation has an impact on how parliaments seek to influence policy-making and hold the EU executives to account. Furthermore, we raise the question of whether and how politicisation affects the role of parliaments as arenas for contestation and communication of different political interests. Jointly, the findings provide the empirical foundations for a more comprehensive debate regarding the democratic implications of politicisation. Politicisation puts pressure on parliaments to act, but parliamentarians themselves may also find it in their interest to instigate contestation. This thematic issue addresses these questions by shedding light on both the European Parliament and national parliaments and examines different policy-fields reaching from climate change and trade, to financial affairs and the Common Fisheries Policy.

Keywords

democracy; European Central Bank; European Parliament; national parliaments; politicisation; Common Fisheries Policy

Issue

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1. Introduction

In October 2016, the small region of Wallonia in Southern Belgium made world headlines when it interrupted the ratification of the Comprehensive Economic Trade Agreement in the Council. This incident is emblematic of two key developments which set the scene for this thematic issue.

First, through the Lisbon Treaty, we have seen the empowerment of the European Parliament (EP), whose

consent is now required for the vast majority of EU international agreements. At the same time, national parliaments—and even regional ones—are increasingly asserting their powers over areas of European governance traditionally dominated by executive actors. Trade is one example, but we also find similar tendencies in the realm of finance and security.

Second, considering that exerting influence and conducting oversight is time-consuming—particularly at the EU-level—parliaments cannot influence or scrutinise ev-

ery policy initiative with equal intensity. A key factor directing parliamentary attention seems to be the ‘politicisation’ of an issue. In other words, the amount of contestation and attention given to a particular issue seems to affect parliamentary activity.

This issue seeks to assess *how* politicisation affects the role parliaments play within the system of EU governance. In particular, the contributions aim to answer the over-arching question of whether politicisation has an impact on how they seek to influence policy-making and hold the EU executives to account. Furthermore, we raise the question of whether and how politicisation affects the role of parliaments as arenas for contestation and communication of different political interests. Jointly, the findings of this thematic issue provide the empirical foundations for a more comprehensive debate regarding the democratic implications of politicisation. Politicisation puts pressure on parliaments to act, but parliamentarians themselves may also find it in their interest to instigate contestation. The subsequent question is under which conditions such contestation takes place.

This thematic issue contributes to two canons of literature that have for the most part remained rather distinct (see, however, Bellamy & Kröger, 2016, for a special focus on national parliaments and the impact of politicisation of EU integration as such):

- The academic debate of the politicisation of EU policies and the (differentiated) impact on EU policy-making processes (e.g., de Wilde, Leupold, & Schmidtke, 2016);
- The role of legislatures within the EU system of multi-level governance (e.g., Heftler, Neuhold, Rozenberg, & Smith, 2015).

This thematic issue studies the phenomenon of politicisation *across* different policy fields—from trade, finances, and climate policy to fisheries—as well as different types of legislatures; by including national parliaments and the EP. It captures the role parliaments play within ‘politicised’ policies, covering a range of issues that either have an external or internal dimension. Furthermore, it looks at how parliaments contribute to the politicisation of policy issues but also explores the mechanisms of depoliticisation. Particularly in the literature on EU politicisation, the latter is not extensively discussed, perhaps because the research in this area has grown in parallel with the increasing contestation of European integration. In addition, as Gheyle (2019) argues in this thematic issue, parliamentarisation is closely associated with politicisation. This might be another reason why much of the literature has focused on how parliaments function as arenas for, and how parliamentarians are actors in, public debate, rather than studying how and why they aim to alleviate conflict.

Taken together, the multifaceted perspective of this thematic issue enables us to not only broaden our empir-

ical insights but also contribute to the conceptual debate on politicisation. All contributions to this thematic issue engage with the concept of politicisation. Politicisation is seen as an essentially discursive phenomenon that builds on political communication (Gheyle, 2019). Although authors might disagree on the causes and consequences of politicisation, there is broad agreement that politicisation of issues include at least three dimensions: First, policies must be salient. Following Hutter and Grande (2014, p. 1004): “Only topics that are frequently raised by political actors in public debates can be considered politicized.” Among the empirical examples investigated in this thematic issue are European Central Bank (ECB) issues for the German Bundestag (Högenauer, 2019), the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP; Rosén, 2019), and the Brexit negotiations (see Meissner, 2019). Secondly, politicisation entails the polarisation of opinion. This can be in parliament, or in public opinion, but the main point is that without an increasing contestation between diverging opinions, it is difficult to speak of the “expansion of the scope of conflict” (Hutter & Grande, 2014, p. 1003). The same is the case for the range of actors involved in debates (de Wilde et al., 2016). If a debate takes place solely among elites, no matter how heated, it does not signify politicisation.

In his article on the external dimension of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), Zimmermann (2019), shows how it is characterized by an uneven distribution of politicisation. He suggests the concept “layered politicisation” to explain the resulting pattern. Two decisive elements are seen to shape this ‘layered’ politicisation: the increasing prominence of normative discourse and the parliamentarisation of the CFP as a consequence of the Lisbon Treaty (layer of rules). Parliamentarisation allowed a plethora of actors to access the decision-making process, such as expert committees and civil society organisations (Zimmermann, 2019). Gheyle’s (2019) article also offers an attempt at conceptualising the relationship between parliamentarisation and politicisation. He argues that parliamentarisation is not a sufficient component of politicisation, but that in order to get a comprehensive grasp of politicisation one needs to take the process of parliamentarisation into account: “It is visible, polarized, parliamentary communication (most likely seen in plenary debates) that is considered the (necessary, yet insufficient) component of the broader (discursive) politicisation of an EU issue” (Gheyle, 2019, p. 231). The close link between both concepts also has normative implications. Widespread public debate and the particular translation hereof in parliament is “argued to be a constitutive force of democratization” (Gheyle, 2019, p. 232).

Thus, politicisation takes many shapes and forms, has many objects and different consequences, and is driven by a range of factors (de Wilde & Zürn, 2012). Accounts of politicisation must, therefore, start with a careful specification of the phenomenon under study, not least the arena in which it takes place (Greenwood & Roederer-Rynning, 2019). As such, Baglioni and Hurrelmann (2016,

p. 106) propose a simple distinction of arenas where politicisation can take place:

- 1) A citizen arena, where “laypeople engage in politics”;
- 2) An intermediary arena, made up of actors with a professional interest in politics (such as political parties, interest groups, the media);
- 3) An institutional arena, which is at “the core” of the political system, such as the EP and national parliaments.

EU researchers unanimously agree that EU issues are increasingly politicised. The permissive consensus that might have been pervasive many decades ago has definitively come to an end (Hooghe & Marks, 2009, 2019). As the contestation of the EU grows, the role of parliaments as sources of legitimacy becomes more important for the EU (Auel, 2019).

The media is a key mediator between the parliaments and the public. Although there is a bias in the media towards conflict and the media have their own agenda, the media continue to play a crucial role, “because it is where the general public can gain access to information about executive decision making and the stances of political actors who challenge decisions” (Statham & Trenz, 2015, pp. 291–292). The subsequent question is to what extent parliamentarians are featured in the media, but also who actually gets to raise issues and attain visibility. The rise of the right-wing, notably during the two most recent EU-elections, has gained a lot of attention. From this perspective, Auel’s (2019) finding that somewhat counter-intuitively, Eurosceptics do not get to dominate media coverage on EU issues is noteworthy.

The media provide a key arena for parliamentarians to convey their message to the EU citizenry. Parliamentarians not only respond to politicisation, but they also attempt to make politicisation happen by evoking public concerns. They use responsive claims to “demonstrate that they react to public concern, but also to draw attention to their own position and mobilise the public” (Rosén, 2019, p. 275). In other words, parliaments are not simply passive receivers of societal pressures that they then translate into political action. They are an “integral cog in a wider politicization dynamic” (Gheyle, 2019, p. 232).

Several contributions within this issue focus on the institutional arena, exploring the link between parliamentarisation and politicisation. Saliency is of key importance, more so than parliamentary powers, in accounting for parliamentary engagement, as shown by Meissner (2019) in her comparison of the high level of involvement of the German Bundestag with the rather peripheral role played by the Austrian Nationalrat in the Brexit debate. Högenauer (2019) delves further into the institutional effects of the politicisation in her case study of the Bundestag’s debates regarding the ECB during the

Eurozone crisis. She shows how politicisation has bred increasing scrutiny of the ECB, as well as growing dissatisfaction, despite there being support for the independence of central banks.

While politicisation appears to lead to a higher degree of scrutiny, the relationship between politicisation and influence is more complex. Going beyond how national parliaments provide arenas for contestation and actors in processes of politicisation, a number of contributions to this thematic issue look at the EP’s interaction with the Council and Commission during decision-making processes. They demonstrate how the politicisation of issues is shown to have an impact on the negotiations, but not necessarily in the direction one would expect. Somewhat paradoxically, as a policy becomes more politicised, it becomes more likely that it will be negotiated within secluded arenas. Using trilogues as an example, Ripoll Servent and Panning (2019) show how this trend is exacerbated when mainstream parties dominate negotiations and are able to hammer out a compromise between themselves. Interestingly this seclusion of inter-institutional negotiations is also seen by members of the EP (MEPs) as a way to politicise—not depoliticise—EU law-making vis-à-vis the Council by bringing salient issues to the centre stage of negotiations. Here civil society organisations are seen to play a key role in aiding MEPs’ attempts to politicise issues (Greenwood & Roederer-Rynning, 2019). Still, uncovering the various de-politicisation mechanisms within the EP are among the prominent contributions of this thematic issue. The full legislative involvement of the EP in decision-making in a potentially highly politicised policy area can thus work as a “constraining factor for the politicisation” of parliamentary activity (Wendler, 2019). Within the area of global governance and climate, the EP’s position has grown closer to the Council’s over time, thereby presenting itself as a “maturing actor in the EU’s climate diplomacy” (Delreux & Burns, 2019, p. 347). While politicisation may serve to increase parliamentary scrutiny of EU executives, de-politicisation of issues is seen as key to secure policy gains at the international level as well as during legislative processes.

2. Contributions in This Thematic Issue

Niels Gheyle (2019) starts off the debate by conceptualising the parliamentarisation and politicisation of European policies. He starts from the assumption that over the last two decades, two related dimensions of EU governance have generated lively academic discussion. The first approach focuses on the politicisation of European integration. This is seen to be a multi-faceted concept bringing together a “multitude of political and societal manifestations underlying an increasing controversy of the EU” (Gheyle, 2019, p. 227). A second strand of academic debate concerns the parliamentarisation of the EU, referring to the increasing role (national) parliaments play in controlling, scrutinising, and

debating EU issues. Gheyle probes the relationship between these two developments from a conceptual and analytical point of view. His key point is simple, but arguably often glossed over: (Behavioural) parliamentarisation is a necessary, possibly insufficient, component of the politicisation of the process of European integration or specific EU policies. He claims that these processes cannot be seen as separate from one another. (Behavioural) parliamentarisation is not equal to politicisation, but if one wants to come to a 'comprehensive' understanding of politicisation one cannot eclipse the process of parliamentarisation.

Hubert Zimmermann (2019) examines the EP's role within the external dimension of the CFP where the EP became a key player following the Lisbon Treaty. This new role gave rise to a shift towards stronger politicisation of a previously rather technocratic policy field. However, rather than displaying clear evidence of such a process, Zimmermann (2019) shows how this policy field remains characterised by an uneven politicisation, where the larger public has yet to mobilise. To explain this pattern, he proposes the concept "layered politicisation," coined to describe an incomplete and less comprehensive pattern of politicisation. While, in the case of the external dimension of the CFP, the degree of political controversy is thus not comparable to "fully" politicised policy fields, one can decipher some similar political dynamics. As Zimmermann (2019) shows in his two case studies, increasing politicisation is shaped by the mounting controversy surrounding the EU's fisheries policy, as well as the empowerment of the EP, which has opened the field to more external actors. Thus, despite lower levels of issue salience, he finds that external fisheries policy is now a contested policy field, with the parliament as a core arena. While this complicates decision-making, it potentially also renders EU fisheries policy more legitimate.

Katrin Auel (2019) then probes how parliamentary actors communicate with citizens through news media. Her starting point is the role played by national parliaments in "legitimising" EU politics. Their capacity to fulfil this role crucially depends on citizens "being actually aware of parliamentary involvement in EU affairs" (Auel, 2019, p. 248). This requires a study not only of whether and to what extent the media covers EU parliamentary affairs, but also of which actors actually acquire media visibility. Auel (2019) analyses the visibility of parties in news media, based on a dataset that includes all articles covering parliamentary involvement in EU affairs in six member states during a four-year period. A key question is: Do Eurosceptic parliamentary party groups and their members dominate parliamentary EU news or does the media coverage conceal Eurosceptics? Although earlier research has shown that public salience seems to lead to an increase in media coverage of EU parliamentary issues more generally, Auel shows that Eurosceptic actors do not seem to benefit from this tendency. Still, she finds that although Eurosceptics by no means take centre stage in media coverage, only a couple

of newspapers provide a "truly balanced coverage," especially when using parliamentary activity as the benchmark (Auel, 2019, p. 260).

Guri Rosén (2019) continues the exploration of the visibility of parliamentarians in news media in her analysis of the case of the TTIP, the recent trade negotiations in the EU that are seen to have "provoked unprecedented levels of controversy" (Rosén, 2019). One crucial channel for public contestation is seen to be the EP, which after the Lisbon Treaty entered into force has to give consent to international agreements. Against this background, this contribution sets out to answer the question of whether MEPs were engaged in debates about TTIP, and if so, what characterised their engagement? Did they act responsively and did they contribute to the politicisation of EU trade policy, as many feared they would after the empowerment of the EP? Building on an analysis of newspaper coverage of TTIP in Germany, Sweden, and the UK, as well as EP plenary debates, the article presents a mixed picture. While many supporters of TTIP attempted to de-politicise the debate, a consistent finding is that opponents most frequently evoke 'the voice of the people', being an example of how responsive statements were used to politicise TTIP. Thus, the author underlines that MEPs not only respond to politicisation, they also attempt to make politicisation "happen by evoking public concerns" (Rosén, 2019, p. 266). Rosén argues that one of the contributions of the article is to draw attention to the multifaceted relationship between responsiveness and politicisation, and how responsive claims are used both to increase contestation and alleviate it.

Katharina Luise Meissner (2019) shifts the focus from trade to the Brexit negotiations and the institutional arena of national parliaments. Most research on Brexit so far has focused on the EP or the UK parliament, while few have paid much attention to parliaments in the other member states. Hence, the article aims to broaden the scope by tracing the Austrian and German parliaments' activities in the Brexit negotiations.

Among the national parliaments of the EU, both stand out as strong legislatures in EU affairs. Yet, during the negotiations with the UK, their involvement has been of varying intensity. This puzzle is the point of departure for Meissner's (2019) article, where she sets out to explain why this is so. She finds that despite similar institutional strength, the German Bundestag is more extensively involved, particularly on an informal level, compared to the Austrian Nationalrat. The reason, Meissner argues, is Brexit's varying saliency in the two member states—"given their different levels of exposure to the UK's withdrawal" (Meissner, 2019, p. 279). Interestingly, the automobile company BMW appears to be a crucial component of German interests in these negotiations. Brexit talks are about pushing (German) national interests through international negotiations and German MPs consider it important to scrutinise Brexit issues based on the expected material costs for Germany and its regions. In Austria, on the other hand, Brexit is neither part of the

public debate nor salient with civil society organisations. No genuine Austrian interest prevailed in the context of the Brexit negotiations and Austria remained back-stage in the so-called Article 50 talks.

Anna-Lena Högenauer (2019), in turn, examines the effects of politicisation within another policy field—that of finances—and within another parliament. Based on analysis of plenary debates from 2005 to 2018, she analyses the relationship between the ECB and the German Bundestag. During the Eurozone crisis, the ECB became one of the key actors, but its prominent role also caused political controversy. Although it contributed to the stabilisation of the Eurozone, the ECB was seen to have gone beyond its mandate and to have expanded its policy remit. Its technocratic approach to the crisis reduced the opportunities for democratic contestation and led to “frustrations” that provoked politicisation (Högenauer, 2019). Högenauer studies how and to what extent this politicisation affected the perception of the ECB in the German Bundestag. She argues that the Bundestag is an unlikely case for politicisation because Germany was very much in favour of a highly independent ECB. Moreover, it has no “active scrutiny culture” even when it comes to its national central bank, and until recently no Eurosceptic right-wing parties were represented in parliament (Högenauer, 2019). However, Högenauer finds that the ECB’s policies have become politicised. The salience of ECB policies has increased, as has the polarisation of opinion in the parliament and the range of actors participating in the debates. While there is no clear government-opposition divide when it comes to the level of parliamentary activity, the criticism is seen to stem from opposition parties, and especially from the far left and right (Högenauer, 2019). Thus, politicisation has led to increased dissatisfaction with the ECB as well as growing scrutiny.

Next, Ariadna Ripoll Servent and Lara Panning (2019) look at preparatory bodies as “mediators of political conflict” in the trilogues, which have become a key feature in preparing EU decisions. They represent a form of “secluded decision-making,” which makes it difficult to understand how “institutional positions are formed and managed and which actors are better positioned to influence policy outputs” (Ripoll Servent & Panning, p. 303). Trilogues are increasingly preceded by so-called shadow meetings, which are *de facto* decision-making bodies. The authors compare the use of shadow meetings in politicised and non-politicised issues by looking into the revision of the statute as well as funding and foundations of the EU political parties and at the asylum package. Building on ethnographic data of participant observation and elite interviews they show how the former dossier received little external attention, but that the two largest still used shadow meetings to enlarge this support also to smaller parties. By contrast, the asylum package was highly politicised, and the EP highly divided. Still, it needed to present a united front against the Council and shadow meetings became the key arena for

compromise building. The authors see a paradox emerging: the more a file is politicised, the more likely that it will be negotiated behind closed doors. This seclusion is seen to be predominant when mainstream parties dominate negotiations and are able to hammer out a compromise between themselves. This, in turn, may empower the Eurosceptic parties, who accuse the EP of lacking transparency and being exclusive.

Justin Greenwood and Christilla Roederer-Rynning (2019) also examine the (effects) of the politicisation of trilogues but turn the focus towards civil society organisations and their relationship with the EP. They argue that while secluded decision-making allows EU institutions to depoliticise law-making, trilogues have become politicised, stemming in part from the relationship between the EP and civil society organisations. The authors substantiate this argument based on insights from the politicisation and historical institutionalist literatures and advance two ideal types of trilogue politics. They then probe these types using interview material and find that, contrary to the Council, most MEPs currently see the seclusion of trilogues as a way to politicise—not depoliticise—EU law-making by bringing salient issues centre stage of the negotiations. The EP is depicted as the main driver of this process by relying on civil society organisations and in particular on NGOs. Moreover, the authors find that EP is “able to assert itself *vis-à-vis* the Council of Ministers by using the ‘noisy politics’ of NGOs” (Greenwood & Roederer-Rynning, 2019, p. 323). Some NGOs even see themselves as agents of “political communication” with the Council on behalf of the EP. Greenwood and Roederer-Rynning (2019) argue, therefore, that civil society organisations can play a key role in politicising issues in a policy-making system that is otherwise out of public sight.

Frank Wendler (2019) remains within the realm of EU law-making but shifts our attention to the area of climate change. By comparing decision-making in external and internal climate change policy, he examines the link between the role of the EP as a “political actor” and an arena for “party political conflict” (Wendler, 2019, p. 328). This presents him with the following puzzle: Does EP involvement in negotiations on legally binding legislation encourage or constrain polarisation across political cleavages, compared to when the EP makes declaratory statements about future goals of climate action? Based on a discursive institutionalist theoretical framework, he compares EP resolutions about international climate conferences, Conferences of the Parties 20 to 24, with the revision of four legislative acts for Phase IV of EU Climate Action. His findings are somewhat counterintuitive: Despite the importance and often very contested content of agreements, politicisation, which Wendler defines as public contestation and polarisation, hardly occurs. He claims that discursive institutionalism offers plausible theoretical arguments to explain this observation (Wendler, 2019). MEPs try to find policy agreement by way of coordinative discourse rather than making po-

larising claims aimed at the wider citizenry. The governance of EU climate action is thus seen as “largely policy-oriented, technical, and relatively immune to more fundamental disputes about the severity of climate change or principles of its mitigation” (Wendler, 2019, p. 336). Overall, the case studies thus indicate a low level of external politicisation.

Finally, Tom Delreux and Charlotte Burns (2019) also look into climate policy and the EP but try to understand the involvement of the EP in the climate negotiations of the UN. Here climate change is seen as a site of increased politicisation at the global level, where concomitantly, a parallel process of EU parliamentarisation has taken place. Whilst the EP has enjoyed important powers in internal policy-making on climate issues since the Lisbon Treaty (2009), the EP has also gained the right to veto the EU’s ratification of international agreements. The authors thus probe the question of the impact that these increased powers of the EP have had on its involvement in UN climate diplomacy. This question is examined through an evaluation of policy preferences prior to international climate conferences (COPs) and the EP’s activities during those meetings. The authors find evidence that the EP’s preferences have become more moderate over time, while the EP is also more active at COPs. Rather in line with Wendler’s (2019) observations, the authors find little evidence that the EP’s involvement in international negotiations is significantly different when it holds veto power. Instead, the EP is depicted as keen to politicise internal EU climate negotiations in order to secure policy gains at the international level.

3. Conclusion

To conclude, there are three main takeaways from this thematic issue on parliaments and politicisation:

- 1) Parliamentarisation and politicisation are intimately connected, politicisation being a key factor in instigating parliamentary scrutiny of executives at both EU and national levels;
- 2) However, parliamentarisation may also correlate with de-politicisation and secluded decision-making, especially in the case of highly salient policy issues;
- 3) As is clear from the various contributions to this thematic issue, this means that it is still an open question whether and to what extent increased politicisation in parliaments contributes to more democratic policy-making.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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