

## **Authority transfer or membership conflict?**

Explaining politicization of European integration in public debates  
on major integration steps

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**Abstract**

While there is increasing evidence that European integration has been politicized, knowledge on the driving forces of this process is still limited. In this paper, we contribute to this research by examining the importance of authority transfers to the EU as drivers of politicization. It innovates in two ways: First, we extend the authority transfer argument by highlighting the mobilizing power of membership conflicts; and, second, we analyze the relevance of national opportunity structures, referenda in particular, and actors' mobilizing strategies for politicization. Our findings show that the authority transfer argument needs to be extended and integrated into a broader framework of political conflict. Empirically, we trace politicization in public debates on every integration step (treaty reforms and enlargement) from the 1970s to the late 2000s in six West European countries (France, Germany, Britain, Austria, Sweden, and Switzerland) based on a relational content analysis of newspaper coverage.

Whereas scholars meanwhile agree that ‘something like politicization has happened since the mid-1980s’ (Schmitter 2009: 211f.) in Europe, there is still considerable controversy about the driving forces and consequences of this process. This paper focuses on the former and seeks to *explain the level of politicization in public debates over European integration*. We can examine the validity of the most prominent argument advanced in the scholarly literature in this field, namely that politicization is ultimately driven by the accumulated effects of authority transfers to the EU (see Hooghe and Marks 2009; de Wilde and Zürn 2012; Rauh 2014; Statham and Trezn 2013b; Zürn 2006; Zürn *et al.* 2012). Most explicitly, this argument was made by de Wilde and Zürn (2012: 138) who state ‘that the politicization of European integration is driven by its increasing authority indicated by the transformation from a traditional international organization to a more encompassing “political system”’. Such transfers are expected to provoke resistance among European citizens and increase demands for public justifications because of the insufficient legitimacy of supranational authority. As a consequence, we should see rising levels of politicization over time in general with peaks around major treaty reforms when formal ‘deepening’ of the EU is at stake. In this context, the Maastricht Treaty and subsequent treaty reforms, in particular the failed Constitutional Treaty and the Lisbon Treaty, are considered as being watersheds in the integration process and its politicization.

There is certainly empirical evidence for such a claim (e.g., de Wilde and Zürn 2012: 146-149; Rauh 2014; Statham and Trezn 2013b), but the argument has not been scrutinized in a larger comparative analysis yet. A closer inspection of politicization of European integration in national election campaigns and major integration debates casts some doubts on its general validity. On the one hand, the general pattern of politicization in national election campaigns does not show such a clear-cut increase in the 2000s and, moreover, it reveals remarkable cross-national variation (e.g., Green-Pedersen 2012; Hutter and Grande 2014; Kriesi 2007). On the other hand, we find highly politicized integration debates in instances in which conflict

was focused on the accession of new members or membership of one's own country rather than on further authority transfers to the supranational level. The French debate on Britain's membership in the EEC in the early 1970s, the Swiss debates on the country's membership in the EU in the 1990s and the controversies on Turkey's EU membership in the mid-2000s are cases in point (see von Oppeln 2005).

These examples suggest that the authority transfer argument does not capture the politicization of Europe in all its relevant manifestations. Therefore, in order to arrive at a fully adequate understanding of the enabling conditions and driving forces of politicization in Europe, it is pertinent to explore the scope of the authority transfer argument in a larger comparative setting. This paper takes up this challenge and innovates in two ways.. *First*, we distinguish between conflicts on 'authority transfer' and 'membership conflicts' in integration debates. By comparing debates that focus attention either on authority transfers ('deepening') or on membership issues ('widening'), we qualify the mobilizing power of authority transfers within the EU. *Second*, we examine the relevance of institutional and actor-centred factors that might condition the way political conflicts over Europe actually play out in public debates (see Hooghe and Marks 2009; 2012; Hutter and Grande 2014; Koopmans and Statham 2010; Kriesi 2007; Kriesi *et al.* 2012; Kriesi *et al.* 2008; Statham and Trezn 2013a; b). More precisely, this paper examines the explanatory power of four variables: referenda, the national electoral cycle, the strength of populist right-wing challengers, and cultural-identitarian framing strategies. All four factors are based on the assumption that politicization may be triggered by the deepening and widening of the EU; however, its extent ultimately depends on strategies of political actors, as well as on the institutional opportunities which they face.

In the following, we test this argument by comparing eighty-six domestic public debates on the main steps of European integration in six West European countries (i.e.,

France, Germany, Britain, Austria, Sweden and Switzerland). In our analysis we distinguish between public debates (a) on treaty reforms, (b) accession of third countries, and (c) accession of one's country. This allows identifying the relative importance of authority transfers and membership conflicts comparatively. While substantial authority transfers have been the object of treaty reforms such as the Maastricht Treaty, membership issues have been dealt with in sometimes protracted negotiations between the EC/EU and the country seeking accession, and these negotiations have been embedded in complicated domestic political decision-making processes.

Public debates on major steps of integration seem to be perfect sites for both a politicization of the European integration process and for its empirical analysis. They are induced by critical institutional events in the integration process; they are potentially open for participation of all kinds of actors beyond the narrow scope of governmental elites and political parties; and contrary to national elections, their public visibility of Europe is not overshadowed by other domestic issues. Thus, they seem most likely cases for a politicization of Europe. Most importantly for our argument, the selected debates directly focus public attention on *particular* aspects of *European* integration, either transfers of authority and changes in the institutional framework of the EU or membership questions. For this reasons, they offer ideal windows of opportunity to compare the mobilizing power of different integration steps and to provide new insights on the driving forces of politicization in public debates on European integration.

We proceed our analysis in five steps. First, we briefly sketch how we conceptualize politicization as our dependent variable. Second, we discuss in more detail the hypotheses on the driving forces of politicization. Third, the research design and the methods are introduced before, fourth, we present the empirical findings of our comparative analysis. In the concluding section, we discuss our results and suggest avenues for future research.

### **What is to be explained? Conceptualizing politicization**

Our analysis is based on a multi-dimensional conceptualization of politicization that emphasizes *political conflict*. Accordingly, politicization can be defined as the “expansion of the scope of conflict” (Schattschneider’s (1975 [1960]: 12) *within* a political system. More precisely, and in line with our previous suggestions (Grande and Hutter 2014; Hutter and Grande 2014), we characterize politicization as consisting of three inter-related dimensions: *issue salience, actor expansion, and polarization*. Such a definition of politicization is open in view of the type of political actors who are involved in a given conflict, the means they use to advance their claims, the political arenas in which they take action, the relationships in which they stand to each other, and the consequences of their activities.

The first dimension, *issue salience*, refers to the visibility of a given issue in public debates. It takes into account that only topics that are frequently raised by political actors in public debates can be considered politicized. If an issue is not debated in public, it can be politicized only to a very limited extent, if at all. This mirrors recent proposals by Green-Pedersen (2012), as well as by Guinaudeau and Persico (2013), who suggest looking at politicization primarily through the lens of salience. The second dimension is the *expansion of the actors* involved in a public debate. Following Schattschneider (1960: 2), we argue that the “number of people involved in any conflict determines what happens”. If only very few and a restricted set of (elite) actors publicly advance their positions, this would indicate that an issue is hardly politicized. More specifically, we focus on the degree to which the dominant executive actors are joined by other actors in public debate (see Koopmans 2007; 2010; Statham and Trezn 2013b: 79ff.). The third dimension of politicization refers to the degree of *polarization*, i.e. the intensity of conflict over the issue among the various actors. To speak of a highly politicized constellation, actors need to put forward starkly differing positions and we must

find strong opposing camps (see de Wilde 2011; Hoeglinger 2012). The most polarizing constellation can be found when two camps advocate completely opposing issue positions with about the same intensity.

All these dimensions have been discussed in the recent literature on the politicization of European integration, although sometimes with a different labelling and with a slightly different meaning. In our previous work (Hutter and Grande 2014: 1004f.), we introduced a combined *index of politicization* in order to make this multi-dimensional conceptualization of politicization accessible for quantitative empirical analysis. Our index of politicization acknowledges the crucial role of salience by multiplying it by the sum of the other two dimensions:  $politicization = salience \times (actor\ expansion + polarization)$ . More details on its calculation will be given in the methods' section (see below).

### **Sources and driving forces of politicization: The hypotheses**

How can we explain the level and scope of politicization of European integration? Why should Europe become a controversial issue? As argued in the introductory section of this paper, a key suspect in this regard is the ever increasing *authority transfer* to political institutions beyond the nation state (see Hooghe and Marks 2009; de Wilde and Zürn 2012; Rauh 2014; Statham and Trenz 2013b; Zürn 2006; Zürn *et al.* 2012). Somewhat simplified, the proponents of this argument expect that the delegation and pooling of national competences at the EU level is the key force that triggers politicization because it increases demands for public justifications in general and it provokes resistance from certain parts of the national population more specifically. As a consequence, political elites are forced to take sides and discuss the issue of European integration publicly. In this context, treaty reforms which involve a significant transfer of authority, the Maastricht Treaty in particular, are considered watersheds in the integration process and its politicization.

We explore the scope of this argument by introducing two distinctions. First, we distinguish between two types of integration problems which may cause political conflict, namely authority transfer and membership. Member states and their citizens have to decide on the size and composition of the ‘club’ to which they belong and on the scope of authority transferred to this club. Both questions can be controversial both between member states and within them. While conflicts resulting from membership in the EU have not figured as prominently in the recent literature on politicization, we assume that the inclusion of new members, i.e. ‘widening’ the Community, and one’s own country’s membership in the EU can be significant causes of domestic conflict as well. Therefore, analysing debates on both treaty reforms and enlargement rounds allows us to compare the level of politicization related to widening and deepening processes and to qualify the authority transfer argument.

Why should the ‘widening’ of the Community induce political conflict if it does not include a transfer authority? Are membership conflicts not a variety of authority transfer conflicts? In order to account for the independent politicizing force of membership conflicts, we distinguish, secondly, between *three different sources of integration conflict*: loss of sovereignty, threats to national identity, and demands for transnational solidarity (Grande and Hutter 2014: 12-17). Conflicts resulting from the loss of national sovereignty might have been most persistent in the history of European integration, but they are not the only possible sources of conflict. Conflicts on European integration can also be triggered by threats to national or European identity, or by demands for transnational solidarity, in particular by a redistribution of financial resources among member states. To put it differently, we argue that the loss of sovereignty, threats to identity, and demands for solidarity represent, at least in principle, independent sources of conflict that can be politicized on different occasions. Accordingly, we may speak of sovereignty conflicts, identity conflicts and solidarity conflicts in the European integration process.



Taking these various sources of conflict into account, it seems evident that the authority transfer argument with its focus on the delegation and pooling of sovereignty presents a restricted view on the causes and driving forces of politicization. In the case of the EU, membership conflicts certainly include transfers of national sovereignty, and at advanced stages of the integration process such a transfer must be particularly consequential. However, membership in a larger community also raises questions of national identity (“who is us?”) and it jeopardizes national principles, norms, institutions and political routines. Moreover, membership may trigger demands for transnational solidarity thus causing re-distributional conflicts. In cases of affluent countries, its net contribution to the EU’s budget may be the cause of domestic conflicts, as we had it in the quarrels on Britain’s EC membership in the 1970s and 1980s; in the case of economically less developed countries seeking accession, their participation in supranational funds and the access of their citizens and companies to the markets of other member states may result in controversies on the desirability of membership.

These examples illustrate the point that the various sources of conflicts induced by European integration may not only coexist but that they can also amplify each other. More generally, following Lipset (1960: 77), we assume that the mobilizing power of a given conflict is strongest when it taps into several sources of conflict. Accordingly, we expect that politicization (as the public articulation and mobilization of these conflicts) is most intensive if the three sources of integration conflict play a role simultaneously. More precisely, we assume that such an intensification of conflict is most likely if the accession of one’s country is at stake. According to this argument, membership to the European Communities should not just be seen as ‘the mother of all authority transfers’, it may raise all sorts of identitarian and re-distributional problems too. For this reason, we assume that the level of politicization is not highest in debates on authority transfer but in debates on a country’s own accession. We call this *membership conflict hypothesis*.

Against this background, our expectations on the politicizing force of enlargement are mixed. Admitting new members implies the sharing of sovereignty with a larger number of member states, but it does not include an immediate transfer of authority to the EU. Therefore, widening the Community should not cause significant sovereignty conflicts. However, it may result either in identity conflicts, if a potential new member is perceived as not sharing the basic values of the Community, or it may provoke fears of a re-distribution of resources in cases in which countries seeking admission are economically less developed. In both instances, enlargement may lead to high levels of politicization too. In sum, however, we expect the aggregate level of politicization in enlargement conflicts to be moderate only (*enlargement conflict hypothesis*).

While authority transfers and unresolved membership questions might ultimately be the triggering factors that drive politicization, they are not expected to provide a sufficient answer to the question of what explains the level of politicization in public debates over Europe. These processes rather induce political potentials into West European societies that can be articulated by political actors given that they face opportunities to do so. That is why another strand of the politicization literature emphasizes additional institutional and actor-centred explanatory factors that might affect the intensity of public conflict on European integration and its manifestation (e.g., Hooghe and Marks 2009; 2012; Hutter and Grande 2014; Koopmans and Statham 2010; Kriesi 2007; Kriesi *et al.* 2012; Kriesi *et al.* 2008; Statham and Trenz 2013a; b). While this is also acknowledged by proponents of the authority transfer argument (see de Wilde and Zürn 2012: 143), the different kinds of explanations are hardly ever tested together in a systematic way (but see Rauh 2014).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the entirety of institutional and actor-centred factors emphasized in the literature. In the following, we will concentrate on four factors which seem to be particularly relevant for the explanation of politicization in public de-

bates on integration steps. Two factors (national referendum and electoral cycle) refer to institutional features, whereas the other two factors (strength of populist right challengers and cultural-identitarian framing) emphasize the role of political actors and their mobilizing strategies for the politicization of Europe.

The first factor is the holding of a *national referendum* in an integration debate. National referendums are certainly “elite-initiated events” (Marks and Hooghe 2009: 20), but they have “introduced a popular element into the process of European integration that is at least partly out of the control of the elected and appointed representatives in Brussels and the national capitals” (Hobolt 2009: 8). More specifically, the holding of a national referendum is expected to increase the salience and visibility of an integration debate; it provides an opportunity to participate for a broader range of actors beyond governmental elites; and it may intensify conflict by increasing polarization among these actors. Therefore, we expect that politicization of integration debates is higher if a national referendum is being hold (*national referendum hypothesis*).

A second factor which may play a role is the *national election cycle*. Proximity to national elections may have a politicizing effect in an integration debate. The closer a debate gets to a national election campaign, as a moment of heightened conflict, the more it may be affected by the agenda of electoral conflicts (for its effect on parliamentary debates, see Rauh 2014). The impact of the proximity to national elections is ambiguous, however. It will increase the level of politicization of an integration debate, if, and only if, European issues play a significant role in the election campaign. In this constellation, proximity to a national election will have an amplifying effect. However, if political parties decide to de-emphasize European issues in an election campaign, proximity to elections will rather have a dampening effect on political conflict. For this reason, we expect the aggregate effect of national election

cycles on the politicization of integration debates to be moderate only (*national election cycle hypothesis*).

Our discussion of the effects of national election cycles on politicization suggests that in addition to institutional opportunity structures, political actors, actor constellations, and mobilization strategies are important. Most importantly, the literature on politicization and European integration assumes that politicization is driven by *parties from the radical populist right and Eurosceptic parties* (e.g., de Vries and Hobolt 2012; Hooghe and Marks 2009; Kriesi 2007). These parties are particularly sensitive to losses of national sovereignty and threats to national identity, and it is argued that they have formulated a very successful strategy for mobilizing those that feel negatively affected by these processes. Moreover, since European issues often cut-across mainstream parties and since they often hold more integrationist positions than their electorates (e.g., Green-Pedersen 2012; van der Eijk and Franklin 2004; Tzelgov 2014), these parties are expected to de-emphasize debates on Europe to keep levels of intra-party conflict low and to avoid alienating their voters. For this reason, the scholarly literature assumes that an intensification of integration debates is more likely to occur if new challengers from the right enter the scene which have strategic incentives to mobilize European issues (*populist radical right hypothesis*).

Finally, we are interested in the importance of *framing strategies* as a crucial element of actors' strategies to politicize European integration (Diez Medrano 2003; Helbling *et al.* 2010). By strategically *framing* a given issue, actors attempt to shift the central logic of conflict. More specifically, actors try to frame the conflict in line with their general ideological predisposition, on the one hand, and with regard to strategic factors in party competition, on the other hand. In this context, it is important to emphasize that 'Europe' is a complex issue which has both an economic-distributional and a cultural-identitarian dimension. The scholarly literature assumes that the politicization of European integration is the product of an in-

creasing importance of cultural and identity-related frames (Hooghe and Marks 2009; Kriesi *et al.* 2008). The argument states that by framing Europe in a cultural-identitarian way, opponents of the EU were able to highlight its perceived negative consequences for national identity and sovereignty, thereby increasing its level of politicization. Empirical analysis of the politicization of European integration in national elections campaigns confirmed this assumption (Hutter and Grande 2014). Although both authority transfer conflicts and membership conflicts can be framed in a cultural-identitarian way, we expect that an identitarian framing is particularly conducive to membership conflicts because problems of national or European identity are particularly relevant in such conflicts (*identitarian framing hypothesis*).

### **Design and methods**

In this paper, we analyse public debates on major integration steps comprehensively from the early 1970s to the late 2000s in six West European countries (i.e., Austria, Britain, France, Germany, Sweden and Switzerland). However, the countries under scrutiny differ with regard to important context factors that might shape the level of politicization and that help us to test and qualify the general hypotheses introduced before. Most important are differences with respect to the duration and scope of EU integration. With France and Germany, the sample includes two founding members of the European Communities; the UK was in the first group of accession countries (joining the EC in 1973); and Austria and Sweden were in the third group of new members entering the EU in 1995. Since we are particularly interested in the level of politicization across different types of integration steps, we deliberately included Switzerland as a country in which accession failed after intense domestic debates. Studying public debates and national referendums on Europe in Switzerland might provide valuable additional insights into the politicization of membership issues.

Our study covers debates on every successful or failed major treaty reform after the decision on the Treaty of Rome in 1957 (these are: Single European Act, Maastricht, Amsterdam, Nice, the European Constitutional Treaty, and Lisbon) and on every enlargement decision since the early 1970s (Northern enlargement, Southern enlargement I & II, EFTA enlargement, Eastern enlargement I & II).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, we included the membership debate on Turkey's EU accession and eight country-specific debates from Austria, Sweden and Switzerland to our sample. The country-specific debates centred on critical decisions regarding those countries' relation to the EC/EU in general and their integration into the Single European Market and the Economic and Monetary Union more precisely: the Free Trade Agreement in the early 1970s involving Austria and Switzerland; membership in the European Economic Area for all three countries; the two Bilateral Treaties between Switzerland and the EU; and the Swedish debate about joining the Euro-zone. In sum, the analysis is based on 86 domestic public debates on 18 different integration steps (a list of all steps and descriptive statistics can be found in the Online Appendix).

Since the unit of analysis, i.e. an integration step, is not a singular event but extends over a longer period, we subdivided each integration step into a set of major formal sub-decisions and we collected data on the public debate on each of these sub-decisions. These 'critical dates' are the (a) the initiation of the project (e.g., formal membership application or a European Summit), (b) the reaction of the European Commission (in case of enlargement rounds only), (c) the beginning of negotiations, (d) the paraphrasing and signing of a treaty, and (e) the national adoption (either by the national parliament or by a referendum). For every 'critical date', we looked at the time periods two weeks before and one week after the date.

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<sup>1</sup> We excluded the debate on the fusion of the three Communities in 1967 because this integration step did not imply a substantial transfer of authority; and we also excluded the debate on Croatia's membership because this was not considered as being a major integration step.

Our study is based on original data collected from newspaper reports. For the study of politicization in *public* debates on European integration, mass media are an indispensable source. We can retrieve very rich information on conflicts among various types of actors from media reports such as newspaper articles. These reports allow us to examine all three dimensions of politicization introduced before (issue salience, actor expansion, and polarization), as well as the specific issues being addressed and the way actors justify their positions.

We selected articles on the integration steps from one national quality newspaper per country: *Die Presse* (Austria), *The Times* (Britain), *Le Monde* (France), *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Germany) and *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (Switzerland). The articles were coded with a specific method of content analysis, i.e. core sentence analysis. This method was originally developed by Kleinnijenhuis and colleagues (e.g. Kleinnijenhuis *et al.* 1997), and it was successfully applied to the study of political conflict by Kriesi *et al.* (2012; 2008). In this method, the unit of analysis is neither a single keyword nor the whole article, but a ‘core sentence’ which consists of a relation between a subject and an object. These core sentences can then be used for quantitative analysis. For the present study, we focused on those core sentences which thematically referred to European integration (for details on the coding, see Online Appendix). As we are interested in *domestic* public debates in this paper, we limited our sample to statements with domestic subject actors. In the end, the empirical analysis of this paper is based on around 17,000 core sentences and 10,000 frames.

How do we measure politicization? For each dimension, we rely on one indicator. Salience is measured by the average number of articles coded per selected day. For the expansion of actors, we take the share of non-governmental actor statements (e.g., by opposition leaders, parliamentary spokespersons, civil society actors) in percent of all coded statements. Our indicator for polarization is based on Taylor and Hermann’s (1971) measure of ideological polarization and ranges from 0 (no polarization) to 1 (see Kriesi *et al.* 2008: 364) (for a

detailed discussion of the indicator, see again Online Appendix). Empirically, the three indicators are significantly related to each other, but the correlation is far from perfect; ranging from  $r=0.37$  (salience and polarization) and  $0.42$  (salience and actor expansion) to  $0.64$  (polarization and actor expansion) ( $N=86$ ). For the calculation of the index, both expansion of actors and polarization are based on a scale from 0 to 1, whereas salience is the absolute number of coded articles per day. In the end, the average index is  $0.26$  (std. dev. =  $0.36$ ) and ranges from a minimum of 0 to the observed maximum of 1.87.

### **Empirical findings**

The empirical findings are presented in two steps: At first, we compare levels of politicization across types of integrations steps and discuss cross-national variations. Thereafter, we examine the relevance of institutional and actor-centred explanatory factors.

Figure 1 shows the average politicization index for the three types of integration steps, namely treaty reforms, EU accession of third countries, and the country's own accession to the EU or the Single European Market. The aggregate values for all eighty-six domestic debates bring to light the highly politicizing character of the decision of countries to join the EU. The average index for this type of debate is more than 2.5 times higher than for those on major European treaty reforms, and it is about seven times greater than for those on another country's EU membership. At an aggregate level, conflicts over treaty reforms certainly do lead to politicization but the level of politicization in such debates is dwarfed by the high intensity of membership conflicts within countries seeking accession. This finding supports our first hypothesis on the mobilizing power of country's own accession (membership conflict hypothesis).

[Figure 1]



This is not to say that the authority transfer hypothesis must be completely rejected. If we distinguish between debates in countries that are already members of the EU and those in non-EU member states, we get a more nuanced picture. The results in Figure 1 highlight that, within EU members, conflicts over treaty reforms – and not over enlargement – cause the highest levels of politicization in most cases. In a nutshell, it is ‘deepening’ rather than ‘widening’, i.e. authority transfer rather than geographical enlargement, which is politicizing in EU member states.

Since the countries in our sample are distinct regarding their duration and scope of EU membership, we expect some cross-national variation in our findings, too. In Table 1, we present average values of politicization for the different types of integration steps for each country separately. These values confirm the outstanding importance of conflicts over a country’s accession, but they also show remarkable differences between countries. Even in Sweden, where we find a very low level of politicization in general, the membership debate was highly politicized. The average index value in Sweden (0.48) is about the same as the respective value in the UK (0.46). However, we observe the highest average values for debates on the country’s decision to join the EU or the Single European Market in Austria (0.93) and Switzerland (0.80). Moreover, the findings in Table 1 indicate significant cross-national differences in the level of politicization in debates on treaty reforms. On average, conflicts were by far the most intense in France (0.62), followed by Austria after the country became an EU member (0.38) and by Britain (0.35). It also becomes evident that EU enlargement did not produce high levels of politicization, except in France (0.34) and in Austria (0.37). In the other countries, enlargement was hardly politicizing at all.

[Table 1]

While aggregate measures are certainly instructive, Figure 2 presents the politicization index for each step and country to give a more detailed picture. For ease of interpretation, we added two horizontal lines which represent empirical benchmarks of politicization. The lower horizontal line indicates the mean value based on all eighty-six domestic debates. The higher horizontal line shows the mean plus one standard deviation. We consider debates that pass the first threshold as politicized while those crossing the second benchmark as showing an exceptionally high level of politicization.

Figure 2 brings out remarkable differences between integration steps and countries. Cross-national variation is most evident when we look at the two founding member states of the European Communities in our sample, *France* and *Germany*. In Germany, we find a consistent pattern of low politicization. Debates on most integration steps show values below average, and there is no debate in which politicization is clearly above the second benchmark. Most remarkably, politicization in the German debate on the Maastricht Treaty was significantly below the levels observed in France and Britain although the existence of the German “D-Mark” was at stake. In relative terms, treaty reforms were more politicized in Germany than enlargement rounds. However, as shown in Figure 2, it was EU membership of Turkey that resulted in the most politicized conflict among German actors (see Leggewie 2004; von Oppeln 2005). In France, by contrast, we observe extremely high values in two debates, namely, the debates on the first enlargement round in the early 1970s (involving accession of Britain, Denmark, Ireland, and Norway) and the Maastricht Treaty. The French debate on Northern enlargement is most remarkable because it deviates in two respects from conventional expectations. It was not on authority transfer, and it took place at a time when politicization was supposed to be still limited. The debate on Maastricht was exceptional too as we recorded by far the highest politicization index of all debates covered by our data.

Moreover, we find very high values in the French debates on the Constitutional Treaty and the Lisbon Treaty. In sum, European integration was highly politicized in French public debates during the entire period. However, except for Northern enlargement, it was mostly the transfer of authority to the EU since the Maastricht Treaty, which was politicizing in France.

[Figure 2]

In *Britain*, we observe a pattern of consistent but not exceptionally high politicization in public debates. Contrary to politicization in electoral campaigns with clear peaks in the 1970s and 1990s (see Hutter and Grande 2014), debates on major integration steps do not exceed our second benchmark. In general, it is conflict over treaty reforms, but not over the accession of third countries, that leads to politicization in Britain. Except for Britain's own EC membership, enlargement of the EC/EU was not an issue at all until the late 2000s. By contrast, Figure 2 shows that the values for each treaty reform, from the Single European Act to the Lisbon Treaty, are slightly above average. They peak in the debate on the Maastricht Treaty, although politicization in Britain did not reach the extraordinary high level observed in France at that time.

In *Austria*, we find distinct patterns of politicization before and after the country joined the EU (see Figure 2). In the early 1990s, politicization was very high in debates on the European Economic Area and Austria's EU membership. After EU accession, the public conflicts over Europe did not end, and many subsequent debates in Austria also show high levels of politicization. Compared to the other EU member states, the Austrian pattern is exceptional since both 'widening' and 'deepening' produced high levels of politicization once the country had joined the EU. More precisely, Figure 2 highlights the crucial role of the debates on East-

ern enlargement and Turkey's EU membership, on the one hand, as well as the Constitutional Treaty and Lisbon, on the other.

Finally, *Sweden* and *Switzerland* show a pattern of politicization caused by conflicts over the country's own EU accession. In Sweden, politicization was only high in the 1990s and early 2000s due to conflicts over the country's EU membership. This politicization of membership issues also affected subsequent debates on the Amsterdam Treaty and membership in the Euro-zone. The level of politicization for integration steps in the 2000s, including the Constitutional Treaty, was very limited, however. In contrast to Austria, the overall level of politicization in Sweden seems not significantly affected by EU membership apart from the accession period itself. This highlights that political conflict over Europe can develop in entirely different ways after accession. In Switzerland, we also find a distinct politicization profile that clearly reflects the country's outsider status. European integration is highly politicizing whenever Switzerland is directly involved. This caused peaks of politicization in the debates on the European Economic Area and Swiss EU-membership in the early 1990s and on the second set of Bilateral Treaties in the early 2000s. Besides these cases, the European integration process did not resonate in public debates in Switzerland.

Taken together, our findings allow qualifying the authority transfer argument as advanced in the scholarly in several respects. First, authority transfers – and not enlargement decisions – have in fact been the most politicizing integration steps within EU member states. However, comparison with accession debates reveals that the transfer of authority to the EC/EU has been of limited politicizing power only except for a few cases such as the Maastricht Treaty in France. However, secondly, these authority transfer conflicts are dwarfed by the mobilizing power of unresolved membership conflicts in accession countries. Thirdly, integration debates in some countries (Austria, France, Germany) indicate that enlargement issues can have very high politicization power if they include identitarian or re-distributive

conflicts. Finally,, our data point to remarkable cross-national differences in the level of politicization that cannot solely be explained by the type of integration question at stake.

Therefore, we now turn to additional factors that might condition the extent to which actors publicly contest European integration. More precisely, we focus on institutional opportunities provided by national referendums and elections, as well as the strength of radical right challengers and the importance of cultural-identitarian framing strategies. To do so, we constructed indicators for (a) the question of whether a national referendum was held or not;<sup>2</sup> (b) the proximity of the integration debates to the next national election (measured in months);<sup>3</sup> (c) the percentage of statements by radical populist right parties relative to all actors involved in a debate;<sup>4</sup> and (d) the percentage of cultural-identitarian frames relative to all frames used by the actors to justify their positions towards European integration in a debate.

Figure 3 presents the average index of politicization for different values of the four independent variables. First, and most importantly, the findings indicate that the holding of a national referendum boosts the level of politicization. In domestic debates with a referendum, the average index is 1.01 as compared to 0.16 in all other cases. Secondly, while politicization tends to be highest in those domestic debates that are closest to the next national election there are no substantial and systematic differences across the four categories. Thirdly, the increasing presence of radical populist right actors is related to increasing levels of politicization. As shown in Figure 3, the average index for a debate without any actor from the radical right is 0.18 and increases to 0.64 for debates with a strong presence of the radical right. Finally, we

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<sup>2</sup> Our sample covers ten integration debates in which a national referendum was held: EFTA enlargement in Austria, Northern enlargement, Maastricht and Constitution in France, EFTA enlargement and Euro-zone in Sweden, as well as Free Trade Agreement, EEA, Bilateral I & II in Switzerland (see Hobolt 2009: 9).

<sup>3</sup> We calculated a weighted average for the different critical events around which we studied the national debates.

<sup>4</sup> We opted for this measure for the strength of the radical right because it indicates the actual presence of the actors in the public debate on Europe, which due to strategic decisions of the actors themselves or environmental constraints might not correspond to their presence in the party system more broadly defined. However, we cross-checked our results by taking into account their vote share in the previous national elections. The results are not significantly affected by this decision.

observe no strong relationship between the share of cultural frames and politicization. Politicization tends to be lowest in debates with a very small share of cultural frames but does not systematically increase the higher the proportion of such justifications gets.

[Figure 3]

In the final step of the analysis, we assess the explanatory power of the four variables and the type of integration step with the help of regression analysis. We calculated simple OLS regressions with the level of politicization of the debate as our dependent variable (including and excluding country dummies to account for across and within country variations). Given the small number of cases and the panel structure of the data, we also cross-checked our results by identifying high-leverage observations and by estimating different types of regression models. However, the main findings reported below were not affected by these decisions (for details, see Online Appendix).

In general, the results in Table 2 confirm the descriptive findings. First of all, debates on the country's own accession are significantly more likely to be politicized than discussions about further authority transfers to the supranational level. By contrast, enlargement debates are significantly less politicized. However, we need to add that the explanatory power of these variables is by far exceeded by the effect of a direct-democratic vote. Knowing whether there was a referendum or not explains more than fifty percent of the overall variance. Furthermore, the full model which includes all independent variables shows that the effect of a country's accession is no longer significant when including the referendum dummy. The other political context factor, national elections, is less relevant. The result of the proximity of national elections does only affect the level of politicization significantly if we control for the other varia-

bles. If we take these factors into consideration, we find that European integration gets more politicized by domestic actors the closer Election Day gets.

[Table 2]

Regarding the **two** actor-centred variables, our results support the radical right hypothesis only. The findings in Table 2 indicate that there is a significant link between the visibility of the radical right in a public debate and its politicization. Note that this also holds when we include country dummies in order to control for the fact that there are countries in which these parties have been irrelevant at the national level in the period of study. In other words, the more visible the radical right becomes in a debate, the more Europe gets politicized. At the same time, the results reveal that the scholarly literature tended to overstate the role of radical right parties. Their presence only adds about six percent to the overall explanatory power of the model (results not shown). By contrast, political and institutional factors, national referendums in particular, seem to play a much more important role in politicizing national integration debates than the sheer presence of challengers from the radical right. Finally, our results indicate no systematic link between the share of cultural frames and the level of politicization – neither across nor within countries. This result is quite remarkable since our comparative analysis of national elections has shown a clear positive relationship between high levels of politicization and cultural-identitarian framing strategies (see Hutter and Grande 2014).<sup>5</sup>

### **Conclusions: Extending the authority transfer argument**

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<sup>5</sup> We also tested for an interaction effect between the presence of radical right parties and the share of cultural frames. However, we found no statistically significant effect, which is partly due to the fact that the two variables are not positively related to each other as one could expect based on assumptions in the scholarly literature. By contrast, we observe a correlation coefficient of  $r=-.12$ .

Our empirical findings reveal a pattern of politicization, which can be characterized by three features. First of all, they provide clear support for an extension of the authority transfer argument and a stronger consideration of membership conflicts in the analysis of politicization. In general, conflicts on one's own country's membership in the European Communities show the highest level of politicization. However, this does not mean that the authority transfer hypothesis must be completely discarded. Rather, it indicates that there are different sources of political conflict on European integration which can lead to politicization; and with the exception of the debate on the Maastricht Treaty in France, it points to the fact that in comparison, the politicizing effect of authority transfers within the EU has been limited thus far. Secondly, there is no clear temporal trend. There are highly politicized integration debates in the early 1970s already; and politicization in the 2000s is not significantly higher than in previous debates. This is consistent with the first finding, since – except for France and Germany – accession of the countries in our sample was decided in the 1970s and the 1990s. Thirdly, we observe remarkable variations across countries that cannot be explained by the duration of membership or the amount of authority transferred to the EU. While politicization in Germany, a fully integrated founding member of the European Communities, is still rather low, it is remarkably high in Austria despite the country's late accession, to take just one other example.

These findings suggest, on the one hand, that the authority transfer hypothesis, which thus far has dominated the analysis of politicization in Europe, needs to be extended and integrated into a broader framework of political conflict. Authority transfers to the EU undoubtedly play an important role in politicizing European integration debates, but have not been the only source of conflict and they have not been dominating political controversies on European integration. On the other hand, our results indicate that subsequent analyses should pay more attention to national institutional and actor-centred explanatory variables. In our study, two of these factors turned out to be of particular explanatory value: national referen-



dums and the strength of radical populist right parties. The most important factor clearly is the holding of a national referendum in an integration debate. The high level of politicization in accession debates can to a large extent be explained by the fact that these debates were combined with a national referendum. Moreover, those cases in which conflicts on authority transfers produced very high levels of politicization, i.e. the French debate on the Maastricht Treaty and the Swedish debate on membership in the Euro-zone, also come along with a national referendum.

Compared to the effects of national referendums, radical populist right parties only had a moderate effect on the level of politicization, and the proximity to national elections and the parties' framing strategies seem to be irrelevant for the politicization of integration debates. Actually, our sample of countries provides only mixed evidence for the 'radical right hypothesis'. While there is some politicization in Britain without a radical populist right party, we find high levels of politicization in Austria and Switzerland, where these parties have been very strong in the last two decades. Germany, as a counterfactual case, confirms the importance of both variables. In the absence of national referendums as institutionalized opportunities to intensify debates on Europe and the weakness of radical populist right parties as political driving force, the level of politicization is consistently low.

Against the background of our discussion of different sources of conflict leading to a politicization of European integration, it seems as if it is not as much the source of conflict – loss of sovereignty, threat to identity, demand for solidarity – which is responsible for variation in the level of conflict but different political opportunity structures and actor constellations. While treaty reforms so far have rarely been the object of a national referendum in the countries covered by our study,<sup>6</sup> they were mandatory on accession decisions. The French referendums on the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 and on the Constitutional Treaty in 2005 indi-

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<sup>6</sup> Contrary to Denmark and Ireland, which are the two countries, where we find national referendums on every major treaty reform.

cate that the level of politicization significantly increases, if controversies on authority transfers were put to a national referendum (see Statham and Trezz 2012). It seems as if this is the most promising – though highly risky – way to politicize the European integration process.

How can we account for this strong effect of national referendums compared to national elections and the proximity of an integration debate to a national election? In our view, it is limitations to the strategic behaviour of political parties, which are responsible for the high levels of politicization in national referendums. While political parties can influence election campaigns to a considerable extent, national referendum campaigns and their outcome are at least partly beyond their control. This is most evident in cases in which the major political parties and interest groups fully support a decision and were voted down nevertheless, as we had it in the Swiss referendum on the European Economic Area in 1992. Contrary to national elections, in which mainstream parties can de-emphasize European issues if they are internally divided, they are forced to take positions in a referendum. This provides all kinds of political actors an opportunity to step in and to articulate their opposition; and it gives particular weight to “campaign dynamics” (Hobolt 2009: Ch. 8). These context factors also accentuate the importance of challenger parties. While they seem to be crucial in instances in which mainstream-parties try to avoid politicizing an issue, they seem to be less important in national referendums.

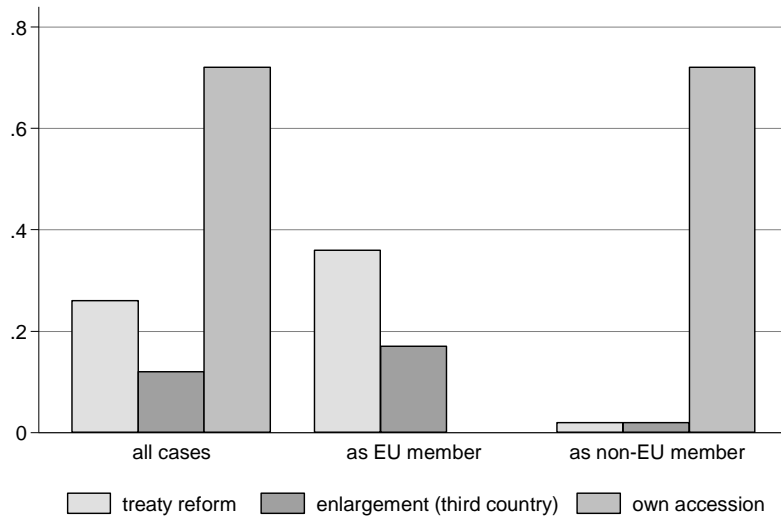
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## Figures and tables

Figure 1: The average level of politicization by type of integration step and EU membership



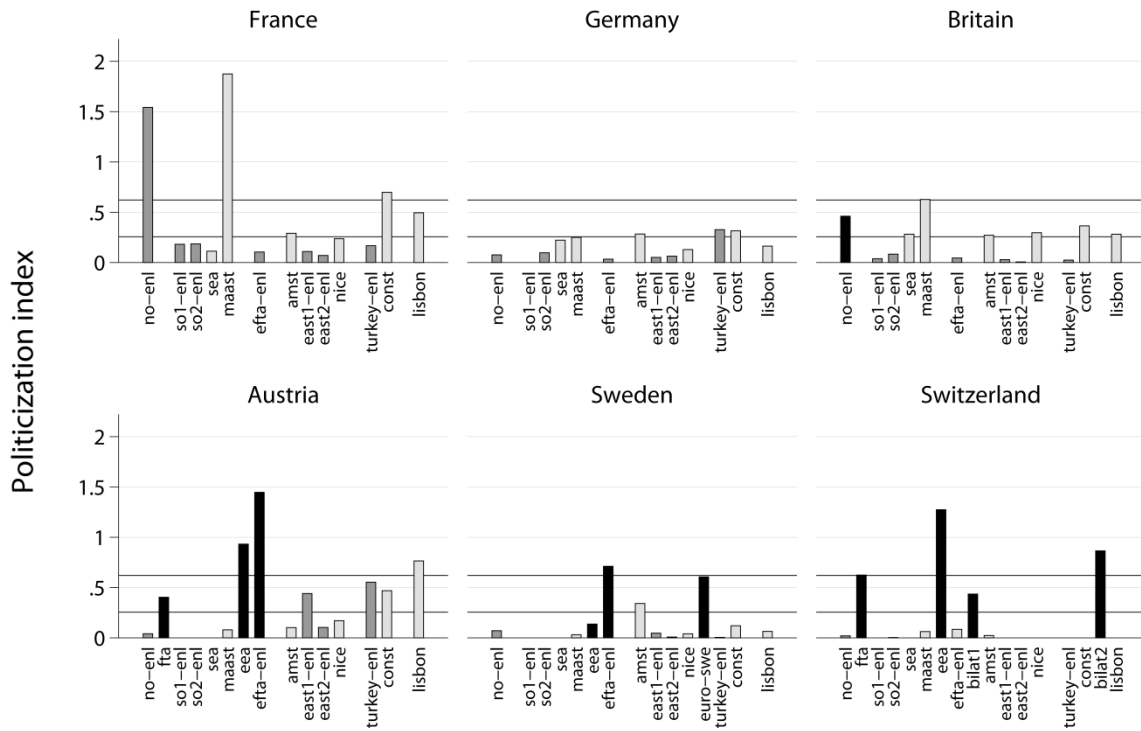
Note: The figure shows the average index of politicization for the three types of integration steps. The index is calculated as salience x (actor expansion + polarization) and the values range from 0 to 1.87 (N=86 domestic debates). More specifically, we present values for all cases and for public debates taking place in EU and non-EU member states, respectively.

Table 1: The average level of politicization by type of integration step and country

		Treaty reform	Enlargement (third country)	Own accession	N
France		0.62	0.34	-	(13)
Britain		0.35	0.04	0.46	(13)
Germany		0.23	0.09	-	(13)
Austria	non-EU member	0.04	0.01	0.93	(8)
	<i>EU member</i>	<i>0.38</i>	<i>0.37</i>	-	(7)
Sweden	non-EU member	0.02	0.02	0.48	(8)
	<i>EU member</i>	<i>0.14</i>	<i>0.02</i>	-	(7)
Switzerland		0.01	0.02	0.80	(17)

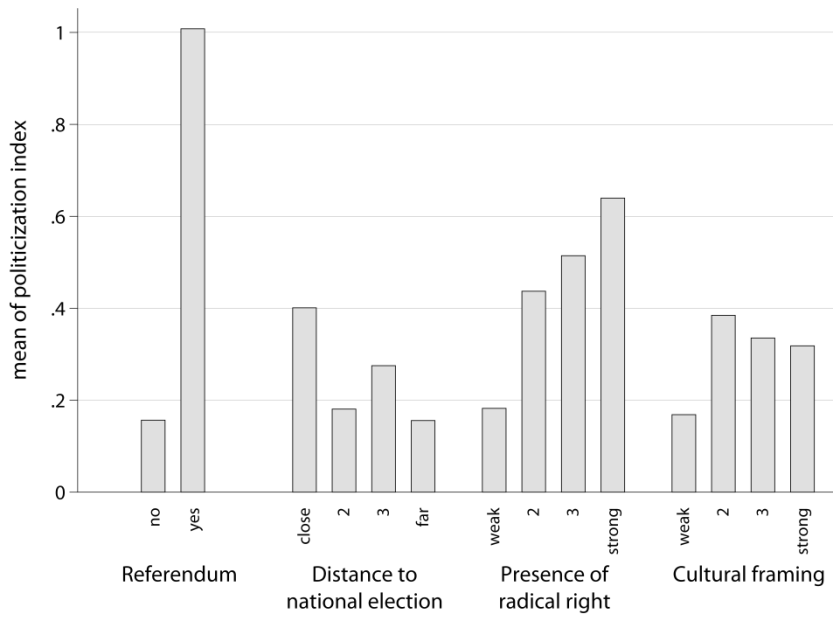
Note: The table shows the average index of politicization for the three types of integration steps by country. The index is calculated as salience x (actor expansion + polarization) and the values range from 0 to 1.87 (N=86 domestic debates).

Figure 2: The level of politicization by integration step and country



Note: The figures show the index of politicization by integration step and country for the domestic debate. The steps were arranged according to the temporal distribution of the public debates. Debates on a country's own accession are highlighted with black bars, debates on enlargement toward third countries with gray bars, and debates around treaty reforms with white bars. The horizontal lines indicate the mean value (plus one standard deviation) based on all 86 integration debates.

Figure 3: The average level of politicization by political opportunity and actor-specific factors



Note: The figures show the average index of politicization. The categories for distance to national election and cultural framing are based on the mean value plus/minus a standard deviation. For example, “far” means that the weighted distance to the next national election for this debate is above the mean value plus one standard deviation. Due to the high number of zeros, the categories for the radical right indicate the following: 1 “weak” = no radical right party reported (0%); 2 = share of radical right is below average (<3.8%); 3 = above average (>3.8%); 4 “strong” = above average plus one std. deviation (>10.8%). The shares of actors and frames were only calculated for debates with at least 20 core sentences by domestic actors (N=68).



Table 2: Impact of type of step, political opportunities, and actors-oriented variables on the politicization in public debates (OLS regressions)

	Type of step		Referendum		National elections		Presence of radical right		Cultural framing		Full model	
Step (ref.=treaty reform)												
Enlargement (third country)	-0.14*	-0.15**									-0.14**	-0.15***
	(0.07)	(0.07)									(0.06)	(0.06)
Own accession	0.46***	0.53***									-0.11	-0.01
	(0.11)	(0.10)									(0.10)	(0.10)
Referendum (yes=1)			0.85***	0.90***							0.76***	0.79***
			(0.08)	(0.08)							(0.10)	(0.10)
Distance to next national election (in months)					-0.00	-0.00					-0.01**	-0.01**
					(0.00)	(0.00)					(0.00)	(0.00)
Presence of radical right (in percent)							0.02***	0.03***			0.01***	0.02***
							(0.01)	(0.01)			(0.00)	(0.01)
Cultural framing (in percent)									0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
									(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Constant	0.26***	0.55***	0.16***	0.16***	0.36***	0.57***	0.24***	0.43***	0.27**	0.34**	0.38***	0.50***
	(0.05)	(0.09)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.11)	(0.14)	(0.05)	(0.10)	(0.11)	(0.16)	(0.11)	(0.12)
Country dummies	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
N	86	86	86	86	86	86	68	68	68	68	68	68
Adj. R	0.26	0.37	0.56	0.65	0.00	0.05	0.14	0.16	0.00	0.06	0.65	0.71

Standard errors in parentheses; \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

Note: The dependent variable is the index of politicization. The relative presence of actors and frames in a public debate was only calculated for debates with at least 20 core sentences by domestic actors.