1 Introduction
European integration and the challenge of politicisation

Edgar Grande and Swen Hutter

Politicising Europe – why bother?

Politicisation has become a key concept in European integration studies. Since the mid 2000s, it has been the object of an intense and controversial scholarly debate.[1] The rise of politicisation as a topic in research on Europe certainly reflects current problems and challenges of the European integration process. The failure of the Constitutional Treaty, increasing Euroscepticism among citizens, the successes of Eurosceptic political parties in national and European elections, the negative outcomes of national referenda on major treaty reforms, public controversies on political strategies to cope with the euro crisis – all these incidents suggest that the elitist approach which characterised European integration for decades has arrived at a critical stage. Politicisation, both as an analytical concept and as a political strategy, seems to be the key to an understanding of the acute problems of the European integration project.

Assessments of the 'politicisation' phenomenon in the scholarly literature differ widely, however. Although there seems to be agreement 'that something like politicisation has happened since the mid-1980s' (Schmitter 2009: 211–212), its level and intensity are still the object of controversies. Three questions are at the heart of the debate. First, there is disagreement over the empirical scope of politicisation. Can we really observe a significant increase in politicisation and what are its characteristic features? Second, it is unclear whether the changes observed are of a lasting nature. Is there a durable structuring of political conflict or do observers exaggerate singular events such as the debate on the Constitutional Treaty or public protest related to the euro crisis in some

[1] See, in particular, Marks and Steenbergen (2004); Hooghe and Marks (2009, 2012); Zürn (2006); Kriesi (2007); Koopmans and Statham (2010a); Risse (2010); de Wilde (2011); de Wilde and Zürn (2012); Statham and Trenz (2013a); Zürn (2014); de Wilde et al. (2014).

southern European countries? Third, there are conflicting opinions on the consequences of politicisation for the future of European integration. Will politicisation strengthen or weaken the European project? Is it part of the problem or the key to its solution?

To start with, Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks (2009), who put the politicisation concept at the centre of a new 'postfunctionalist theory of European integration', argue most forcefully that there has been a significant politicisation of the integration process in the post-Maastricht period, which has become visible not only in changing public opinion but also in electoral and protest politics. In their view, the European integration project has become the object of controversial 'mass politics'. This argument takes issue with a number of scholars who argue that the 'giant' of European politics is still 'sleeping' (e.g., van der Eijk and Franklin 2004, 2007; Green-Pedersen 2012). Ruud Koopmans (2007: 205), for example, on the basis of a comparative analysis of public debates on Europe, concludes, 'European integration has remained a project by political elites, and, at least as far as discursive influence is concerned, also to the benefit of political elites.' According to his analysis, those actors that have been expected to be the catalysts for a new phase of 'mass politics', i.e., political parties and civil society actors, are the least present in Europeanisation debates (see Koopmans 2010). Statham and Trenz (2013a, b) in their analysis of public debates on the Constitutional Treaty find evidence in support of both claims. On the one hand, they observe an increasing visibility of the EU in mass media public debates; on the other hand, participation in these debates is mainly limited to political parties.

Moreover, there is controversy over the causes and consequences of politicisation. Hooghe and Marks (2009) argue that politicisation is the negative consequence of structural changes in the integration process. It is considered to be a response to transfers of authority to the EU, and this process passed a critical threshold with the enactment of the Maastricht Treaty (see also de Wilde and Zürn 2012; Rauh 2015). In their view, politicisation is transforming the structural basis of European integration for the long term. Other authors, such as Börzel and Risse (2009), argue that an increase in politicisation is the result of controversies over singular events, such as the Constitutional Treaty or the opening of membership negotiations with Turkey. They expect politicisation to calm down once these conflicts about key constitutive aspects of European integration have been settled.

In this context, the crucial question is not primarily a quantitative one, i.e., whether European integration has resulted in higher levels of political conflict. More important is its qualitative dimension. To have lasting

effects, politicisation should have the power to *structure* political conflict systematically (see Bartolini 2005). Such a structuring of political conflict was decisive in establishing national democracies and party systems in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in North America and western Europe. This process was characterised by the 'nationalisation' of political conflict, which was dominated by a specific, i.e., socio-economic, cleavage in most industrialising countries (see Lipset 1963: 324ff.; Caramani 2004; Tilly 2004). Given the intensification of the European integration process in recent decades, we may expect a similar structuring of political conflict in Europe – which could then be the basis of its attenuation and pacification.

Finally, there is substantial disagreement over the consequences of politicisation for the future of the European project. For Hooghe and Marks (2009), politicisation is one of the causes of the current crisis in European integration because the political elite can no longer rely on the 'permissive consensus' of citizens. As a result of politicisation, they are constrained in decision-making processes by citizen dissatisfaction and dissent. Hooghe and Marks's assessment contradicts arguments that regard the politicisation of Europe as a necessary precondition for further integration, as advanced by Habermas (2001, 2012), Delanty and Rumford (2005), Beck (2006, 2013) and Hix (2006, 2008a). These authors assume that politicisation will have mainly positive effects on the integration process because it gives supporters of the 'European project' better opportunities to articulate their views and to mobilise European citizens. However, the two positions do not seem entirely incompatible. Supporters of increasing politicisation, who, for example, suggest direct elections of the president of the European Commission or Europe-wide referenda, recognise that increasing support by European citizens is an indispensable precondition for the advancement of the European project and for balancing its elitist bias. Sceptics about politicisation doubt that the EU is equipped with the requisite organisational infrastructure to mobilise and channel such developments (see, e.g., Bartolini 2005, 2009). They suspect that such opportunities will be predominantly used by Eurosceptic actors, thus aggravating the problems of European integration.

In our view, the scholarly debate on the politicisation of European integration is not primarily a normative debate. Politicisation is neither good nor bad per se. Too little can be as problematic as too much. However, the politicisation of European integration raises a number of *empirical* questions regarding its level and forms, its underlying conflicts and conflict structures and the actors and actor constellation responsible for the mobilisation of these conflicts. The controversies in the scholarly debate reflect shortcomings in empirical research on politicisation, which

we attempt to overcome in this book. First, our empirical knowledge about the scope, intensity and forms of politicisation, as well as its timing and driving forces is still insufficient. Empirical accounts mostly focus on limited and more recent periods of time or on single events (see, e.g., Hoeglinger 2012; Statham and Trenz 2013a, b). Second, the controversies are due to different conceptualisations and measures of politicisation (see de Wilde 2011); and third, the interpretation of the findings is often hampered by a lack of empirical benchmarks and a focus on a rather limited number of explanatory factors.

The study presented in this book aims at settling these controversies. It systematically examines whether and how the European integration process has become politicised over the last four decades. How much politicisation of European integration do we actually have? Has there really been an increase in the overall level of politicisation? If so, what are the driving forces of change? Are there differences across countries and political arenas? And what are the likely consequences of these changes? Has politicisation resulted in a lasting structuring of political conflict, and how will this conflict impact on national and European politics and on the future of the European integration process?

This book addresses these questions both empirically and theoretically. Empirically, it presents the results of a comprehensive analysis of the different forms of politicisation of European integration. The study covers both electoral and non-electoral forms of political mobilisation and it systematically includes the public debates on every major integration step (i.e., treaty reforms and the accession of new member states) since the early 1970s in six west European countries (Austria, France, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK). The book also aims to strengthen the theoretical basis of the politicisation debate. Following Schattschneider (1975 [1960]), Rokkan (2000), Bartolini (2005) and Kriesi et al. (2008, 2012), we apply a dynamic framework of political conflict and political structuring to the analysis of the European integration process. We argue that there is in fact an intensified political conflict over European integration issues. This politicisation is the product of new structural conflicts over national sovereignty, national identity and transnational solidarity. These conflicts have created the potential for the formation of new political oppositions that provide the basis for an increasing and lasting politicisation of the European political process. However, these new oppositions have not produced an entirely new cleavage, such as a 'pro-' and 'anti-EU' cleavage. Rather, following Kriesi et al. (2008, 2012), we interpret the conflicts over European integration as part of a new 'demarcation–integration' cleavage brought about by broader globalisation conflicts over economic reforms, cultural identity and national sovereignty.

In this introductory chapter, we set the stage by presenting key concepts and hypotheses. Furthermore, we provide theoretical arguments about how the politicisation of Europe may affect both the structure of political conflict in western Europe and the European integration process. The chapter is organised as follows. Next, we introduce our conceptualisation of politicisation before presenting some theoretical arguments on why European integration should give rise to political conflicts. Following this, we describe how the institutional structure of the European system of multi-level governance channels political conflicts and how it affects their intensity. In the following two sections, we discuss the main driving forces behind politicisation and its consequences. Finally, we introduce our research design and methods, before concluding with a brief outline of the book.

Conceptualising politicisation

What do we mean by politicisation? In the political science literature, the concept of politicisation can be found in various contexts and with rather different meanings. Scholars use it both to analyse the relationship of the political system to other societal systems (e.g., the economy) or sub-systems (e.g., the administrative system), and to analyse processes *within* the political system. The first meaning, *external* politicisation, is particularly prominent in the literature on political economy, where the concept of politicisation refers to the extension of the scope of the political system vis-à-vis the (capitalist) economy (e.g., Zysman 1983; Hall 1985). We also find the concept in research into public administrations, where scholars use it to analyse the influence of politics, of political parties and governments in particular, on the administrative system (e.g., Peters and Pierre 2004; Bauer and Ege 2012). The second meaning, *internal* politicisation, can be clarified with the help of Schattschneider's concept of politics. For Schattschneider (1975 [1960]), *conflict* is the key ingredient of politics. Accordingly, politicisation can be defined as an *expansion of the scope of conflict within the political system*.[2] This definition is very 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 having such politicisation.

In our study, we adopt this second meaning of the concept of politicisation. We use it as a tool to empirically analyse the level and

[2] De Wilde and Zürn (2012: 139) combine both meanings by referring to politicisation as 'making a matter a subject of public regulation and/or a subject of public discussion'.

forms of polit-ical conflict over European integration within the political systems of west European democracies. Our main objective is a comprehensive empirical stocktaking of the politicisation of European integration in its various dimensions, which will allow us to put forward normative arguments on a solid empirical basis. However, even with such a narrow definition, politicisation must be considered a multifaceted process. Again, we rely on Schattschneider (1957), who identified the 'intensity, visibility, direction and scope' of conflict as key dimensions of politics. Following this concept of politics, we focus on three main conceptual dimensions of politicisation: *issue salience* (visibility), *actor expansion* (range), and *actor polarisation* (intensity and direction).[3]

First, we assume that only topics that are raised by political actors in *public debates* can be considered politicised. If an issue is not debated in public, it can only be politicised to a very limited extent – if at all. Van der Eijk and Franklin's (2007) picture of a 'sleeping giant' illustrates this extremely well (see also de Vries 2007). While these authors find quite a high degree of polarisation in public opinion on European integration, they stress that the issue has not yet shown its full re-structuring potential, because political parties (or other types of collective political actors) have not publicly addressed the topic and its salience has remained low. For this reason, we agree with Green-Pedersen's (2012: 117) agenda-setting proposal that *salience* is the most basic dimension for politicisation (see also Guinaudeau and Persico 2013). No other dimension can replace salience. At the same time, however, we do not share Green-Pedersen's narrow definition of 'politicisation as a matter of salience' only. While it might be true that salience is correlated with the other dimensions of politicisation, we assume that they are at least partly independent; and it is these independent qualities of actor expansion and polarisation which are important for a full understanding of processes of politicisation and their dynamics. In Schattschneider's words, 'the contagiousness of conflict, the elasticity of its scope and the fluidity of involvement of people are the X factors in politics' (Schattschneider 1975 [1960]: 3) – and these factors cannot be reduced to the salience of an issue in public debates.

Second, we see *expansion of the actors* involved in a public controversy as another key dimension of politicisation. This dimension resembles what de Wilde (2011) calls 'public resonance'. However, we prefer the term 'expansions of actors' since public resonance is an ambiguous concept

[3] All three dimensions have been discussed extensively in the recent literature. Therefore, it is not by chance that our list closely mirrors the three components that de Wilde (2011) stresses in his review article: (a) intensifying debates over an issue, (b) increasingly diverging issue positions taken by collective actors and (c) public resonance of these intense polarized debates (see also de Wilde and Zürn 2012).

which can be understood in both a narrow and a broad way. Narrowly defined, it refers to an increasing number of types of actors involved in public debates. However, it could also refer to public opinion more broadly. We prefer the narrow conceptualisation, since the broader one tends to conflate politicisation with both its precondition (i.e., political potentials in the wider public) and its effect (i.e., changing individual attitudes and behaviour).[4] In addition, public resonance in a broader sense also partly overlaps with salience and visibility.

Following this narrow understanding, we argue that if only a restricted set of very few (elite) actors publicly advance their positions towards European integration, this will indicate that the issue is only politicised to a limited extent. More specifically, we need to focus on the degree to which the dominant executive actors are joined by other actors in public debate. In this context, we propose distinguishing between actor expansion *within* a political arena and *across* political arenas. The most relevant political arenas for the purposes of our study are the electoral arena and the protest arena. In this regard, the electoral arena, where political parties compete for votes, plays a prominent role. In this arena, expansion of the range of actors means that not only representatives of parties in government participate in debates on European integration issues but also party actors without executive functions (for example, party leaders in parliament or from the opposition). This may even include new challengers not represented in parliament. As long as we only observe debates among executive politicians, we consider an issue to not be highly politicised even if it may be relatively salient (see also Koopmans 2007, 2010 and Statham and Trenz 2013a: 79ff.). However, political controversies in the electoral arena have an elitist bias in any case. For this reason, recent research on politicisation has given particular emphasis to the participation of actors from civil society and their visibility in public debates (e.g., della Porta and Caiani 2009).

The third dimension of politicisation is *intensity of conflict*. In our view, a highly salient public debate among a broad range of actors is not enough to speak of a high level of politicisation (see also de Wilde 2011 and Hoeglinger 2012). In addition, the actors need to put forward differing positions and we must find opposing camps. Thus, a key aspect of politicisation is the *polarisation* of conflict among political actors. More precisely, we define polarisation as the intensity of conflict related to an issue among the different actors involved. The most polarising

[4] Examples that look at the impact of public contestation on individual behaviour can be found in the literature on EU issue voting (see, e.g., de Vries 2007 and de Vries et al. 2011a, b). Another innovative approach relies on focus groups to study how citizens debate Europe (see Hurrelmann et al. 2015).

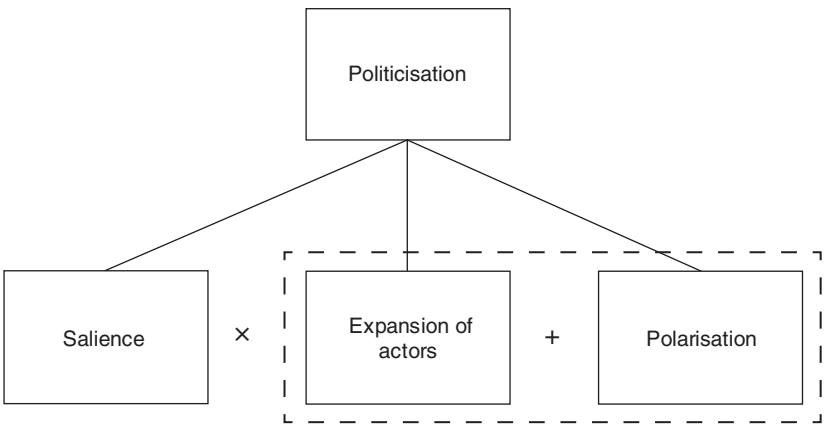

Figure 1.1 Index of politicisation

constellation can be found when two camps advocate completely opposing issue positions with similar intensity (see also Kriesi et al. 2012: 57–58). Thus, we assume that finding only a few dissenting voices is not enough to speak of an intensively politicised issue. A high level of politicisation must involve strong opposing camps.

Having defined politicisation as a multi-dimensional phenomenon which includes an increasingly salient and polarised public debate among an expanding range of actors, we are confronted with a methodological challenge. How can we combine these dimensions in such a way that we can measure politicisation comprehensively? For this purpose, we propose a quantitative *index of politicisation*, which takes all three dimensions into account and relates them in a specific way (Figure 1.1; see also Hutter and Grande 2014). As stated before, we regard salience as a necessary, although not sufficient, condition for politicisation. Salience cannot be substituted by the other two dimensions, i.e., by actor expansion or polarisation. Therefore, its relation to these variables cannot be additive. At the same time, the latter two dimensions can to some extent replace each other. In other words, a salient and polarised debate among only a few executive politicians is not more or less politicised as compared to a salient but not polarised debate among a broad range of actors. For this reason, in our politicisation index salience is multiplied by a variable that is composed of actor expansion and polarisation (for details, see Chapter 2).

This combination of different variables has the great advantage of allowing comparisons over a long period of time and a large number of countries at a high level of aggregation. However, it has the disadvantage

Table 1.1 *Types of politicisation*

		Extension of conflict: *Actor expansion*	
		Low	High
Intensity of conflict: *Polarisation*	Low	Low-intensity elite conflict *(type 1)*	Low-intensity mass conflict *(type 3)*
	High	High-intensity elite conflict *(type 2)*	High-intensity mass conflict *(type 4)*

Note: This typology refers only to constellations in which European integration is salient.

that information becomes lost that could be instructive for an in-depth analysis. In fact, we can imagine the dimensions of our index as three sliders that may each take many different positions, and these combinations may result in different patterns or types of politicisation. A focus on these different types of politicisation helps us to clarify our objectives further, since we are not only interested in the quantitative increase in the level of politicisation of European integration within and across political arenas; we also want to find out whether there have been qualitative shifts in its basic types.

To identify and compare different types of politicisation, we put forward a typology based on the two dimensions of the extension (i.e., the range of actors) and intensity of conflict (i.e., the polarisation of actors). Salience is implicitly incorporated in the typology because an issue needs to cross a certain level of salience before we can speak of politicisation. In other words, we leave aside the constellation of European issues where Europe is not really a salient issue at all. Such cases certainly exist, but, in our opinion, they do not represent instances of 'politicisation'.

On the basis of the remaining two dimensions, four different types of politicisation can be identified (see Table 1.1). To begin with, we can think of a situation when only a small set of actors raise European issues with only a moderate range of positions being heard. In this case we may speak of a 'low-intensity elite conflict' (*type 1*). If polarisation increases but the contestants involved are still predominantly elite actors, the conflict may take the form of a 'high-intensity elite conflict' (*type 2*). We know from studies of other issue fields (e.g., women's rights or environmental protection) that an issue might be neglected by established political actors but may be forcefully raised through mobilisation from below without the participation of the political elite. In this case,

the range of actors is limited too, but for different reasons. This type of conflict may rather be labelled 'polarised outsider contestation'. Moreover, we can think of a constellation in which a broad range of actors with similar positions is engaged in an extensive public debate, something we could label 'low-intensity mass conflict' (*type 3*). Finally, we prefer to speak of a 'high-intensity mass conflict' when a broad range of actors is involved in a highly polarised controversy (*type 4*). This is the strongest type of political conflict since we have high values on every one of the dimensions of politicisation introduced before. However, we do not assume that politicisation to this extent is the most preferable type from a normative perspective.

This typology allows us to clarify our objectives further. In this book, we are not only interested in the quantitative increase in the scope and extent of politicisation of European integration within and across political arenas but we also want to ascertain whether there have been qualitative shifts in its basic forms. The politicisation hypotheses advanced by Hooghe and Marks (2009), for example, claims that there has in fact been such a shift from a low-intensity elite conflict to a high-intensity mass conflict in the past two decades.

European integration and political conflict

Why do we expect a politicisation of European integration? Since our concept of politicisation emphasises *political conflict*, answering this question requires the *causes of such conflicts* in the integration process to be identified. As a starting point, we can take the essential problems of regional cooperation with which the participants in the European integration project have been confronted from the very beginning:

- First, the problem of *scope of cooperation*. In which areas do we need to cooperate? What is the functionally most appropriate scope of cooperation? Which areas should be excluded from cooperation? Should cooperation include fiscal solidarity?
- Second, the problem of *membership and enlargement*. With whom should we cooperate? Who should become a member of the newly created community? Are there geographical limits to cooperation? What are the obligations and entitlements associated with membership?
- Third, the problem of *institutional design and authority*. What is the appropriate institutional framework for cooperation? How large should the authority of the newly created supranational institutions be? How can the use of supranational authority be legitimised?