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Edited by Laurent Bernhard , Flavia Fossati , Regula Hänggli , Hanspeter Kriesi

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*Part I*

The Context Structures and the  
Policy-specific Debates

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## 1 Introduction

### Shaping the Debate on Unemployment and the Labor Market

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*Hanspeter Kriesi, Laurent Bernhard, Flavia Fossati and  
Regula Hänggli*

In fall 2008, the world has experienced a financial and economic crisis of enormous proportions: the Great Recession. This has been the greatest economic downturn since the Great Depression in the 1930s. In its wake, unemployment became the most important preoccupation of Western European publics and politicians. Even before the crisis hit Western Europe, unemployment had been a chronic problem in the region's countries for many years. As a chronic problem, unemployment did not display the characteristic life-cycles of political issues as suggested by Downs (1972). Contrary to suddenly imposed real or symbolic crises, a chronic problem does not give rise to a cycle of media attention (Neuman 1990). Even if unemployment heavily preoccupied public opinion, it has not normally led to corresponding attention in the media: typically, it was 'a story without a story line'. Under the exceptional circumstances of the Great Recession, however, unemployment not only increased considerably in most countries, it also became exceptionally salient in the media and in the general public. Thus, in May 2010, at a time, when the overall economic situation was already considerably improving, the two most important issues for the European publics according to a Eurobarometer survey were 'unemployment' and 'the economic situation,' mentioned respectively by 48 percent and 40 percent of the populations in the 27 member states of the European Union (EU).<sup>1</sup>

In this volume, we propose to study comparatively the debate on unemployment-related policies in the shadow of this great economic crisis. Comparative studies in political communication are no longer as rare as they used to be (Gurevitch and Blumler 2004); the field has matured. Most comparative studies focus, however, on electoral

<sup>1</sup> Eurobarometer 73.4 (Fieldwork: May 2010; Publication: August 2010).

campaigns (e.g., Swanson and Mancini 1996, Esser and Strömbäck 2012a), news production (e.g., Esser 2008, Esser and Strömbäck 2012b), or media systems (e.g., Hallin and Mancini 2004, Esser et al. 2012). The analytical framework guiding comparison, in turn, tends to home in on country characteristics, most importantly on a country's political culture and communication culture (Hallin and Mancini 2004, Pfetsch 2003, 2004, Gurevitch and Blumler 2004, Couldry and Hepp 2012). It is very unusual for a comparative study to focus on a specific policy domain. We actually know of only two comparative studies that take as their focus the political communication in a given policy domain, the comparative study of the abortion discourse by Ferree et al. (2002) and the comparative study of globalization-related policies by Helbling et al. (2012).

As a study of political communication in unemployment-related policies, our investigation is situated at the crossroads of political communication and policy analysis: it compares the political debates on labor-market policy in the shadow of the Great Recession, and the way the most important political actors of this policy domain tried to shape and influence it. Our study takes a *supply side perspective* by examining the ways in which political actors try to shape the public debates on the issue of unemployment (Baglioni et al. 2008). It is devoted to the politicization of the problem of unemployment through communicative action by collective actors in the public space. We explore two key facets about the public debates on unemployment-related issues. On the one hand, we focus on the political actors and ask how they shape the debate on unemployment, i.e., we study the role played by different types of actors, by the configuration of power among the actors participating in the debate, by their action repertoires, their belief systems and their framing strategies – assuming that all these aspects are conditioned by the arena, in which the actors intervene. On the other hand, we ask about the policy-specific characteristics which are relevant for the debate. What makes an issue salient and what kind of issue characteristics contribute to its politicization in a given country context?

Against this background, this book is concerned with commonalities and differences at the contextual level. By looking at policy-specific debates in Western Europe, we ask whether patterns of political communication vary across countries. This in turn begs the question about the increased uniformity of communication practices throughout the Western world. Indeed, this topic has attracted a lot of scholarly attention among comparativists in recent years (Esser and Hanitzsch 2013, Pfetsch 2014). According to the convergence thesis, global trends such as technological advances, the commercialization and the professionalization of

the media should result in homogeneous outcomes. However, diverging patterns of cross-national variations may still be available due to cultural and political peculiarities. To date, empirical evidence has not provided any conclusive findings (Boczkowski et al. 2011). In the framework of the present empirical analysis, we strive for contributing to this topical academic debate. Although both contents and methodological approaches vary considerably throughout this book, all chapters are bound together by their overarching interest in systematically considering the question of cross-national similarities and dissimilarities.

To that end, we shall compare the unemployment debates in six Western European countries – Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom (UK). As far as we know, this is the first time that politicians' communication strategies for such a large number of public debates are compared. Our country selection has been guided, on the one hand, by the existing differences in economic regimes in Western Europe in general and in labor-market regimes in particular, and, on the other hand, by the differences between media systems. In terms of the 'varieties of capitalism' literature (Hall and Soskice 2001, Schmidt 2009), our analysis includes a liberal market economy (LME) – the UK; two continental coordinated market economies (CME) – Switzerland and Germany; a Nordic coordinated market economy – Denmark; and two state-influenced market economies (SME) – France and Italy. In terms of the trajectories of labor-market regimes (Thelen 2012), we have selected three dualization countries – Germany, France and Italy; two flexicurity countries – Switzerland and Denmark; and a deregulation case – the UK. As far as the media systems distinguished by Hallin and Mancini (2004) are concerned, we have in our selection two Mediterranean or polarized pluralist models – France and Italy; a North Atlantic or liberal model – the UK; and three North/Central European or democratic corporatist models – Denmark, Germany, and Switzerland.

As we sought to understand the communication strategies of the actors involved in these debates, we came to realize that we needed to know quite a bit about the country-specific labor-market policies in order to make sense of what was going on in these debates – a seeming disorder of country-specific debates, a *Babylonian confusion*. If someone had picked up a local newspaper or watched national news broadcasts in any one of the countries covered by our study in fall 2010, chances would have been great that the reader would have come across a story about the problems of the national labor market and the government's attempt to deal with it. But, chances would also have been very great that the way the problems

were presented in the media, the way the government tried to deal with them, and the arguments exchanged between political actors in the debate would have been quite country-specific. In Italy, for example, people were talking about the ‘precari’ – outsiders to the labor market, a concept which has been unknown to a foreign audience. In the UK, the debate in fall 2010 was focused on ‘spending reviews’ and ‘universal credits,’ terms which would have left foreigners perplexed. Similarly in Germany, ‘Hartz IV’ had become a household term but would have surely been a complete mystery to other Europeans. The same no doubt applies to the details of Danish activation policies debated in the Denmark’s daily news at the time, or to a measure such as the French ‘revenu de solidarité active,’ which played an important role in French debates on labor-market policy in 2010.

Accordingly, a key lesson we learnt early on in our study is that policy-specific contexts matter a great deal. If we wanted to understand not only what political actors were talking about, but also why they talked about these policies in the way they did, we had to dig deeper into the substance of the labor-market policies. More generally, if we turn to specific policies, comparative studies of political communication cannot replace detailed knowledge of the substantive policies into which political communications are embedded. The context of political communication in this particular case not only includes the overall context of the economic crisis and the national political and communication cultures, but also policy-domain specific institutions and configurations of power as well as policy legacies that, together, decisively shape what is being communicated and how it is communicated.

A second key lesson gleaned during the early part of our study is that salient issues do not automatically translate into intensive public debates. The latter occur only in instances of politicization by political or media actors. This may partly be attributable to the less spectacular increase of unemployment rates as compared to previous major economic downturns of the 30s and the 70s of the twentieth century. Another explanation may relate to the fact that the Great Recession came in various guises. Hence, related crisis topics such as real estate bubbles, undercapitalized banks, anemic growth rates, and a lack of financial discipline competed for the attention of both political and media actors. In any case, the fact that in 2010 unemployment was a very salient issue does not mean that these actors felt impelled to mobilize the citizen public on this topic. Newspapers may report on unemployment trends every day, they may point to factories closing and individual cases of people who have lost their jobs, or they may discuss the structural origins of unemployment without, however, necessarily discussing policies that would solve the

unemployment problem. The politicization of a problem like unemployment presupposes that the problem is not only salient to the general public, but that it will also become part of the political agenda. This means that politicians start to address the problem, that it becomes the object of political conflict, and that the proposed political measures resonate with the general public, i.e., that the general public, as expressed by Schattschneider (1975), is ‘socialized’ into the conflict and gets actively involved in the debate among the political actors. Without politicization, the problem of unemployment remains an individual predicament for which the unemployed only have to blame themselves.

### **Policy-related Public Debates on Unemployment**

A public debate refers to all public-oriented communication related to a particular issue in a given time frame (Helbling et al. 2012). This definition is close to what Ferree et al. (2002: 9) call “public discourse”: “public communication about topics and actors related to either some particular policy domain or to the broader interests and values that are engaged”. Following Helbling et al. (2012), we prefer to speak of ‘public debate,’ as the term better reflects the ongoing confrontation between political actors taking different positions and mobilizing different arguments. Even though public debates are rather open in nature, they are typically focused on a specific problem – such as unemployment.

Public debates about a specific problem extend far beyond the narrow confines of political arenas. They are held in the media and in the public at large and include communications about aspects of the problem which are not directly policy-related. In the case of unemployment, such aspects may include (among others) its overall level and development (e.g., the number of unemployed and trends in the unemployment figures), or individual cases that serve to illustrate its seriousness, discussions of its causes and consequences, or moral evaluations of the situation concerning the problem. In our study, we focus on the policy-related public debate on unemployment, which originates in the political arenas, from where they spill over into the media arenas and the public arena at large. Political arenas correspond to the institutionalized sites of political structuration where policy positions and their justifications are introduced and debated by political actors (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988: 55). Such sites include the electoral arena, the parliamentary arena, the administrative arena, and (in some countries) the direct-democratic arena. These arenas may be national in scope, or they may reach beyond the boundaries of the nation state and include debates in other nation-states or at the

Table 1.1 *Distribution of articles: Percentage shares of articles referring to policy measures, referring to policy measures from home country, and involving any kind of political actors or involving political actors from our list*

Articles	Referring to policy measures	From home country	Involving political actors	Involving political actors from list
Germany	37.3	30.4	18.8	14.3
France	25.3	17.6	9.3	4.4
Italy	22.9	15.6	8.5	5.4
Switzerland	26.4	16.4	9.0	3.0
Denmark	22.8	9.4	5.2	2.4
UK	20.8	17.0	7.5	3.6
Total	26.2	18.6	10.2	5.9

Source: Content analysis of a selection of major newspapers and TV news programs during fall 2010.

supranational level. Whatever their nature, political arenas are all focused on policy-related issues.

Unemployment is a topic of great concern to the general public that is widely debated by the public at large. In this debate, policy-related communications about unemployment make up only a relatively minor part. This is shown by the content analysis of the press and TV news coverage of the unemployment debate in the six selected countries during the fall period 2010.<sup>2</sup> Table 1.1 presents some key results. Only about a quarter of the articles/news items we identified with our search in the press and TV news programs as dealing with problems of unemployment or jobs were actually referring to policy measures. The corresponding share was highest in Germany, where it amounted to more than a third (37.3 percent) of all press articles and TV news items, and it was lowest in the UK, where it corresponded to only roughly one quarter (20.8 percent) of all articles dealing with unemployment and jobs in one way or another. Once we consider that the media not only refer to national policy measures, but also to policies debated in other countries, the share of relevant articles/news items for national policy debates diminishes to less than one quarter

<sup>2</sup> The results reported are based on the content analysis of a large number of newspapers and TV news programs that has been conducted in the framework of the Module 4 of the NCCR-Democracy at the University of Zurich (see Vorläufiger Abschlussbericht Inhaltsanalyse NCCR II Modul 4, Version 7.2.2012. In addition to some country-specific terms, the keyword search for the identification of contributions to the public debate on unemployment in the press and TV news programs of the six countries studied was designed to take up any article with a reference to “unemploy\*” or “job\*”).



overall, and to a range of 30.4 (Germany) to 9.4 (Denmark) percent per country.

In policy-related communications, some actors advocate policy change while some others defend the status quo. The political actors involved in a given debate attempt to control their fellow politicians, the media, and the public in order to impose their specific policy preferences. But political actors are not the only contributors to the policy debate. Indeed, a large part of the contributions to national policy-specific debates is not attributable to political actors at all, but to journalists. In fact, taking journalists' contributions to policy-specific debates into account reduces the share of the overall debate that can be attributed to political actors to no more than 10.2 percent overall, or to 18.8 percent of all unemployment or job-related articles and news items in Germany, and to as little as 5.2 percent in Denmark. Finally, only about half of the contributions by political actors or 5.9 percent of all contributions (varying from 14.3 percent in Germany to 2.4 percent in Denmark) are attributable to actors whom we covered in our project (see next section).

This is to say that the policy-specific debate on unemployment and jobs in times of crisis occupies only a rather limited part of the overall issue-specific debate and that the key political actors controlled an even smaller part of this debate during the period of our study. The large number of articles and news items that talk about unemployment without mentioning policy measures report above all on factual trends about rising/declining numbers of unemployed at home and abroad, or they report on estimates about the future trends of unemployment. Other articles and news items that include both information on policy measures and other aspects of unemployment also have a positive or negative tone (see *Figure 1.1*). During our period of observation in fall 2010, these reports were predominantly negative, although there were also some reports on positive trends. Given the extent of the crisis, this overall negative tone is of course not at all surprising. Indeed, the predominantly downbeat tone of reporting applies to all six countries. Even in Switzerland, where the unemployment rate was still very low by international standards, the great majority of the media reports on the development of unemployment were pessimistic, which goes a long way toward explaining why the Swiss were much preoccupied about unemployment in general. By contrast, the prognosis reported in the Swiss media was clearly more optimistic (44 percent exclusively positive prognosis) than in all other countries with the (surprising) exception of Italy (with 51 percent exclusively positive prognosis). Particularly bleak was the outlook in the media in the UK, with only 12.6 exclusively positive prognoses.

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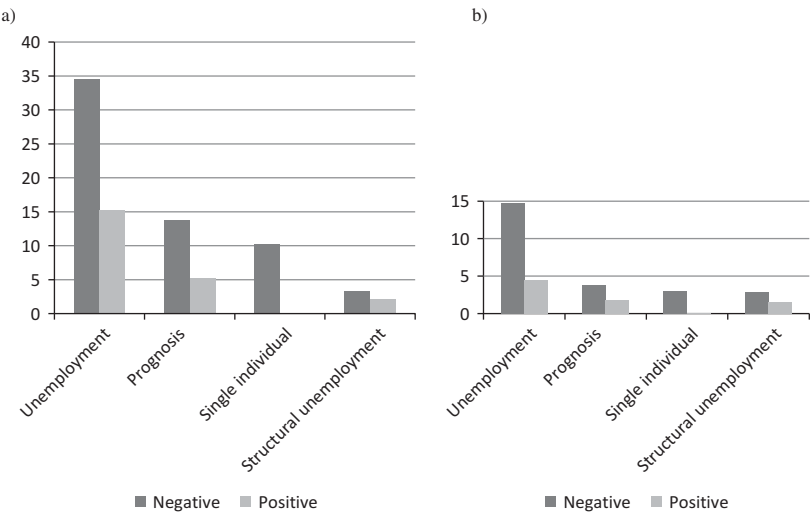


Figure 1.1 Topics covered by the public debate on unemployment and jobs other than policy measures  
a) Articles/news items without references to policy measures  
b) Articles/news items also including references to policy measures

In addition to reports about the state of unemployment and prognosis of future unemployment trends, the media also reported on the fate of single individuals (almost exclusively pointing out cases of individuals who lost their job). This happened most frequently in France (in 7.5 per cent of all articles/news items). Some reports also discussed the two structural problems related to unemployment – youth and long-term unemployment.

Having identified the limits of the contributions of politicians to the public debate on unemployment, we want to point out two advantages of studying public debates from the perspective of political communication strategies. Most empirical analyses to date about the communication strategies of political actors have actually focused on electoral campaigns. As a consequence, the state of the art in this field is mainly restricted to political parties (and the affiliated individual candidates) operating in settings of extraordinarily intense communication. Examining public policy debates has two key advantages over the study of electoral debates: first of all, it presents the advantage of allowing for an analysis of the *full range of political actors*, including not only political parties, but also state actors, business organizations, public interest groups, social movements,