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Politicization compared: at national, European, and global levels

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ABSTRACT
The current literature on politicization can be separated into three groups: politicization within national political systems, of the EU, and of international institutions. In spite of speaking about a similar phenomenon based on a common definition, these three strands of literature do not interact with each other and display, beyond the definitional consensus, significant differences. The focus on different political levels also leads to various assessments. This contribution compares these three strands of literature with the goal of showing that it is necessary to simultaneously look at all three levels to understand the dynamics of politicization and de-politicization. There is a significant potential of analyzing different (de-)politicization processes in an integrative framework to provide fresh insights for each of the fields. In fact, some of the differences between the three kinds of literature can be resolved only by looking at the three levels in parallel.

KEYWORDS Politicization; multilevel politics; integration; technocratic governance; cleavage

The concept of politicization has made a steep career since the early 2000s. It is an important issue in the current study of European integration, indicating that the European politics has moved from a permissive consensus to constraining dissensus with an increased role for identity politics. The politicization of international institutions both by leftist anti-globalization movements as exemplified by the Battle of Seattle – the 1999 World Trade Organization (WTO) protests – and by the right-wing populist challenge to the transferal of authority to international organizations (IOs) is well studied. On the domestic level, the rise of right-wing populist parties can be seen as a response to a period of de-politicization in liberal democracies.

In all of these debates, the term 'politicization' has been defined in a similar way. Politicization, in the most general terms, means the demand for, or the act of, transporting an issue or an institution into the sphere of politics –

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making previously unpolitical matters political. This core of the concept is common to different conceptions represented in the three kinds of literature. Politicization, therefore, can be generally defined as moving something into the realm of public choice, thus presupposing the possibility to make collectively binding decisions on that matter. In most political systems, a collective choice about an issue is based on a prior process of putting the issue on the agenda, some deliberation about the right decision, and the interaction of different positions regarding the choice. The more salient the issue, the more actors and people participate in the debate, the more positions are polarized, and the more politicized a decision or institution is. While different strands of the literature use different operational definitions, there seems to be a common core meaning of the concept of politicization.

In spite of speaking about a similar phenomenon based on a common definition and pointing to fundamental transformations, these three strands of literature do *not* interact with each other but display, beyond the definitional consensus, significant differences. To begin with the obvious, they talk about different political levels. The focus on different political levels also leads tendentially to varying assessments. Whereas European Union (EU) studies in general terms mainly ask about the disintegrative effects of politicization – thus questioning earlier hopes in politicization (Haas 1964; Schmitter 1969) – the study of de-politicization in the national context and of politicization of international institutions more often emphasizes the normatively positive aspects of increased mobilization. Whereas the international relations (IR) literature sees the politicization of international institutions mainly as a function of the rise of international authority, most students of EU politicization and re-politicization in the domestic context see it as part and parcel of a changing conflict constellation within the member states. While work about de-politicization in the domestic context sees growing mobilization as a response to de-politicization, EU studies and IR scholars see 'their' politicization as a very recent process without antecedents.

In the remainder of this contribution, I want to systematically compare these three strands of literature with the goal of showing that it is necessary to simultaneously look at all three levels to understand the dynamics of politicization and de-politicization. I will argue that a perspective that takes the interaction effects between the three different levels into account will help to produce different or at least more nuanced findings about politicization processes. It will lead to richer assessments of the overall level of politicization and help to better understand the dynamics of de-politicization and re-politicization, also allowing for a more sophisticated understanding of the consequences of politicization.

In the next section, I systematically compare analyses on the three levels along a set of common themes and concepts. Against this background, I

emphasize in the second section the potential of analyzing different (de-)politicization processes in an integrative framework to provide fresh insights for each of the fields. In fact, some of the differences between the three kinds of literature can be resolved only by looking at the three levels in parallel.

Three levels of politicization research

The main distinction between the three kinds of literature refers to different political levels. Drawing this distinction does not mean naturalizing these levels. It rather takes up three different discourses that have evolved separately (with fluid borders) since each of them addresses different politicization processes. In each of the three, different decision-making bodies located on different political levels are studied.[1] It is for this reason that the three kinds of literature look at somewhat different behaviors and changes, use different indicators for the study of politicization, and point to partially different causes of politicization. It seems therefore worthwhile to dig deeper and to look at each of the three levels in more detail.

The national level: politicization in comparative politics

For a long time, politicization necessarily meant politicization of domestic politics. With the centralization of political authority in the nineteenth century, people in Western Europe were expected to address the national political institutions when they had political demands. In comparative politics, the study of politicization was always part of the field – without always using the term itself. The analysis of the decline in voter turnout, party membership, and traditional political mobilization in the 1960s thus implicitly referred to processes of de-politicization. The trend toward de-politicization began in the 1960s. Two towering political science figures captured this trend early on. Otto Kirchheimer (1965) coined the term 'catch-all party' as part of an investigation into political party transformation in Britain and Germany. A catch-all party is a political party that aims to attract people with diverse political viewpoints, appealing to broad segments of the electorate, and centralizing decision-making power. Catch-all parties thus reduce polarization and the number of actors involved in decisions. Robert Dahl sketched the adverse consequences of catch-all parties. In his view, these parties come with the

> politics of compromise, adjustment, negotiation, bargaining; a politics carried on among professional and quasi-professional leaders who constitute only a small part of the total citizen body; a politics that reflects a commitment to the virtues of pragmatism, moderation and incremental change; a politics that is un-ideological and even anti-ideological. (Dahl 1965: 21–2)

In addition to the rise of catch-all parties, the rise of neo-corporatism and cartel parties contributed to de-politicization. Neo-corporatism favored economic tripartism, which involved strong labor unions, employers' unions, and governments as 'social partners' to negotiate and manage a national economy (Schmitter and Lehmbruch 1979). Cartel parties use the resources of the state to maintain their position and prevent the rise of alternative parties (Katz and Mair 1995). Last but not least, the growing role of non-majoritarian institutions fostered the tendency towards moderation and compromises (see also section 2). Independent central banks became more important all over the world, becoming more autonomous at the same time (Rapaport et al. 2009). Similarly, constitutional courts increased in importance in many countries (Hirschl 2005). In general, according to a quantitative study, 'autonomous regulatory agencies' play a role in 73% of all policy areas in the countries under investigation (Jordana et al. 2011).

These developments for quite some time induced a more or less positive reading. The decline in political participation, evidenced in the average member country of Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) by a steady fall in voter turnout and a marked decrease in party membership since the 1960s (Norris 1998), was mainly seen as an indication of de-alignment, that is, the erosion of the socio-structural foundation of political interests and preferences. De-alignment was considered as a sign of a grown-up democracy in which political competition was dominated by issues instead of cleavages (Dalton 1984; Sundquist 2011).

Another reading set in much later and was much more critical. In this view, the rise of catch-all parties, cartel parties, non-majoritarian institutions, and neo-corporatism set in train an alienation between parties and representatives on the one hand and among people on the other. In this view, low voter turnout was not a sign of deep satisfaction with the political system, but was accompanied by low confidence in party politicians and parliaments. In this way, the rise of catch-all parties caused the decline in traditional political participation (Mair 2013). It is above all the work of Colin Crouch (2004) and Chantal Mouffe (2005), who brought these studies into the realm of political theory and gave them a broader meaning. On this basis, it was Colin Hay (2007) who explicitly connected them to the concept of politicization. These influential studies shifted the focus from demand-side explanations of declining political mobilization – such as less social capital (Putnam 2000), over-critical citizens (Norris 1999), and decreased voters' age – (Franklin 2004) to the supply side, pointing to the effects of globalization and remote decision making. At the same time, they already indicated a change in the trend since signs of re-politicization on the national level were emerging: the establishment of new parties, especially the first right-wing populist parties in Austria, France, and Switzerland (e.g., Betz 1994); social movements resisting potentially destructive technologies (Beck 1993); increasing polarization in American

politics (DiMaggio et al. 1996); and more recently a renewed increase in voter turnout. One of the major proponents of de-alignment theory, Russell Dalton (2018), speaks in his most recent book about re-alignment instead.

While the early research asked about the causes of the decline in political participation in Western democracies, the later research asked about what follows after the decline of the class conflict and the consequences for democracy. Since it is increasingly acknowledged that we do not see a simple decline in the level of politicization, but rather a restructuration of the political landscape, research is again more or less explicitly informed by cleavage theory (Bartolini and Mair 2007; Lipset and Rokkan 1967). In this view, a social revolution creates packages of conflicts that pit two structurally defined groups against each other. It is then the taming of the class conflict and the decline of the working class that leads to de-politicization in the first place. In the second place, however, the emergence of a new cleavage caused by changes in the value systems of affluent societies (Inglehart 1990) and globalization (Kriesi et al. 2006) leads to new forms of politicization and polarization (Zürn 2018b).

The perspective on 'the political' is rather comprehensive. While there is a focus on parties and voter turnout as well as (in the US case) on congressional voting, the study of cleavages has broadened, and it also includes social movement and public debates (de Wilde et al. 2019; Kriesi et al. 2012). There is an interest in the overall level of political participation and mobilization, and thus in looking at different forms of political behavior. Moreover, the focus is on the (democratic) use of political institutions. Most of the approaches in comparative politics focus on political participation in democratic states and consider both participation and conflict lines indicated by this participation as a necessary ingredient of democratic politics. To be sure, the rise of populist parties, especially of right-wing populism, is not welcomed by many, as well as being considered a danger for liberal democracies (Müller 2016). At the same time, it is viewed by others as a means to express dissatisfaction within the system and as a mechanism that may help to close representational gaps (Merkel and Ritzi 2017).

The major hypothesis explaining the dynamics of de-politicization and re-politicization refers to a fundamental change in the cleavage structure that can be observed in most modern societies. The taming of the class conflict has produced the rise of a second cleavage between the winners and losers of globalization. As a result, a two-dimensional political landscape has emerged in which the decline of politicization along the class cleavage is compensated along the globalization cleavage between integrationists and demarcationists (Kriesi et al. 2012) or between cosmopolitans and communitarians (de Wilde et al. 2019).[2] In this view, democratic political systems need to adjust to the new landscape with changed party systems and some institutional adaptations. It is, however, considered to be a change within

democratic systems, which only by inappropriate responses may lead to a systemic challenge. New parties and new institutions are needed to close representational deficits and allow for new coalition building.

The European level: politicization in EU studies

Functionalist integration theory had already been interested in the topic of politicization (Schmitter 1969). The renewed academic interest in the role of politicization in the European integration process started about ten years ago. While the first three decades of the EU were seen as a welfare-enhancing process based on economic interests, the broadening of the integration process into non-economic issue areas led to the rise of identity politics, which entangled European integration in a growing conflict between elites and masses: from permissive consensus to constraining dissensus (Hooghe and Marks 2009).

As opposed to the re-politicization of domestic politics, the politicization of the EU was not preceded by a de-politicization of European politics. In spite of moments of political salience, the EU institutions worked smoothly and silently most of the time. While some academics complained about the democratic deficit in the EU and asked for the institutional prerequisites to allow for Europe-wide public debates and political competition on the EU level (e.g., Follesdal and Hix 2006; Habermas 2007, 2011; Hix 2008; Risse 2010; Zürn 2000), the permissive consensus was seen by most as part of the success of the EU. Interestingly, most of the early deviating voices were primarily not EU experts but they brought in perspectives from Political Theory (e.g., Habermas), Comparative Politics (e.g., Hix), or IR (e.g., Risse). The majority of Europeanists argued differently. Especially major EU theorists like Giandomenico Majone (1994, 1996) and Andrew Moravcsik (2004, 2006) emphasized the pareto-optimizal and apolitical character of the EU as its central feature. In this view, the EU as regulatory state focuses neither on distributive nor on salient issues, but it manages efficiency and coordination problems. Any democratization of this process, therefore, is considered as counter-productive.

Politicization was observed only when the Constitutional Treaty was rejected in referendums in the Netherlands and France. This rejection brought into the open that support for further integration cannot be taken as given. The permissive consensus (Lindberg and Scheingold 1970) in European societies that gave space to European governments to pursue the path of deepening integration dissolved and was replaced by a constraining dissensus. It is this constraining dissensus that lies at the core of a postfunctionalist theory of integration (Hooghe and Marks 2009). Remarkably, both the term of permissive consensus until the early 1990s and the shift towards Euroscepticism afterward are hardly contested anymore. In the words of Philippe

Schmitter (2009: 211–2), '[n]o serious student of European integration can deny that something like politicization has occurred since the mid-1980s'.

Related to the rise of constraining dissensus was the observation of U-shaped support for European integration. While the EU still has firm support from mainstream political parties and their voters, it is more the extreme parties on the right and the left as well as their supporters who are Eurosceptical. This U-shape reflects a growing divide between elites and the broader public regarding the EU, with the elites strongly in support (Hobolt 2009; Hooghe 2003; Teney and Helbling 2014). It is this socio-structural difference in support of the EU project that anchors most explanations of politicization.

The primary hypothesis about this shift was the notion of a growing relevance of identity politics. Accordingly, the de-emphasis on the economic benefits of European integration was accompanied by a growing emphasis on national considerations regarding culture and self-determination. To the extent that the EU has moved beyond the economic integration project, it has caused identity politics and with it the politicization of European integration. Right-wing populist challengers and Eurosceptic political forces 'smelt blood' (Hooghe and Marks 2009: 21). Hutter et al. (2016), however, point out that conflicts between and within mainstream parties may also nurture the politicization of the EU, of which Brexit may be seen as the most important instance.

In general, there are significant parallels between the more encompassing cleavage analysis and the politicization of the EU (see Hutter et al. 2016; Marks and Steenbergen 2004). The growing conflicts about European integration are then a constituent of a broader cleavage between demarcationists and integrationists with the EU as an object of contention among others. In most cases, this derives from a conflict between cosmopolitan-minded elites and more communitarian-minded publics, but the conflict can also be utilized in the competition between and within mainstream parties. Two differences to the study of re-politicization on the national level are noteworthy. First, the mainly positive connotation associated with politicization in the domestic context is much more contested in the EU context. The politicization of the EU is seen especially by post-functionalist theory as a problem and a danger for the integration process. In line with the reasoning of Majone (1996) and Moravcsik (2006), the shift from permissive consensus to constraining dissensus puts shackles on the executive decision makers, thus preventing compromises on the European level. The result is a decline in problem-solving capacity and the entry towards a vicious cycle of declining effectiveness and support (Hooghe and Marks 2009).

While many EU scholars considered politicization as a problem and hindrance for further integration, others emphasize the possibility of overcoming the democratic deficit. In these contributions, the apolitical and non-redistributive character of the EU was questioned (Follesdal and Hix 2006). Moreover,

politicization was considered as a necessary social condition for the development of institutional procedures that allowed for more democracy and political competition within the European institutions (Beck 2006; Rauh and Zürn 2014; Risse 2010; Sabel and Zeitlin 2010; Zürn 2006). In this view, democratization is considered as a necessary prerequisite of further European integration, and the rise of politicization, therefore, offers a political opportunity. It has been empirically shown that a high level of politicization of EU decision making can actually improve the responsiveness of supranational institutions (Rauh 2016). However, much of research on EU considers politicization a problem. It is not a resource utilized as part of regular politics, but – to put it bluntly – an anti-systemic force. Only very recent research openly tests the possible consequences of EU politicization (Bes et al. 2018).

Second, the politicization of the EU is mostly studied by looking at indicators that play out on the national level. In the words of Edgar Grande and Swen Hutter (2016: 29), their 'analysis focuses on the *domestic* level because the national level is still considered the central arena for political mobilisation and national governments are still the most relevant actors in key decisions on European integration'. The rise of Eurosceptic parties, the growing divide between elite and masses, and public debates are the indicators that are analyzed to understand the politicization of European institutions better (see, e.g., contributions to de Wilde et al. 2016). This is different from the study of politicization in the domestic context, where the indicators utilized to study the phenomenon are on the same level as the institutions and decisions that are politicized.

In sum, politicization is viewed by European studies as a response to a too far-reaching European integration – either beyond the economic realm (Hooghe and Marks 2009) or too much European authority (de Wilde and Zürn 2012) – that would endanger or even halt this process. Therefore, the majority of Europeanists see politicization as something problematic that may lead to the decline of the EU.

The global level: the politicization of international institutions

Whereas the politicization of episodes of foreign policy has a long history, the politicization of international institutions has a comparatively short one. The public debates preceding each of the two World Wars, the Vietnam War, or the German *Ostpolitik* – to name a few – are all instances in which 'foreign policy' strategy and decisions gravitated to the center of the political debate. World politics, therefore, has been at the center of political debates in certain instances for a long time. To the contrary, the politicization of international institutions is a relatively new phenomenon. The anti-apartheid and third world movements in the 1970s can be considered predecessors of current developments, but the broad politicization of international

institutional policies and procedures with electoral effects was largely absent at that time. In contrast, the politicization of inter- and transnational institutions points to a process through which widening arrays of actors – such as individual citizens, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), parties, lobby groups, and governmental bodies – are oriented towards international institutions.

The Battle of Seattle is a crucial event for the study of politicization on the global level. This led to rich research about the study of protests that is cognate to the concept of politicization. This work – originated by scholars like Donatella della Porta, Dieter Rucht, and Sidney Tarrow – has shown that there are many indications for an ongoing transnationalization of social protests (Della Porta 2007; Della Porta and Caiani 2009; Gronau et al. 2009; Pianta and Zola 2005; Rucht 2013; Tarrow 2001, 2005). Moreover, Della Porta and Tarrow (2012) see transnational movements that target international institutions as the latest and most important move in the transnationalization of social protests. Indeed, Della Porta (2011) uses the concept of politicization to grasp these developments (see also Nullmeier et al. 2010; Steffek and Hahn 2010).

In IR, the concept of politicization of inter- and transnational institutions was introduced shortly after the Battle of Seattle (Zürn 2004). It was associated with the authority transfer hypothesis from the beginning. According to this hypothesis, the politicization of inter- and transnational institutional institutions including the EU grew, because they exercise more authority and have become more intrusive from the 1990s onwards. This has produced legitimation problems and made it possible to move formerly barely visible institutions into the spotlight of political contestation (Zürn et al. 2007). The hypothesis received support in quantitative studies of public media (Rauh and Boedeker 2016; Rixen and Zangl 2013; Schmidtke 2014), as well as in qualitative studies on political mobilization and political attitudes (Binder 2013; Viola 2013; Zürn et al. 2012). In general, research on the politicization of inter- and transnational institutions is less developed than that on the politicization of the EU. There are fewer studies and less quantitative data available. Nevertheless, the global level is an elementary component of politicization in a multi-level governance world. Moreover, the study of politicization on the global level provides a distinctive take.

First, the authority transfer hypothesis emphasizes the interplay and normality of de-politicization and re-politicization dynamics. To the extent that the relative importance of different political levels changes, political attention changes accordingly. Any lobbyist with a limited amount of resources needs to ask which political institutions on which political level they need to address to achieve their goals. To the extent that, for instance, the WTO becomes more relevant than national tariff policies, we see a transfer of political authority and, with it, a shift of attention on the side of the rational lobbyist. In this

sense, the study of politicization on the global level has highlighted the authority–legitimation link, according to which any authority attempts to arouse and foster legitimacy beliefs by legitimating the exercise of authority (Zürn 2018a: chap 3). Second, the study of politicization of inter- and transnational institutions, therefore, looked at both aspects of politicization at the same time: the authority-challenging, anti-systemic protests against international institutions mainly by nationalist forces as well as the mere utilization of international institutions with the goal to change policies. To the latter category belong such diverse groups as the lobbyist mentioned above, transnational movements with an anti-neoliberal program, such as the Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions and Citizens' Action (ATTAC), or ecologically-minded NGOs like Greenpeace. In all these cases of utilization of inter- and transnational institutions, the goal is to change policies. Only part of the current politicization of international institutions thus comes in the form of resistance against global governance institutions. Many transnational non-state actors publicly address international institutions in a positive way, for instance, by calling for drastic intensification of governance measures at the international level. Public resistance to international institutions and their more intensive utilization are both expressions of the process that is referred to as politicization. Therefore, the politicization of inter- and transnational institutions were studied both on the level of global politics and as reflected in national political systems.

Finally, the focus on the authority transfer hypothesis points to the underlying question about the changes of political mobilization in a global governance system that includes the interaction between different levels. Politicization is therefore seen as an enabling condition that can lead to democratization and deepening of the global political level – a necessary but not sufficient condition for democratization. At the same time, politicization may contain the seeds of the decline of global governance (Zürn 2018a).

These explorations into three kinds of literature about politicization can be illustrated in the Table 1, which summaries them on the basis of six issues that have also structured the reviews. This summary aims at highlighting differences and therefore neglects nuances that are discussed in the text.

The plea for an integrated perspective as a new avenue of politicization research

The three reviews have shown that (de-)politicization takes place and is studied on all political levels, but that the three kinds of literature are not well-connected with each other. The concept is used on all three levels, and arguably all the major conceptions used on the different levels are expressions of a common core concept even if their operationalization differs due to context. Therefore, it comes as a surprise that the interactions among them

Table 1. Three kinds of politicization literature.

	Comparative politics	EU studies	International relations
Origin and empirical research	Decline of participation; later right-wing populism and the new political landscape	Rejection of Constitutional Treaty; U-shaped support for EU	Battle of Seattle; nationalist rejection of international institutions
The operational components	The aggregate degree of political mobilization	EU institutions and policies as discussed in national political systems	Transnational movements as well as international institutions as reflected in national and transnational debates
Resistance or utilization	Utilization (use of political system to get new policies)	Resistance (against EU)	Rejection and utilization of IOs
Major question	After class cleavage?	Identity politics?	Contested authority?
Major hypotheses	End of catch-all parties; new party landscape	Identity issues becoming more relevant	Authority transfer hypothesis
On consequences and evaluation	Representational deficits and coalition building	Negative (constraining dissensus)	Enabling politicization; creates a critical juncture for either decline or deepening of global governance

are not far developed. Against this background, I want to conclude by pointing out that the majority of the most relevant questions in the study of politicization can be answered only if a more integrative perspective is taken.[3] I would like to underline this claim by pointing to three major issues of politicization research referring to the degree of politicization, its social origins, and its consequences.

To start with, the level of politicization and contestation cannot be assessed by looking at the three levels only separately. If someone who believed in the liberal ideal and the need to establish political structures of non-discrimination lived in the early 1960s, there would have been very good reasons for that person to become a member of a national left-leaning liberal party. If a person with similar political beliefs becomes politically interested five decades later, it may be much more plausible for them to work with Amnesty International. In any case, the choice of one or the other is not a sign of 'more' or 'less' politicization. A focus on only one political level in the study of politicization runs the danger of overlooking counter-trends on the other political levels. It is therefore that the much-regretted decline in political participation in the domestic context was partially accompanied by increased engagement on the European and international levels. What might have looked, in the first place, like de-politicization may turn out as a scale shift in political participation. It is therefore necessary to take a perspective that encompasses all three levels.

With such a perspective in mind, there are good reasons to argue that the overall level of politicization has increased in recent years – at the latest when

the de-politicization trend on the national level reversed. One hypothesis for the integrated study of politicization, therefore, is that the overall level of politicization and contestation grows over time if activities on different political levels are taken into account (Zürn 2014: 64).

In addition, it seems important to analyze and understand the relationship of politicization among the three different political levels. Arguably, the development of politicization on one level is affected by politicization on other levels. It can also be expected that the specific form of this relationship depends on scope conditions. While the relationship may have been substitutive during the last decades – indicating a zero-sum relationship between the degrees of politicization on different levels – in times of crisis and of extraordinarily high levels of politicization, it may be a mutually reinforcing one. Currently, it looks like the politicization of the EU and international institutions translates into further accentuation of the new cleavage domestically.

Second, taking the three processes together points to a general dynamic of de-politicization and re-politicization. De-politicization on all three levels is a response to moving consequential political decisions away from majoritarian institutions such as national parties and parliaments to non-majoritarian institutions such as central banks, constitutional courts, and IOs.

Since the nineteenth century, democratic political systems have been considered those in which parliaments – in connection with parties and government – play the decisive role. Parliaments are prototypical majoritarian institutions; they decide via majority by elected representatives. The representatives are elected on the basis of a competition between parties. Parliaments and parties thus are majoritarian institutions that embody the idea of popular sovereignty. Non-majoritarian institutions, like courts and central banks, have always played an important role in democratic political systems as well. Non-majoritarian institutions can be defined as governance entities 'that (a) possess and exercise some grant of specialized public authority, separate from that of other institutions, but (b) are neither directly elected by the people, nor directly managed by elected officials' (Thatcher and Stone Sweet 2002: 2). In democratic theory, one of their major tasks is to control and limit the public's powers so they do not violate individual and minority rights, and thus do not undermine the democratic process (Elster 1994; Holmes 1994). In addition, they implement the norms set by the legislature (see Ackerman 2000). International institutions are also non-majoritarian institutions since they intrude into majoritarian politics based on similar, mostly technocratic justifications (see Keohane et al. 2009). In this conception of democratic rule, parliaments are the norm setters, while non-majoritarian institutions play a limiting role.

With this distinction in mind, it can be argued that recent decades have seen a reversal in the relationship between majoritarian and non-majoritarian institutions. Many non-majoritarian institutions became norm setters.

Increasingly, non-majoritarian institutions not only provided a check on and implemented decisions of majoritarian institutions, but were key in policy making and norm setting. This is also true for a dense network of international arrangements and organizations that differ in both quality and quantity from traditional international institutions. The new international arrangements exercise authority over their constituent members and, at the same time, intervene profoundly in the internal affairs of countries, undermining the consensus principle of international politics and national sovereignty. This rise of international authority also transforms the role of government along the majoritarian–non-majoritarian axis. Since governments are elected, they have traditionally been seen as majoritarian institutions. To the extent, however, that the more powerful Western governments control international authorities, they can use international institutions to circumvent parliaments and party members. In fact, the rise of multi-level governance systems, including all the new space created for blame-shifting and credit-claiming, detaches the executive from the legislature and makes government a significant player in the world of non-majoritarian institutions. The rise of international institutions empowers the executive and weakens parliaments.

Overall, some domestic institutions within democracies, as well as international institutions, became more powerful relative to parliaments and parties in the last three decades. These non-majoritarian institutions not only implement and control policies – as foreseen by the notion of democratic constitutionalism – but they have also become strongly involved in setting norms and rules. In this sense, the last decade has witnessed a de-politicization by moving consequential decisions to non-majoritarian institutions.

As a response, we can see a re-politicization on all three political levels. On the domestic level, political contention and party politics is back. At the same time, European and international institutions are brought back into the political realm to the extent that their decisions are no longer accepted as administrative acts with technocratic justification or considered to be without alternative. In this way, the three movements towards re-politicization belong together and are directed against a period of de-politicization in which many decisions were moved towards non-majoritarian institutions. To find out whether there is close interaction between de-politicization and re-politicization, and to understand the role of multi-level politics in this context, it is necessary to take an integrated perspective.

Third, it is also necessary to look at the interactions between the national, the European, and the international levels to fully grasp the consequences of de-politicization and re-politicization. Arguably, the politicization of politics on all levels feeds the rise of a new social cleavage that plays out not only in party systems in Western Europe but also on different political levels in similar ways (de Wilde et al. 2019). According to cleavage theory, cleavages are triggered by social revolutions that create socio-structural divisions. In the case of the

new cleavage, the underlying social revolution is globalization, and one can expect that the winners of globalization are pitted against the losers. The new cleavage is, therefore, one between cosmopolitans and communitarians. In ideational terms, cosmopolitanism stands for a political ideology that advocates open borders and a transfer of public authority to the global level and that prioritizes the protection of individual and minority rights. Communitarians, on the other hand, emphasize the constitutive role of communities and identities for the development of social attitudes. In their view, both distributional justice and democracy depend on social contexts that most often are territorially delimited. They emphasize democratic self-determination and are much less in favor of international institutions and regional integration processes than are cosmopolitans. Finally, communitarians reject the notion of universal values and tend to subsume individual rights under the majority culture. The main actors of the cosmopolitan coalition include mainstream political parties, state agents in the government, the judiciary, and the liberal media. The communitarian camp is dominated by authoritarian populists who advocate national protectionism on economic issues and anti-globalization, but also receive increasing support from some factions in leftist parties and the traditional circles in conservative parties.

If we conceive this new cleavage as a struggle about borders that plays out on all levels of multi-level governance, the need to look at interactions between different levels becomes obvious. While cosmopolitan positions use international institutions to predominate, communitarian positions are often restricted to national arenas. Whereas cosmopolitans can use the European and the international level to influence domestic decisions, communitarians put forward a de-proceduralized notion of the national will, often against individual rights and international obligations. Grasping these strategic interactions between levels is necessary to understand the dynamics of de-politicization and re-politicization. There is, therefore, a significant benefit of studying politicization on different levels as part of a general de-politicization and re-politicization dynamic in a broadly conceived global multi-level governance system.

Notes

1. In distinguishing the national, European, and international level, the local level gets incorporated in the national one. It would be a separate but quite interesting question why there is much less work on the politicization of local politics.
2. We have chosen cosmopolitanism and communitarianism – terms with roots in recognized and respected political–philosophical traditions – in order to emphasize that current conflicts may not be temporary ones between modern and atavistic factions in society, but a much more permanent cleavage inspired by two opposing political ideologies.

3. Of course, this does not exclude the fact that, to find answers for particular questions, one needs to focus on the politicization on a specific level.

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