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# Politicizing Europe in Elections to the European Parliament (1994–2019): The Crucial Role of Mainstream Parties

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## Abstract

Based on original data, this article analyses the politicization of European issues in European elections. Contrary to scholarly expectations, our findings show a higher level of politicization of European issues compared to national elections. However, politicization has been declining in both electoral arenas from the early 2000s until 2014 despite the increasing visibility of radical Eurosceptic parties. This paper suggests that this decline in politicization is a consequence of relatively low levels of emphasis put on the EU issue by mainstream political parties. It argues that Eurosceptic parties have had a paradoxical effect on politicization, since mainstream parties have responded to the former's mobilizing efforts by de-emphasizing European issues rather than pursuing a confrontational strategy. This finding is corroborated by the 2019 elections, where we observe remarkably high levels of politicization in those countries where mainstream parties have been forced to open the debate around European issues.

**Keywords:** European Parliament; elections; political parties; politicization; salience

## I. European Elections: A Neglected Topic in Research on Politicization<sup>1</sup>

In the last two decades, European integration has been the object of intensified political conflict in the member states of the European Union (EU). After the successful completion of economic integration with the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, public controversies resulting from disagreement on fundamental questions on the scope and future direction of European integration intensified. These conflicts produced new divides between member states and within political elites; and they mobilized citizens to a hitherto unknown extent. The rise of Eurosceptic parties in EU member states, the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty in national referenda in France and the Netherlands in 2005, public protest against the austerity measures imposed by the EU in the Eurozone crisis in South European countries, and not the least the negative outcome of the Brexit referendum in the UK in 2016 signal the end of the ‘permissive consensus’ (Lindberg and Scheingold, 1970) which had facilitated European integration in the post-WW II decades. These developments have been reflected in a burgeoning literature on the ‘politicization of Europe’ (de Wilde, 2011; de Wilde *et al.*, 2014; Grande and Hutter, 2016; Hoeglinger, 2016; Hutter *et al.*, 2016; Hutter and Grande, 2014; Risse, 2014; Statham and Trezz, 2013, 2015; Zeitlin *et al.*, 2019). Inspired by postfunctionalist integration

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theory (Hooghe and Marks, 2009), this literature shows that European integration has become a matter of ‘mass politics’ (Bartolini, 2005; Hutter *et al.*, 2016) with a substantial amount of politicization in public and parliamentary debates, election campaigns and national referenda. Politicization, defined as the expansion in the scope of conflict among political actors (Schattschneider, 1960, p. 16), has become a decisive force in the European integration process.

The main insights in research on politicization have been gained through the study of national level politics. Elections to the European Parliament (EP) have largely been ignored in this field, despite the fact that the electoral arena has been identified as the main channel for articulating and mobilizing new political conflicts on European integration (Hutter *et al.*, 2016). The scholarly literature provides some good reasons for this ‘error of omission’. Since the first EP election in 1979, these elections time and again turned out to be ‘second-order national elections’, comparable to national by-elections or state elections in federal systems (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). In second-order elections, the interest of parties, media and voters is weaker, reflected in lower spending on election campaigns, less media attention and lower turnout. Moreover, the first large-scale election study on EP elections in 1989 and 1994 found that parties did not give their voters a clear choice about European issues (van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996). EP elections were mainly shaped by domestic politics; and conflict about Europe in these election contests resembled very much conflict within member states (Marks and Steenbergen, 2004). As the second-order character of EP elections is considered being an ‘unavoidable consequence of the institutional design of the EU’ (van der Brug and van der Eijk, 2007, p. 230), there are good reasons to assume no significant change over time in the foreseeable future.

Consequently, studying political conflict in EP election campaigns does not seem to promise much added-value for those interested in the politicization of the European integration process and its consequences. Recent studies challenge this conventional wisdom. They not only point to relatively high levels of EU issue salience in EP elections (Braun and Schmitt, 2020; Braun *et al.*, 2016; Dolezal, 2012; Spoon, 2012); they also provide evidence that EP elections matter by having considerable impact on domestic politics. EP elections, for example, facilitate the success of smaller and more radical parties on the national level by inculcating voting habits (Dinas and Riera, 2018) or by simply increasing the public visibility of these parties (Schulte-Cloos, 2018). However, a systematic empirical analysis of the relevance of EP elections for the politicization of European integration issues is still missing.

This article seeks to fill this gap by investigating the politicization of Europe in EP election campaigns covering the entire post-Maastricht period. It innovates by introducing two new data sets on European election campaigns (EEC, EEC\_EU), which we combine with existing data on national election campaigns (Grande *et al.*, 2020; Kriesi *et al.*, 2020) and Euromanifesto data (Schmitt *et al.*, 2018). The article is structured as follows: First, we present our concept of politicization and the state of current research into political conflict in EP elections. Based on this literature, we formulate assumptions about the development and specific causal factors of political conflict over Europe in EP elections. Next, we describe the research design of our study and the method of data collection. Finally, we present the results of our analysis in three steps. We start with presenting descriptive data on the level and development of politicization in EP elections; we continue with a

comparison between national and EP elections; and we conclude with the analysis of the role of political parties for the politicization of European issues in EP elections.

## II. Politicizing Europe in EP Elections: Conceptual Considerations – Theoretical Assumptions

### *How Do we Conceptualize Politicization?*

The term ‘politicization’ can be found with different meanings in the political science literature (for short summaries see de Wilde and Zürn, 2012; Grande and Hutter, 2016, p. 7). The conceptualization we use in this article is based on three assumptions. First, we follow Schattschneider (1957, 1960) who emphasizes the importance of political conflict within the political system. Politicization as a political process then refers to the ‘dynamics of the expansion of the scope of political conflict’ (Schattschneider, 1960, p. 16) among political actors. Defined in such a way, this concept can be applied to a broad range of political controversies because it makes no assumptions on the content of conflict, the goals of controversies and the strategies used by political actors.

Second, we acknowledge that politicization is a multi-dimensional process. Schattschneider (1957) identified the ‘intensity, visibility, direction and scope of conflict’ as key dimensions of political conflict. Accordingly, our concept of politicization distinguishes and integrates three dimensions: (a) the salience of a contentious issue (visibility), (b) the number and type of actors involved in a conflict (scope), and (c) the degree of polarization among these actors (intensity and direction). We assume that these dimensions are independent and that the expansion of conflict in each dimension follows a distinct logic.

Third, our concept emphasizes the importance of actor strategies. Political actors, political parties in particular, have a broad range of possibilities to strategically impact on each dimension of this concept of politicization. First of all, they can aim at increasing or decreasing the public visibility of an issue, as highlighted by saliency theory of party competition (Budge and Farlie, 1983). Moreover, they can strategically address the intensity of conflict. A party may decide to deliberately adjust to the position of its main adversary; or it can choose a confrontational strategy by taking an opposite position (Meguid, 2005). Not the least, political actors can influence the scope of actors in a debate or decision-making process by manipulating ‘the inclusion or exclusion of contestants’ (Schattschneider, 1957, p. 941) in order to change the balance of forces in a political conflict. In party competition, the choice of the political arena and the territorial level of decision-making can play an important role in this regard.

Taken together, politicization of Europe is political conflict over European issues<sup>2</sup> whereby political actors have a broad range of strategic options to deliberately intensify or dampen controversies over these issues. High levels of politicization require that European issues are visible in public, a large number of actors beyond governmental elites participate in a controversy, and actors are grouped into clearly distinct and distant political camps. Accordingly, we conceptualize the politicization of Europe as a multi-faceted

<sup>2</sup>European issues are known for their multifaceted character and therefore reach from the general debate over the future paths of European integration to the specific discussion over single policies (for example migration or environmental policy).

process comprising the salience of European issues, the polarization of actors towards European issues and the scope of actors involved in this process. The Brexit referendum campaign is a perfect example for such a ‘high intensity mass conflict’ (Grande and Hutter, 2016, p. 11) over a constitutive European issue.

### *How Much Politicization of European Issues Should we Expect in EP Elections?*

The literature on European parties and elections features a range of arguments that suggest low but increasing levels of politicization of European issues in European election contests (see, for example, van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996; Marks and Steenbergen, 2004; van der Eijk and van der Brug, 2007; van der Brug and de Vreese, 2016). This literature typically refers to the ‘second-order’ nature of EP elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Schmitt *et al.*, 2020). The ‘second-order model’ assumes that EP elections follow a peculiar logic: Because there is less at stake as compared to the main national elections, voters decide ‘by heart’ rather than with their ‘mind’. Although formulated initially to explain voter behavior and voting patterns, the second-order election model has also influenced scholarly debate on party competition in European elections. It suggests that (national) parties have neither strategic incentives nor organizational capacities to intensify political conflict over European issues in these elections. Scholars thus widely agree that EP elections ‘have to be regarded as national political events’ (van der Brug and van der Eijk, 2007, p. 227) which are dominated by domestic events and issues in much the same way as national elections are. The conventional wisdom holds that ‘EP elections are fought not as “European elections” but [...] are in fact about national political issues’ (Hix and Høyland, 2011, p. 157).

Accordingly, the politicization of European issues is assumed to be rather low in European election contests as long as such issues play no role in national elections and public debates. In the last two decades, various strands of research have provided evidence that the latter can no longer be taken for granted. Scholars of European elections found signs that as a consequence of authority transfers in the 1990s, the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 in particular, and of Eastern enlargement in 2004 the process of European integration has become increasingly contested (Marks and Steenbergen, 2004; van der Brug and van der Eijk, 2007) and conflict reshaped over time (Schäfer *et al.*, 2020). Against this background, they expected ‘that the debate about European integration will not only become more politicized, but that issues related to it will also become more important in national elections’ (van der Eijk and van der Brug, 2007, p. 6). These expectations have been supported by proponents of so-called EU-issue voting (de Vries, 2010; de Vries and Hobolt, 2016). The literature covering EU-issue voting suggests that voters rely increasingly on European issues when casting their ballots in national elections. Empirical studies show that there was a significant number of national elections in EU member states in the post-Maastricht period in which Europe has been a politicizing issue, even if its salience has been lower than major economic and social policy issues (Grande and Hutter, 2016; Hoeglinger, 2016; Hutter and Grande, 2014). Accordingly, if the issue of Europe is playing an increasing role in first-order national elections, it may also serve as a politicizing force in second-order European elections.

The scholarly literature has identified several factors that may have a positive effect on politicization in EP election campaigns. First, the multi-layered institutional architecture

of the EU's political system is expected to play a role as it forces national political parties to operate in multi-level electoral systems (Braun and Schmitt, 2020; van der Brug and van der Eijk, 2007). Because of complex interdependencies between national and EP elections, we may expect that trends regarding the politicization of European integration observed in national elections may (at least to some extent) spill over and have an impact on elections at the European level, and vice versa. Second, the European Parliament has become more powerful with the Maastricht Treaty and subsequent treaty changes (Brack and Costa, 2018). As a result, EP elections should have become more controversial and more visible to the media and voters. With the introduction of the *Spitzenkandidaten* ('leading candidate') system in 2014, elections to the EP were supposed to become more consequential too (Hobolt, 2014; Schmitt *et al.*, 2015).<sup>3</sup> Third, Europe's 'multiple crises' may have intensified political conflict over European integration (Zeitlin *et al.*, 2019). The 'constitutional crisis' of the 2000s with the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty in national referenda in 2005 and the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty may have had an impact on the European election in 2009. The Eurozone crisis has been a critical juncture in the European integration process which may have had consequences in the 2014 EP election; the 'Brexit crisis' triggered intense public debate over European issues not only in the UK but also in other EU member states; and, not the least, the refugee crisis after 2015 has produced new divisions and tensions within and between member states. Hence, there are good reasons to assume that these various crises have resulted in an increasing politicization of European issues in EP elections.

Taken together, we expect that the salience of European issues has been significantly higher over the last two decades than in previous EP elections, and that political polarization has become stronger as well. This should hold true in particular in those countries that have witnessed increases in politicization of European issues in national elections, such as for example, France and the UK (see Hutter and Grande, 2014). This leads us to our first hypothesis about the development of politicization of European issues in EP election contests. It assumes an increasing politicization of European issues in EP elections since the early 1990s which should be particularly pronounced in the last two elections of 2014 and 2019 (*politicization hypothesis*).

The literature on politicization shows that political parties are the main drivers of political conflict over Europe (Hutter *et al.*, 2016; Statham and Trezz, 2013). Among these, radical right and left populist and Eurosceptic parties play a prominent role (Hooghe and Marks, 2009; Kriesi, 2007). The theory of issue entrepreneurship (Hobolt and de Vries, 2015) generally suggests that radical outsider parties act as political entrepreneurs who occupy extreme positions on issues such as Europe to gain competitive advantage over mainstream parties. The case of EP elections offers a particularly fertile political and institutional opportunity structure for such parties (van der Eijk and Franklin, 2004). On the one hand, the logic of second-order elections in general privileges extreme parties. On the other hand, elections to the EP provide a favourable institutional context for challenger parties because of their proportional electoral law in all countries. This has been of particular importance for radical Eurosceptic parties in France and the

<sup>3</sup>Even though empirical evidence shows that the *Spitzenkandidaten* system did not live up to expectations yet (Braun and Popa, 2018; Braun and Schwarzbözl, 2019; Grande and Vidal, 2020), these changes may nevertheless have contributed to an increasing politicization of European issues in EP elections in 2014 and 2019.

UK, such as the Front National (FN) and UK Independence Party (UKIP). For all these reasons, we expect these parties to have a positive effect on all dimensions of politicization: they increase the salience of European issues, they expand the scope of actors involved in European election debates, and their strong opposition towards further European integration leads to stronger polarization (*radical challenger hypothesis*).

There is some evidence, however, that mainstream parties need to be taken into account as well (Green-Pedersen, 2019). Mainstream parties are known for their de-emphasizing strategies when responding to Eurosceptic challenger parties (Green-Pedersen, 2012; Statham and Trenz, 2015). In particular pro-European catch-all parties with strong internal dissent tend to be silent on Europe (van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996) and choose to follow strategies such as adoption, co-option or position blurring (Adam *et al.*, 2016; Adam and Maier, 2016). With the passage of time, however, mainstream parties might change their strategies and become more confrontational with respect to European issues (Braun *et al.*, 2019; Heinze, 2018). Thus, we expect that in countries where Eurosceptic parties have already taken the initiative and triggered the politicization of European issues, the subsequent steps taken by mainstream parties prove decisive for the development of politicization of European issues. If they respond to the mobilizing efforts of challenger parties by pursuing a confrontational strategy instead of trying to sidestep European issues, this should boost the level of politicization because it has a positive effect on both issue salience and polarization (*mainstream party strategy hypothesis*).

### III. Design and Method

#### *Research Design*

We combine three *comparative* perspectives to analyse the politicization of European issues in EP elections. More precisely, we explore EP election campaigns (a) in four EU member states (Austria, the UK, France and Germany); (b) for the entire post-Maastricht period; (c) and in comparison with national election campaigns during the same period. This comparative approach offers a unique opportunity to examine levels of politicization in EP elections, their development over time, and the forces driving it. Our study covers the last six EP elections between 1994 and 2019<sup>4</sup> – the period in which politicization of European issues at the national level has become more noticeable with the formation and strengthening of Eurosceptic challenger parties, intensified inter-party competition and significant intra-party conflict in mainstream parties. Our country selection is guided by two considerations. First, these countries represent the macro-region in Europe in which the reshaping of political conflict has been most pronounced over the period examined in our study (Hutter and Kriesi, 2019; Kriesi, 2016). As European issues have been constitutive for this transformation of cleavage structures (Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Kriesi *et al.*, 2008), the politicization of these issues in EP election campaigns should be strongest in countries of this macro-region. Second, our selection of countries considers variation within this group. Although they all represent established Western democracies, they diverge regarding key EU-specific variables such as duration of EU membership, level of integration (Leuffen *et al.*, 2013), public opinion

<sup>4</sup>For an overview of all EP and national elections covered by our analysis see Part I.1 in the Online Appendix.

towards the EU and strength of Eurosceptic parties. Even if this country sample does not allow generalization across all EU member states, we expect that our comparative study provides important insights into the role of EP elections in the process of politicizing Europe.

### *Data Collection*

We assume that election campaigns as covered by mass media are the most appropriate window of observation to examine the intensity, scope and direction of political conflict in EP elections over a longer period of time. We used the two most prominent quality newspapers in each country<sup>5</sup> as our data source and coded them according to the core sentence method (Kleinnijenhuis and Pennings, 2001; for detailed information on data and coding, see online appendix, Part I.2) in two independent steps. The first coding step aimed at exploring European issues in relation to other topics discussed during an election campaign to map the salience of European issues. It results in our European Election Campaign (EEC) data set. This data set is based on a keyword list of political parties and their leading politicians which allows identifying articles referring to politics in general. We use this data to measure the salience of European integration issues relative to communication on other political issues in the electoral arena. The second coding step resulting in our EEC\_EU data set aimed at zooming into debates on European issues for a more nuanced picture of the specific topics addressed and the positions articulated by political actors. It focuses exclusively on different types of European issues which we use to map the polarization of political parties over EU issues.

In the case of EEC data, we build on the issue categories developed by Kriesi *et al.* (2008, 2012; see in more detail, Dolezal, 2008, pp. 58–60) and distinguish between 11 broad issue areas (for example welfare, economic liberalism) that cover all relevant topics discussed in contemporary politics, with European integration being one of these categories. In the case of the EEC\_EU data, we build on the different subtypes of EU issues developed by Hutter *et al.* (2016). For a detailed description of this coding strategy see the online appendix, Part I.2 and Dolezal *et al.* (2016, pp. 55–60).

### *Operationalization*

As outlined above, we conceptualize politicization as a multi-faceted process and distinguish between three independent dimensions, namely (a) the public visibility of conflict (namely salience), (b) the polarization of actors on European issues, and (c) the scope of actors involved in a controversy. All three components of politicization are measured at the systemic level, in other words at the level of the overall party system at the time of an EP election. *Salience* refers to the visibility of European integration compared to other policy-related issues. Using EEC data, it is operationalized as the percentage share of core sentences on European integration issues compared to the number of all coded core sentences during an election campaign. *Polarization* is measured using EEC\_EU data as the variance between party positions on European integration issues. This measure follows Taylor and Herman's (1971) index and was frequently used in projects on

<sup>5</sup>We used the following newspapers: *Die Presse/ Der Standard* (Austria), *The Times/ The Guardian* (Britain), *Le Monde/ Le Figaro* (France), *Süddeutsche Zeitung/ Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany).

politicization and political conflict transformation in the last decade (see for example Kriesi *et al.*, 2012; Hutter *et al.*, 2016; Hutter and Kriesi, 2019).<sup>6</sup> *Scope of actors* is calculated using EEC\_EU data again as the percentage share of core sentences in an election which do not originate from actors belonging to the national governmental executive. Following Hutter and Grande (2014) and Grande and Hutter (2016), we calculated an *index of politicization* on the basis of these three variables by taking the sum of polarization and actor expansion, multiplied with the salience of the issue. This index allows for the study of politicization of European integration in EP elections over time and across countries at a high level of aggregation.

#### IV. Empirical Analysis

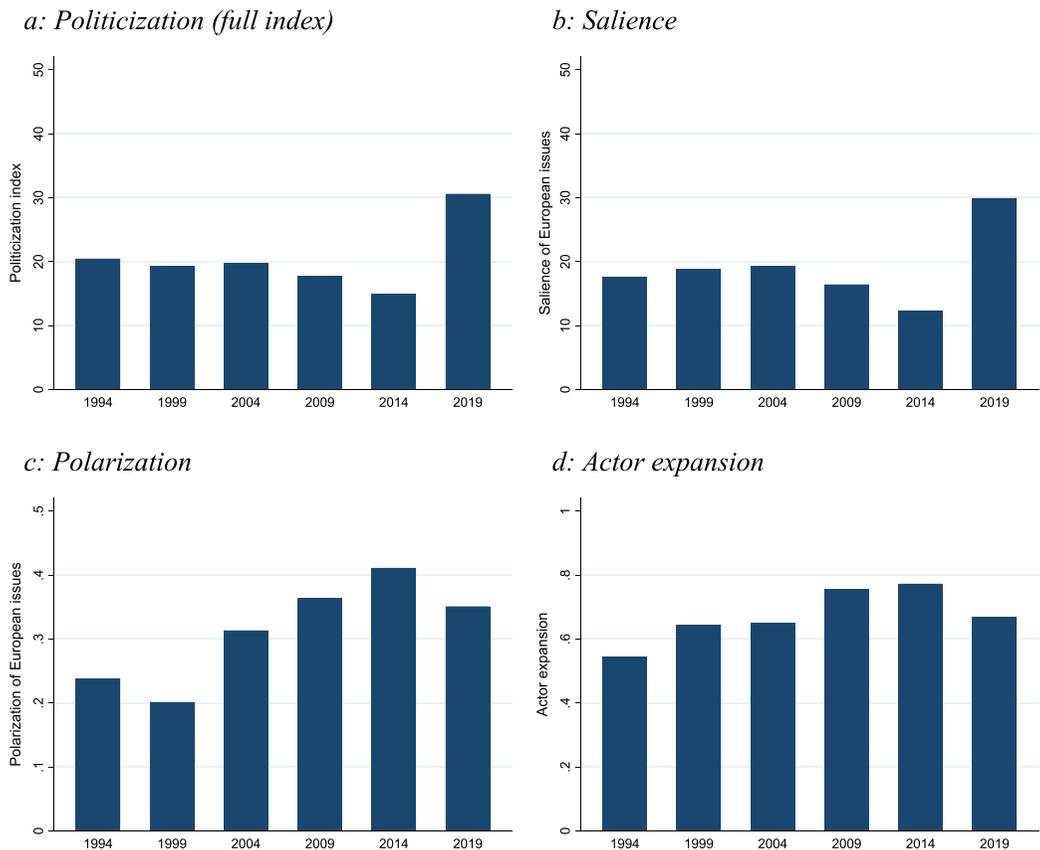
##### *How Politicizing Are European Issues in European Election Campaigns?*

Figure 1 shows that European issues have in fact been politicized in EP elections to a remarkable degree. European elections may follow a distinct political logic heavily affected by domestic factors; however, this second-order national logic has not crowded out European issues in EP election campaigns in the post-Maastricht period. Our results show that European issues in general have been visible and controversial in these campaigns. Our analysis also reveals remarkable variation over time and across dimensions. Most surprising against the backdrop of our politicization hypothesis is the overall *development of politicization*. Figure 1a shows that politicization is rather high in the three elections following the Maastricht Treaty. Contrary to our expectations, however, we observe a *decline* in the following two elections in 2009 and 2014. Despite the Eurozone crisis, the introduction of the *Spitzenkandidaten* process and the rise of radical right populist and Eurosceptic parties, in 2014 the aggregate level of politicization of European issues was comparatively low. In 2019 we observe a boost in politicization with outstandingly high level of politicization. Nevertheless, this development does not fully meet our theoretical expectation. Our general politicization hypothesis which assumes steady increases over time certainly needs to be qualified.

A closer look at the individual dimensions of politicization reveals that the development of politicization of European issues is strongly associated with the rise and decline of salience (see Figures 1b–1d). With the exception of Germany, where EU issues have never been salient in any of the EP elections under consideration, we can see a significant decline in the public visibility of European issues in the 2000s. The other two dimensions of politicization develop as expected. Figure 1c shows an increase in polarization with a peak in 2014. Figure 1d reveals a steady expansion in the scope of actors until 2014. These findings indicate that party competition over European issues intensified in EP elections, that parties gave voters a choice over Europe, and that parties in opposition assumed more importance in conflicts over European integration. In short, until 2014

<sup>6</sup>Our measure of polarization takes into account that parties do not attribute the same importance to an issue in an election campaign. In order to avoid that mainstream parties with minor interest in an issue (as measured by its relative share compared to all other issues) outweigh smaller radical parties who put particular emphasis on the same issue, we use weights for the party-specific salience of an issue. Consequently, parties who give much emphasis on an issue have a larger impact on the overall polarization score. In addition, our measure takes into consideration that not all subcategories of European issues are equally important in an election campaign. For this reason, we use a second weight which assures that more intensely discussed European topics have a larger impact on the overall polarization score (see also Hutter and Grande, 2014, pp. 1007–9).

FIGURE 1: Political Contestation over European Integration in EP Elections *Note: This figure maps the mean of the politicization index for all four countries and of its individual components (salience, polarization, actor expansion) over time.*

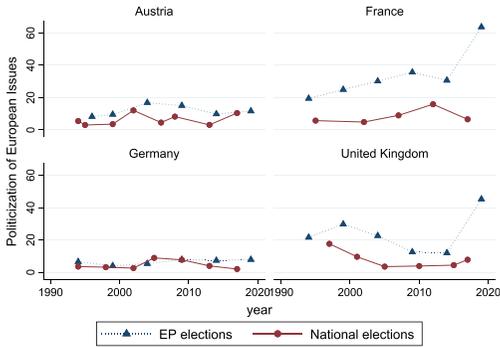


the intensity and scope of conflict over European issues have been increasing in EP election campaigns, while the public visibility of these issues has been declining. The 2019 EP elections, in clear contrast, show a reverse pattern with a strong increase in salience and a moderate decline in the other two dimensions.

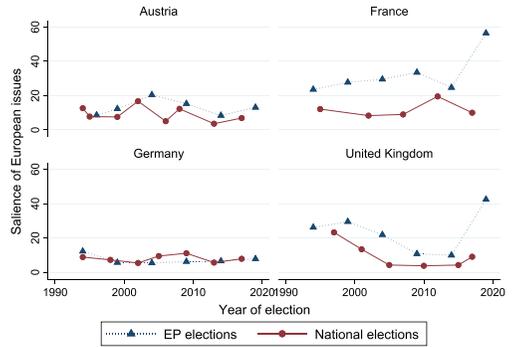
Regardless of these more general trends, our data also reveals remarkable differences between countries. In Figure 2 (dotted lines), we show the results for each of the four countries separately. We can identify two different patterns represented by two pairs of countries. On the one hand, Austria and Germany are characterized by moderate levels of politicization without any substantial differences over time. In Germany, EU issues have never been salient in any of the EP elections under consideration, while political conflict over Europe calmed down in Austria in the 2000s. In France and the UK, on the other hand, political conflict over European integration has been intense in EP elections. In both countries, politicization increased in the 1990s; in the 2000s, it developed in different directions, however. While we observe further increases in France with a first peak in

FIGURE 2: The Politicization of Europe in National and EP Elections, by Country *Notes:* Figures show the development of the politicization index as well as its individual components (salience, polarization, actor expansion) by country in national and EP elections. Please note: For the 2017 national elections the values are based on a slightly different coding strategy (see Kriesi *et al.*, 2020).

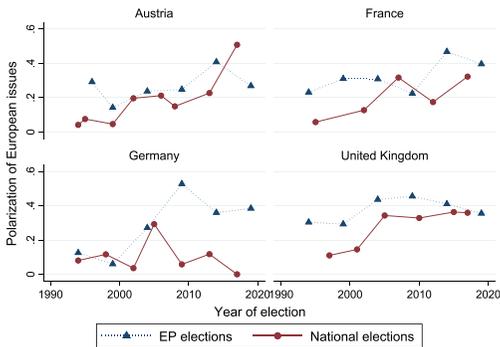
a: Politicization (full index)



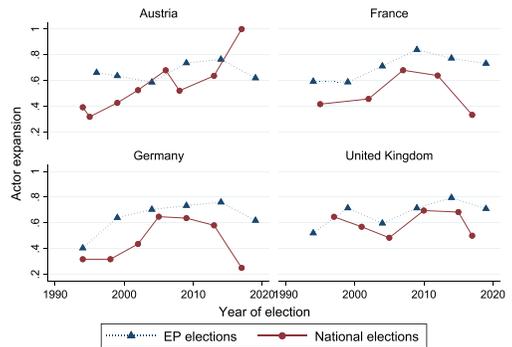
b: Salience



c: Polarization



d: Actor expansion



2009, politicization declined in the UK after 1999. Both countries stand out because of the rise in politicization in the 2019 EP elections. We might have expected such a result for the UK because the intense domestic controversies over Brexit played a crucial role in this election, turning it into a ‘first-order polity election’ (Galpin and Trenz, 2019). The French case indicates, however, that exceptionally high levels of politicization can result from other domestic circumstances as well: it was the first election under Macron’s presidency, a national leader with an undeniable interest in European politics.

*How Does the Politicization of European Issues in EP Elections Compare to National Election Campaigns?*

Drawing on data from national elections generated by Kriesi *et al.* (2020) and Grande *et al.* (2020), Figure 2 also shows the results for national elections (solid line) compared to European ones (dotted line). Two findings are worthy of particular mention. First, our

comparison with national elections shows that politicization in both electoral contests develops in the same way, although at different levels. This suggests that there are strong interdependencies between both arenas. Second, the level of politicization is – with the exception of Germany though – higher in EP elections than in national elections. This finding indicates that EP election campaigns are biased towards European issues despite the fact that these elections are second-order national elections. This ‘bias towards Europe’ is most apparent in France, where the politicization of European issues is clearly highest, and where there is a huge difference between the level of politicization in European elections and in nationwide presidential election campaigns. Germany, where politicization is consistently low in both national and European elections, represents the opposite case. Austria and the UK show levels of politicization in between these extreme cases, but in both countries, politicization is clearly higher in European elections.

*How Can we Explain the Specific Patterns of Politicization of European Issues in EP Elections and its Development over Time?*

Although there is wide agreement in the literature on politicization that political parties play a crucial role there is some controversy on which parties are the drivers of politicization of European issues. The theory of issue entrepreneurship (Hobolt and de Vries, 2015) suggests that radical outsider parties act as political entrepreneurs who occupy and exploit extreme positions on issues such as European integration to gain competitive advantage over mainstream parties. In the countries covered by our study, such parties have certainly become more important in the last two decades. This holds for France with the *Front National* (FN, now *Rassemblement National*) and several radical left parties; Austria with the radical populist right *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (FPÖ) and the Eurosceptic *Liste Martin*, which was very successful in EP elections in the 2000s; the UK where UKIP became a major force in domestic politics; and to some extent also for Germany, where the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) (originally formed as a Eurosceptic force that opposed fiscal transfers to Southern European countries in the Eurozone crisis) entered the EP in 2014 and the national parliament in 2017.

Comparisons with national elections in the 1990s and 2000s show that these Eurosceptic parties have been particularly successful in European elections (Kriesi *et al.*, 2012). What is the actual effect of these parties on politicization? To address this question, we use the emphasis these parties have put on EU issues in their respective election manifestos, the so called Euromanifestos, as an independent variable. Manifesto data maps the official preferences of parties towards or against political issues and the salience they attribute to these issues in an election (Braun *et al.*, 2019). We measure the emphasis of political parties on European matters as the sum of all European polity issues mentioned in their Euromanifestos. European polity issues include, for example, matters of authority transfer from member states to the EU and a strengthening of supra-national institutions such as the EP (for further details on operationalization of EU polity issues and the empirical analyses presented in Figure 3, see Part I.3 in the Online Appendix).

Figure 3 (left-hand panel) plots the relationship between the emphasis placed on EU issues by extreme challenger parties and the politicization of European issues in EP



correlation is much more systematic: In elections with mainstream parties placing much emphasis on EU polity issues in their official party documents, the politicization of Europe in election campaigns is higher.<sup>8</sup> Although this provides moderate support for our mainstream party hypothesis, we take a particular look at some noticeable cases to get a better grip of this finding. French parties of the moderate right in particular seem to drive the relationship between mainstream parties' EU issue emphasis and the politicization of Europe in EP elections. This is reasonable, since our period of investigation was a transformative phase for this party family: It was shaped by 'strong internal divisions between pro- and anti-European members of both the RPR and the UDF' (Evans, 2003, p. 161), leading to internal splits and the founding of new parties at the centre (UMP) but also at the fringe (RPF). Precisely these moderate-right parties put strong emphasis on European issues in their Euromanifestos (see Part I.3 in the Online Appendix) which illustrates that internal party divisions over European issues are key to understand the relationship.

These findings suggest that the effect of political parties on politicization merits a differentiated treatment for both countries and the individual components of politicization. While radical challenger parties certainly contribute to increasing polarization and to an expansion in the scope of actors, mainstream parties seem to be crucial for the development of issue salience. Therefore, in a last step we examine the role of mainstream parties for the development of issue salience in EP elections in more detail. Our EEC dataset allows for the calculation of the emphasis that mainstream parties place on European issues in public debates as the share of these issues in relation to all other subjects. Results are shown in Table 4 in the Online Appendix for each election in each of the four countries. Most importantly, we find the same two pairs of countries that we previously identified in our analysis of politicization. On the one hand, mainstream parties in Austria and Germany display low levels of issue emphasis. This is most pronounced in Germany, where issue emphasis by mainstream parties (CDU, CSU, SPD) was very low in the entire period. France and the UK again represent the group of high salience countries. In France, levels of politicization have been very high and this goes along with high levels of issue salience attributed to European issues by mainstream parties. In the UK issue salience accorded by mainstream parties was high in 1999 and it declined at first to a low level. Apparently, British mainstream parties responded to the rise of a radical Eurosceptic challenger party by de-emphasizing European issues in EP elections. This interpretation is supported by our results on the 2019 EP elections. In France and the UK, the two countries where we observed a marked rise in politicization in 2019, we also find a marked increase in the emphasis mainstream parties place on European issues in the election campaign.

## Conclusions

Despite the fact that they are second-order national elections, EP elections are relevant for studying the politicization of European integration issues. Focusing on EP election

<sup>8</sup>To substantiate our findings and rule out the possibility that exceptionally high or low values of EU issue emphasis by single political parties are responsible for the overall relationship, we replicated the same analyses at the party type level (namely for both party types, we are mainly interested in: mainstream and extreme challenger parties). The findings which are almost identical (though showing slightly stronger effects) are presented in Figure 3, Part II.1 of the Online Appendix.

campaigns by using new media-based data sets, the findings of our study provide new insights into the development of political conflict over European issues in these elections and the driving forces of politicization more generally. They are important for a variety of reasons when it comes to the future study of EU politics.

First, in contrast to the results on earlier EP elections (van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996), we show a substantial amount of politicization of European issues in most countries and most elections over the post-Maastricht period (1994–2019). Most importantly, we find consistently higher levels of politicization of European issues in EP elections in comparison to national first-order elections. These findings suggest that EP elections certainly have the potential to politicize European issues; and they can have significant (intended or unintended) consequences for domestic politics (see also van der Brug and de Vreese, 2016). Second, our comparison with national elections reveals that the development of politicization in EP elections follows national trends relatively closely. Although political conflict over European issues is more visible and intense in EP elections in most of the countries, it seems to be driven by the same factors at both levels. Third, our data reveals that the rise of Eurosceptic political parties can have a paradoxical effect on political conflict over European issues. While the electoral strength of Eurosceptic parties has been increasing since the early 2000s, the level of politicization of European issues in some EP elections has been declining – except for the 2019 EP elections in France and the UK. Our analysis of the role of political parties suggests that this can be attributed to the behavior of mainstream parties. They responded to the new radical challengers by de-emphasizing European issues in EP election campaigns since 2004. The British EP elections in 2009 and 2014 are striking examples in this regard. In these elections, the electoral successes of UKIP went hand in hand with low levels of politicization and low issue emphasis on behalf of mainstream parties. This finding is corroborated by our results on the 2019 EP elections. In these elections we observe outstandingly high levels of politicization – but only in those two countries (France, UK) where mainstream parties were unable to avoid European issues.

These findings illustrate that new radical challengers have certainly intensified political conflict over Europe by increasing polarization. However, these parties have generally been too weak to substantially increase the salience of European issues in public election debates. Therefore, mainstream parties occupy a strategic position in politicizing European issues. When they are unable (for example in France due to internal party divisions) or unwilling (for example in the UK due to Brexit) to sidestep European issues in an election campaign, they contribute to a substantial increase in the visibility and intensity of political conflict over the European project. In a nutshell, it is up to them whether they try to seduce the awakening giant or use its force to advance the European integration process by presenting voters clear choices. As our study shows elections to the European Parliament can be an important arena for such a politicization.

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### Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

### Data S1. Supporting Information