

**POLITICIZATION IN THE EU:  
BETWEEN NATIONAL POLITICS AND EU POLITICAL DYNAMICS**

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**Abstract**

The EU has become increasingly politicized not only at the bottom, due to the rise of Euroskepticism on the back of populism, or from the bottom up, as national politics permeates member-state leaders' positions in the Council. It has also emerged purely at the top, in the increasingly politically charged dynamics of interaction within and among EU actors. Such multi-level politicization involves not only struggles for power—ideational as much as institutional and coercive—but also for legitimacy. Current theorists of EU integration, because of their tendency to focus on only one or another EU actor—Council, Commission, or EP—have tended to overlook such EU level politicization, to their detriment. This paper argues that while the EU has gone from 'politics *without* policy' at the national level to 'politics *against* policy' in contentious areas, it has gone from 'policy *without* politics' to 'politics *with* policy' at the EU level. The paper illustrates with the cases of the Council and the Commission in the Eurozone crisis.

Keywords: Politicization, European Union, Council, Commission, populism, Eurozone crisis

Having started life as largely apolitical and technocratic, the EU has become increasingly political over time as a result of deepening integration. In recent years, however, the pace of politicization has accelerated in response to the EU's multiple crises, beginning with the Eurozone crisis. Such politicization has been most apparent at the national level, with the rise of the populist extremes in social movements, political parties, and even in government, most notably in Hungary and Poland (Kriesi 2014, 2016; Hix and Hoyland 2013). But it has also affected the EU level. In the Council, we see the growing influence of public opinion and electoral politics on member state leaders' positions; in the European Parliament, the election of extremist parties.

Politicization is not just bottom up, however. It is equally at the top, in how the interrelationships of major EU-level actors—Council, Commission, European Central Bank, and European Parliament—have become more political in every way. That politics

is certainly connected to the national pressures. But it also concerns political struggles for power and influence among the various EU-level actors. Such struggles are ideational, regarding which political-economic ideas about what to do prevail, as much as institutional, involving which actor gets to do what, and coercive, concerning who imposes the costs of the decision on whom (Carstensen and Schmidt 2017). Battles are fought not just over who is in charge of decision-making but also over which policies to implement how and why. And they increasingly spill out from the corridors of power into the political sphere through policymakers' communications directed not only to fellow policymakers but to European citizens more generally.

Notably, these political battles are not just about power; they are also about legitimacy. What used to be seen as purely technical and therefore impartial decision-making is now increasingly contested as political (Caramani 2017), with questions raised not only about who acts with legitimate authority but equally about which policies are legitimate and on what grounds (Crum and Curtin 2015). Such growing EU-level politicization is manifest not only in the increasing discursive intensity of the internal debates over what to do and who should decide but also in their externalization. EU actors now join in public discourse, deliberation, and contestation about what should be (or is) done, who should do it, and why, much more so than in the past, when the main voices heard were those of the member states leaders.

This article begins with a discussion of EU integration theories and their failure to deal sufficiently with questions of EU legitimacy as well as the phenomenon of multilevel EU politicization. It then discusses national level politicization, arguing that what Schmidt (2006) had characterized in the past as national 'politics *without* policy' has now become 'politics *against* policy' in contested areas, with citizen's feelings of disenfranchisement and mistrust translating into the rise of Euroskepticism. The article subsequently considers the impact of politicization on the EU level, maintaining here that what Schmidt (2006) previously described as 'policy *without* politics' has now turned into 'policy *with* politics.' In addition to the 'bottom-up' effects of national politicization on EU policymakers has come politicization 'at the top,' in the interactions among EU institutional actors. The article supports its contentions through an illustration of the politically charged dynamics of EU governance in the Eurozone crisis, focusing on the cases of the Council and the Commission. The conclusion considers whether such politicization may ultimately have a positive or a negative impact on legitimacy in the EU, at national as well as EU levels.

## **THEORIZING THE NEW POLITICIZATION OF EU GOVERNANCE**

Contemporary theorists of EU integration have largely overlooked today's more politically charged dynamics of interaction in EU governance, in which all EU actors are more interdependent in their pursuit of power and quest for legitimacy. In so doing, they continue in the long-standing tradition of EU integration theory, in which scholars have tended for the most part to focus on one or another EU actor, and debated primarily about which actor has the most power and influence in European governance (Schmidt 2018). One group sees intergovernmental actors in the European Council as in charge, whether they depict such actors as engaged in coercive processes of hard bargaining (Hoffmann 1966; Moravcsik 1998; Schimmelfenning 2015) or deliberative processes of consensus seeking (Puetter 2012; Bickerton et al. 2015). Another group finds that supranational actors in the Commission (along with the ECB and other regulatory agencies) are in control, whether because of their incremental gains in institutional competences and powers of enforcement (Haas 1958; Sandholtz and Stone Sweet 1998; Ioannou et al. 2015) or their ideational role in policy design and discretionary oversight (Bauer and Becker 2014; Dehousse 2015). Yet another group considers the European Parliament to be an increasingly important actor, at least informally, as a result of its growing institutional and discursive influence (Hix and Hoyland 2013; Fasone 2014; Dinan 2015; Héritier et al. 2016).

The benefit of such debates among theorists of European integration is that each group lends insight into the powers and influence of its preferred EU actor. The drawback is that they lose sight of the overall picture, that is, how all such EU actors have become more dynamically interactive in EU-level governance, and empowered. Moreover, they also tend to miss out on the increasingly politically charged nature of those dynamics of interaction. This has its sources primarily at the national level, in citizens' changing attitudes toward both national governments and EU governance. EU policy-making has been greatly affected by the increasingly significant crosscutting cleavages at the national level between traditional political divisions based on adherence to right/left political parties and newer identity-related divisions based on xenophobic/authoritarian versus cosmopolitan/liberal values (Hooghe and Marks 2009; Kriesi et al. 2012). Although some EU integration theorists do take account of the impact of national political pressures, their analyses center on the effects of politicization on their preferred EU actor (in particular those focused on intergovernmental actors in the Council, e.g., Schimmelfenning 2015). Most do little to consider how such politicization might affect the dynamics of interaction of EU governance considered as a whole.

Rather than taking sides, this article builds on the insights of all such theorists while arguing that every EU actor has gained in power and influence in an increasingly interactive and politicized EU governance system in which power may be exercised through persuasion as well as through coercion or institutional predominance. Such

politicization is manifest both at the EU-level, in the increasing contestation as well as cooperation among EU institutional actors all vying for power and influence, and at the national, which has also had an impact on EU-level interactions.

Once we focus on politics, however, it is important to recognize that politics in any democratic polity is not just about wielding power or exerting influence. It is also about legitimacy—including the legitimation of the exercise of power and influence. And in a EU originally conceived as apolitical and technocratic, the most important questions raised by its increasing multi-level politicization center on legitimacy.

But what is legitimacy in the EU? This has long been a matter of debate. Up until the current cascading series of crises, while some scholars argued that the apolitical/technocratic EU was indeed democratically legitimate because of its policy outcomes and governance procedures (e.g., Majone 1998; Moravcsik 2002), others contended that the EU suffered from a ‘democratic deficit’ because of its lack of ‘politics’ (e.g., Scharpf 1999; Hix 2008; Schmidt 2006). Since 2010, however, with the onset of the Eurozone crisis, most scholars now see the EU as lacking in legitimacy on all grounds—politics, policies, and processes (e.g., Scharpf 2013; Schmidt 2013, 2016; Curtin and Crum 2015). In the language of EU democratic systems theorists, these translate into concerns about the EU’s output legitimacy, focused on policy effectiveness and performance; the EU’s input legitimacy, centered on citizens’ political participation and governing elites’ responsiveness (Scharpf 1999); and the EU’s throughput legitimacy, concentrated on the quality of the governance processes, including their efficacy, accountability, transparency, inclusiveness and openness to interest consultation (Schmidt 2013).

In the early years, theorists of EU integration assumed that the only legitimacy possible for the EU was ‘output’ legitimacy, based on good economic and social performance—whether by serving national interests (Keohane and Hoffmann 1991), satisfying domestic constituencies (Moravcsik 1998), or providing beneficial policies for all (Haas 1958; Sandholtz and Stone Sweet 1998). Over time, however, came an increasing focus on the quality of the governance processes under the influence of neo-liberal economic philosophy, which favored technocratic throughput over popular input to produce optimal output (e.g., Majone 2001). As a result, throughput legitimacy often joined output legitimacy (or was even conjoined with it) under the assumption that this enhanced policy effectiveness (Schmidt 2013). Such a focus on policy and process has largely been seen as responsible for the depoliticization of EU policymaking, in which neo-liberal policies have been presented as technical and neutral, such that TINA, there is no alternative, and therefore no political debate necessary—or possible (Fawcett and Marsh 2014; Schmidt and Thatcher 2013).

But while such ‘depoliticization’ may have long characterized EU-level governance, politics—along with input legitimacy—has remained primarily at the national level. Despite the fact that EU-level input legitimacy has often been ascribed to the Council via member states’ indirect representation of their citizens and to the EP through their direct elective representation of the citizens, these don’t compare to national input legitimacy. The Council is not a representative arena *per se*, but rather a bargaining or deliberative arena in which member state leaders represent their countries’ interests and their citizens’ concerns. In contrast, the EP is indeed a representative arena, but it is only marginally representative, given the high rate of voter abstention and low level of citizen awareness or engagement with it (Scharpf 1999; Crum and Curtin 2015). As a result, input legitimacy has remained largely at the national level. But the problem here is that as the EU has integrated increasingly deeply, it has eroded national input legitimacy and therefore democracy by encroaching more and more on national decision-making. EU legitimacy has come into question even more than before in consequence, as populist-inspired politicization—which claims political legitimacy (input) —now challenges technocratic-driven depoliticization—which had assumed that good policy performance (output) and quality procedures (throughput) was sufficient for legitimacy. The result is that mainstream politics in the EU has found itself under attack from two sides: the rise of populist parties on the one hand, the rise of technocracy on the other (Caramani 2017). The only thing these two forces hold in common is their rejection of mainstream party politics, their increasingly negative impact on such politics, and their deleterious effects on democratic legitimacy (Zürn 2016; Kriesi 2016; Hobolt 2015).

The EU’s impact on member state democracy initially made for what Schmidt (2006) had characterized over a decade ago as national ‘politics *without* policy,’ as more and more responsibility for decisions has been moved up to the EU-level from the national in policy area after policy area. This Europeanization of national policies has also led to increasing politicization of the EU as an issue (De Wilde and Zürn 2012; Hurrelman et al. 2015; Zürn 2016; Kriesi 2016; Hutter and Kriesi 2016), in particular with the rise of populist political extremes contesting the EU’s legitimacy (Kriesi 2014). In the most contentious EU-related policy areas, such politicization has today engendered what we could call national ‘politics *against* (EU) policy—or even ‘politics *against* (EU) polity’ in the case of Brexit and some of the more extreme Euroskeptic parties. At the same time, Schmidt’s (2006) characterization of the EU level as consisting of ‘policy *without* politics,’ based on long-standing EU preferences for apolitical and/or technocratic decision-making, also no longer fully describes EU governance today. The increasingly politically charged nature of interrelationships within as well as between EU institutional actors means that the EU-level has moved to ‘policy *with* politics’ in more contentious areas.

## FROM ‘POLITICS *WITHOUT* POLICY’ TO ‘POLITICS *AGAINST* POLICY’ IN THE MEMBER STATES

Politicization has been most apparent at the national level, where citizens have gone from the ‘permissive consensus’ of the past to the current ‘constraining dissensus’ (Hooghe and Marks 2009). National electorates have grown more and more dissatisfied with leaders who implement EU policies regardless of their expressed wishes, with poor results. As Peter Mair (2013) has put it, national governments have been torn between being ‘responsive’ to citizens, by fulfilling their electoral promises, and acting ‘responsibly,’ by adhering to supranational commitments. In a globalizing and Europeanizing world, they have opted for responsibility over responsiveness to the displeasure of growing numbers of citizens. To express their discontent, electorates have more and more frequently voted to turn out incumbent governments, to bring in populist parties on the extremes (Hutter et al., 2016), or to vote down positive EU-related referenda (Schimmelfennig, this special issue). Rising Euroskepticism and anti-EU as well as anti-euro feeling is another manifestation of increasing national political volatility (Kriesi 2016; Hobolt 2015), as are the dramatic changes in party alignments across Europe (Hutter and Kriesi, this special issue).

In the national level’s long-standing ‘politics without policy,’ national debates along the left/right divide have been increasingly emptied of substance in areas where policies have moved up to the EU-level (Schmidt 2006). In consequence, political (input) legitimacy has come into question. Citizens’ political participation (input) occurs primarily at the national level and has little direct impact on EU policy or processes—even if it can have a significant indirect effect through governing elites’ positions in the Council.

As a result, citizens have felt themselves disenfranchised, with no effective voice on policies or policymaking, and with little control over politicians other than in the voting booth. Eurobarometer polls (EB 2007-2018) show that EU respondents have long considered that their voices did not count and that trust in national governments and EU governance both dropped precipitously. For the citizens, the problem is that even when they ‘throw the rascals out’ in protest, the satisfaction is short-lived, as the newly elected politicians, after promising to reverse the policies of their predecessors, end up applying the same policies. This helps explain why, across Europe, we find the rise and rise of populist parties with Euroskeptic ideas and delegitimizing discourses excoriating political elites for the policies that they claim don’t work (making for output illegitimacy), the processes that they claim are corrupt and unaccountable (ensuring throughput

illegitimacy), and the politics that they claim are unrepresentative (entailing input illegitimacy). This is at the basis of national ‘politics *against* (EU) policy.’

Note, however, that such feelings (and the realities) of disenfranchisement are not only due to the EU’s multi-level political system. While Brexit was probably the *summum* of the EU’s populist revolt—until the Italian election of March 2018, when the euroskeptics won a governing majority—Trump’s election in the US was fueled by very much the same sentiments. ‘Politics *against* policy’ has been a growing trend for advanced industrialized countries generally, and not just the EU. That discontent is in part a consequence of the increasing supranationalization of decision-making in an era of globalization, where governments have exchanged national autonomy for shared supranational authority in order to regain control over the forces they themselves unleashed through neo-liberal policies of liberalization and deregulation (see, e.g., de Wilde and Zürn 2012; Schmidt and Thatcher 2013; Zürn, this special issue).

The difference between most advanced industrialized countries and EU member states is that other countries retain a certain modicum of autonomy and control because they remain sovereign. Their politically elected governments are able to choose to accept, to contest, or even not to implement policies of which they (or their citizens) disapprove. This reinforces political (input) legitimacy. EU member states, having pooled their sovereignty by giving up autonomy and control for the EU’s shared authority, cannot do this, given the role of EU institutions in enforcing the rules through Commission oversight, ECJ opinions, and the national courts (S. Schmidt 2018). The extent of EU-level globalization could therefore seem to be a case of what Dani Rodrik (2011) has termed ‘hyperglobalization.’ But if so, then the EU may very well constitute an extreme example of Rodrik’s trilemma (see Crum 2013), in particular in the case of Eurozone governance (Nicoli 2017). Countries under conditions of hyper-globalization normally choose between giving up national sovereignty or national democracy. In the hyper-Europeanization of Eurozone governance, some countries have risked losing both sovereignty and democracy, as in the case of Greece, while other countries could be seen to have retained both, arguably the case of Germany (Matthijs 2016).

#### **FROM ‘POLICY *WITHOUT* POLITICS’ TO ‘POLICY *WITH* POLITICS’ IN THE EU**

National level politics *against* policy has had major spillover effects on EU policymaking. In the Council, member state leaders now pay much closer attention to citizen concerns and their own electoral interests than in the past. The Commission, the European Central Bank, and the European Parliament all now seek to communicate and legitimate their actions to the wider public on an on-going basis, keenly aware of the political importance of public perceptions.



But politics in the EU goes beyond these direct national linkages, having also invaded the intra and inter-institutional dynamics of EU-level decision-making. As integration has deepened, EU actors have become more interdependent, with long-standing relations of cooperation now riven in many domains by greater contestation. The dynamics of contestation among EU actors involves political struggles not only over interest-based power and influence but also over which policy ideas are deemed most (output) effective and (input) legitimate. The result is more politically charged EU governance existing alongside national-level politicization.

This represents a major change from the early years of the EU, when it was seen as apolitical and technocratic. In the EU-level's long-standing 'policy without politics,' the (input) politics of the left and right was mostly circumvented in EU decision-making. Partisan politics was overshadowed by the politics of national interests in the Council, the politics of the public interest in the European Parliament, and the politics of organized interests in Commission policy formulation or of technocratic interests in policy implementation (Schmidt 2006: 21–29, 158-162).

Although much of this characterization still remains accurate today in many areas of EU governance, national level politicization has had an impact. In the Council, even if partisan politics *per se* remains largely absent, the politics of nationally partisan governments has infected Council decisions. Individual governments have been able to impose their preferences through threatened (or actual) vetoes of impending legislation, often the case of the UK pre-Brexit, and through refusal to agree to and/or implement legislation, the case of populist governments in Central and Eastern Europe on aspects of refugee and immigration policy. At the same time, coalitions of member states have been able to gain agreement for their preferences, as the result of coercive threats (e.g., Schimmelfennig 2015) or deliberative persuasion (Puetter 2012). A case in point is the Eurozone, with its restrictive budgetary policies and structural reforms that were pushed by a Northern European alliance led by Germany (Blyth 2013; Crum 2013; Schimmelfennig 2015).

In the EP, bottom-up politicization has arrived first and foremost in the form of the larger presence of populist representatives elected in the 2009 elections. Even though their actual presence has had minimal impact on EP policies (so far), it has given populists a EU platform from which to speak to their national constituencies. Moreover, although the grand coalition of center-left and center-right has so far continued to privilege the politics of the public interest, its sensitivity to the political (input) concerns of the citizens has meant that it has increasingly made public pronouncements on the political issues of the day, such as the refugee crisis and the Eurozone crisis, often accompanied by scathing

critiques of the Council, the ECB, and the Commission through hearings and in reports (Héritier et al. 2016).

While the so-called non-majoritarian institutions, including supranational actors such as the Commission, the ECB, the ESM (European Stability Mechanism), and other regulatory agencies, have not experienced the same degree of politicization as the majoritarian institutions of the EU, politics has nonetheless exerted its influence. Such politics involves the direct but diffuse influence of national politics (generalized from across the member states). As non-majoritarian institutions have become ever more aware of and concerned by public sentiment about the EU, they have become increasingly intent on appearing responsive to politically salient issues so as to improve public perceptions of output legitimacy (Hartlapp et al., 2014: 229-230; Rauh 2016). Concerns about national level politicization have also led EU officials to increasingly communicate with the public directly—to inform the citizens of EU actions as well as to legitimate those actions (Biegón 2013). An early example of this was the Commission's 'Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue, and Debate,' launched in 2005 following the failure of the Constitutional Treaty, which sought to introduce more input legitimacy into EU decision-making through democratic consultation.

Yet another way in which the Commission in particular has responded to politicization from the bottom up has entailed revising its perceived ambitions for the EU, which have become more modest. Rather than pushing the politically sensitive aspiration to 'ever closer union,' the Commission has now become more focused on core goals, and has been more interested in better accomplishing its main tasks (Peterson 2015; see also Hodson 2015). As such, the Commission's ideas and institutional entrepreneurship have focused on making European integration work better, whether or not this serves its specific power and interests (Bauer and Becker 2014; Dehousse 2016). At the same time that it has thus been in search of output legitimacy via more effective policies, the Commission has also sought to improve throughput legitimacy via more accountable, transparent, and inclusive policymaking processes (Schmidt 2013), for example, in its expert committees (Sabel and Zeitlin 2010).

Politicization also comes through the deeper intensity of interactions between majoritarian and non-majoritarian institutions. Such politics 'at the top' is particularly manifest in the greater pressure from majoritarian bodies—both the Council and the EP—on non-majoritarian institutions such as the Commission and the ECB to do their bidding. The Council, for one, has deliberately sought to take back control through the creation of *de novo* regulatory bodies outside the main EU institutions, intended to contain if not reduce Commission powers (Puetter 2012; Bickerton et al. 2015; Fabbrini 2016). This has involved not only keeping the Commission out of those bodies but also putting the

member states *qua* member states *in*, for instance by ensuring their representation on the governing boards, as in the cases of the ECB and ESM (Hodson 2015).

Even the ECB, as the most insulated from the political interference of other EU actors because of its charter-based autonomy, has nonetheless become more ‘political.’ Not only has it become more politically strategic but it has also become much more politically interactive ‘at the top’ in its coordination with other EU institutional actors (Schmidt 2016). Such interaction was not the case at its founding, when the first two presidents, intent on maintaining the institution’s ‘credibility,’ avoided interaction with the member state leaders in the Council for fear of even the appearance of allowing political considerations to influence its decisions. In recent years, however, the ECB president has opened up dialogue with the more powerful governments to gain tacit agreement for politically sensitive departures from orthodox *ordo-liberal* monetary policy—most notably just prior to ECB President Draghi’s announcement that he would do ‘whatever it takes’ to save the euro (Spiegel 2014).

The EP has also become an increasingly political actor in the inter-institutional dynamics ‘at the top.’ Most importantly, politics comes in through the EP’s role in co-decision processes via the ‘trilogues’ with Council and Commission, in which the EP has increasingly pushed its own political agenda (Roederer-Rynning and Greenwood, 2015; Héritier et al. 2016). But even in areas where the EP has had little remit, it has successfully been engaged in ‘politicization by stealth,’ in efforts to extend its power beyond the provisions of the Lisbon Treaty (Meissner and Schoeller, this special issue). EP politics has also entailed greater scrutiny of other EU institutional actors through investigative committees and close questioning in public hearings, as mentioned above. Politics additionally comes in as a result of other EU actors increasingly looking to their interactions with the EP as ways to reinforce their input legitimacy, using it as a forum of accountability—something ECB President Draghi made clear in his speech to the EP in November 2015. Finally, the EP’s 2009 successful election push on the *Spitzenkandidat*, in which it insisted that the leader of the majority party be named President of the Commission, created a direct ‘political’ (input) link between the EP and the Commission (Dinan 2015).

### **POLITICALLY CHARGED GOVERNANCE IN THE EUROZONE CRISIS**

The Eurozone crisis has only exacerbated such politicization and, with it, questions of legitimacy. Especially at the inception of the crisis, all three kinds of legitimacy came increasingly into question. The lack of EU-level political debate (input), combined with governance processes that included intergovernmental decision-making by the Council in

closed-door bargaining sessions, supranational rules elaboration and implementation by the Commission, and the relative absence of the EP in most Eurozone decisions (throughput), conspired to make the policies focused on ‘governing by the rules and ruling by the numbers’ appear apolitical and technocratic. But they were indeed political, and highly conservative at that, given demands that member states follow ordo-liberal stability rules of austerity and implement neo-liberal structural reforms (Schmidt 2016). They also engendered increasing political tensions among member states, in particular Northern European ‘creditors’ versus Southern European ‘debtors.’ The policies themselves proved largely ineffective at solving the crisis since they generated poor results (output), as evidenced by declining macroeconomic performance along with increases in unemployment and poverty (Blyth 2013). This helps explain why, since the Eurozone crisis began up until only relatively recently, citizens’ attitudes towards both their national governments and the EU deteriorated dramatically in most countries, in lock step with their economies.

### *The Council*

Political contestation in the Council centered on member states’ disagreements with regard to their ideas about which policies would produce the best outcomes (output legitimacy) in what ways (throughput legitimacy) while serving the best interests of their citizens (input legitimacy). At the inception of the crisis, while the markets waited for EU member state leaders to act as they slowly ratcheted up their bets against Greek debt, the main contest was between Sarkozy and Merkel. The two had very different political-economic visions of what to do, with discourses to match. While Sarkozy was in neo-Keynesian mode, pushing for quick rescue at whatever cost by promoting continued fiscal stimulus in the name of output legitimacy, Merkel resisted doing anything at all. Pure political calculation was clearly in play, as Merkel delayed action in the hopes that Greece would tighten its own belt sufficiently to calm the markets while allowing her party to win the Nord Rhine Westphalia elections on 9 May 2010—a gross miscalculation. Her main legitimacy concerns seemed to be input-related, and national, as she openly worried that the German Constitutional Court might block a Greek bailout on German constitutional grounds while her statements catered to the media feeding frenzy regarding ‘Germans who save’ versus the ‘lazy Greeks.’ To her citizens as well as to Council members, she maintained that Germany would not pay for Greek debt and that she was not about to agree to a ‘transfer union,’ claiming this would violate her promises to her electorate as well as the legal prescriptions of the treaties.

But once Merkel finally did agree to a rescue, with a loan bailout for Greece and a loan bailout mechanism for other countries at risk of contagion, she insisted in exchange on reinforcing the rules of the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP). This essentially meant

following German ordo-liberal ideas on policies and processes, in marked contrast with the neo-Keynesian ideas of Sarkozy in the run-up to agreement. Merkel argued that the best way out of crisis would come from austerity policies to rapidly reduce debt along with structural reform for countries in trouble (output legitimacy) while reinforcing the stability-based oversight rules of the SGP to monitor member state behavior (throughput legitimacy). Support from a coalition including other Northern European countries and the UK enabled German ideas to win the day. Even Sarkozy belatedly came on board, relieved that something would finally be done to ‘save the euro,’ and cognizant that this was also electorally useful for him with his conservative constituency in France (Crespy and Schmidt 2014). The result was that ‘Merkozy’ dominated for the next year and a half, with austerity policies and structural reform the *mot d’ordre*, and little public contestation from member state leaders.

Toward the end of 2011, however, as the EU economy continued to deteriorate while national politics became increasingly volatile—as populist parties grew, incumbent governments were defeated, and weak countries fell like dominoes under market attack—the political dynamics among member state leaders in the Council began changing. Mario Monti, the newly appointed ‘technical’ Prime Minister went to Brussels as well as to Germany to plead the case for growth; and the Socialist candidate for President of France, François Hollande, took up the rallying cry in his campaign in early 2012. Once elected President, Hollande pushed further for growth in meetings of the European Council, while Monti continued his pressure. The result was a lot more talk of growth—in contrast to the stability discourse—although little was actually done. Nonetheless, political communication had changed, most notably by the staunch supporter of stability herself, Chancellor Merkel, who now talked of the importance of growth *and* stability. And this was a message taken to heart by the Commission in its oversight function.

Only in 2014 did the discourse change yet again. This time, the new Italian Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi, came to Brussels with demands for greater flexibility in the application of the rules, which was echoed by Hollande. And again, with much hesitation and political contestation from Merkel, flexibility was also added to the discourse, on condition that it remained ‘within the stability rules.’ Here too, the discourse made a difference. It lent support to the Commission, which had been reinterpreting the rules increasingly flexibly since 2012 without admitting it, and which had been under fire for overstepping its authority in doing so from Northern European finance ministers in the Eurogroup.

### ***The Commission***

The Commission has a difficult role to play, given that it is at one and the same time an independent executive—responsible for the initiation of legislation and for acting as ‘Guardian of the Treaties’—and a subordinate bureaucracy—charged to ‘execute’ the decisions of the Council, the ultimate political authority, and increasingly the EP in co-decision with the Council. The Eurozone crisis has intensified the contradictions in the role. At the same time that the Commission’s enhanced oversight responsibilities in the European Semester have given it a tremendous amount of ‘political’ discretion to make decisions, such decisions are subject to member states’ ability to amend most of them.

Politics has of course always been present to some extent in Commission dealings with member states in the Council. But it has only been since the mid 2000s that partisan politics has been acknowledged, with the appointment of José Manuel Barroso as President of the Commission because his political ‘color’ reflected that of the majority in the newly elected 2004 EP. But what ‘politics’ means for the Commission has changed over time both within the Presidency of Manuel Barroso (2004-2014) and between it and that of Jean-Claude Juncker (2015-2019). If the Barroso Commission at the onset of the Euro crisis was often seen as a ‘secretariat’ to the Council, by the end of Barroso’s term it was regarded as anything but. Not only did it increasingly exercise discretion in its judgments on the European Semester, by reinterpreting the rules ‘by stealth’ in order to improve performance—thereby serving output legitimacy to the detriment of (throughput) accountability (Schmidt 2016). It also acted as a ‘policy entrepreneur,’ for example, by joining with the ECB to push Banking Union (Bauer and Becker 2014; Dehousse 2016).

But however ‘political’ the Barroso Commission may have appeared to members of the Council, the changeover from the Barroso to the Juncker Commission constituted a difference in kind. Institutional as well as discursive transformations were in evidence as a result of differences in policy agenda and in discourses of legitimation. Institutionally, Barroso was appointed in 2004 by a Council that took into account the political orientation of the majority. In contrast, Juncker was the choice of a Council that found itself unable to circumvent the EP’s clever campaign to have the *Spitzenkandidat* named as Commission President (Dinan 2015).

The politics also changed. Barroso went to great lengths to maintain the fiction of an apolitical Commission. Juncker instead announced in the electoral campaign of 2014 that he would be a ‘political’ leader rather than a technical one, meaning political sensitivity to citizen’s (input) concerns and preferences. The differences in the ‘political’ orientation of the Presidents come out clearly in their discourses of policy legitimation. Whereas Barroso’s State of the Union Addresses speeches focused on the ‘rationality’ of EU decisions mainly in terms of economic outputs, Juncker’s were more input-based,

referencing democracy and popular sovereignty (Pansardi and Battagazzorre 2018). Moreover, intent on making sure that the Commission was no longer seen as ‘the bad guy’ (Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018: 168), Juncker committed himself to socializing the European Semester while introducing greater flexibility, albeit with more clearly specified ‘rules’ for flexibility (European Commission 2015), in order to avoid the problems of the Barroso Commission with regard to throughput legitimacy. He also sought to push the Council further through innovative suggestions for the future of the EU, as in the Five Presidents’ report (Juncker et al. 2015).

The Commission has naturally had to be sensitive to the Council’s authority not only because of how the Council might react as a body to its decisions but also how individual or groups of member states may respond. This can often push in opposing directions. One instance of such pressure was French President Hollande’s angry outburst against the Commission’s 2013 European Semester recommendations on structural reforms of the French pension system on the grounds that: ‘The Commission has no right to dictate what we have to do’ (*Le Figaro*, May 29, 2013).

But while the Commission has to pay attention to French and Southern European leaders pushing for growth and flexibility, it also has to deal with Northern European leaders demanding strict adherence to the rules. Northern European countries’ increasing opposition to flexibility came to a head in 2014, with Germany and Finland making a frontal attack on the Commission in an eight-page memo in which they claimed that the Commission used ‘a somewhat arbitrary approach’ in granting budgetary flexibility, and went so far as to suggest that ‘a separate pair of eyes’ was needed to ensure that the rules were properly applied (*Financial Times* 28 February, 2014). Matters were not helped in 2016, when Commission President Juncker quipped, when asked about (again) making exceptions to the rules for France, that it is: ‘Because it is France’ (Reuters, May 31, 2016). This, naturally, led to accusations by Northern European finance ministers in the Eurogroup and conservative politicians in the Council that the Commission President was playing politics, with political discretion exercised in the context of budgetary oversight for Southern European countries as well as France (*Der Spiegel* online, June 17, 2016).

In short, the Commission has to navigate very narrow ‘political straits.’ On one side they have member states under surveillance, seeking fiscal space for economic growth in order to respond to citizens’ demands while reducing their deficits and paying off their debts. On the other, they have member states pushing for stricter and more punitive application of the rules, in response to their own citizens’ worries about having to pay the debts of others. Note that not all of this is about national politics from the bottom up, though. It is also about political-economic beliefs centered on which kinds of policies will promote growth, and in what order to reform. The Commission has played a leading role in



arguing that risk sharing and risk reduction should go together, rather than the former being delayed until sufficient progress is made with the latter. Lines of battle are drawn not just between Northern and Southern European member states in the Council. They also occur also within the Commission itself, with ideational battles carried out using technical charts and graphs, and a ‘politics of numbers’ determining which countries benefited from calculations with regard, say, to structural deficits or to what counts as debt for a country’s balance sheet (Mabbett and Schelkle 2014).

## CONCLUSION

Our final question is whether such politicization is a good thing or a bad thing for EU governance. For the most part, this question has long divided scholars concerned mainly with input legitimacy, who have argued that politicization is a good thing, necessary for European integration to be accepted by national publics (E.g., Hix 2008; Hix and Hoyland 2013), and those centered on output legitimacy, who have seen it as a bad thing, making it increasingly difficult for the EU to produce effective policies because of conflicting preferences, or even to agree on the benefits of the outcomes (Scharpf 1999). By now, however, in particular since the Eurozone crisis, the refugee crisis, and Brexit, asking whether politicization is a good thing or a bad thing is almost beside the point since, like it or not, it is a ‘thing,’ and here to stay (Kriesi 2016; De Wilde and Zürn 2012; Hooghe and Marks 2009).

But if politicization is not going away, our final concern should be to analyze the differential effects of politicization. This is something that cannot be answered in general terms, since each policy area differs as to whether EU and national-level politicization helps or hinders legitimacy.

In the Eurozone crisis, for example, if we were to focus solely on the substance of Eurozone debates, we could argue that the mutual accusations among EU actors are politically delegitimizing—even leaving aside populist-related national politicization. But if instead we were to pay more attention to the discursive processes through which such contestation takes place, we could see a glimmer of hope.

EU governance, so long apolitical and technocratic, where disagreements were treated in private and deals remained behind closed doors, has changed. Discussions are more politically charged among EU actors, with differences debated in public. And all such actors seek to communicate so as to legitimate their positions directly to citizens. Such greater EU-level public deliberation and debate, however contentious, is in and of itself politically (input) legitimating.



But can the EU-level's new 'policy *with* politics,' with its more politically charged interactions, provide a response to national-level politicization? Not really. While the EU-level may gain in input legitimacy, it cannot resolve the problems of input legitimacy at the national level. Much the contrary, so long as the negative discourse among EU actors persists, it may further fuel the euro-skeptic populist extremes, in particular if the EU's multiple crises continue without resolution.

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