
Dissertation – Summary

EU supporters at a disadvantage? Party politicization of European integration in Austria

The aim of the dissertation is to study the party politicization of European integration in Austria. In particular, the dissertation seeks to explore conditions for the politicization of European integration as well as its manifestation in substantive terms. It thus provides an integrated approach to the study of party politicization that considers both *content* and *emphasis* as constitutive of the concept of issue politicization, whereas most research in the field only focuses on either of them.

Content refers to the specific concerns about European integration and the framing employed by parties in the politicization of the EU issue; *emphasis* refers to the degree of politicization in quantitative terms, i.e. the salience ascribed to the issue by different political actors according to which they will emphasize the issue. As argued in this dissertation, distinguishing between the two—while at the same time considering both—is of utmost analytical importance, since both connect to different strands of theory. The content of politicization is strongly linked to parties' issue-positioning that, in turn, is connected to the broader programmatic and ideological profile of a party that constrains parties' response to the issue of Europe. *Content* is therefore best understood by employing a cleavage perspective. *Emphasis*, on the other hand, largely overlaps with the concept of issue-salience and is dependent on strategic considerations related to party competition. The salience theory of party competition thus provides the theoretical foundation for exploring parties' emphasis on European integration in the politicization of the issue.

Learning more about the mechanisms behind and the manifestation of the politicization of Europe presupposes politicization to actually appear. Not least due to the comparatively high level of public Euroskepticism, the strength of a Euroskeptic party firmly established in the party system, and strong anti-EU coverage in the yellow press, Austria is a suitable case for the study of party politicization of European integration. As indicated in the title of the dissertation, the specific conditions in the Austrian political environment also account for adverse conditions for parties supportive of European integration in the process of politicization.

The dissertation is innovative in its empirical design by including a variety of data sources, combining different methods for analyzing politicization, and considering different arenas of party contestation. The empirical core focuses on the electoral arena, more specifically: general election campaigns, analyzing election manifestos, TV debates between rival candidates, and election posters. Broadening the empirical scope, the final chapter then turns to decision-making arenas by analyzing a selection of parliamentary debates and coalition agreements between governing parties.

A qualitative text analysis studies the content of politicization and distinguishes different facets of European integration instead of using one general pro- and anti-integration category. As argued here, this is very important, since EU politicization can take very different forms. The qualitative text analysis is complemented by a number of indicators—both qualitative and quantitative—shedding light on the emphasis each party devotes to the issue of Europe; this combination of indicators from different sources offers a more detailed and convincing picture of parties' emphasis on European integration compared to available—and often contradictory—data on parties' EU issue salience.

What patterns can be observed for the Austrian case regarding the content of the debate in the politicization of European integration? Scholars have hypothesized that the politicization of Europe will look differently depending on whether Euroskeptic parties are located at the left or at the right fringes of the political spectrum, i.e. distributional conflict in the former case and sovereignty/identity conflict in the latter case. For Austria we would thus expect a strong bias towards question of sovereignty and identity in the politicization of Europe, since party Euroskepticism has become a radical right phenomenon. The empirical findings demonstrate that over the course of time, concerns about national sovereignty and identity indeed become much more important, whereas the focus on particular policies and conflict about different policy alternatives diminishes. This is strongly related to changes in conflict configurations and changes in individual parties' emphasis on the issue: Disputes between parties shift from conflict within the left and the right block, respectively, towards conflict between EU supporters and opponents: In the 1990s, conflict not only appeared between Euroskeptics and EU supporters, but also among the latter group—in particular within the left/libertarian block (SPÖ, Greens, Liberals). This biased the debate towards questions of distribution and/or different policy priorities; from 2006 onwards, however, conflict about European integration first and foremost occurs between the radical right Eurokpetic parties and EU supporters, and the debate clearly shifts towards concerns about sovereignty/identity.

The results for Austrian general election campaigns thus show that despite a disadvantageous opportunity structure, EU supporters significantly informed the debate about Europe in Austria in the 1990s. Once they take a backseat in emphasizing the issue, however, the framing of the debate becomes clearly biased towards Euroskeptic radical right parties' thematic priorities and thus towards questions of national sovereignty. The findings also indicate a stronger polarization over the course of time in the debate about Europe, which very much reflects a fundamental debate about virtues and downsides of the EU, with pro-European parties being pressured to justify their support for European integration against attacks by the radical right Euroskeptics. The temporal trend thus clearly indicates an increase in anti-EU, radical right party politicization of Europe that in recent years has clearly put its stamp on the debate about European integration in the Austrian electoral arena.

The situation is different in decision-making arenas. Though the analysis of parliamentary debates over the course of time indicates stronger politicization and a polarization of conflict about European integration between parties—which is in line with the findings for the electoral arena—the impact on decision-making has remained limited so far. The analysis of coalition agreements showed that even in coalitions with one Euroskeptic partner, the government's stated policy program includes a strong commitment towards European integration in general and also on imminent decisions that further the widening and deepening of integration; this commitment is also reflected in Euroskeptic parties' voting behavior in parliament: While part of a coalition government, they voted in favor of EU treaties irrespective of their anti-EU rhetoric in the electoral arena. This clearly shows the limited room for maneuver for Euroskeptic governing parties in the governmental and parliamentary arenas. The political significance of increasingly Euroskeptic party politicization of European integration in Austria is thus confined to the electoral arena—at least so far.

Beside these results on the Austrian case, the dissertation also makes an important contribution to the broader study of party politicization of European integration: (a) It demonstrates the empirical relevance of an analytical distinction between the potential for conflict and the actual expression of the latter. (b) By considering both the *content* and *emphasis* as constitutive to the concept of politicization, the dissertation provides an integrated approach to the study of politicization that

points to the necessity of combining different strands of theories in order to provide for a better understanding of the manifestation of politicization as an empirical phenomenon. (c) The project at hand applies an innovative research design that considers a variety of different data and methods. This research strategy proves itself valuable, as indicated by the comparison of the empirical findings against other available data. (d) Though the analysis of election campaigns represents the empirical core of the study, the dissertation also makes an attempt to consider arenas of domestic decision-making. This is important insofar as it reveals that party response towards the EU issue can vary from one arena towards the other.

Politicization fulfills an important function in democratic politics. By broadening the audience towards the public, politicization makes visible conflict about an issue between political actors. It thus informs about the different political preferences and policy alternatives available in the party system. This linkage function is all the more important when it comes to EU policy making: The multi-level EU polity is very complex and strongly differs from citizens' experience of democracy at the member state level. Only when political parties include the issue of Europe in their policy repertoire for domestic competition will voters have a serious choice between different alternatives for the future development of European integration.

Focusing on the case of Austria, the dissertation has shown that once EU supporters avoid actively debating European integration matters in election campaigns, the politicization of the issue will be dominated by the anti-EU rhetoric of the radical right. Since recent political developments suggest that European integration will remain high on the public agenda, political parties striving for an ever closer union will need to find a way to actively engage (again) in the politicization of European integration—even under adverse electoral conditions. Otherwise they risk yielding the floor to those who already proclaim the failure of the EU project.