

The Politicization of European Integration in the Eurozone Crisis: Accounting for the Lack of Supranational Citizen Mobilization

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Abstract: While the Eurozone crisis has contributed to Europeanization trends in the domestic politics of EU member states, it has not to the same extent triggered citizen mobilization at the supranational level. Theories that treat politicization as an undifferentiated phenomenon tend to miss this important distinction. This article argues that the weakness of supranational mobilization it can be explained by factors that restrict the citizens' receptiveness for EU-related messages originating from political institutions, the media, or parties: limited familiarity with the EU, the perception that EU institutions are not the primary culprits for the crisis, and a weak sense of political efficacy when it comes to participation in EU level decision-making. These factors imply that politicization is, under present conditions, more likely to result in a renationalization than in a supranationalization of EU politics.

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Introduction

European integration, it is sometimes said, is perpetually in crisis. But rather than stifling the integration process, past crises have, at times, served as catalysts for propelling the European project forward (Kühnhardt 2009). It is not surprising, therefore, that a number of authors have expressed the hope that the Eurozone financial crisis which has preoccupied the European Union (EU) since 2010 might, in the long run, have similarly beneficial effects. Among the possible consequences of the crisis mentioned by these authors, its potential to accelerate the democratization of EU decision making plays a particularly prominent role (Habermas 2012, 44-53; Beck 2013, 66-86; Statham and Trenz 2014). According to this scenario, the crisis highlights the political relevance of the EU for the citizens' everyday lives, exposes the interconnections between European societies, and accentuates the EU's existing democratic deficiencies. It thus leads to increased public debates about EU politics and triggers more widespread practices of active supranational citizenship. As Jürgen Habermas has put it:

[T]he more the national populations realize, *and the media help them to realize*, how profoundly the decisions of the European Union pervade their daily lives, the more their interest in making use of their democratic rights also as EU citizens will increase. [...] Thus the logic of this development would imply that national citizens who *have* to accept a redistribution of burdens across national borders would also *want* to exercise democratic influence in their role as EU citizens over what their heads of government negotiate or agree upon in a legal grey area.” (Habermas 2012, 49-50, emphasis in original)

Four years into the Eurozone crisis, we are forced to conclude that this optimistic scenario has not become a reality. This is not to say that the crisis has not had any effects on the ways in which citizens relate to European integration. In fact, there is clear evidence of a remarkable *Europeanization of domestic politics* in Eurozone member states. Crisis-related decisions by national governments have been controversially discussed in national public spheres and

parliaments (Crespy and Schmidt 2013; Puntsher Riekmann and Wydra 2013; Closa and Maatsch 2014). In multiple instances, national governments have collapsed. In national elections, the crisis has been a prominent theme (Belot et al. 2013; Hutter and Kerscher 2014) and incumbents have become targets of harsh electoral punishment (Kriesi 2012; LeDuc and Pammett 2013). There have also been prominent instances of political protest, for instance the *indignados* movement in Spain or the collection of more than 37,000 signatures in support of a constitutional challenge to the European Stability Mechanism in Germany (Pianta 2013).

What we have not seen, however, at least not to the same extent, is a *mobilization of European citizens at the supranational level*. Protest events have remained largely national in character; with little transnational coordination and limited “European perspectives” in their messages, let alone an EU-wide focus (Ibid., 154). In the European Parliament (EP) election in May 2014, voter turnout edged up only marginally (from 47.0% in 2009 to 47.1% in 2014) – in spite of the media attention generated by the crisis and regardless of the attempts by EU level parties to personalize the election by naming candidates for the office of European Commission President. The election results also underscored the importance of domestic political contexts in shaping voting patterns. While Eurosceptic political parties did well in a number of member states, the election outcomes differed markedly from one member-state to the next; there was no consistent EU-wide partisan trend. In other words, while there has clearly been significant political mobilization of citizens in the context of the crisis, this mobilization has primarily occurred in the domestic realm. As Philip Genschel and Markus Jachtenfuchs (2014, 12) have put it, the crisis-induced politicization of EU affairs has “proceeded mostly in nationally segmented domestic publics instead of a transnationally integrated European public sphere”; it has engaged Europeans primarily in their role as national rather than EU citizens.

These developments are not only of central importance for the future of democracy in the EU (Baglioni and Hurrelmann 2014), they also represent a significant challenge to existing scholarship on the politicization of European integration. Why, we ask in this article, has the politicization triggered by the Eurozone crisis taken place largely at the domestic level, rather than mobilizing Europeans as EU citizens? We argue that this question can only be answered based on a differentiated conception of politicization that distinguishes different *objects, arenas and manifestations of politicization*, and with the help of a causal model that accounts for factors affecting the *citizens' receptiveness* for EU-related messages (Section I). We demonstrate the importance of these factors by reporting on evidence from public opinion surveys as well as from our own qualitative study of citizen discourses in four Eurozone states (Germany, Austria, Spain, and Ireland). After providing the methodological rationale for this approach (Section II), we argue that the lack of supranational politicization can be explained by the citizens' limited familiarity with EU level politics; attributions of responsibility for the Eurozone crisis that de-emphasize EU-level decision making; and a weak sense of political efficacy when it comes to EU politics (Section III). We close by emphasizing some of the implications that these patterns of politicization are likely to have for the future development of European integration.

Conceptual Considerations: Accounting for Different Patterns of Politicization

The concept of politicization was first introduced to European integration research in early neo-functional theories, which hypothesized that the growing saliency of European issues in political contestation would be one of the unintended consequences of the creation of regional institutions – a special case of “spillover”, as it were (Haas 1958, 11-19; Schmitter 1969). The concept was re-discovered in the early 2000s when scholars of multilevel governance, some of

them inspired by neo-functionalism, used it to make sense of the series of contentious EU Treaty referendums which indicated that the population's "permissive consensus" on European integration could no longer be taken for granted (Zürn 2006; Hooghe and Marks 2009).

These contributions have been hugely influential in EU Studies; they have helped establish politicization as one of the most vibrant research fields in the discipline. One of the shortcomings of this research, however, has been its relatively undifferentiated conception of politicization. There is widespread agreement in the recent literature that politicization is best approached as a matter of *salience of EU-related issues in political debates and decision-making processes*, expressing itself in the visibility of EU topics, the degree of controversy attached to them, and their ability to mobilize political engagement (De Wilde and Zürn 2012; Hutter and Grande 2014). However, the existing scholarship seldom distinguishes different types or patterns of politicization. In our view, this explains a number of inconsistencies in the findings and interpretations of existing studies (Hurrelmann, Gora and Wagner 2013); it also hampers the ability of existing politicization research to fully make sense of the political effects of the Eurozone crisis.

Objects, arenas, and manifestations of politicization

To move towards a more differentiated understanding of politicization, three kinds of distinctions are useful. The first is between various *objects of politicization*. After six decades of European integration, the internal complexity of the European construction has grown to such an extent that "the EU" can no longer be treated as one homogeneous issue that may or may not be politically salient. Rather, it seems appropriate to distinguish at least four potential objects of politicization: (a) *the EU as an organization*, including its ideational foundations, basic logic of

governance, and one's own country's membership; (b) *the EU's constitutional structure*, including its institutions, objectives and responsibilities, as well as decision-making procedures; (c) the *specific policy issues* that are currently on the agenda of the EU's legislative, executive, or judiciary institutions; as well as (d) the *effects of European integration on domestic politics*, that is, issues in national politics that emerge as an implication of EU membership.

All of these aspects of European integration may, secondly, become salient for various types of actors that inhabit different types of *political arenas*. In this respect, we may distinguish (a) *institutional arenas* at the core of the political system, which are populated by politicians (e.g., the European Parliament or national parliaments); (b) *intermediary arenas* linking political decision-making processes to the broader citizenry, which are dominated by participants with a professional interest in politics (political parties, interest groups, the media, etc.); and (c) *citizen arenas* in which laypeople engage in politics (in elections, in discussions with friends, etc.). While a lot of good research on politicization has focused on intermediary arenas – studying party manifestos, media debates and the like (e.g., Statham and Trenz 2012; Hutter and Grande 2014) – saliency of EU-related issues in citizen arenas constitutes the most far-reaching type of politicization, as it indicates that political engagement with the EU has reached beyond political elites and policy professionals.

Finally, it makes sense to distinguish different *manifestations of politicization*, in other words, types of expression in which it becomes evident – and researchable for social scientists. These include (a) *political attitudes* that can be tapped via public opinion research; (b) *political communication* that can be studied with methods of discourse analysis; and (c) *political activities* at different political levels, such as electoral participation, voting behavior, or protest activities that are susceptible to direct or indirect observation. All of these manifestations are obviously

interrelated, but empirical politicization research will usually focus primarily on one of them. Again, the last type of manifestation may be treated as the most profound, indicating that political engagement with the EU not only affects how people think and talk, but has had consequences for political behaviour.

Citizen receptiveness for EU-related messages

These distinctions allow us to formulate the research question of this article in a more precise fashion: We are interested in finding out why the Eurozone crisis has, at the *citizen level*, primarily manifested itself in *domestic political activities*, rather than activities at a supranational level. Existing explanatory models of politicization are of limited help in this respect. The most comprehensive attempt to theorize the emergence of politicization has been presented by Pieter de Wilde and Michael Zürn (2012). They describe the increasing authority of the EU as the main trigger of politicization (or independent variable), whose effects are mediated by what they call political opportunity structures (as intervening variables), including long-standing European integration narratives presented by a country's political elites (with "consistent" narratives being less likely to lead to politicization than "ambivalent" ones), media responsiveness to EU issues, political party strategies, as well as the presence or absence of institutional or situational opportunities, such as referendums or crises (Ibid., 139-145).

When applied to the Eurozone crisis, this model would predict a significant boost in politicization: After all, the crisis has not only highlighted the political importance of the EU's existing powers, but also resulted in a shift of further responsibilities to the EU (Schimmelfennig 2014). At the level of political opportunity structures, national narratives of European integration have, if anything, become more ambivalent even in traditionally pro-integration states such as

Germany, thus creating openings for explicit criticism of the EU; media responsiveness to EU decision-making has been higher than ever before in the EU's history; political parties at the national and European level have found it impossible to avoid taking position on EU-related issues (for instance, on supporting or opposing the bailouts and associated conditionality); and opportunities for political participation have existed in the form of elections both at the national and at the European level.¹ However, none of the factors identified by de Wilde and Zürn can convincingly account for the domestic rather than supranational focus of the resulting citizen mobilization.

One reason for this gap in the de Wilde and Zürn model, which is otherwise quite plausible, is that it does not differentiate between various arenas of politicization. When discussing their dependent variable, de Wilde and Zürn cite evidence especially from intermediary and citizen arenas, but they do not draw clear distinctions. All of the intervening variables in their model, on the other hand, seem to relate primarily to politicization in intermediary arenas, explaining why opinion leading elites (European integration narratives), political parties (party strategies) or media actors (media receptiveness) might be more or less prone to treat European integration as politically salient. This kind of intervening variable is not presented, however, for the citizens. What is missing, in other words, is attention to factors that affect the *citizens' receptiveness for EU-related messages*, which cannot be taken for granted even in a situation in which politicization in intermediary arenas has already occurred.

¹ All these developments might themselves be interpreted as evidence of politicization. However, de Wilde and Zürn treat them as pre-conditions of politicization, distinguishing between “readiness” to treat EU-related issues as politically salient (intermediary variable) and the actual expressions of salience in political discourse or activities, such as media reports or party manifestos (dependent variable) (de Wilde and Zürn 2012, 147). We adopt the same conception in the remainder of this article.

In a multilevel system that presents different types of participation opportunities, such factors of citizen receptiveness can account for differentiated patterns of political mobilization. As we want to argue in this article, the willingness of citizens to make use of participation opportunities at a given political level depends on (a) their *familiarity* with this political level's institutions and policies, which encompasses aspects such as awareness, knowledge, and interest, (b) the perceived *responsibility* of this level for the political problems considered most pressing, and (c) the citizens' *sense of political efficacy* at this level, that is, their perceived ability to bring about change through participation. In the context of the Eurozone crisis, we argue that all of these factors privileged national over supranational channels of mobilization.

Methodological Framework: Enriching Quantitative Evidence with Qualitative Insights

In order to make this claim empirically plausible, we have adopted a two-pronged methodology: First, we use selected quantitative indicators from public opinion surveys; secondly, we incorporate qualitative analysis from focus groups that we conducted in four Eurozone member states. While both methods may in principle be used to directly measure the attitudinal or discursive manifestations of politicization, we employ them here to make sense of intermediary factors that motivate political activities – political knowledge and interest, attributions of political responsibility, and attitudes towards political participation.

All of these factors represent standard items of public opinion surveys, which therefore represent a logical starting point for our analysis. Survey-based public opinion analysis has been an established part of the methodological toolkit of European integration research since the 1970s (for an overview, see Hooghe and Marks 2005; McLaren 2006). Its main advantages lie in the statistical representativeness and generalizability of its findings, as well as the ease of making

longitudinal and cross-national comparisons. However, when it comes to political issues of limited or questionable salience for the citizens – such as, at least traditionally, European integration – survey methods have the tendency to induce respondents to “make things up as they go along” (Zaller 1992, 76-96), without providing clear indications on whether a certain response represents deeply held convictions or an unreflected ad-hoc attempt to respond to a question in a way that avoids embarrassment. In order to understand motivations for political participation (or non-participation) in the complex context of the EU’s multilevel system, it is therefore useful to complement public opinion analysis with qualitative methods that provide a better insight into how people discursively relate to the EU, and how their EU-related reality constructions are developed, discussed and modified in interactions with others.

The qualitative evidence that will be presented in this paper has been generated in sixteen focus groups conducted in December 2013. As a research tool, focus groups enjoy a growing popularity in EU Studies (for recent examples, see White 2011; Duchesne et al. 2013; Van Ingelgom 2014). Their main value added, compared to public opinion research, lies in their ability to analyze deliberately triggered, but still relatively “non-artificial” communication of ordinary people, thus generating insights into “the process of people constructing and negotiating shared meaning, using their natural vocabulary” (Gamson 1992, 17). Even though focus groups do not produce results that are statistically representative of the whole population, they provide deeper insights into the ways in which people make sense of a specific topic.

For the present study, we conducted focus groups in the capital cities of four Eurozone states – two that had to accept bailouts and the associated conditions (Spain and Ireland), two that provided funds to finance these rescue measures (Germany and Austria). Even though the Eurozone crisis has highlighted the political importance of EU politics in all of these states, it is

plausible to expect that citizen reactions are shaped by the contributor/recipient dynamics that developed during the crisis. We conducted four focus groups in each national capital; each group was composed of eight to ten participants. Participants were recruited, under our supervision, by local public opinion research firms, using their existing panels.² In each country, two of the groups were composed of citizens with a postsecondary education degree, while the other two groups consisted of citizens without such a degree. All groups were evenly mixed with respect to other demographic characteristics (such as gender and age). In the group discussions, participants were first asked about the political events that had recently excited them; a second question then focused specifically on the economic problems of recent years. These questions were designed to find out whether EU-related issues – or the EU dimension of multilevel issues such as the economic crisis – were mentioned spontaneously. In subsequent rounds of questioning, participants were asked explicitly about their view of the EU, their country’s EU membership, their personal attachment to “Europe”, EU institutions and policies, opportunities for exercising influence on EU decisions, as well as objectives for the EU’s further development. The focus groups provide rich evidence on a number of EU-related topics; in the following sections, we only report on those that are relevant to this paper.

Empirical Results: Factors Inhibiting Supranational Citizen Mobilization

What insights do public opinion research and focus groups provide that might help make sense of the patterns of citizen mobilization in the context of the Eurozone crisis? As mentioned in the

² The institutions we cooperated with were *Teleinform Estudios de Mercado* in Madrid, *The Grafton Suite* in Dublin, *items Marktforschung* in Berlin, and *meinungsraum.at* in Vienna. Our strategy of recruitment resulted in groups whose participants were, for the most part, already familiar with focus group settings. However, we made sure that they had not participated in groups on similar topics or with similar research objectives.

conceptual section, we want to focus on three factors that influence the citizens' receptiveness for EU-related messages originating from institutional or intermediary arenas, namely their familiarity with the EU, the extent to which political responsibility for the crisis is attributed to it, and their perceived sense of political efficacy in EU decision-making.

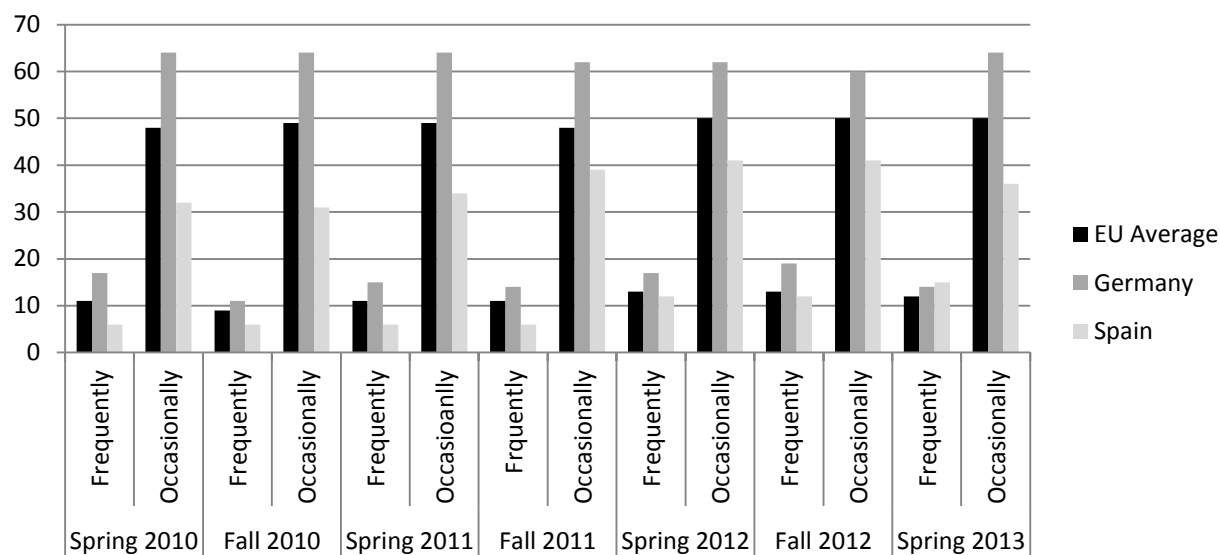
Familiarity with the EU: Awareness, knowledge and interest

A first factor that might prevent people from engaging in political activities at the supranational level could be that they are simply not sufficiently familiar with it. In other words, it makes sense to start by inquiring how well citizens actually understand – and want to understand – the EU. This familiarity entails *awareness* of its existence, and of the ways in which the EU affects the lives of the citizens, a basic *knowledge* of the main EU institutions and policies, as well as some degree of interest in the EU and a willingness to observe its political processes.

Public opinion figures provide some first insights into the political importance that citizens attribute to the EU. One interesting measure, in this respect, is the (self-reported) frequency with which European political affairs are discussed with friends and family. Figure 1 displays some recent evidence, with an emphasis on two member states (Germany and Spain). The first thing to note is the low level of respondents who report that they “frequently” discuss European political matters; frequent discussions about national political affairs, according to the respondents, occur about twice as often. Secondly, there is a significant number of respondents who say that they “occasionally” discuss the EU, though with large national differences. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the trend seems to stay very much the same throughout the period in which the economic crisis became prominent in the media, which suggests that the crisis did

not generate additional interest in EU politics. This might be seen as quite surprising. Our focus groups can provide some additional insights that help understand these observations.

Figure 1: Frequency of discussing European political matters with friends and family, EU average, Germany and Spain (Source: Eurobarometer 73-79)



First, they clearly indicate that citizens possess a basic *awareness* of the existence of the EU and its political influence. Nearly all groups in our four countries recognized the importance of the EU, and the extent to which it makes decisions that affect the citizens' lives. Citizens also had fairly consolidated opinions about the EU as an organization. They generally commented favourably on the idea of European integration, but judged the EU itself quite negatively, citing factors such as zealous overregulation, needless standardization, self-serving bureaucracy, and a lack of respect for national differences. Our participants also had clear opinions about the benefits and costs of their own country's EU membership; their assessments combined positive aspects (most notably, freedom to travel, but some participants also mentioned peace and

stability) with negative ones (most notably, a loss of national sovereignty, evident for instance in unregulated migration and the implementation of austerity measures).

Nonetheless, most participants at the same time acknowledged that they lack the proper understanding of how the EU makes decisions and the ways in which it actually functions. This *lack of knowledge* became evident both objectively in the many factual mistakes that the participants made when talking about the EU, and subjectively in admissions, even from well-educated participants, that they perceived the EU as an “undistinguished whole” without adequately understanding institutions, responsibilities and procedures. The following exchange from one of our Dublin groups illustrates this point:

Moderator: Are you familiar with the specific institutions of the European Union?

Desmond: Okay, how many of them are there?

Clare: Let's say, when people mention them, I'll be like: “oh yeah, I've heard that, oh yeah, I know that”...

Seamus: ...the European Parliament... the Commission...the European Central Bank is somehow related, isn't it?

Fiona: The Court of Human Rights.

Desmond: But I'm sure there are loads and loads of kind of subsets of every organization up there... to dispense of some of this stuff, and doing that and fixing that. I wouldn't know half of those.

Clare: But I think they interconnect a lot of them with each other. It seems a little bit complex and, you know, it's not always clear.

This exchange reveals that even the recognition of the names of the main EU institutions does not mean in any way an understanding – even a basic one – of how the EU is structured or makes decisions. To be sure, citizen knowledge of national politics might also be quite limited. But many of our participants stressed, even without being explicitly asked, that they felt much less knowledgeable about the European than about the national level of decision making. Here is how the issue came up in one of our Austrian groups:

Fritz: I have too little contact, information – at least that’s how it is for me – and I always have to ponder, when someone is in the media, who is that, what is he responsible for? So, either they are not sufficiently present in the eyes of the citizens, or...

Marianne: [...] I don’t read everything that’s written in the newspapers, but if I have to find it, because I have to deal with such things in my job as well, then I’ll be able to. That means, I also see the EU only as a whole, but I do know the different institutions, the different ones that exist, but who is really responsible for what...

Fritz: But that’s something that one does master as an Austrian, that one knows what the Federal President can decide, what the Chancellor can decide, what a Minister can decide, and what a Member of Parliament can decide. But when it comes from Brussels, it gets vague.

This excerpt already indicates that the lack of proper knowledge about the EU and its main institutions is related to the *interest* that people may have (or not have) in relation to European affairs. Like Marianne in the exchange above, many participants in our focus groups expressed mixed feelings about this particular aspect: they recognized that to be informed about the EU is an important thing (or even a duty), but also acknowledged that often they do not have the energy or the time to actually do it. Some participants also explained that they preferred to focus on national or local affairs, complaining that the EU was either too remote or too complex to understand. Finally, many participants pointed out the lack of proper channels and adequate information about the EU that is presented in a simple, clear manner and easy to understand by the average European. This is clear in the following exchange from one of our Dublin groups:

Kaitlyn: I definitely don't feel that well informed but I suppose it's kind of what you were saying earlier – I don't know if I would go looking for that information, so you know I just get what comes to me in the news [...]. But, you know, it's kind of [...] just bits and pieces and it's coming in to a context of [...] confusion anyway. So it's not the clearest picture of information, but I'm not really seeking it out because I don't really feel like I have a huge stake in what happens in Europe. Unless there's something in particular that's unusually interesting going on, but that's how I kind of feel about it.

Norah: I'd feel very similar... I pick up bits in the news, but they are, kind of, a bit between two stools because my baseline level of information is rudimentary, I guess. So a lot, I'm sure, passes me by [...] and I don't know how to counter that.

All the focus groups in our four different countries exhibit this combination of general awareness for the EU as an organization, but limited knowledge of concrete EU institutions and policies. They also suggest a weak interest among citizens in being informed about the EU agenda and decisions, even among participants who readily acknowledged that they should pay more attention. What this implies for political mobilization is that many citizens lack the basic cognitive preconditions to make informed and confident use of participation opportunities that relate to EU policy making. This is different at the domestic level where the (perceived) familiarity with the relevant institutions is greater. It might also be different if supranational participation was framed as a decision not about policy, but about the EU as an organization – for instance in referendums about EU membership. But the EU's supranational participation opportunities – especially, of course, the EP elections – do not have this character; they are designed to give citizens a voice on *policy* aspects of European integration, and hence on topics that many Europeans do not feel sufficiently familiar with.

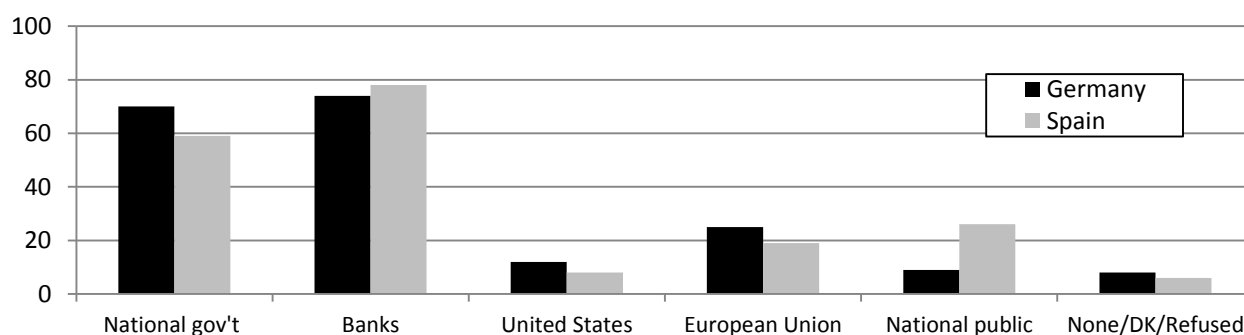
The EU and the crisis: Attributions of responsibility

The citizens' limited familiarity with EU's day-to-day operations should not, however, be treated as a reality that is immutable in the longer term. In fact, one of the hopes voiced by advocates of the "crisis as opportunity" hypothesis is precisely that the Eurozone crisis, by highlighting the role that EU level decisions have played in triggering the crisis as well as in the crisis response, will lead people to become more interested in EU affairs. Such a development would presuppose,

however, that Europeans do actually hold the EU responsible for the crisis, whether by blaming it for problematic economic developments, or praising it for an effective response.

As Sara Hobolt and James Tilley (2014) have recently pointed out, developing such responsibility allocations is particularly difficult in a multilevel system like that of the EU, where political competences are shared between different political levels. How have citizens dealt with this task in the context of the Eurozone crisis? Again, public opinion research can serve as a starting point for our analysis. While we do not have data on all EU states, surveys in Germany and Spain reveal that national governments and banks are considered the primary culprit for the crisis (Figure 2). The EU is mentioned much less frequently. Yet while these public opinion figures provide a good sense of the citizens' assessments of primary and secondary responsibility, they do not give us any insights into how exactly the EU's role in the crisis is understood: For which mistakes is it blamed? Which changes are considered desirable? For all of these questions, which are crucial for understanding how responsibility attributions translate into political mobilization, we will again turn to qualitative evidence from our focus groups.

Figure 2: Citizens' responsibility attributions for current economic problems, Germany and Spain, Spring 2012 (percentage who name institutions as being most or second most to blame; source: Pew Research Centre 2012)



The first thing to note, in this context, is that discussions of responsibility for the crisis were the one topic in our groups that revealed the most profound differences between the debtor states (Spain and Ireland) and the creditor states (Germany and Austria). Our Madrid and Dublin groups agreed that the austerity measures that were imposed in both countries as a consequence of bailout conditionality had had a very real negative effect on the citizens. Nevertheless, most participants insisted that these measures, though demanded by the EU, were to be seen as a consequence of mistakes by domestic actors – governments, banks, society as a whole. The following exchange from one of our Madrid groups can serve as an illustration:

Alberto: It's a popular thing to say that the crisis has been imposed on us. This reminds me how easy it is to say that it's Merkel's fault, which we often hear... And it turns out that we're all here with no blame. The ones who are really guilty, you would guess, are the bankers, the big business people, and politicians. This is true, but it is also true that every single one of us has also contributed to the crisis. A person with a house buys a bigger one, without really paying for it; a person with a car buys another one...

Joaquin: Let's not forget that some banks were speculating. The politicians and the banking sector are the real ones to blame. We are paying the decisions of politicians and suffering the recession that banks created; and [...] we've been bought by the Germans, Mrs. Merkel... and for what?

What is also characteristic about this exchange is that when “Europe” was brought up in our Madrid and Dublin groups, it was personified primarily by Germany and its Chancellor, rather than by the EU institutions and their top personnel. EU institutions were criticized occasionally, especially in Dublin, for not sounding the alarm before the crisis, but responsibility for the austerity policies, and their effects, was not allocated here. Rather, many participants expressed the view that the crisis rescue measures were largely engineered by Germany, in an attempt to protect its own interests, while the own government had all but lost control. Some participants

actually applauded this, arguing that with Spanish or Irish politicians in charge, the situation might be even worse.

In our Berlin and Vienna groups, where the crisis was of course much less painfully felt, the focus on the EU as a culprit was similarly indirect. Participants here were quick to criticize national governments in the Eurozone periphery for incompetent or irresponsible policies, but many also blamed the own government (in Germany or Austria) for spending taxpayers' money too willingly on bailing out failing states or banks. When the EU was mentioned in the context of the crisis, the focus was not on concrete policy decisions either before or during the crisis, but on the fundamental architecture of Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), especially its overambitious membership. Here is how participants in one of our Berlin groups discussed the issue:

Moderator: Do you find that the economic crisis has been managed well by the politicians in charge?

Karl-Heinz: No, not at all. Every idiot could have done that differently. You know, if you go and put completely different countries – I am not against European unification, I find it top notch, I'm all for it – but if you put different countries, poor ones and rich ones, into one pot, then this is what is bound to happen, and it can't be that *we* have to pay all the time. The Chancellor is doing a decent job in holding our money together, more or less, but what is happening, it can't continue like this. Otherwise we'll all go down in the end. [...]

Jürgen: And it's getting even worse, you know, we're taking in more and more poor countries, such as Romania and Bulgaria right know. By God, these are poorhouses! What is supposed to happen there? You know, corruption is a daily occurrence there, there is poverty with no end, and we say, come join us. Who is supposed to pay for all of this? That's the problem. Well, the Germans, logically, as we're the main payer. But we can't – you know, one or two patients can perhaps be carried along in a huge community, but we have other patients as well.

Ingrid: That should be considered before accession happens.

Manuel: But you can't deny that Germany is profiting from it. The supposedly poor countries are downgraded by the rating agencies, and as a result, countries like Germany get cheap credits. [...]

Karl-Heinz: Well, the issue is [...] that we have massive immigration from poor countries, and I don't understand why the government [gives immigrants] startup funds and more. That's not a fortune, I know that, but you can find other solutions – [it's] just like [in the case of] Greece, where they shoved in money like crazy, but to give some instructions for spending it wisely, that they didn't manage to do.

Jürgen: That's when they say, we're Nazis, we're not allowed to do that. We're welcome to give the money, we may do that all the time, but we're not allowed to demand anything in return.

In it interesting in this exchange how discussions about the Eurozone crisis are confounded with issues of EU enlargement and the resulting migration, all of which is perceived as a threat to German resources. While not always quite as explicit, this framing of the crisis, which blames the economic problems on the geographical reach of EU and Eurozone membership rather than any concrete EMU policy decisions, was common in both Berlin and Vienna.

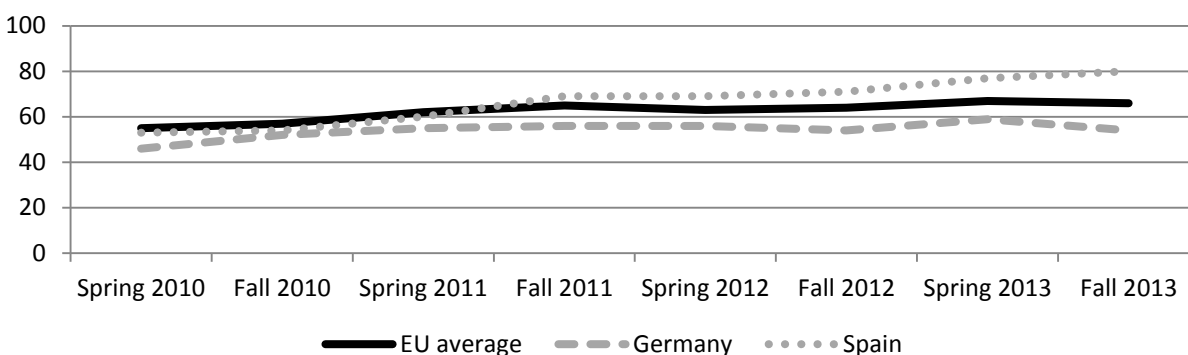
What all of our groups had in common, then, was that even where a “European” level of responsibility for the crisis was perceived, it was understood in a way that was removed from ordinary citizen participation – by locating it either in another member state or at the most fundamental level of EU organization that can only be affected by dissolving and refounding the EU. By contrast, EU-level policy decisions, which might be influenced through participation in the EU's democratic procedures, were not treated as being a major reason for the Eurozone crisis, nor as a lever through which one's own country's economic situation could be improved.

Sense of political efficacy

A final factor that affects the citizens' receptiveness for EU-related messages, and determines whether politicization manifests itself in political activities at the supranational level, is the

extent to which citizens perceive that they can have an influence on decisions taken in the EU. Even if citizens follow EU affairs attentively and consider EU policies responsible for important political problems, political mobilization at the supranational level might not occur if the institutional devices for political participation at this level are considered ineffective. Public opinion studies have, for a long time, indicated that the EU's democratic procedures are deficient in this respect, and in the course of the Eurozone crisis, the share of the population who feels largely powerless in the EU has increased further (Figure 3). Once more, we take these public opinion figures as a starting point, but rely on our own qualitative study to explore in more detail why so many citizens think that their voice does not count in the EU.

Figure 3: Percentage of citizens who state that “my voice does *not* count in the EU”, EU average, Germany and Spain (Source: Eurobarometer 73-80)



We should acknowledge from the beginning that many citizens feel cynical about democratic politics at the member-state level as well. In fact, in our focus groups, participants in three of the four countries displayed a strong disenchantment with politics in general, and criticized politicians for corruption, incompetence, and lack of responsiveness. Germany, perhaps unsurprisingly, was the only exception. Nevertheless, when it came to their perceptions of

political influence, our participants in all countries indicated very consistently that their political efficacy was significantly lower at the European than at the member-state level.

Three main lines of reasoning played a role in this context. First, in all countries but Germany, participants complained that their country's representatives had little influence in Brussels; hence they saw no point in trying to influence national governments or MEPs. This was sometimes blamed on the incompetence of national governments, the low quality of MEPs from the own country, or an overly deferential national character, but even more frequently, it was explained as an inevitable consequence of being a small to mid-size state in a union of 28. Secondly, the most visible democratic institution of the EU – the EP – was usually presented as largely powerless. Even among the well-educated participants, its significant legislative competences were seldom acknowledged. The following exchange from one of our Berlin high-education groups illustrates this quite nicely:

Werner: I would not be able to say which strings one can pull [to exercise influence in the EU]. Apart from the European Parliament elections, but [in the EP] they only talk, and the decisions are taken elsewhere, that's well known. That it's simply a fig leaf, as it were, that it has no real say. But meeting allowances are claimed before taking a flight home [...].

Ulrike: They're allowed to! That's the worst, they're allowed to!

Werner: That's unbelievable, yes, a true rip-off, but well, the decisions are taken elsewhere. In truly opaque committees, and I don't know how I could exercise any influence as a citizen.

The last statement touches on a third factor that was mentioned in all groups as an obstacle to effective political participation, namely the limited information that the participants felt they possessed about the EU. There was a widespread perception that too little is known about politics at the EU level to make an informed contribution, a deficit that is of course exacerbated by the participants' limited interest in EU politics, as discussed above, as well as the EU's institutional complexity. As a result, "you go voting blind" when participating in EP elections, as one of our

Irish participants put it. For some participants, this lack of information was clearly the most decisive factor; they emphasized that even additional mechanisms for citizen input – such as direct elections for executive posts or referendums on policy issues – would not improve the EU’s democratic qualities as long as the information deficit was not resolved. This exchange from one of our Vienna groups provides an illustration:

Frank: I have the feeling that I can’t exercise any influence at all in the EU. That is funny somehow, I always laugh, they have for instance a Commissioner for Currency and then there is the head of the Eurozone – this Mr. Dijssel... – so there are two different [persons], sometimes one talks, sometimes the other. The Euro-Commissioner is speaking for the Euro, I assume, and the Currency-Commissioner... – what is the currency of the EU? What is he speaking for? [...] You know, that is somehow – I am unable to connect with that. And I cannot elect these people, you know, I do not understand that, the connection.

Christa: Well, direct elections are missing, and one cannot...

Frank: Yes, but even that wouldn’t help, for how should I vote – someone I don’t know, or have never seen?

The citizens’ perceived lack of political efficacy in EU-level politics is hence not exclusively, perhaps not even primarily, a matter of institutional design. This might explain why the nomination of front-runner candidates, which should have improved what Hobolt and Tilley (2014, 143-153) call “government clarity” (i.e., transparency how one’s vote affects government composition), does not seem to have had a major effect on boosting voter turnout in the 2014 EP election. As long as voters do not feel sufficiently informed about the issues at stake in an election, even a clear choice between rival government personnel will not put voters in a position where they feel comfortable making an electoral decision.

Conclusion

The starting point for this article was the observation that, contrary to the “crisis as opportunity” discourse advanced by Jürgen Habermas and others, the Eurozone crisis does not seem to have led to a significant increase in supranational citizen mobilization. We argued that this presents a challenge to theories of politicization, which tend to describe politicization as a unitary phenomenon and are, at present, not well equipped to describe and explain differences in its manifestations. It is beyond the scope of one paper to remedy this deficiency in a comprehensive fashion, and this has not been our ambition here. Rather, we focused on the narrower objective of identifying factors that account for the relative weakness of supranational citizen mobilization, especially when compared to the remarkable Europeanization of domestic politics that could be observed in the Eurozone crisis. We have highlighted in particular the need to examine factors that affect the citizens’ receptiveness for EU messages, which – we argue – shape the way in which relevant political developments at the EU level, and communication about them in institutional and intermediary arenas, translate into citizen activities.

As we have tried to show in this paper, the Eurozone crisis has not had a more noticeable impact on citizen mobilization at the supranational level because (a) while citizens are aware of the EU, they are primarily interested in, and knowledgeable about, fundamental aspects of European integration, like the benefits and costs of one’s country’s membership, rather than day-to-day policy decisions that might be affected by political participation in the EU’s supranational democratic channels; (b) while the Eurozone crisis has resulted in increased media visibility for EU decision-making procedures, citizens do not tend to consider the EU a primary culprit for the crisis, and when they do blame the EU, they focus on aspects that are removed from the influence of supranational democratic institutions; and (c) the citizens’ sense of political efficacy

is low when it comes to EU-level politics, due in large part to the perception of being insufficiently informed about the EU's political processes.

These factors of limited citizen receptiveness for European integration might themselves be a legacy of the permissive consensus era, in which citizen mobilization in European affairs was actively encouraged. Be that as it may, when analyzing the current politicization of European integration, it is important to take these factors into account. They should be considered intermediating variables that determine whether – and how – developments that trigger politicization translate into citizen mobilization. As we have seen, even under conditions that emphasize the political importance of European integration, and even if politicization has already occurred in institutional and intermediary arenas, it is not self-evident that politicization will also occur in citizen arenas, let alone in a form that entails supranational political activities. In fact, all of the factors discussed above currently have the effect of de-mobilizing the citizens when it comes to supranational political activities, at least compared to political activities at the member-state level. This implies that unless it is possible to increase Europeans' interest in the day-to-day operations of the EU, to make the effects of EU policies more palpable for the citizens, and to bolster their sense of political efficacy at the EU level, the politicization of European integration – when and where it occurs – is more likely to lead to a renationalization than to a supranationalization of European politics. Such a renationalization is not necessarily bad for democracy, but it requires different democratization strategies than ones that emphasize supranational citizenship.

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