Abstract: A growing literature in EU Studies claims that European integration has become comprehensively politicized in the EU’s population. The most convincing evidence for this assertion stems from research on political and societal elites – studies of party manifestos, interest groups activities, news media reporting, and the like. By contrast, evidence on politicization trends in the broader citizenry is much more ambiguous. This article raises the question of whether politicization is more than an elite phenomenon. Based on a differentiated conception of politicization, it analyzes focus groups conducted with EU citizens in four member states. It shows that, for most citizens, only the fundamentals of European integration have gained political saliency, while the EU’s day-to-day activities remain largely non-politicized. In addition, patterns of politicization in the European population are conditioned by significant knowledge deficits.

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Introduction

‘Politicization’ is one of the most widely discussed concepts in EU Studies today (de Wilde, 2011; Hooghe and Marks, 2012). Defined in the most general terms, it refers to the emergence of widespread political debates about EU politics which unsettle the traditional ‘permissive consensus’ on European integration. The idea of politicization as an aspect of regional integration was first brought up in neo-functionalist theories (Haas, 1958, pp. 11-19; Schmitter, 1969). Its new popularity stems mainly from two debates: first, attempts by theorists of multilevel and global governance, some of them inspired by neo-functionalism, to make sense of the series of contentious EU Treaty referendums which suggest an increase in popular interest in – and criticism of – European integration (Zürn, 2006; Hooghe and Marks, 2008); and second, contributions to the debate about the EU’s democratic deficit, in which the formation of a ‘European demos’ of attentive and engaged citizens has been discussed both as a precondition and as a possible outcome of institutional democratization (Habermas, 2001; Bartolini, 2005; Hix, 2008).

In the past decade, both strands of the politicization literature have generated a multitude of scholarly contributions, most of which revolve around two issues: First, have Europeans really moved beyond the ‘permissive consensus’ (Hooghe and Marks, 2008; 2012; de Wilde and Zürn, 2012), or does ‘Europe’ continue to be a low-salience issue for most of the population, with little impact on political cleavages (Bartolini, 2005; Moravcsik, 2006; Duchesne et al., 2010)? This question is significant not only for determining how far the EU has moved from intergovernmental to multilevel governance, but also for assessing whether EU citizens are ‘ready’ for more democratic competition at the EU level (Hix and Bartolini, 2006; Magnette and Papadopoulos, 2008). Second, if politicization has occurred in European society, what are its implications? Does it encourage the EU’s further institutional development, including steps towards democratization (Zürn, 2006; Hix, 2008), or does it produce a ‘constraining dissensus’ that stands in the way of institutional reform (Hooghe and Marks, 2008)? This question divides authors who otherwise agree that politicization is a reality; by contrast, those who claim that the EU remains non-politicized tend to defend the institutional status quo.

The fact that such relatively fundamental questions about politicization persist in the literature can be explained, to a significant extent, by a lack of differentiation in existing academic debates about the issue. As we will show in this article, the existing literature often does not distinguish clearly enough between different arenas in which politicization may occur, different aspects of European integration that may become politicized, as well as different member states whose political contexts may shape patterns of politicization. While there is convincing evidence that some politicization has occurred – particularly from studies on the activities of political and societal elites, such as political party, interest group, or news media personnel – insufficient attention has been devoted to the questions of whether politicization is more than an elite phenomenon, and to what extent it may be generalized in substantive and geographical respects. As a result, the existing empirical observations about politicization are often forced into a dichotomous framework in which politicization is either present or absent in Europe, either beneficial or problematic for the EU’s development, rather than acknowledging that it might come in different shapes and that its implications might be diverse and context-dependent.

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In this article, we make the case for a more differentiated analysis of politicization. We also emphasize the need to examine politicization in international comparison, and with a focus on ordinary citizens. The article proceeds in three steps: It begins with a conceptual discussion that disentangles the various dimensions of politicization (I.). Based on the resulting typology, it then takes a look at the existing literature to substantiate the claim that politicization among non-elite parts of the citizenry needs to be studied in a more systematic fashion (II.). To fill this gap in the literature, the article reports on empirical research examining citizen discourses about EU-related issues in four member states: Germany, Austria, the United Kingdom, and Ireland (III.-V.). Our study is based on a series of focus groups; it is informed by – and contributes to – the recent ‘qualitative turn’ in EU Studies (Díez Medrano, 2003; Bruter, 2005; Favell, 2008; Duchesne et al., 2010; Gaxie et al., 2011; White, 2011). The picture that emerges is more complex than many other assessments of politicization: We show that a number of particularly fundamental aspects of European integration – especially the benefits and costs of membership, the question of democracy legitimacy, and European identities – are strongly politicized in the population; yet at the same time, the EU’s day-to-day activities remain almost completely non-politicized. Furthermore, politicization is conditioned by the citizens’ knowledge deficits regarding European politics. The resulting pattern can be described as one of ‘uninformed politicization’; it has important implications for the chances of addressing the EU’s democratic deficit by means of institutional reform.

I. Conceptualizing Politicization: A Framework for Analysis

In spite of the recent popularity of the concept in the literature, there is no universally accepted definition of what exactly politicization is, and how it can be measured. This article takes as its starting point a definition of politics as the cooperative or conflictive attempt at making collectively binding decisions for a defined group of people (Weir and Beetham, 1999, p. 8). An issue is politicized, then, if and when it is raised by the participants as a relevant object of – or factor in – the collective decision-making process. This definition implies that politicization is best studied as a discursive phenomenon: It is not sufficient that actors are aware of an issue, or able to form opinions about it (de Wilde and Zürn, 2012); what is required is rather that an issue becomes salient in political communication that seeks to influence – or responds to – the collective decision-making process (Green-Pedersen, 2012). The most basic measure to assess the extent to which European integration has become politicized is hence the frequency with which EU-related issues are addressed in political discourse.

A number of crucial distinctions follow from this definition. First, it is necessary to distinguish different arenas of political discourse in which politicization may occur, each characterized by the discursive presence of specific actors. These include institutional arenas at the core of the political system, which are populated by full-time politicians (e.g., the European Parliament or national parliaments); intermediary arenas linking political decision-making processes to the broader citizenry, which tend to be dominated by participants with a strong – and often professional – interest in politics (political parties, interest groups, the media, etc.); and citizen arenas in which laypeople communicate about politics (at the workplace, in discussions with friends, etc.). In the first two of these arenas, we can further distinguish between coordinative discourse that is primarily internal and communicative discourse that is directed at a wider audience (Schmidt, 2006). Each arena and type of political discourse has its own rules structuring communication. Clearly, patterns of politicization can be expected to differ depending on these factors. An understanding of these differences is also
essential to assess whether (and how) the politicization of EU-related issues spreads from one arena to another, thus bringing about the ‘widening of the audience or clientele interested and active in integration’ that Schmitter (1969, p. 166), in one of the earliest publications on the issue, identified as a core feature of the successive growth of European integration’s political saliency.

A second distinction that is crucial for an analysis of politicization focuses on the various aspects of European integration that may become politically salient in one or more of these arenas. After six decades of integration, the internal complexity of the European construction is so high that ‘the EU’ can no longer be treated as one homogeneous object of politicization. In this study, we hence differentiate between the following potential politicization objects:

- **The characteristics and functioning of the EU’s political system.** This category relates to the day-to-day operation of the EU polity. Within it, four types of issues might become politically salient: membership (Should our country be a member of the EU? What are benefits and costs of membership?), constitutional structure (What should be the responsibilities of the EU? How should it make its decisions?), policy issues (How should the EU address current challenges in its policy portfolio?), and domesticated issues (How should a member state deal with domestic implications of EU membership?). This distinction is important for interpreting the consequences of politicization: While politicization of EU policy and domesticated issues indicates that EU debates are entering the realm of ‘normal politics’, politicization of membership or constitutional structure implies that the very institutional foundations of the EU polity remain contested (Bartolini, 2005, pp. 347-62).

- **The principles and objectives of European integration.** This second category refers not to the EU’s current operation, but to the long-term parameters and goals for its development. These become politicized if they are no longer taken for granted, but become the object of explicit discussion, possibly leading to a ‘manifest redefinition of mutual objectives’ (Schmitter, 1969, p. 166) and/or the development of alternative visions for ‘another Europe’. The challenge to principles and objectives of integration might target the policy sectors for which EU competences are desired (scope of integration), the internal decision rules that are considered appropriate (level of integration), or the geographic reach of the EU. Visions of ‘another Europe’ that are advocated might consist of an expansion as well as a restriction in scope, level, and geographic reach of integration. By contrast, principles and objectives of integration are non-politicized if they remain unaddressed in political discourse.

- **The political community of Europeans.** The last category of politicization objects refers to Europe not as a polity, but as a collectivity that might become a focal point for identification. European integration is politicized in this respect if political actors define their political identity with reference to EU institutions and/or fellow Europeans (Checkel and Katzenstein, 2009; Duchesne et al., 2010; White, 2011). This politicization may consist of positive references to a European political community, but we also speak of politicization if negative references to Europe gain ground in defensive national identity.

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2 The category of domesticated issues is inspired by the work of Imig and Tarrow (Imig, 2004; Tarrow, 2005). An example for domesticated issues are cuts in national budgets mandated by membership in the Eurozone.

3 The first two of these categories are taken from Schmitter’s (1969) early conception of politicization. The last has been added in an attempt to update the conception, taking account of Schmitter’s (2004, p. 56) own self-critique that enlargement remained inappropriately ‘un-theorized’ in early neo-functionalism.
constructions (Risse, 2010). In both cases, European integration is seen as important for a person’s allegiance to relevant political communities. This differs from cases in which Europe remains insignificant for collective identification.

The third set of distinctions that is helpful for making sense of politicization in the EU focuses on the extent and structure of conflict in debates about EU-related issues. It must be pointed out that, contrary to some other definitions (de Wilde, 2011), political polarization in our understanding is not a necessary component of politicization. Politicization does not always lead to dissensus: While issues that are politically salient are often characterized by the presence of conflicting positions, they may also be valence issues about which no (overt) conflict exists. Quite frequently, political discourse operates precisely through the repeated affirmation of positions that are putatively shared. It is therefore important to distinguish between EU-related debates that are fairly consensual in character, and others in which significant dissensus becomes evident. More fine grained analysis of the distribution of political positions, and its implications for EU policy making and institutional development, can follow from here (Down and Wilson, 2008). In assessing these implications, it is important not to assume a priori that consensus is necessarily ‘permissive’ and dissensus ‘constraining’ for European integration – whether this is indeed the case can only be based on a careful analysis of the positions taken on salient issues.

II. Operationalizing Politicization: A Focus on Citizen Discourses

In recent years, a number of prominent authors have asserted, in a forceful and rather programmatic fashion, that European integration has indeed become fundamentally and comprehensively politicized (Marks and Hooghe, 2008; 2012; de Wilde and Zürn, 2012). Yet while this position is widely shared – it can increasingly be considered the mainstream view on the issue – other authors maintain that politicization, if it has occurred at all, has been a fairly limited development that has not reached the broad population (Bartolini, 2005; Moravcsik, 2006; Duchesne et al., 2010). The conceptual scheme developed in the preceding section can help us get a better sense of what evidence lies behind these conflicting assessments.

That European integration (and its various components distinguished above) is politicized in institutional arenas is unlikely to be disputed even by critics of the politicization hypothesis – at least as far as discourse of a largely coordinative nature is concerned. A number of recent studies on political debates in such arenas, both at the European and national level, show that politicization in this context is a reality. They also indicate that politicization does not remain limited to relatively fundamental issues of membership or constitutional structure; rather, policy issues – of a European or domesticated kind – are also controversially debated in institutional forums, including the European Commission (Hooghe, 2000), the Council (Mattila, 2004), the European Parliament (Hix et al., 2006), as well as national parliaments (Wendler, 2011). However, these tendencies in internal debates among politicians are not necessarily reflected in communicative discourses between politicians and the citizens (Schmidt, 2006): In this context, politicians might make the strategic decision to keep EU issues non-politicized.

This raises the question of whether politicization has spread beyond institutional arenas. To answer this question, it makes sense to first examine intermediary arenas. In recent years, an impressive amount of research has been done on such arenas, and the results mainly support the politicization hypothesis. A particularly fruitful source of evidence in this context have been the manifestos and communicated positions of political parties, in which issues of
EU membership, constitutional structure, and long-term integration objectives (Hooghe et al., 2004; Benoit and Laver, 2006; Kriesi et al., 2008), as well as selected EU policies (Pollack, 2000), have been shown to be highly salient. The politicization of EU-related and domesticated policy issues has also been demonstrated in research on associational activity, which includes behind-the-scenes lobbying as well as public mobilization (Imig, 2004; Berkhout and Lowery, 2010; Greenwood, 2011), and in studies of news media reporting (Koopmans and Statham, 2010). While some studies also point to limits of politicization in intermediary arenas (Green-Pedersen, 2012), the evidence, on balance, clearly suggests that these arenas have been affected by significant politicization tendencies.

By contrast, evidence for politicization is much more ambiguous with respect to citizen arenas, which are populated not by political and societal elites, but by laypeople without a professional interest in politics. The main indicators that proponents of the politicization hypothesis cite as evidence for politicization in this context stem from public opinion studies – mainly based on the Eurobarometer – which show that European citizens can express an opinion about EU membership, the EU’s constitutional structure, European identities, and the allocation of policy responsibility to various political levels (van der Eijk and Franklin, 2004; Ray, 2004; McLaren, 2006). However, Eurobarometer data has several deficiencies as an indicator of politicization. A first problem is that it does not provide good insights into the politicization of European or domesticated policy issues, as questions about existing or currently debated policies are not systematically included in the surveys (Gabel and Anderson, 2004). A second problem is even more fundamental: It has to do with the limited capacity of public opinion research in measuring political saliency (Zaller, 1992, pp. 76-96). If citizens are asked in a survey about various aspects of European integration, they might be able to come up with an opinion, but the survey will not reveal whether they really care intensely about the issue, and whether the response options provided to them correspond in a meaningful way to how they would conceive of the topic outside of the survey encounter.

For this reason, qualitative methods – such as semi-structured interviews or group discussions – should be considered an essential complement to public opinion studies in research about politicization in the citizen arena. Their advantage lies in the fact that they can better reflect the discursive character of politicization. In recent years, a number of qualitative studies have been conducted that deal with citizen attitudes towards the EU, as well as European identities. Compared to the public opinion studies cited above, they suggest a much more limited extent of politicization. What they emphasize instead, quite consistently, are low degrees of interest and information about EU affairs, reflected in a weak discursive presence of EU-related issues in political debates among citizens, particularly if the participants are less educated (Favell 2008; 2010; Díez Medrano, 2003; 2010; Duchesne et al., 2010; Gaxie et al., 2011; White 2011). Yet while these studies clearly hold important insights for the question of politicization, they usually do not treat the concept as one of their major categories. As a result, they show relatively little interest in distinguishing patterns of politicization that develop around various aspects of European integration (political system, integration principles, identities, etc.) and instead treat (non-)politicization as a phenomenon that is fairly homogeneous in substantive terms.

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4 Public opinion researchers may try to get around this problem by asking respondents to identify the most pressing political problems of the day. This procedure makes it possible to assess how important ‘the EU’ is compared to other issues (Kriesi et al., 2008; Green-Pedersen, 2012), but it does not allow for a differentiated assessment of the saliency of the various aspects of European integration that were distinguished above.
This indicates that there is a significant need for further research that focuses on politicization in citizen arenas and that distinguishes carefully between various objects and dimensions of politicization. Based on the considerations above, we consider qualitative studies that focus on the citizens' political communication a particularly promising approach to achieve this objective. In this article, we report on a study based on focus groups with European citizens. Even though focus groups are not a 'natural' setting for political discourse, but rather involve communication that is deliberatively triggered by a researcher (Morgan, 1997), the data that they generate differs from public opinion studies in that they provide insights into ‘the process of people constructing and negotiating shared meaning, using their natural vocabulary’ (Gamson, 1992, p. 17). For the present study, we conducted a total of sixteen focus groups – four in each of four EU countries: Germany, Austria, the UK, and Ireland. Given the exploratory character of this study, this sample of countries was intended to provide some variance with respect the size of a state’s population (large or small), its cultural background (Germanic vs. Anglo-Saxon), and traditional popular attitudes towards EU membership (EU-friendly or EU-skeptic). While all of these factors might be expected to result in distinct patterns of politicization, our study did not aspire to test causal hypotheses. Its main objective was to map if and how European integration is politicized, focusing in particular on the differences that exist between member states as well as between the various aspects of European integration that might become politically salient.

Each of our focus groups was composed of eight to ten participants; the groups were held in mid-December 2010 in the capital city of each country (Berlin, Vienna, London, and Dublin). Participants were recruited, under our supervision, by local public opinion research firms, using their existing panels.\(^5\) In each country, two of the groups were composed of citizens with higher-than-average levels of income and education, while the other two groups consisted of citizens with lower-than-average income and education. 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 political response to the economic and financial crisis. These questions were designed to find out whether EU-related issues (or the EU dimension of multilevel issues such as the financial crisis) were mentioned spontaneously. In later rounds of questioning, participants were asked explicitly about their country’s EU membership, EU institutions and policies, objectives for the EU’s further development, as well as European identities (see English-language interview guide in the Appendix).

Our focus groups make it possible to discern similarities and differences of politicization patterns in the four national capitals, as well as in discourses about various EU-related objects. As in all qualitative research, making sense of these patterns is ultimately an interpretive exercise whose results can best be presented in an analytic narrative. However, to make our results more easily comparable, we established three broad categories: An EU-related issue was defined as an issue of high saliency if it generated a lively debate among participants – triggered either spontaneously by the group members themselves or by the moderator’s prompting – in which participants explicitly responded to each other and continued the debate even without the moderator’s constant involvement, and in which at least half of the group’s members became active. An issue was defined as being of medium saliency if most

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\(^5\) The institutions we cooperated with were WorldOne Research in London, The Grafton Suite in Dublin, items Marktforschung in Berlin, and meinungsraum.at in Vienna.
participants, after explicit prompting, were able to develop a position on the issue, but mainly responded to the moderator’s questions, while discursive interaction between participants remained limited and they often talked past each other. Lastly, an issue was defined as being of low saliency if, even after prompting, participants avoided addressing the issue, either directly by declaring their lack of interest or competence, or indirectly by moving to another topic. For issues that were of high or medium saliency, we also sought to identify whether the positions voiced in the groups were largely consensual, or whether explicit dissensus became apparent.

Before we report on our detailed results, it is necessary to discuss three limitations of our research design. First, while our approach allows us to address different objects of politicization, it provides insights for only one potential manifestation of politicization in the citizen arena. The preceding paragraphs have tried to sketch the rationale for this approach; at the same time, it is clear that our study should be complemented by research using different approaches. Second, our research provides only a snapshot view for politicization in late 2010, while the concept would ideally call for a longitudinal analysis. This is a limitation that our work shares with many other publications on the issue; still it would be very desirable to study politicization more systematically over time. Finally, our research design does not produce representative results that could easily be generalized. Focus groups are a qualitative procedure with a small number of participants (136 in our study); there is also a consistent danger of a group being dominated by particularly vocal participants. For these reasons, our research should primarily be seen as a ‘plausibility test’ for our basic hypothesis that patterns of politicization are more differentiated than often assumed. Still, in many respects the focus groups (particularly those in the same country) turned out to be remarkably similar to each other, which leaves us confident that our results are more than just an artifact of any particular group composition.

III. Political System: Which EU Issues Trigger Political Debates?

One thing that became abundantly clear from our focus groups is that the EU is not on top of people’s mind when they think about politics. Responding to our opening question about the most interesting recent events, participants gravitated to a discussion of national issues that dominated the headlines in late 2010, such as the government’s austerity budget in the UK, a negative OECD report on school performance in Austria, or the abolition of military conscription in Germany. Even in Ireland, where – shortly after the EU/IMF bailout – the financial crisis was the dominant topic, the discussion focused on the underlying causes of the country’s financial difficulties as well as the national government’s response, rather than on the bailout itself. Spontaneous references to EU-related issues were not completely absent, but occurred only in six of our sixteen groups, triggered no significant debates, and were overshadowed even by references to local/regional or international issues.

Membership

When a discussion about the EU and its political system was prompted, participants in all countries were most comfortable discussing – and had the most consolidated opinions about – the issue of membership. The general image of the EU evoked in these discussions was remarkably similar in all countries, and was dominated by negative connotations such as bureaucracy, inefficiency, centralization, remoteness, and a tendency to over-regulate.
metaphor of the EU as a ‘gravy train’ for semi-retired national politicians was also used frequently.

Beyond this general image, there were clear national differences in how membership was discussed. The fundamental question of whether joining the EU was a good decision was explicitly raised only in the small member states, Austria and Ireland. Participants in Vienna were divided on this issue. While some argued that, for a small country like Austria, EU membership was a necessity, others pointed to the example of Switzerland as a country that had successfully stayed outside of the EU. Particularly in the low income/education groups, many felt misled by the own government in the 1994 membership referendum. While positive effects of membership – especially free travel and educational mobility – were acknowledged, the majority of participants put more emphasis on negative consequences, most importantly increased competition from low income countries, more migration, and (tied to this) an alleged rise in crime rates. Also frequently mentioned were price increases due to the Euro, the requirement to comply with needless regulations (the most prominent example concerned naming requirements for jam – ‘Marmelade’ versus ‘Konfitüre’), as well as the EU sanctions imposed on Austria in 2000.

While EU membership was hence a dissensual issue in Austria, the Dublin focus groups displayed a consensus that membership ‘has been good for Ireland’, a position that was repeated like a mantra in all four groups. However, the long-term benefits of membership were often compared against more recently emerging costs, especially in the context of the financial crisis. What was expressed here was not so much a dissensus between participants, but rather ambivalence in individual opinions. There were references to the destruction of Irish manufacturing and small scale industry, the loss of fishing and agriculture, as well as to migrants depressing Irish salary levels. In discussing the financial crisis, two groups drew a contrast to Iceland, arguing that, as a non-EU state, it had more flexibility in dealing with the crisis. It was also suggested that the bailout was mainly in the interest of large EU states. However, such EU-skeptical tones were immediately turned into a self-critique of Ireland. There were regular references to the country not adequately standing up for itself in Brussels, and allowing itself to be pushed around. In conclusion, EU membership appeared highly salient, but not openly dissensual – even though there were signs that the consensus on membership might be gradually eroding.

In our German and British focus groups, the question of whether the own country would be better off outside of the EU did not come up as a major topic. In Berlin, debates in three of our four groups rather focused on other countries’ EU membership: Most participants here agreed that the EU had grown too large, and that Germany would profit from an EU with fewer members. The bailouts were a prominent issue in these discussions, the dominant interpretation being that Germany had to pay for the financial irresponsibility of other EU states. Some participants expressed nostalgia for the Deutschmark, and explicitly raised the prospect of the Euro’s (or even the whole EU’s) collapse. However, such criticism was never taken as an argument for Germany to leave the EU; rather the implication was that other states should be kicked out. The fourth of our German groups (from the high income/education category) clearly stood out from the others in its almost euphoric pro-EU attitude. Participants in this group were prototypes of what Fligstein (2008) has described as the culturally cosmopolitan and geographically mobile winners of integration; they pointed to the positive effects of the Euro for Germany’s economy, along with many other benefits of membership. On balance, EU membership in the Berlin groups appeared highly salient to the extent that its
consequences were actively debated, but the underlying consensus on German membership remained unchallenged.

Contrary to our expectations, the question of leaving the EU was also not a major topic in the UK. One factor accounting for this might have been the relatively moderate saliency of European integration in our London groups. These groups were distinctive in the large number of respondents who claimed that EU membership had little to no impact on their lives. In general evaluations of the EU, negative characterizations dominated, but the issues that emerged to justify these positions varied greatly among the participants and groups. They included a loss of British sovereignty; a negative effect on British farmers; and several accusations of EU membership being a waste of money, whether generally or specifically in relation to paying ‘European politicians’. Positive effects of membership were discussed primarily in the high income/education groups; the main issue that emerged here was the free movement of people. While most participants hence had an opinion on the benefit (or lack thereof) of EU membership, and some dissensus became evident in this respect, the debate remained relatively unstructured and engaged the participants less than comparable discussions in the other three countries, indicating that EU membership achieved only medium saliency.

**Constitutional structure**

Compared to the membership debates, discussions about constitutional structure were characterized by a greater degree of similarity across countries. Everywhere, discussions about this aspect of the EU’s political system were hampered by very low levels of knowledge. The great majority of participants reported that they perceived the EU as ‘one big whole’, without distinguishing its various institutions. When pressed, most knew that there exists a European Parliament (EP), but few had precise memories of the most recent election, which was often confused with other voting opportunities (such as Treaty referendums). Party groups in the EP and their political competition were never mentioned. Some participants had heard of the Court of Justice, but it was regularly confused with the European Court of Human Rights or even the International Criminal Court. Knowledge about other EU institutions was scattered at best. Regarding EU personnel, some could recite the names of current or former EU politicians, but with considerable inaccuracies. In the British groups, for instance, the name of Herman Van Rompuy, the President of the European Council, was brought up, but he was mistakenly identified as President of the EP. No one was familiar with the current British Commissioner, and the only British MEP that participants had heard of was Nigel Farage of the UK Independence Party, who has a successful and prominent media presence. In the light of such knowledge deficits, most respondents did not even try to aim for precision when talking about the EU. The most common reference to the EU was simply by the adverb ‘there’ (in German: ‘da’ or ‘dort’) when talking about institutions, and the pronoun ‘they’ (in German: ‘die’) when talking about EU politicians and bureaucrats.

This lack of knowledge did not prevent participants from passing judgement about the quality of the EU’s constitutional arrangements. Contrary to some public opinion research, we found little evidence that the allocation of policy responsibilities to the EU is comprehensively politicized – most of our participants were simply not aware of the precise scope of EU powers. They were more forthcoming with their views on the EU’s democratic quality, and a strong consensus emerged that it was weak. Criticism of the EP was particularly widespread; it focused almost exclusively on the personal characteristics of MEPs – described as
incompetent, lazy, overpaid, corrupt, remote from the citizens, and by and large ineffective – rather than on the EP’s institutional role. (Only our group of German cosmopolitans reached a different conclusion; here the EP was praised for representing the interests of the electorate, with the SWIFT case being cited as example.) A common thread running through all discussions was a passionate call for more information. Most participants were well aware of fact that they knew quite little about the EU, and they usually blamed the EU’s lack of transparency. Many demanded specific EU segments in TV newscasts, the publication of information material in more accessible language, and explicit activities by EU politicians to explain the organization to the people.

Constitutional issues, all in all, were highly salient in our focus groups, albeit in a form different from the one suggested in previous studies. We found little politicization of EU policy competencies, but intense debates about questions of democratic legitimacy. These legitimacy issues, however, were not discussed in institutional terms, what was expressed was rather a fundamental perception of disenfranchisement when it comes to EU politics.

Policy issues
These tendencies are further corroborated by our findings on policy issues. In the focus groups, only few participants were familiar with specific EU policies, let alone with those currently on the EU’s agenda. This is illustrated by the fact that outside of the one exceptional German group, only a handful of participants had even heard of the Summit of the European Council that took place later in the same week in which our groups were held (16-17 Dec 2010), and at which crucial issues regarding the future of the Euro were to be discussed. When asked about EU policies, most participants responded by reporting on their general perceptions, usually resulting in accounts of centralization and bureaucratization. These references remained superficial, and except for frequently cited clichés (regulating the curvature of bananas, etc.), participants did not indicate which policies they were referring to. Beyond such general images, knowledge of EU policy was limited to isolated references to issues in which individual participants had a personal interest, with no consistency between groups. National differences were relatively minor in this respect. Compared to their British and Irish counterparts, German and Austrian participants appeared to be particularly concerned with a loss of regional cultural distinctiveness – the commonly used metaphor was that of an ‘Einheitsbrei’, or uniform cultural mishmash, produced by the EU. In Ireland, knowledge of specific EU policies was somewhat better than average, particularly in the high education/income groups. Here, some EU issues with domestic impact, most importantly agriculture and fisheries, were of medium saliency. On the whole, however, our groups suggest a low level of politicization in the policy dimension. The great majority of participants were simply not aware of the EU’s policy activities, and their statements did little more than mirror the general image that they held of the EU.

Domesticated issues
We also noticed relatively few instances in which domestic policy issues were discussed with an explicit EU reference. The financial crisis and resulting bailout in Ireland was an obvious exception. Even more remarkable, however, and consistent across all four countries, was the discussion of migration as a domesticated EU issue. EU membership was taken to imply more immigration, a development that was generally viewed critically, but for which the primary blame was put on domestic policies, which were accused of making migration to the own
country particularly attractive. In Ireland, for instance, labour migration from the newer EU states led to a discussion of Irish social benefits, especially children’s allowance collected by migrants, and there was a general perception that these benefits were both too high and too susceptible to fraud. Similar concerns were a major theme in the other states as well, particularly in the low income/education groups. For instance, many Austrian respondents characterized their country as being too attractive for immigrants from the East, a fact that was blamed for a rise in crime rates. In the UK, participants lamented that their government had ‘let in so many East Europeans’ that they felt ‘alien’ in their own country. Members of our German groups expressed concerns that historical sensitivities prevented the country from showing what they considered adequate toughness in dealing with immigrants; many referred positively to France’s expulsion of Roma in the fall of 2010, and bemoaned the fact that similar policies would not be considered politically correct in Germany. The prominent role of migration in our focus groups underscores the potential of the issue as a rallying cry for populist mobilization. It is significant, however, that migration was discussed primarily in domesticated rather than European terms. This illustrates that the citizens’ interests and emotions are still focused on politics at the national level, even in cases in which an issue’s European dimension is evident.

IV. Principles and Objectives of Integration: Is ‘Another Europe’ Desired?
Our second category of politicization objects are the fundamental principles of European integration. The question here is whether the established objectives on which the European project has been built, and the question of whether they are still appropriate, are a salient issue for citizens: How do citizens debate such more fundamental aspects of integration? Do they suggest that ‘another Europe is possible’, or desirable? To answer such questions, we asked our focus group participants a number of questions about potential changes to the parameters of European integration, affecting the scope of EU powers, the procedures through which decisions are made, and the geographic reach of integration. Unavoidably, there was some overlap between the resulting debates and the discussions about the operation of the EU’s political system. Nevertheless, the debates triggered by these forward-looking questions produced some interesting additional insights.

Scope of integration
In the most general terms, our findings suggest that what the EU does – the scope of EU policies – is less salient to citizens than how it exercises these tasks. The appropriateness of the policy domains under EU responsibility achieved only low to medium saliency. Our participants did not seem to have a good understanding of existing EU competencies, let alone a consistent vision for change in this respect. When discussions about the issue were triggered, this did not deter them from suggesting individual modifications in policy allocation, which – quite remarkably – were almost always in the direction of more EU powers. However, such proposals remained idiosyncratic; they usually concerned issues of personal interest to individual participants – ranging from traffic to policing to animal rights – in which the national government was perceived as falling short, and were usually not taken up by other participants. When we mentioned prominent ‘transnational’ issues that might be considered particularly appropriate for greater EU influence (e.g., foreign affairs, migration), a consensus on more EU involvement emerged only for environmental policy. The Dublin groups demanded more EU regulation of the economy. Greater EU powers over foreign affairs were desired by some participants, but the majority rejected such proposals, citing national sovereignty. On the
whole, our groups suggest that the current scope of European integration is not completely removed from political debate, but there are no indications of a systematic challenge to the status quo in this respect.

**Level of integration**
Regarding procedures of EU decision-making and their underlying logic, discussions were more structured, and we can speak of medium saliency. In all countries, at least some participants seemed to have a consistent vision of change in this respect, sometimes in the direction of intergovernmentalism (as in suggestions that the EU should be little more than regular summit meetings of national leaders), sometimes in the direction of supranationalism, especially more EU-level democracy. As might have been expected, the former position could be found predominantly in the low education/income groups, the latter in the high education/income groups. However, the majority of participants in all countries (and from all types of groups) reacted in an ambiguous fashion to suggested changes in decision-making procedures: While refusing to join calls for more intergovernmentalism and acknowledging that greater democratic control of EU decisions would be desirable, they shied away from embracing proposals for democratization, mainly out of concerns that this might lead to further centralization and a shift of power to unfamiliar and inaccessible EU institutions. The result was seemingly paradoxical: Participants who complained about the lack of democratic legitimacy were at the same time highly suspicious of institutional change to bring about democratization. The explanation for such attitudes, in our view, can be found in the citizens’ limited knowledge of European institutions. Since these institutions are perceived as opaque and remote, institutional measures that rely on tinkering with their roles and powers are greeted with intuitive skepticism.

**Geographic reach of integration**
Of all the integration principles included in our study, the geographic reach of integration was the topic that our participants were most comfortable discussing. In spite of occasional confusion regarding the current size of the EU, there emerged what can be described as a ‘constraining consensus’ in all four countries – which, of course, are all ‘old’ EU member states – against further EU enlargement any time soon. While most of our low income/education participants expressed this opposition in unconditional terms (especially with respect to Turkey), most participants in the high income/education groups did not categorically rule out enlargement in the more distant future, but stressed that stringent requirements would have to be met. The great majority of participants agreed that the EU has expanded too rapidly in recent years, and that this had led to significant problems, most importantly too much migration. Some explicitly called for a smaller EU. As discussed above, this sentiment was particularly strong in Germany, but it was shared by a number of participants in the other countries. The geographic reach of the EU was hence clearly the most highly salient issue in our integration principles category.

**V. Political Community: Do Citizens Consider Themselves ‘European’?**
In our third category of objects, the political community, our focus groups also provided strong evidence for politicization, albeit with variations between member states. In Berlin and Vienna, the group discussions were clearly in line with suggestions in the recent identity literature (Fligstein, 2008; Risse, 2010) in that they pitted respondents with positively defined European
identities against others who, in a defensive reaction against Europe, defined their identity in exclusively national terms. As expected, the former construction was more prevalent in the high income/education groups and the latter among lower income/education participants, but there was no perfect match. Those participants who positively identified with Europe generally perceived no contradiction between European, national, and regional identities. Some stressed that their European identities referred to Europe (especially Western Europe) as a cultural entity, not to the EU polity. By contrast, most participants who emphasized national identities explicitly denied any European affiliation. In their discourses, Europe was presented as a threat to the very cultural distinctiveness that they conceived as forming the core of their national belonging.

Compared to the German and Austrian groups, the number of participants who positively identified themselves as European was small in Ireland, where exclusive national identities dominated. Yet while these identities were defined in contrast to ‘Europe’, this ‘other’ was generally not seen in pejorative terms. For instance, the EU was described as mature and cosmopolitan compared to Ireland’s parochialism, and European workers were praised as driven and ambitious compared to the Irish laziness and tendency to live beyond one’s means. These attitudes were undoubtedly influenced by country’s financial crisis, which most participants considered a national disgrace. While they might dissipate once the country moves out of its current gloom, they do suggest that Irish identity, despite a weak personal identification with Europe, is framed against an EU background. By contrast, the politicization of European identities remained limited in the UK. Positive references to Europe as a political community were rare; Europe was generally seen as a single unit, but one that is separate from Britain due to geography, language, and/or culture. There were some attempts to frame British identity in contrast to Europe, for example identifying Britain as more multicultural, however these were few. With respect to identities, our London groups were hence exceptional; in the other three countries, European integration can be described as significantly politicized in the political community category.

Conclusion: Uninformed Politicization
While we have to be cognizant of their limited generalizability, our focus groups in London, Berlin, Vienna, and Dublin suggest that European integration can no longer be described as completely non-politicized in the European citizenry. However, our research also indicates that European integration remains a far cry from becoming comprehensively politicized; rather, politicization is limited to specific aspects of European integration (Table 1). In our study, politicization tendencies were strongest in debates about EU membership, European identities, EU enlargement, as well as – in the constitutional category – questions of democratic legitimacy. By contrast, EU-level or domesticated policy issues, with the exception of migration, were not significantly politicized. In some of our categories, we found notable differences between member states. The income and education of our respondents did not have a major effect on levels of politicization, but often proved relevant for the positions that participants took on politicized matters.
Table 1 – Summary: Politicization tendencies in focus groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>London</th>
<th>Berlin</th>
<th>Vienna</th>
<th>Dublin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political system</strong></td>
<td>Membership</td>
<td>Medium saliency; dissensual</td>
<td>High saliency; consensual</td>
<td>High saliency; consensual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Constitutional structure</td>
<td>Generally low salience (lack of knowledge), but high saliency of legitimacy issues (sense of disenfranchisement)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Policy issues</td>
<td>Low saliency</td>
<td>Medium saliency of some issues (e.g., agriculture, fisheries)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Domesticated issues</td>
<td>Low saliency (exception: issue of migration with high saliency)</td>
<td>Low salience (exceptions: economic policy, migration)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Integration objectives</strong></td>
<td>Scope of integration</td>
<td>Low to medium saliency (unstructured debate; no systematic challenge to status quo)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Level of integration</td>
<td>Medium saliency (some dissensus; few consolidated opinions on democratization strategies)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Geographic reach of integration</td>
<td>High saliency (consensus against further enlargement)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political community</strong></td>
<td>Low saliency (few references to Europe)</td>
<td>High saliency, European vs. defensive national identities</td>
<td>High saliency, European vs. defensive national identities</td>
<td>Medium saliency, exclusive Irish identity in EU context</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Our study, on the whole, provides strong arguments for greater differentiation in academic debates about politicization. It also highlights the importance of a variable that has thus far received too little attention in some of these debates: the citizens’ limited knowledge about the EU, which results in a distinct pattern of *uninformed politicization*. In our focus groups, low knowledge levels not only contributed to the emphasis that our participants put on relatively general (and vague) membership and identity issues, they also shaped the way in which the fundamental problem of the EU’s democratic legitimacy was discussed. For most of our respondents, the democratic deficit of the EU was not defined in institutional terms, but became visible as a much more diffuse, yet also much more fundamental feeling of disenfranchisement with respect to EU politics. This type of deficit cannot be easily fixed through institutional democratization, since such reforms necessarily rely on the very institutions that citizens view with suspicion. The EU hence faces a vicious circle when attempting to deal with challenges to its democratic legitimacy. Its core problem is its (perceived) remoteness from the citizens, which leads to a fundamental lack of trust in EU institutions. Tinkering with these institutions to bring about democratization only accentuates this mistrust, and is hence unlikely to encourage more democratic engagement.
References
Díez Medrano, J. (2003), Framing Europe: Attitudes to European Integration in Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom, Princeton: Princeton University Press.


Appendix: Interview guide for the focus groups

Introductory remarks:
- Introduction: Researcher at Carleton University (Canada) in the field of Political Science, working on politics in Europe
- Topic of today’s discussion: How do ordinary people view recent political events and decisions?
- Objectives of group discussion: Natural conversation with relatively equal participation of everyone. If someone is very quiet throughout the discussion, a question might be explicitly addressed to him or her.
- Final remark: In talking about politics, two things are very normal: First, there will be fields about which you do not know much – don’t feel bad about this. Second, we should expect that people have different opinions. Please don’t hesitate to voice disagreement, but do so in a respectful way.
- Ask all participants to briefly introduce themselves

1. As I mentioned, I am interested in your evaluation of recent political events and decisions. In a first step, could you please tell me: Which political developments have made you excited about politics recently, in a positive or negative way?
   Probe: One major political development of the past few years has been the economic crisis beginning in 2008. Do you think it has been handled well by the politicians in charge?

2. In particular, I would like to learn about your evaluation of the European Union. To begin, could you please tell me: How has the existence of the European Union affected you personally?

3. What does “Europe” mean for you? Do you feel European?
   Probe: Are there things that Europeans have in common? Do you think you have more in common with other Europeans than with citizens of other Western countries?

4. In general, do you think it is good that many political decisions are now made at the European level? How do you evaluate the policies made by the EU?
   Probe: In which policy areas, if any, should the European Union have power? Which ones are better decided at other political levels?
   Probe (if not mentioned spontaneously): Would you favour more EU powers in the following fields (ask one by one): social policy, foreign policy, immigration, environment?

5. Are you familiar with the specific institutions of the European Union? If so, which one, in your view, represents your interests the best?
   Probe: Have you participated in the last European Parliament election? Why (not)?

6. If you compare the European Union to politics at the national or local level: Are you more or less likely to get excited about EU politics than about politics within your country?
   Probe: Why is this? (If the EU level is characterized as less interesting:) Would you characterize politics at the local or national level as ‘higher quality’ than EU politics?
Probe: Did you know that a summit of the EU’s heads of state and government takes place in Brussels this week?
Probe: How would the EU need to change to become more interesting?

7. **What should be objectives for the further development of the European Union? How would you like it to look in 10 years?**

Probe: Should the EU develop further in the direction of a democratic state or federation (for example by getting a more powerful parliament or a directly elected president)?
Probe: Should the EU accept more member states (for example Croatia or Turkey)?