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Conflict reconsidered: The boomerang effect of depoliticization in the policy process

Conflict reconsidered: The boomerang effect of depoliticization in the policy process

Eva E. A. Wolf[1] | Wouter Van Dooren[2]

[1]Department of Political Science, University of Antwerp, Belgium

[2]Department of Political Science, University of Antwerp and Antwerp Management School, Belgium

Correspondence

Eva E. A. Wolf, Department of Political Science, University of Antwerp, Sint- Jacobstraat 2, Antwerp 2000, Belgium. Email: eva.wolf@uantwerpen.be

This article argues that the efforts of policy-makers to avoid conflict in the short run can be counterproductive in the long run. Not only may policy-makers fail to reap the benefits of conflicts when they try to steer clear, but conflict may actually increase rather than diminish. We study conflict through the conceptual lens of (de)politicization in the lengthy and highly contested policy-making process over the multibillion-euro 'Oosterweelconnection' highway in Antwerp (Belgium). An in-depth media analysis of 739 articles is combined with data from 32 narrative interviews. We conclude that efforts to end public debate through depoliticization can have a boomerang effect, in which conflict disappears only temporarily, and that these efforts can ultimately increase conflict while wast- ing engagement and creativity. More attention to the productive aspects of conflict is needed in public administration literature and practice.

1 | INTRODUCTION

When confronted with public resistance towards policies, policy-makers may be tempted to disengage from the dis- cussion wherever possible, hoping that the conflict will eventually disappear. However, conflict also has a produc- tive side. It is a potential source for human betterment (Kriesberg and Dayton 2017, p. 1) and can foster engagement (Hajer 2003; Rosanvallon 2008; Mouffe 2009; Laws et al. 2014; Verloo 2015) and stimulate creativity (Coser 1956; Carnevale 2006; Cuppen 2011; Coppens 2014). These values seem highly relevant for good policy- making. Might avoiding or negating conflict be equal to wasting a good opportunity?

This article uses the theoretical perspective of '(de)politicization' (Gamble 2000; Hay 2007; Jenkins 2011; Bev- eridge and Naumann 2014; Wood and Flinders 2014) to analyse how policy-makers deal with public conflict over policy plans and the concomitant effects on the policy-making process. The question of how policy-makers deal with conflict is explored through an in-depth analysis of the policy process surrounding the contested multibillion- euro 'Oosterweelconnection' highway in Antwerp (Belgium). We add to the academic literature in three ways. First, this article addresses what may be called a conflict gap in public administration (PA). Explicit attention to the topic of conflict is sparse, and when conflict is mentioned it is, with some notable exceptions (Laws et al. 2014; Verloo 2015), usually seen as something problematic to avoid or overcome, thus neglecting its productive capacities.

Second, we know very little about the reasons why policy-makers choose to engage in or disengage from conflict. This article answers a call for more research into why policy-makers deal with political conflict the way that they do (Hay and Stoker 2009; Hay 2014; Kuzemko 2016). Finally, it answers the call for more empirical research on the topic of depoliticization and on the dynamic interplay of depoliticization and politicization (Beveridge and Naumann 2014; Hay 2014; Wood and Flinders 2014).

2 | STEERING CLEAR OF CONFLICT IN POLICY-MAKING?

2.1 | Conflict in the public administration literature

Conflict can be defined as: 'the process that arises when two or more persons or groups manifest the belief that they have incompatible objectives' (Kriesberg and Dayton 2017, p. 2). Scholars of PA often fail to acknowledge the importance of conflict in the policy- making process (Lan 1997). Moreover, when PA scholars do write about conflict over policies, it is usually framed in negative terms. This negative view is found in the Weberian approach to PA, which prescribes conflict as only appropriate for a limited amount of time, namely during the political discussions leading up to a policy decision. After politicians agree on a policy, the idea is that the policy moves on to the imple-

mentation phase, where public administrators technically execute the political decisions taken (Weber 1946). Although it has long been demonstrated that the confinement of political conflict to one phase of policy-making is normatively untenable and empirically incorrect (Lipsky 1980; Svara 1985; Stone 2002; Lodge and Wegrich 2012), the continuing influence of the Weberian model means that conflict is still seen as something that should be con- tained. Once politicians have set a policy, political conflict should ideally be over and done with.

Take, for example, the New Public Management (NPM) school of thought. While ill-defined (Hood 1991; Rhodes 1996), work in the NPM tradition usually aims to incorporate private sector management techniques into public policy-making to improve public sector performance. Political conflict should only come into play when politi- cians determine political goals ('steering'), but should not play a role in the execution or implementation of policies ('rowing'). Given its focus on the efficient execution of policy, it should not come as a surprise that the NPM litera- ture sees conflict over policies as a hindrance. Conflict, after all, is often highly inefficient. Existing research high- lights the tendency of NPM strategies to deny or repress political conflict in policy implementation (Gray and Jenkins 1995, pp. 91–92; Burnham 2001; Watson and Hay 2003; Diefenbach 2009, p. 895).

The value of policy conflict is also underappreciated by approaches that oppose NPM's focus on efficiency, for example, public value governance (PVG). PVG aims to maximize the creation of public value when responding to complex public sector challenges (Benington and Moore 2011). However, similar to NPM, PVG theoretically under- plays the political process that is inherent in all phases of policy-making (Dahl and Soss 2014; Hartley et al. 2015). Hence, it mostly focuses on finding shared goals and steering clear of conflict. So does the 'evidence-based' stream in the PA literature (Boswell 2014) with its focus on letting evidence settle political questions. Other contemporary PA approaches, such as 'joined-up government', 'collaborative governance', and 'networked governance', also do not fully appreciate conflict. While they give tacit attention to conflict, they still prescribe managerial consensus-building tactics to move beyond conflict at the expense of fostering the productive capacities of political difference (O'Toole and Meier 2004; Swyngedouw 2005; Davies 2009; Eriksson 2012; Behagel and Arts 2014). This also holds for the traditional and more recent participative planning literature (see Mouffe 2000; McClymont 2011).

While others recognize that many PA approaches negate political conflict (see Davies 2007; Dahl and Soss 2014; Swyngedouw 2014), they tend to focus on how this impacts democratic inclusivity. With some exceptions, the most notable ones from scholars working on the crossroads of conflict resolution, urban planning and public administration (Hajer 2003; Laws et al. 2014; Verloo 2015), the literature does not explore the impact of conflict on the policy-making process itself. Nor does it ask whether steering clear of conflict is even practically feasible and/or desirable. These questions are relevant,

however, as there are reasons to believe that the negative view of policy conflict is unwarranted.

Conflicts have productive capacities. As noted in the field of conflict studies, conflicts are not only part and par- cel of human lives but are also a source of human betterment (Kriesberg and Dayton 2017). Indeed, if political apa- thy is something that worries us, then policy conflicts serve as reminders that people still care about what happens in the public domain. Conflict thus signals civic engagement (Hajer 2003; Rosanvallon 2008; Mouffe 2009; Laws et al. 2014; Verloo 2015). In addition, conflict can stimulate creativity. The confrontation of different ideas can not only prevent tunnel vision, but also stimulate innovation (Coser 1956; Carnevale 2006; Cuppen 2011; Coppens 2014). This is not to say that policy conflicts cannot become destructive. They can lead to zero-sum games that leave the parties involved questioning and even distrusting the policy-making system (Schön and Rein 1994; Term- eer et al. 2010) and the 'other' party (Glasl 1982; Kriesberg and Dayton 2017, pp. 152–54). However, good things may be lost in the policy-making process when too much effort is expended on avoiding conflict.

2.2 | Engaging or disengaging with conflict through (de)politicization

The previous section has argued that the lack of attention in PA to the positive effects of conflict is problematic because avoiding conflict might mean a lost opportunity to reap its productive benefits. The potential threats that steering clear of contestation poses for the policy process are also the subject of the literature on 'depoliticization'. This article follows Hay (2007) in defining depoliticization as the moving of issues from the political arenas of delib- eration and contingency, where action is possible, to the non-political arenas of fate and necessity, where nothing can be done (Gamble 2000; Hay 2007; Jenkins 2011; Beveridge and Naumann 2014; Wood and Flinders 2014). When policy-makers depoliticize public issues, they present them as unamendable. When subjects that ought to be open to deliberation are presented as beyond the reach of policy-makers, the democratic quality of policy-making may be threatened.

Depoliticization can operate in various ways (see Flinders and Buller 2006; Wood and Flinders 2014). Policy- makers can put decision-making power 'at one remove' (Burnham 2014, p. 189), so that the power to decide on public issues no longer lies with them, but, for example, with institutions such as public–private partnerships (Willems and Van Dooren 2016). Flinders and Buller call this 'institutional depoliticization'. They may also institute rules that 'tie their hands' (Flinders and Buller 2006, p. 304) to remove contingency, a form of depoliticization also known as 'rule-based' depoliticization. Both pose problems in terms of the amenability of policies by democratic institutions. If, for example, interest rates are not set through political decisions, but through an independent central bank (institutional depoliticization) or through a fixed algorithm built into decision-making (rule-based depoliticiza- tion), the possibilities for resisting decisions on interest rates become heavily constrained (Burnham 2011).

Finally, depoliticization can be accomplished discursively, when policy-makers state that there is no space for deliberation on specific topics. This type of depoliticization, realized through argumentation, is termed 'preference shaping depoliticization' by Flinders and Buller (2006), but has recently been re-termed 'discursive (de)politicization' by Wood and Flinders (2014). Discursive depoliticization can, for example, be accomplished through the TINA (There Is No Alternative) argument, made famous by Margaret Thatcher in relation to globalized capitalism. Discur- sive depoliticization, too, can pose problems for democratic amenability. If, for example, policy-makers convincingly claim that globalization is an external force that cannot be contended with (Diefenbach 2007, p. 129), policy proposals seen to be at odds with globalization are delegitimized.

We have earlier defined conflict as the manifest beliefs of incompatible objectives. This definition, that focuses on the manifestation of views, requires attention to argumentation and deliberation. The theoretical lens of discur- sive depoliticization is useful for studying how policy-makers deal with conflict, because it foregrounds how policy- makers allow, avoid or deny the possibility of political deliberation on (incompatible) policy objectives. We are interested in not only how policy-makers deal with conflict, but also in the concomitant effects on the policy process. For this second purpose, too, the theoretical lens of discursive depoliticization is useful, as the depoliticiza- tion literature pays explicit attention to the problems taking away contingency may pose for the policy process.

In addition to becoming discursively depoliticized, issues can also become discursively politicized. This happens when what was previously argued to be unamendable becomes subjected to democratic deliberation. Nor is discur- sive (de)politicization the prerogative of policy-makers. Citizens, too, can (de)politicize issues by pressing or denying the possibility for further deliberation on set policy objectives. Compared to citizens, however, policy-makers obvi- ously have a privileged institutional position to set public problems and their solutions. Because of this privilege, they can define public problems and promote particular solutions as the only ones that make sense. As Flyvbjerg's (1998) analysis of urban planning in Aalborg demonstrates, those with the power to define what counts as rational thinking can preclude further deliberation, which automatically becomes a waste of time if only one solution is pro- moted as sensible (see also Stone 2002). How politicization, depoliticization, and repoliticization interact, and how citizens can take part in this process, still remains an underexamined topic in the (de)politicization literature (Beveridge and Naumann 2014; Hay 2014, p. 308).

Through the conceptual lens of discursive (de)politicization, this article empirically addresses the question of whether policy-makers engage or disengage with conflict by allowing or closing off deliberation. This article adds to the depoliticization literature in three ways. First, it studies the interaction of depoliticization and politicization in a field dominated by studies focusing on depoliticization only (Beveridge and Naumann 2014; Hay 2014, p. 308). Second, it explicitly explores how and why policy-makers deal with contentious debate, thereby moving beyond the assumption that they intentionally

depoliticize for self-interested reasons (see also Hay and Stoker 2009; Hay 2014) and thus add- ing to the recent work of authors that highlight the non-intentionality of depoliticization (Kuzemko 2016). Third, it answers the call for more empirical work on how depoliticization works (Hay 2014; Wood and Flinders 2014).

3 | METHODS

This article presents a study of conflict in the policy-making process through an examination of the Oosterweelcon- nection case. The Oosterweelconnection, often shortened to just 'Oosterweel', is a planned highway currently esti- mated to cost 3.5 billion euros. The history of the Oosterweel project dates back to 1995 (Verelst 2009). From 2005 onwards, the project became the subject of heated public debate and it remains in the planning phase at the time of writing. As Oosterweel's policy process spans more than two decades of policy-making and one decade of public debate it is a good case for analysing the dynamics of politicization and depoliticization over time. From this case we can learn more about how policy-makers deal with policy conflict and how their approaches to conflict affect the process of policy-making (Stake 1994; Timmermans and Tavory 2012).

The case study combines an in-depth media analysis with data from 32 narrative interviews. For the media analysis we studied articles pertaining to the Oosterweelconnection in 2005, 2009 and 2014, the years that represent the peaks in media attention and thus offer a rich public discourse on the topic. These peaks in attention indicate times of politiciza- tion and depoliticization, because a lack of media attention indicates a lack of public deliberation and a glut of media attention suggests the opposite. Peaks were identified by searching for articles containing the word 'Oosterweelconnec- tion' (Dutch: 'Oosterweelverbinding') in the period from 1995 to 2014. We included the following newspapers: De Stan- daard, De Morgen, Gazet van Antwerpen, Het Laatste Nieuws, De Tijd, Het Nieuwsblad, Metro, and Het Belang van Limburg. These represent all Flemish subscription newspapers and one widely read free newspaper (Metro). We chose the Flemish edition for each newspaper. If only local editions existed, we chose the Antwerp edition, as Antwerp is where the Ooster- weelconnection is planned for construction. Figure 1 shows the number of articles found for the various years.

For each year, we first scanned through the titles, then selected several months in each year to analyse in greater depth. These months were tied to key moments and were also the months that scored highest in terms of media attention. A total of 739 articles were analysed in depth. Table 1 presents the number of articles for each year, the months analysed, and the key moments. The latter will be discussed in more detail in the empirical sections.
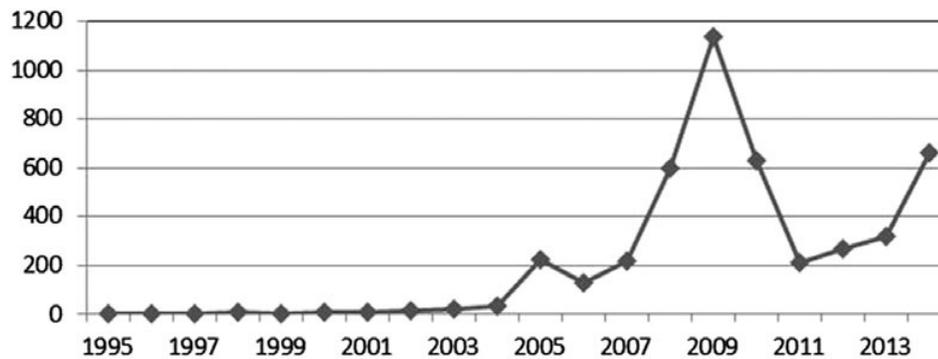
FIGURE 1 Articles on the Oosterweelconnection

The articles were coded with the Nvivo software program between January and November 2015 to analyse the arguments in the public discussion. With iterations between data and theory, our coding process followed what is called the abductive approach (Schwartz-Sea and Yanow 2012; Timmermans and Tavory 2012). To identify arguments, we focused both on symbolic language (metaphors, proverbs and comparisons of Oosterweel to other projects) and on the presentation of evidence (numbers, references to specific research, claims made by experts and legal references). We then inductively divided these arguments into a large number of themes related to both policy content (i.e., 'health'; 'environment' and 'spatial impact') and the process of policy-making (i.e., 'standing still', 'moving forward' or 'fraud'). In subsequent rounds of coding smaller codes were regrouped under larger labels, recoded or removed when deemed inconsequential. The resulting coding process clearly distinguished between arguments in favour of moving forward with the planning process for Oosterweel, and thus closing off the public discussion (depoliticization), and arguments in favour of taking more time to deliberate, and thus opening up the discussion (politicization).

In addition to the media analysis, 32 interviews were conducted between August 2015 and February 2016 with key stakeholders in the Oosterweel policy-making process. The respondents included seven key political figures from the Flemish administration and the city of Antwerp, 16 civil servants, seven members of action groups, one urban planning academic and one representative of an organization hired to organize the public communication on the Oosterweelconnection. Respondents were selected based on their involvement in the policy process and in con- sultation with knowledgeable academics. The list of respondents was subsequently updated over the course of the interviews through the snowball method. The average length of the interviews was 1 hour 44 minutes, with the lon- gest lasting 3 hours 10 minutes and the shortest lasting 50 minutes. The interviews followed a narrative format. Respondents were asked to tell their story of the Oosterweel policy process, which allowed for a focus on their involvement and experience of the different phases. To aid the reconstruction of stories, a timeline was drawn on a piece of paper, which was filled out over the course of the interview together with the respondent. By asking about events rather than asking directly about opinions, attitudes or causes, we tried to avoid justifications and rationaliza- tions as much as

possible (Jovchelovitch and Bauer 2000). Nevertheless, when we speak of 'motivations' or of 'why' actors acted the way they did, we are always referring to actors' stated reasons.

TABLE 1 Years and months analysed

Year	Number of articles	Month	Key moment
2005	80	March	Presentation of Oosterweel scale model
		April	Discussion over merits of replacing bridge with tunnel
		October	Emergence of action group Straten-Generaal
2009	470	March	Results of independent study published
		October	Municipal referendum on Oosterweel in Antwerp
2014	189	February	Results of EIA; emergence of action group Ringland
		May	Elections for Flemish government

Because of the politically sensitive nature of the events in the Oosterweel conflict, all respondents were prom- ised anonymity. The interview data were therefore anonymized. After transcribing the interviews, Nvivo was used for coding, again following an abductive logic. In the first round, the interviews were coded inductively with a focus on how respondents made sense of the conflict. This resulted in a large number of thematic codes such as 'fixed policy' (when respondents stated that their hands had been tied), 'party politics' (when respondents stressed elec- toral motives) and 'steering' (when respondents expressed personal views on good and bad policy-making). We also coded the events that respondents emphasized were of critical importance ('critical events') in the development of the conflict. Subsequent rounds of coding grouped similar codes together and removed codes that turned out to be inconsequential. Based on the thematic codes and the codes for 'critical events', we identified a split between expla- nations employed by actors to justify their efforts to disengage from public debate, so that the Oosterweel policy process would move forward (depoliticization), and efforts to open up debate, so that the Oosterweel project would be reconsidered (politicization). The media analysis was combined with the analysis of interview data which allowed us to investigate both the public discussion on Oosterweel and the events not covered in the media and link the public debate to the lived experience of the actors in the process.

4 | OPENING UP AND CLOSING OFF THE OOSTERWEEL DEBATE

This section presents our results by discussing how policy-making regarding the Oosterweelconnection has been closed off (depoliticization) and opened up (politicization) over the years. Figure 2 provides a summary. The next section analyses these processes of (de)politicization and discusses its consequences for the policy process.

4.1 | 1995–2003: Making and implementing plans

Public works in Belgium are governed by the regional governments of Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels. The Flemish government has jurisdiction over the Antwerp region, a region which has long been struggling with severe traffic congestion. To address this issue, actors from the Flemish government, the province of Antwerp and the city of Ant- werp started sketching out plans beginning in 1995 for a new highway that would complete the ringroad around the city. The Flemish government feared local resistance, so it was deemed important by local actors to demonstrate that they spoke in unison. Various private meetings between important political and economic actors in Antwerp were organized between 1995 and 2000. In 2000, the governor of the Antwerp province organized a one-day pub- lic meeting to which a wider circle of stakeholders were invited, which also included representatives from civil soci- ety organizations. During this meeting, the highway plans were disclosed to gauge public support, which was deemed sufficient. The Flemish government agreed to fund the highway. This decision was part of a larger political
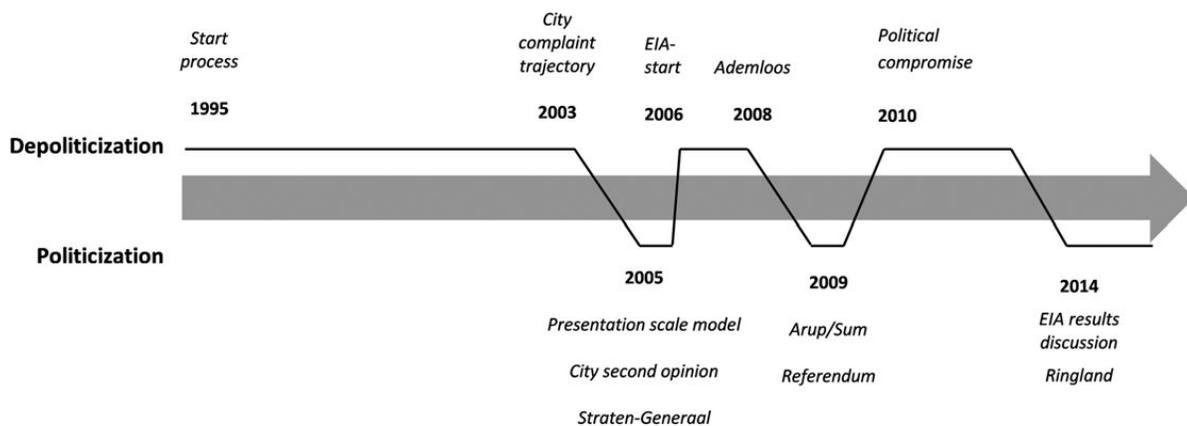

FIGURE 2 Depoliticization and politicization in the Oosterweel policy process

deal between the ruling parties (Liberal, Social-Democrat, and Green), which also included investments in public transportation and bicycle infrastructure in Antwerp.

After this commitment, decisions still had to be made on the implementation of the trajectory and the construc- tion. To that end, the Flemish government decided to establish a special purpose vehicle (SPV) named 'BAM' in 2003. Meanwhile, several engineering studies were carried out to prepare for construction. By now, the highway had been named the Oosterweelconnection since it would be situated in the 'Oosterweel' area of Antwerp. In inter- views, those involved in the early decision-making described their satisfaction during this period with finally reach- ing conclusions about this vital piece of infrastructure.

Respondents from the city of Antwerp, however, experienced this period differently. According to them, the Oosterweelconnection only seriously came to their attention after the Flemish government had already committed itself to its construction. Before that time,

plans had simply been too vague to invite serious debate. They remember being shocked by some of the engineering studies, which seemed to be more focused on the technicalities of con- necting the two highways than on the integration with and effect on the city. Some city officials also remember being sceptical about the highway's location so close to the city centre. However, these doubts were deflected by their city council (for administrative actors) or their political party (for political actors), who emphasized that political commitments had already been made. This first explicit effort to keep Oosterweel depoliticized resulted in an initial lack of overt resistance against Oosterweel. While there were manifested beliefs about the incompatibility of policy objectives (building Oosterweel and integrating this highway into the city of Antwerp), conflict remained internally suppressed.

4.2 | 2003–08: Debate opened and repressed

Debate on Oosterweel flared up between 2003 and 2008. The lingering doubts from within the city government were reinforced when new spatial development plans suggested that the Oosterweelconnection could curb urban development. Actors from the city council now asked BAM and the Flemish government to reconsider the trajec- tory. Respondents, both those connected to the city government and to the Flemish administration and BAM, remember this period clearly. Respondents from the city of Antwerp recall being told, again, that the Oosterweel trajectory had already been decided on. As they felt that there was no leeway in terms of location, they ordered a second opinion on the possibility of replacing the overpass with a tunnel, and, in doing so, attracted media atten- tion. Actors from the Flemish administration and BAM felt it highly inappropriate for the city to raise these objec- tions so late in in the policy-making process. They publicly labelled the second opinion as a loss of valuable time becasue the 'traffic infarct' ('Stad speelt met vuur', 2005) suffered by Antwerp and Belgium needed to be fixed as soon as possible.

Civil society actors also started to question the Oosterweel project. To this point, policy-making had largely been conducted inside political and administrative circles. In March 2005, however, when the scale model of the Oosterweelconnection was presented, media attention surged. While many newspapers praised the design of the overpass, some civic actors were highly critical. Similar to the city government, these actors argued that Oosterweel could harm urban development. This civic critique culminated in October 2005, when the action group 'Straten- Generaal' presented a proposal to locate the highway further away from the city centre. Their plea to reopen the discussion, however, was deflected by the argument that all possible trajectories had already been researched.

After the second opinion concluded that the tunnel would be the more expensive option, the city of Antwerp reconfirmed its commitment to the Oosterweelconnection. Although municipal politicians and civil servants still had reservations, they felt that there was simply no way the Flemish government would change the Oosterweel trajec- tory.

Interviewees also noted that the political coalition of the Antwerp city council was similar to the Flemish gov- ernment: therefore, party discipline further silenced voices of protest from the Antwerp government.

Meanwhile, the action group Straten-Generaal submitted their trajectory proposal for further research in the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) on Oosterweel. The public debate on Oosterweel dwindled after 2005, which is evident in the decrease in media coverage. The results of the EIA were presented in 2007 and reconfirmed the Oosterweel trajectory as the best option. Straten-Generaal's members, however, felt that they had been chea- ted in terms of both the quality and the quantity of research on their trajectory. It seemed to them that they were not being taken seriously at all.

This episode hence started with a period of politicization, with the request for a second opinion, the presenta- tion of the scale model and the concomitant complaints from the Antwerp city government and Antwerp citizens. Next came a period of depoliticization with the project moving on to the EIA phase of decision-making. Thus, con- flict initially manifested itself openly, but was repressed when policy-makers refused to further discuss Oosterweel, and died down as a significant topic of public debate after the planning procedure continued.

4.3 | 2008–14: Making a U-turn and getting back in line

A new action group called Ademloos (literally: 'breathless') emerged in 2008. The founders of Ademloos had already been critical of Oosterweel, but became even more so after visiting one of the presentations that Straten-Generaal had organized after the latter's EIA disappointment. Ademloos claimed that the Oosterweelconnection would bring more cars into the city, thus increasing the number of fine particles in the air and harming the health of Antwerp residents. These claims received media attention and the public debate on Oosterweel was reopened. Moreover, action groups now not only claimed that Oosterweel was a bad project, but also accused the Flemish government of intentionally dismissing any critique.

The pressure mounted on the Flemish government to address the allegations. In the summer of 2008, an addi- tional study to compare the Oosterweelconnection to other trajectories was ordered from the research consortium Arup/Sum. This move was welcomed by action groups, but was regarded with resentment by Flemish actors involved in the early decision-making. They felt that to backtrack now would only lead to further postponement of a project that was already long overdue.

The results of the Arup/Sum study were presented in the spring of 2009. Meanwhile, Ademloos had also col- lected enough signatures to hold a municipal referendum on Oosterweel in October 2009. The study concluded that the cost–benefit balance was negative for all trajectories. Hence, Arup/Sum proposed a new trajectory. Their pro- posal, however, incensed actors from the Flemish government who argued that Arup/Sum

had been asked to com- pare existing proposals rather than devise new ones. Moreover, the Arup/Sum proposal violated some of the technical requirements that had been set years earlier. Lastly, Oosterweel supporters stressed that choosing a dif- ferent trajectory now would amount to a loss of all prior investments. The minister responsible for the project rejected the Arup/Sum solution in favour of the Oosterweelconnection, which in turn exasperated the Oosterweel opposition.

Meanwhile, the mayor of Antwerp, a member of the Social-Democratic Party, part of the Flemish coalition gov- ernment at the time, publicly declared his sympathy for the Arup/Sum proposal. In the media, this was soon termed a 'U-turn' (e.g., Brinckman 2009, p. 7). Actors from other parties in the Flemish government accused the mayor of breaking earlier commitments on Oosterweel for egoistic electoral reasons. In the Antwerp municipality, however, where discontent with Oosterweel had continued to accumulate, respondents remember feeling relieved by the mayor's new policy position.

The public discussion on Oosterweel was alive again, with a high peak in media attention in the run-up to the municipal referendum in October and much discussion on the benefits and drawbacks of the different trajectories. When 59.24 per cent of the voters spoke out against the Oosterweelconnection, both action groups and the city of Antwerp declared that it was no longer possible to carry on with the project. However, Oosterweel supporters from the Flemish government thought differently. To the allegations of unfairness directed at them by protesters, they replied that the protesters themselves were acting unfairly by abusing the instrument of the referendum to block a pressing public project. Furthermore, their faith in Oosterweel's superiority remained strong. They were unwilling to go along with what they considered a broken commitment by the Social-Democratic Party.

In September 2010 the coalition parties reached a political compromise on the Oosterweelconnection. The tra- jectory would be the same, but the contested overpass would become a tunnel. The city of Antwerp confirmed its commitment to this new plan. But the action groups were not at all satisfied. They argued that they had been resist- ing not merely the overpass, but the entire Oosterweel trajectory.

Regardless, the decision-making procedure on Oosterweel continued with the now altered Oosterweelconnec- tion. Because of the alterations, a new EIA had to be conducted. Awaiting the results of the new EIA, media atten- tion soon decreased and the public debate subsided. After a period of intense repoliticization during which the conflict over the Oosterweelconnection was highly visible, the Oosterweel project was depoliticized once more. While the conflict was far from settled in the eyes of protesters, the compromise made it seem as if consensus had been reached. Oosterweel was no longer a significant topic of public debate.

4.4 | 2014: Devious policy-makers or selfish protesters?

In February 2014, the results of the new EIA were released. These brought no final closure to the debate as they were interpreted very differently. The Flemish coalition parties and the parties in the city of Antwerp, who again formed mirror coalitions, claimed that the Oosterweelconnection was superior because it scored highest on the aspect of mobility. Within a week of the EIA results being made public, these parties stated their intent to move for- ward with the Oosterweelconnection. This infuriated action groups who argued that the Oosterweelconnection was not the obvious winner of the EIA: their preferred trajectory did not score badly on mobility either and scored bet- ter on liveability. The speed with which the decision had been reached also invited suspicion. Lastly, they criticized the EIA for treating the Oosterweel trajectory differently from other trajectories.

Media attention peaked in the aftermath of the EIA and the Oosterweelconnection became repoliticized as a public issue. The action groups considered the EIA fraudulent and announced that they would take the issue to the judicial arena. Policy-makers supporting Oosterweel claimed that this very fact confirmed that the Oosterweel opposition would always find reasons to object. The continued opposition was not seen as a sign of public resis- tance but as selfish perseverance from individual protesters.

Soon after, a new action group called 'Ringland' entered the Oosterweel debate. Ringland argued that the only way out of the Oosterweel debacle was to build no new infrastructure for the moment but to restructure and tun- nel the existing ring road. Their proposal received a significant amount of media attention and became a major topic in the Flemish elections in May. All political parties claimed to support Ringland. However, actors from the Flemish government and BAM stated in the media that tunnelling would have to be combined with the Oosterweelconnec- tion. Not building anything now would amount to 'economic self-destruction' (as cited in Moolenaar 2014, p. 3) because of prior investments in the process. Opposition parties, joined by the action groups Straten-Generaal and Ademloos, countered that combining the two would be technically impossible. They claimed that the governmental support for Ringland was a trick to harness electoral support, only to drop this support after re-election.

Both Oosterweel supporters and opponents felt that the very history of Oosterweel decision-making was prov- ing them right in either wanting to close off or open up debate on Oosterweel. For example, an Oosterweel sup- porter from the city government explained in the interview:

> It [revisiting the debate over the Oosterweelconnection] is like a merry-go-round. There is a solution every time, but a better solution can always be found ... At some point you have to realize something.

In contrast, a member of Straten-Generaal stated:

> In those first weeks after the press conference [held by Straten-Generaal in 2005] a

political dis- course emerged that went something like: '... it is too late [for alternatives] now and we have to move forward.' ... How on earth is it possible that a discourse that proved so ill-fated is still alive?

The parties that supported Oosterweel became the dominant parties after the Flemish elections in 2014. They decided to maintain the Oosterweelconnection and to explore the options for tunnelling. At the time of writing, the Oosterweelconnection is still in the planning phase. In the spring of 2017, policy-makers reached a compromise with action groups on how to move forward after a long period of intermediate intervention starting in 2015. This latter phase has not been part of the analysis.

5 | THE BOOMERANG EFFECT OF DEPOLITICIZATION

This section analyses the processes of (de)politicization described in the previous section and probes more deeply into how policy-makers have dealt with conflict and its consequences for the policy-making process.

5.1 | Discursive mechanisms of depoliticization and politicization

We earlier defined depoliticization as the movement of an issue from the political arenas of deliberation and contingency to the non-political arenas of fate and necessity. The history of the Oosterweelconnection demonstrates that over the course of the policy process, various types of arguments were used to close off or open up public debate.

5.1.1 | Depoliticization arguments

Three types of argumentation—managerial, technical, and crisis—were used to depoliticize the Oosterweelconnection. These forms of argumentation are discussed below and summarized in Table 2.

The managerial argument

Managerial argumentation stressed that decisions were made after careful consideration and that the time for talk was over. In depoliticization, these arguments were used to avoid deliberation, which was seen as a time-consuming activity that hampered project accomplishment. Until the project began, the policy process remained a 'merry-go-round' with 'better proposals' continuously emerging as the enemy of good ones. For example, policy-makers closed off deliberation through managerial arguments before 2003 and between 2003 and 2005 when actors from the Antwerp municipality tried to renegotiate the location of the highway. The argumentation resurfaced again after the political agreements of 2010 and 2014. Each time, the fact that a decision had already been reached was used as a plea to move on to execution and to halt further discussion.

The technical argument

Technical argumentation was also used to depoliticize the issue. When using technical arguments, policy-makers stated that their preferred policy had superior technical qualities that rendered reconsideration senseless. For exam- ple, policy-makers closed off discussion through technical arguments in 2005, when they stated that the viability of both the city's tunnel proposal and Straten-Generaal's proposal had already been disproved in earlier research. They also used technical argumentation to disqualify the Arup/Sum research, stating that it did not live up to established technical requirements, and to cut short the reopened discussion on Oosterweel after the emergence of Ringland by referring to the EIA results.

TABLE 2 Depoliticization arguments

	1996–2003	2003–08	2008–14	2014
Managerial	Decision has been taken	Decision has been taken	Political compromise reached	Recommitment to Oosterweel
Technical		Research proved Oosterweel superior	Oosterweel superior to Arup/Sum	Oosterweel superior in EIA
Crisis		Urgency because of congestion	Urgency because of congestion + invested resources	Urgency because of congestion + invested resources

The crisis argument

Crisis argumentation stated that because of the great urgency of the public issue, swift action was necessary and deliberation was therefore cut short. The metaphor of the 'traffic infarct' looming over Antwerp was used in 2005, and was also reused throughout the policy process to activate this sense of crisis and impending disaster. Similarly, policy-makers invoked a sense of crisis by stating that the endless talks and significant financial resources already invested in the Oosterweelconnection would be wasted if Oosterweel were not realized. This argument was advanced in 2009 and combined with technical argumentation to delegitimize the Arup/Sum proposal and close off discussion. Likewise, in 2014, supporters of the Ringland proposal were told that they could count on sympathy from policy-makers as long as it did not result in 'economic self-destruction' by jeopardizing the Oosterweelconnection.

5.1.2 | Politization arguments

Opponents of the Oosterweelconnection did not just accept the closing off of discussion. Instead, they successfully engaged in repoliticization by using three types of arguments— negligence, fairness, and personal. These arguments are discussed below and are summarized in Table 3.

The negligence argument

Negligence argumentation stressed that important topics, which were not considered in deliberation, demanded a reopening of discussion. This kind of argumentation was used in 2005 when opposition actors argued that the pol- icy plans did not give sufficient consideration to spatial impacts. Negligence was also argued by the action group Ademloos with regard to fine particles, as well as by Ringland when they presented their 2014 proposal as an over- looked solution that could satisfy all policy demands.

The fairness argument

A second type of argumentation used to politicize Oosterweel concerned fairness. This type of argumentation asserted that because of flaws relating to unfair treatment, policy outputs could not be trusted and discussion had to be reopened. Their perceived mistreatment in the first EIA prompted Straten-Generaal to become more activist and eventually spurred the organization of the referendum. The argument of unfair treatment was further rein- forced when the government forged a new political compromise on the Oosterweelconnection despite having lost the referendum. The argument resurfaced in 2014 when the very speed of Oosterweel decision-making was again interpreted as a sign of the government's intention to silence dissent. Actors from within the city government also advanced the fairness argument: they complained that their voices of dissent had long been silenced, which created a build-up of frustration and contributed to their support for the Arup/Sum proposal, partly explaining this so-called 'U-turn'.

The personal argument

Finally, personal argumentation was advanced by Oosterweel opponents to reopen discussion. This type of argu- mentation focused on the ascribed characteristics of politicians that would immediately make any of their claims suspicious. We mostly see this argumentation in the later stages of the policy process, and particularly in 2014 when doubts were repeatedly cast on the sincerity of the Flemish government's support for Ringland. Oosterweel opponents claimed that the support was a trick on the part of the government to increase their electoral support and that the history of the Oosterweel process proved the untrustworthiness of those pushing for Oosterweel.

TABLE 3 Politicization arguments

	2003–08	2008–14	2014
Negligence	Lack of attention to spatial impact	Lack of attention to fine particles	Lack of attention to possibility of tunnelling
Fairness		Ignoring Arup/Sum and retaining Oosterweel after referendum	Quickness decision on Oosterweel after EIA
Personal			Political statements are untrustworthy

5.2 | Making Oosterweel (un)modifiable

Whether for managerial reasons, technical reasons, or the threat of impending disaster, policy-makers could portray any attempt to redeliberate on Oosterweel as irrational and, hence, ill-advised (see also Wolf and Van Dooren 2017a). As a result, like in the Aalborg case covered by Flyvbjerg (1998), 'antagonistic confrontations [were] actively avoided' (p. 231). However, in the case of Oosterweel, those resisting the project nevertheless succeeded in mobi- lizing counterarguments and in portraying the Oosterweelconnection as contingent rather than as set in stone. In these efforts, too, appeals to rationality played an important role. The media significantly picked up on the argu- ments against Oosterweel only after protesters were able to mobilize evidence of the alleged health dangers brought on by Oosterweel and after they were able, through the Arup/Sum study and through the referendum, to present counter-proposals backed up by evidence and by tangible measurements of support. Oosterweel critics managed to overcome allegations of being irrational by asserting that their proposal was not less, but more, rational than the Oosterweelconnection.

Even if policy-makers tried to disengage from conflict by presenting Oosterweel as beyond debate, the analysis does not reveal malicious intent on the part of policy-makers to do so simply to get their way. Rather, the case reveals an entrenched view of conflict as stirring the waters of good projects and thus points to the non- intentionality that may characterize depoliticization. In the case of Oosterweel, political commitments and research already 'proved' the project to be worthy, and thus unsuitable for wider discussion. Policy-makers, who measured success as being able to finish this important public project, therefore pushed for implementation over conversation and saw resistance as a roadblock on the way to the finishing line. This was only exacerbated when delay set in and choosing a different option would amount to that delay being amplified (see also Wolf and Van Dooren 2017b).

5.3 | The boomerang effect of depoliticization

The analysis demonstrates that the efforts to close off debate by stressing the fixity of the plans in no way ended it. Rather, we argue, these moves of depoliticization had a boomerang effect that ultimately increased conflict, defined as manifest beliefs about the incompatibly of the parties' goals.

First, avoiding conflict by closing off debate does not mean that the debate is over. Like a boomerang, conflict may disappear from view only temporarily. It is understandable that policy-makers would rather move an already lengthy policy-making procedure forward than re-engage in public debate. However, in the case of Oosterweel, con- flict simply resurfaced in a different way. This risk of conflict re-emerging seems especially high in policy-making processes on megaprojects that take a long time to plan and build. Moreover, disengagement through depoliticiza- tion also presents a missed opportunity to

harness the positive aspects of conflict. In this case, the voices that cri- tiqued the Oosterweelconnection reflected a serious engagement from both the city administration and citizens. The politicization of the Oosterweel issue through negligence argumentation brought new, creative, ideas into the political discussion. Both the tunnel proposal from the city and the proposal from Straten-Generaal, for example, reflected a type of engagement that did not just resist existing plans, but also presented creative alternatives. These voices were, however, ignored rather than invited to the table. By steering clear of conflict, policy-makers failed to reap this engagement and creativity.

Second, also like a boomerang, the more energy spent on getting rid of conflict, the more forcefully it returns. In the case of the Oosterweelconnection, the conflict did not simply disappear after 2005, but resurfaced later, and more vehemently. The protest shifted from negligence arguments to an emphasis on the unfairness of the policy process and, later, on the personality traits of politicians. The frustration of being continually dismissed by policy- makers increased the conflict: those resisting Oosterweel no longer objected only to the original plans, but also to a policy process that they perceived as unfair and serving only the interests of alleged untrustworthy policy-makers. As a result, parties increasingly felt that not only were their infrastructure objectives incompatible, but also their goals for structuring the policy process, as well as the alleged personal, selfish, objectives motivating the 'other' party. Policy-makers also stressed that it was not they, but the Oosterweel opponents, who were being unfair. Policy-makers, too, engaged in personal argumentation by stating that it was in the nature of protesters to resist Oosterweel and by casting doubts on the trustworthiness of those politicians resisting Oosterweel. Thus, as more energy was spent on depoliticization, the conflict grew in a way that encouraged distrust of process and persons— the negative aspects of conflict—and silenced its positive aspects.

6 | CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Through an in-depth case study of the Oosterweelconnection conflict in Antwerp, this article concludes that efforts to close off public debate through depoliticization may be counterproductive in the long run. Depoliticization can increase conflict in a way that fosters its negative aspects, that is, distrust and hostility towards the other party, at the expense of the positive sides of conflict, that is, public engagement and creativity.

The implications for the PA literature are fourfold. First, the analysis demonstrates that policy-makers are prone to conflict avoidance because they see conflict as something bad. This echoes Lan's (1997, p. 32) argument made over two decades ago that 'As a matter of course, many public administrators adopt a decision rule of conflict avoid- ance.' It also reinforces his call for the academic and practical need to give more attention to conflict in PA.

Second, and relatedly, the analysis does not find that policy-makers necessarily avoid conflict to further their self-interest, and thereby strengthens the conclusions of authors

such as Kuzemko (2016), who highlight that depo- liticization may not be as intentional as is often implied in the depoliticization literature. Rather, it concludes that policy-makers depoliticize because they view conflict as irrational and, hence, negative. As a consequence, their pre- ferred policy is presented as the only rational course of action (see also Flyvbjerg 1998; Stone 2002). This confirms that what is called an 'anti-political' sentiment, by which is meant the characterization of political conflict and con- duct in highly negative ways, is perpetuated not only by citizens but also by policy-makers themselves (Hay and Stoker 2009). Even if depoliticization is not an intentional strategy, when policy-makers equate one type of policy with being the only sensible course of action, this does complicate resistance to that policy, as opponents have to be able to present evidence of their rationality in order to be taken seriously.

Third, that policy-makers are prone to avoiding conflict is all the more problematic because it (a) may not work, (b) inhibits the possibility of reaping the benefits of conflict, and (c) can trigger the theoretical mechanisms of a boomerang effect. To the existing argument against conflict avoidance in much PA literature, that is, that it harms democratic inclusivity, we thus add a more practical argument. Conflict avoidance may be counterproductive for policy-makers who want to implement a project, especially when they are trying to realize projects that will take many years to complete. The term boomerang may sound familiar to scholars of transnational advocacy who use the term 'boomerang pattern' (Keck and Sikkink 1999) when talking about the influence of advocacy groups. Our analysis demonstrates that the idea of conflict triggering a boomerang mechanism is also useful for PA. However, while the transnational advocacy literature studies the boomerang pattern as resulting from the strategic action of advocacy groups, this work highlights the affective dimensions of conflict that bear on civic actors and multiply their reasons for resistance rather than spur their resignation.

Finally, the analysis confirms that depoliticization and politicization often interact dynamically, and that depoliti- cization can trigger repoliticization (see also Beveridge and Naumann 2014). It also offers various types of discursive moves that can be used to (de)politicize. The arguments of depoliticization (managerial, technical and crisis) overlap with those presented by Wood and Flinders (2014) in their discussion on discursive depoliticization. Particularly in the case of politicization arguments (negligence, fairness and personal), this article makes a contribution, as the topic of politicization has received far less attention than the topic of depoliticization. This typology of (de)politicization arguments may be further expanded.

Beyond these implications, the article also suggests at least three issues for future research. First, while the analysis explores the consequences of conflict avoidance, it investigates neither what happens when policy-makers do engage with conflict nor what such engagement could or should look like. Exploring these issues is particularly important given the increasing calls in PA for public participation, which are often rife with conflict about the nature of and solution to public problems. Second, while the

analysis shows that citizens can muster the power necessary to repoliticize issues, future research could explore the extent to which institutional, contextual, and other differ- ences enable or constrain (de)politicization. For example, the ability to organize a referendum was critical to the abil- ity of the opponents of Oosterweel to politicize the issue (see also Beveridge and Naumann 2014). Finally, future research could explore how the reasons for policy-makers to (dis)engage with conflict relate to their 'theories in use' on policy-making and, in turn, how this relates to the academic theories in PA. In the case of Oosterweel, 'evi- denced-based' and 'managerial' thinking were particularly salient theories in use. Further research into this topic, and what the PA field could do to promote better theories-in-use, could be highly relevant.

We would like to end by stressing that for over a decade, opponents of the Oosterweelconnection have pro- posed different solutions to deal with congestion, urban planning and public health. More attention to how we can foster, rather than marginalize, such engagement triggered by conflict is needed in public administration literature and practice.

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