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Reacting to the politicization of trade policy

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ABSTRACT
How do actors react to the politicisation of trade policy? This special issue aims to tackle this question, considering a broad set of actors including members of parliament, political parties, regional and national governments, interest groups, and the European Commission. To set the stage for the contributions to the special issue, in this introduction, we first conceptualise politicisation as the combination of high salience and high contestation. We then present existing research on the politicisation of trade policy, highlighting the relative scarcity of work on reactions to politicisation. The introduction also offers a typology of strategies available to actors in response to politicisation, which distinguishes between dodging, free riding, confronting, and bandwagoning. These strategies differ with respect to the position taken by actors relative to contestation and by their level of activity. Finally, we summarise the main lessons learned from the special issue.

Introduction

Over the past decade, politicisation – conceived of as an increase in salience as well as contestation – has characterised trade politics in many economically developed countries. In the European Union (EU), successful agreements such as the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) with Canada, or aborted agreements such as the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA) and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) with the United States (US) have been politicised to varying degrees (De Bièvre & Poletti, 2020; Dür & Mateo, 2014). In the US, the Trump administration heavily contested previous US trade policy towards China, railed

against a Transpacific Partnership with a host of South-East Asian countries, forced a renegotiation of the bilateral trade agreement with Canada, and doubled down on the abandonment of TTIP with the EU (Kay & Evans, 2018). These developments have taken place in clear connection with a more generalised contestation of international cooperation in the Western world (De Vries *et al.*, 2021; Hooghe & Marks, 2009; Zürn, 2018).

In this special issue, we seek to advance the research agenda on politicisation in general, and the politicisation of trade in particular, with an actor-centred comparative analysis of reactions to politicisation in trade politics. Among the questions that we address are: How do various actors, such as civil society organisations (CSOs), business associations, governmental and legislative actors at supranational, national, and regional levels of governance, react to politicisation? Which types of strategic responses do they craft and how can we account for similarities and differences between those responses? How do interest groups and civil society actors react and how can we account for variation across different types of interest groups? And what role do subnational, regional actors play in crafting responses to politicisation? Do they defend federal-level policymaking or rather resort to shifting blame to policy-making processes and outcomes at the federal level of governance?

To set the stage for the contributions to this special issue, in this introduction we first define three key terms, namely contestation, salience, and politicisation. We then provide a brief review of the literature on the politicisation of trade policy, with a special emphasis on studies that investigate reactions to politicisation. The introduction's central contribution then is to offer a typology of strategies that actors can use in response to politicisation, namely dodging, free riding, confronting, and bandwagoning. Dodging and confronting are strategies that actors who remain supportive of a contested policy can use, with dodging referring to a low level of activity and confronting to a high level of activity. Free riding and bandwagoning are the equivalent strategies available to those on the same side of the policy debate as the contesting actors. We suggest that actor and issue characteristics and the institutional set-up governing the policy-making process explain actors' choices among these available strategies. The final section offers a summary of the contributions included in this special issue and the lessons learned from them about actors' responses to politicisation.

Contestation, salience, and politicisation defined

Many conceptual labels have been given to public controversy over trade policy. The most common is politicisation (De Bièvre & Poletti, 2020; Duina, 2019; Kay & Evans, 2018), which we also use in this special issue. However, authors also rely on the concepts of contestation (De Bièvre, 2018;

Johansson-Nogués *et al.*, 2020), salience (Meunier & Czesana, 2019), and contentious politics (Laursen & Roederer-Rynning, 2017; Park, 2017; Roederer-Rynning & Kallestrup, 2017). The existence of this multiplicity of terms begs for clear definitions.

We define salience via the number of actors that view an issue as a collective problem in need of a political solution, without regard for whether this attention is mobilised (see Wlezien, 2005). By measuring salience within a given polity, we can infer political demand – the will to deploy enforcement resources controlled by a political institution to achieve behavioural compliance (Bartolini, 2018). Contestation refers to the mobilisation of opposition to a (proposed) policy. This is consistent with a definition of contestation as involving 'the range of social practices which discursively express disapproval of norms', including arbitration, deliberation, justification, and contention (Wiener, 2014).

Politicisation, in turn, is the accumulation of salience through contestation. This definition of politicisation is different from one that considers individual acts that 'name an issue as political' as politicisation because these acts capture the literal essence of 'making a non-political issue political' (Kauppi & Trenz, 2019; Palonen, 2003; Wiesner, 2021). We consider such individual-level acts as contestation but not yet politicisation. The definition also assumes that the two dimensions of salience and contestation are largely independent of each other. Indeed, it is possible for a policy to be highly salient but not contested (everybody agrees on what to do) or to be contested but not salient (a few actors are unhappy with a policy, but the policy is not considered important by many actors). That being said, contestation requires some salience, and most salient policies will also see some degree of contestation.

Table 1 illustrates the relationship between salience, contestation, and politicisation. If an issue is highly contested and highly salient, we refer to it as politicised (bottom right cell in the table). Vaccine mandates, for example, acquired this status in many countries during the coronavirus pandemic, since a great many people considered them as a collective problem in need of a political solution, and because opponents were highly mobilised. But contestation and salience are not always correlated. Consider a case of response to a natural disaster such as a hurricane or a flood. A number of priorities become important public problems as a result of the disaster on the

Table 1. Contestation, salience, and politicisation.

	Low contestation	High contestation
Low Salience	Low-profile issue (Procurement decision)	Contested issue (Autonomous weapons systems)
High Salience	Salient issue (Natural disaster response)	Politicised issue (Vaccine mandates)

ground: first aid, power restoration, clean up, rebuilding, and so on. In this situation, there is not much debate over what to do (i.e., there is low contestation), even if some contestation can be expected over how to do it, in which order, or at what speed. This is hence an example of a salient issue with low contestation (bottom left cell in Table 1).

On the other end of the spectrum, sometimes people argue over things that are not particularly salient. Many civil society organisations begin to operate in such a context – contesting issues and policies with the specific intent of 'raising awareness' and hence increasing the salience of issues that are currently only considered important problems by their members and supporters. A current example are autonomous weapons systems, which have prompted concern among citizen groups and experts, but which are not (yet) a highly salient issue in public debate. We consider such an issue 'contested' (top right cell in Table 1). Finally, some government decisions take place in the context of low contestation and low salience. Procurement decisions, for instance, are often such low-profile issues, as they are considered as important only by a limited number of participants and stakeholders and they also involve no or only little contestation (top left cell in Table 1).

While Table 1 suggests qualitative differences between cells, salience and contestation, and hence also politicisation, are continuous variables. Even among politicised issues, there are differences in the level of politicisation, that is, they can be more or less politicised. This conceptualisation allows for comparisons in the extent of politicisation across different contexts and times. Exactly where the transitions across the four types of issues (low profile, contested, salient, and politicised) are located is difficult to ascertain. This is reflected in slightly different operationalisations of the concepts in the articles included in this special issue.

One authoritative definition of politicisation also includes a dimension called actor expansion – as politicisation increases, more actors get involved (see de Wilde *et al*., 2016, for the definition and Hutter *et al*., 2016 for its application to EU integration). We exclude this dimension from our definition for two reasons. On one hand, we think that increasing contestation and salience reflect such an expansion of actors already. We hence consider this dimension necessary, but taken into account by the other two. On the other hand, this special issue is about how different actors respond to politicisation, specifically because it remains unknown whether, how, and why politicisation entails an accumulation of responses across many types of political actors. In that sense, actor expansion should not be part of the definition, but an aspect to be explained.

The definitions provided allow us to distinguish these concepts from two other terms often used in this literature, namely 'quiet politics' (Culpepper, 2010) and 'contentious politics' (Tilly, 2008). The former refers to the politics

surrounding issues in the upper row of Table 1, as they are decided outside the public spotlight. Contentious politics is the term given to disruptive political tactics, which are one way of moving issues from the low salience to the high salience row in Table 1. While the 'new politics of trade' often entails mobilisation by citizen organisations associated with contentious politics (De Bièvre & Poletti, 2017; De Ville & Siles-Brügge, 2017; Young, 2017), politicisation can also be affected by and lead to more mundane activities such as campaigning, debating, reporting or online social networking (Duina, 2019; Siles-Brügge & Strange, 2020).

State of the art

Much research has studied the causes of contestation, increasing salience, or politicisation of international authority (De Vries *et al.*, 2021; Zürn, 2018), European integration (Hutter *et al.*, 2016), and trade policy (De Bièvre & Poletti, 2020; Kay & Evans, 2018). As this strand of literature is already very large, we focus this review of the literature on those studies that are concerned with trade policy. Generally, however, the debates in the work focused on trade policy reflect broader debates on politicisation. When discussing the key contribution of this special issue, namely its focus on *reactions* to politicisation, we also review the broader literature.

Many authors consider politicisation a bottom-up process initiated by clashes in values among trading partners (Duina, 2019; Jungherr *et al.*, 2018; Steiner, 2018) or in their economic interests (Baccini *et al.*, 2022; Dür *et al.*, 2020). From these perspectives, politicisation is presumed to be a reaction among the so-called 'losers' of economic integration and is expected to be commensurate with actual or eventual material and intangible losses attributable to trade policy decisions. As economic losers often also exhibit non-economic attitudes that run counter to economic integration, attempts at testing this argument face an observational equivalence problem that is difficult to solve (De Bièvre & Poletti, 2020). Partly as a complement and partly as an alternative to these bottom-up explanations of variation in politicisation, some scholars focus on the role of institutions in either bringing new actors into the process of politicisation (Laursen & Roederer-Rynning, 2017), or in mediating the interactions between them (Andrione-Moylan *et al.*, 2023b).

Meanwhile, many scholars have begun investigating the activities of political entrepreneurs. This approach builds on the finding that external shocks create arenas of electoral competition more easily mobilised by nationalist, isolationist, and radical-right parties (Colantone & Stanig, 2018) and opposition parties more generally (Ahlquist *et al.*, 2020). A number of articles have focused on the efficient use of framing strategies to mobilise opposition to TTIP (Conrad & Oleart, 2020; Eliasson & Garcia-Duran, 2018;

Gheyle & De Ville, 2019; Siles-Brügge & Strange, 2020). Much of this attention has focused on the arguments of interest groups (Dür, 2019). Before TTIP, citizen groups had already been shown to have produced 'cascades of attention' (Halpin, 2011) by effectively bandwagoning against the anti-counterfeiting trade agreement (Dür & Mateo, 2014; cf. Hamilton, 2023). Other authors have investigated the interaction between citizen groups and populist politicians in the contestation of trade policy (Rone, 2021); citizen groups and policymakers more generally (Gheyle & Rone, 2022); as well as the role of the media in influencing public opinion (Foos & Bischof, 2022).

While many scholars have thus focused on the causes of contestation or politicisation, few have asked research questions related to its consequences. This gap is especially significant because politicisation does not happen all at once. Waves of politicisation occur through interactions among political actors, suggesting that actors cannot respond to politicisation without simultaneously contributing to it. Expectations about how such interactions unfold form the theoretical underpinnings of the articles in this special issue. Mainstream parties respond to niche challengers (Meguid, 2005), citizen groups react to issue salience (Dür & Mateo, 2014), political parties react to public opinion (Romeijn, 2020), and so on. These reactions are in turn mediated by the institutional environment.

Among the few studies focusing on these reactions are those included in a special issue of this journal on 'EU Actors Under Pressure' (Bressanelli et al., 2020). These studies investigate how EU-level actors respond to politicisation within member-states. A key point made by these authors is that politicisation may not necessarily limit actors' room for manoeuvre but also may provide them with opportunities. These actors also do not need to simply accept politicisation, as they can also try to depoliticise an issue. Indeed, such attempts at depoliticisation, especially by EU actors, were also present in the TTIP debate (Andrione-Moylan et al., 2023a). Garcia-Duran and co-authors specifically focused on the reaction of the European Commission to the politicisation of trade policy in the EU (Garcia-Duran et al., 2020). They show how politicisation made the Commission adopt the 'managed globalization' doctrine. This is in line with the idea that politicisation increases the responsiveness of the European Commission (Rauh, 2016).

We add to this literature by considering many different actors (public actors, interest groups, political parties, etc.) that can respond to politicisation in different institutional contexts with a larger set of strategies. Each contribution to this special issue hence focuses on one particular type of actor and analyses that actor's responses to politicisation. As a result, we take a step down the ladder of abstraction (Sartori, 1970) – rather than focus on the big trends which lead to a macro-level 'societal response', we focus on the micro- and meso-level interactions which carry it forward or bring it to

a halt. By zooming in on how different types of actors respond to rising salience and contestation, we are able to provide new insights into the dynamics of politicisation which have thus far been obscured by a lack of conceptual clarity.

Contribution of the special issue

The key contribution of this special issue is to categorise actors' reactions to politicisation and suggest some arguments that explain why one or the other is chosen. Four broad strategies are available to actors when they face a politicised policy, which we illustrate in Table 2. These strategies are to dodge the conflict, actively confront the challengers, free ride on the contestation of others, or to bandwagon with them. As shown in Table 2, these strategies differ from each other on two dimensions: the position that actors take and their level of activity on an issue. In the following, we discuss these strategies for the various types of actors that we consider, namely governmental actors, opposition politicians and parties, and interest groups.

Starting with the *dodging* strategy, some actors that are opposed to the contestation that takes place with respect to a specific policy may want to stay out of the political debate and keep their head low. For example, a company may expect gains from a trade agreement. Attracting the attention of actors that campaign against the trade agreement, however, may be dangerous (Dür & Mateo, 2023). A boycott campaign against the company could cost it much more than it would benefit from the trade agreement. Its best strategy then may be to stay on the side-line. Alternatively, knowing that it is difficult to maintain high levels of contestation for a long time, as other issues tend to rise in attention, it may adopt this strategy with the hope of just waiting it out. A government that is confronted with the sudden politicisation of an issue may opt for the same strategy (Hurrelman & Wendler, 2023). If it sees no other way forward, it may also concede, for example by reducing its ambition in terms of the trade liberalisation that it wants to achieve (Antoine *et al.*, 2023). This strategy was also supported by parts of the Socialists and Democrats (S&D) group in the European Parliament in the face of the highly politicised Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) (De Ville & Gheyle, 2023). The Commission's decision to draft a lowest common denominator proposal for an investment screening mechanism also aligns with this strategy (Vlasiuk Nibe *et al.*, 2023).

Table 2. Actors' strategies in response to politicisation.

		Position taken	
		Against contestation	Aligned with contestation
Level of activity	Low	Dodging	Free riding
	High	Confronting	Bandwagoning

Alternatively, those supporting a policy that gets contested may fully renounce it. This is what happened with the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA) and TTIP negotiations, both of which were abandoned by EU member state governments in the face of broad opposition. Even for opposition politicians and parties this strategy can be beneficial if they adopted a position in favour of a policy in the past and now cannot credibly oppose the government on that issue.

Actors opposed to the contestation may also opt for a strategy of *confronting*, that is, to actively work against the challengers. For example, they may try to sell the policy at hand to the public. Illustratively, from the beginning of the TTIP negotiations, the European Commission invested considerable amounts of resources in making a case for the planned agreement (Garcia-Duran Huet & Eliasson, 2017). Some business actors may, likewise, attempt to react to or even pre-empt contestation by citizen groups by using their resources to shore up public support for a policy, even if this is rather rare (Dür & Mateo, 2023). As part of the confronting strategy, governmental actors can also try to buy off some of the challengers, for example by inviting them to join advisory committees. Finally, actors taking a position against contestation can work to discredit the critics. In the TTIP campaign, for example, then EU Trade Commissioner Karel De Gucht accused TTIP critics of spreading lies (Crisp, 2014).

Moving on to actors aligned with contestation, they can jump on the bandwagon (if they were not yet active) and actively contribute to further politicisation by contesting an issue and attempting to increase its salience. *Bandwagoning* can be attractive for actors such as NGOs for whom donations are important. They may find it attractive to get involved in a campaign as soon as they see that it successfully mobilises a large number of people (Dür & Mateo, 2016). For them, this is an opportunity to showcase themselves, which in turn can help them shore up their finances. Opposition parties also often jump on the bandwagon of a campaign started by non-governmental actors. The TTIP campaign, for example, was initially started by citizen groups. When their contestation was successful in increasing the salience of the negotiations, opposition parties jumped on the bandwagon with the aim of benefitting politically from that campaign. The choice of the Austrian Freedom Party to join the noisy politics campaigns of those who opposed CETA is also an example of this strategy. Contributions to this special issue find evidence of bandwagoning among members of parliament (Basedow & Hoerner, 2023; De Ville & Gheyle, 2023), political parties (Donnelly, 2023; Rosén & Polk, 2023), regions (Broschek & Freudlsperger, 2023), and citizen groups (Dür & Mateo, 2023).

Finally, some actors, even if they are aligned with contestation, may decide to engage in *free riding* on the efforts of other actors. This may be a governmental actor that is unhappy about a policy but finds it difficult to show this

opposition publicly. This is most likely in the context of the EU, where governments are often expected to abide by a consensus norm, namely not to voice their objections to policies supported by all or most other governments even if they oppose them. The free-riding strategy, however, can also be employed by interest groups. Hamilton (2023) shows that citizen groups that fail to benefit from contestation in terms of increasing representativeness, political information and legitimacy tend to reduce their level of activity on the issue.

Each of the four strategies thus is used by some actors in reaction to politicisation. Depending on which strategy dominates and is most successful, this may lead to further politicisation or to de-politicisation of an issue. The decision of the Austrian government to ratify CETA despite politicisation, for example, led to an end of the broader public debate on the issue in Austria (see Hurrelman & Wendler, 2023). By contrast, in the case of ACTA many actors jumping on the bandwagon of the anti-ACTA campaign created ever greater politicisation of the issue, until governments decided to stop the ratification of the agreement (Dür & Mateo, 2014).

The discussion so far naturally begs the question of which factors determine the choice of strategy in reactions to politicisation. Building on the assumption of boundedly rational actors, we emphasise three sets of factors: actor characteristics, issue characteristics and institutions. With respect to actor characteristics, most basically, the exogenous preferences of actors often determine whether they find themselves in line with or in opposition to contestation. For example, business actors that benefit from trade will position themselves against the contestation of trade agreements. The governmental actors that negotiate a trade agreement will also generally find themselves in opposition to contestation. Import-competing producers, by contrast, likely find themselves aligned with contestation. Many actors, on the other hand, possess some flexibility to position themselves in opposition to or in alignment with contestation. Subnational governments not directly involved in negotiating a trade agreement, opposition parties, and civil society organisations may not have strong substantive preferences regarding the policy, but use their positioning to achieve other aims, such as electoral success or organisational maintenance.

Actors' expected benefits and losses from a policy also likely matter for their level of activity in response to politicisation. The greater the expected losses from a policy, the more likely it is that an actor actively works in support of the challengers. But in addition to being vulnerable to the effects of a policy, actors may be vulnerable to the reputational consequences of opposing it. For example, firms that are highly vulnerable to being the target of a consumer boycott (e.g., a producer of branded clothing) are unlikely to actively lobby in favour of a policy that is highly contested (i.e., bandwagon). By contrast, firms that produce goods and services far up in the production chain may find it easier to take an unpopular stance (Dür &

Mateo, 2023). More generally, we expect that actors which represent broad segments of a polity are best positioned to counter contestation through confrontation, while those representing concentrated interests will likely be forced to 'dodge' by making concessions or waiting for contestation to stop. Conversely, actors aligned with contestation may be most likely to bandwagon because they see the possibility of acting in concert with a coalition as a window of opportunity.

With respect to issue characteristics, on some issues, the mobilisation of the public is easier than on others. For example, it is easier for actors to frame some of them in a way that arouses emotions and hence mobilises people. While such framing is clearly endogenous to the process of politicisation, there are nonetheless certain themes that have been empirically demonstrated to resonate in effective campaigns. If an issue can be linked to bodily harm (and the causal chain is very short) or equality of opportunity, critics have a greater chance of success (Keck and Sikkink, 2014). At the same time, for some issues it may be easier for executive actors to devise frames that allow them to create support for a policy (Hurrelman & Wendler, 2023). One issue characteristic at the heart of this special issue is the extent to which an issue is politicised. This is held constant across contributions focusing on reactions to politicisation. But it is worth mentioning that this has an impact on actors' expectations about whether and with whom it is possible to forge alliances, as well as helping them to identify potential pitfalls. How far advanced a policy is in the policy process can also matter. Being highly active to push an issue over the finishing line may be easier than being highly active knowing that the policy still has a long way to go. The various contributions to this special issue take up these points in more detail.

Finally, institutions should also matter for actors' choice among the strategies presented in Table 2. The larger the majority is that the government needs to ensure passage of a policy, the less it can rely on a confronting strategy. Knowing this, opposition parties may be more likely to adopt a position aligned with contestation, with the aim of extracting concessions from the government. Interest groups are also aware of the legal rules governing the policy-making process. A supermajority requirement may make free riding more attractive for some opponents of a policy, as they may reckon that their active work against the policy is not needed. By the same logic, institutionalised opportunities for meaningful participation in the formation of public policy should encourage contestation more broadly, as these give would-be opponents an opportunity to offer purposive incentives to their supporters (Rothenberg, 1988). This is especially relevant for actors such as political parties and civil society organisations whose survival is dependent on the production of public goods rather than (or in addition to) selective incentives.

Summary of the special issue

The contributions to this special issue consider the reactions to politicisation of a variety of actors: parliaments and political parties, executive actors at different levels of government – subnational/regional, national, and supranational in case of the European Commission – and civil society actors and interest groups. At the same time, we keep the policy field constant by focussing only on international trade (and its adjacent policy areas where actors couple trade to e.g., investment policy). Furthermore, we restrict the analysis to two trade policy making entities in the transatlantic area for two reasons. First, the United States and the European Union have both witnessed varying degrees of politicisation of their preferential trade agreement negotiations over the last decade. Second and more importantly, this case selection restricts the analysis to advanced economies with (quasi-)federal democratic political systems where several layers of government are involved in central government policy making – at the federal level in the US and at the supranational European level in the EU.

Parliaments and political parties

In a first contribution, Robert Basedow and Julian Hoerner (2023) investigate the impact of politicisation on the voting behaviour of members of the European Parliament (MEPs). They find that politicisation negatively affects MEPs' support for trade liberalisation, but that this effect is rather small. They also theorise that the effect of politicisation should differ depending on the constituents that MEPs represent and the MEPs' broader attitudes towards the EU and trade. This argument is in line with our conceptualisation above: actors' responses to politicisation should vary depending on whether their exogenous preferences mean that they are aligned with or opposed to the contestation that is taking place.

In the second contribution, Ferdi De Ville and Niels Gheyle (2023) delve deeper into these MEP incentives and analyse internal party dynamics within the European Parliament. They seek to explain the continued support by parts of the S&D group for negotiations on TTIP in the face of unprecedented civil society mobilisation against it. They show how the leadership of that group reacted to contestation by emphasising responsibility rather than responsiveness as they sought to forestall MEP voting defection in national MEP delegations. In our terminology, German MEPs followed a strategy located somewhere between dodging and confronting – preferring to offer token concession while pursuing the agreement rather than bowing in the face of public pressure. They did so because they occupied positions of responsibility in the European Parliament, such as president of that institution. Other national delegations within the S&D group, for whom

responsibility played less of a role in this debate, could opt for a bandwagoning strategy. These differences across different national delegations in terms of strategy choice are exemplary of the effect of political institutions on actors' reactions to politicisation.

Relative to the quite clear and surprising EP support for an active strategy of maintaining support for trade negotiations by taking on challengers, the reaction to the politicisation of trade agreement negotiations by the US Congress and its two parties was one of withdrawal of support. In the third contribution to this special issue, Shawn Donnelly (2023) points out that while both Democrats and Republications reacted to the contestation of trade policy by opposing further liberalisation, they still differed in their approach. Democrats started to focus on national economic development, whereas Republicans linked their criticism of trade liberalisation to cultural and ideological issues. Both parties' reactions can be seen as bandwagoning with actors opposed to liberalisation. This demonstrates the relative flexibility which political parties have to align with contestation. It also highlights a distinctive feature of the American two-party system: that contestation is likely to originate within the party rather than outside of it. In this light, bandwagoning is encouraged by a different set of values held within each party, enabling the two parties to choose similar policies, based on divergent justifications.

Fourth, and last as an analysis of parliamentary and electoral responses, Guri Rosén and Jonathan Polk (2023) investigate the determinants of the positions on trade of parties represented in the parliaments of EU member states. In comparing the impact of economic and cultural ideology on party support for trade openness, they find that the former has a stronger impact. This suggests that especially extreme left parties are bandwagoning. Larger 'catch-all' parties, which more often succeed in forming government, are more likely to actively confront the actors that contest (liberal) trade policy. Radical right parties, meanwhile, are found to be dodging or free-riding by keeping quiet on the cultural implications of trade liberalisation. This contribution hence puts emphasis on the role of actor characteristics for strategy choice.

Executive actors at different levels of government: subnational, national, and supranational

Next to these insights into the reactions of parliamentarians and parties to contestation, three contributions turn our attention to responses to politicisation by executive actors, be they at the subnational, national, or supranational level. In the fifth paper, Jörg Broschek and Christian Freudlsperger (2023) explore to what extent politicisation sparked regional governments' involvement in trade policy. They show that politicisation generally increased regions' participation in trade policymaking. However, the effect of politicisation is not equal across all member states but interacts with variation in the

institutional setting in explaining the extent of regions' long-term engagement with trade policy. In line with our point concerning the role of institutions, they argue and empirically show that a bandwagoning strategy by regions is especially likely in countries in which regional involvement in trade is only weakly institutionalised.

In a sixth contribution, Achim Hurrelmann and Frank Wendler (2023) examine how public contestation constrains national governments' EU-related policy making. To that end they apply the theoretical framework of discursive post-functionalism to the very different national ratification trajectories of the EU–Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) by EU member-state governments. They find that public contestation does not necessarily prevent the ratification of an agreement like CETA, but that the effect of previous politicisation and contestation by civil society actors is mitigated by institutional provisions on the involvement of domestic actors, the composition of government coalitions, and framing strategies of national governments. This contribution thus combines actor characteristics, institutions, and issue characteristics to explain strategy choice in response to politicisation.

Finally, the jury is out on how the supranational level of government in the European (quasi-) federal political system reacts to politicisation. With regard to trade politics, it has been claimed that the supranational European Commission has engaged in a form of de-politicisation by splitting off one of the many contested issues – investment regulation – from trade negotiations. While such a technocratic and legalistic motivation might sound logical, it stands at odds with the fact that the EU executive arm, the European Commission, used this tactic in some but not in other EU preferential trade agreements. It also is at odds with the fact that the EU adopted a quite important new investment screening regulation without much controversy or public outcry. In contribution number seven, Anna Vlasiuk Nibe, Sophie Meunier and Christilla Roederer-Rynning (2023) therefore develop an alternative argument for how the European Commission could engage in a deliberate strategy of 'pre-emptive de-politicization' of the potentially highly incendiary regulation of incoming foreign direct investment, especially from China. This strategy shortened the policy process and limited the number of actors involved in it. They thus show how executive actors can effectively combine a dodging as well as a confronting strategy to pre-emptively forestall future politicisation of a potentially incendiary issue like international investment regulation.

Civil society and interest group actors

The last three contributions to the special issue zoom in on civil society and interest group responses to politicisation. In the eighth contribution, Andreas Dür and Gemma Mateo (2023) wonder how the politicisation of trade policy

affects the lobbying strategies chosen by interest groups. They find that when facing an issue that is highly politicised, business actors move even more toward inside lobbying and citizen groups move even more toward outside lobbying. Business groups hence are those actors who most clearly opt for a dodging strategy in the face of increased or exceptionally high levels of salience and contestation, while civil society groups tend to be able to go for the active bandwagoning strategy. The difference in strategy choice between business groups and civil society groups again attests to the importance of actor characteristics, with exogenous preferences and different degrees of vulnerability explaining the difference in actors' strategies.

In a ninth contribution to this special issue, Elise Antoine, Ece Özlem Atikcan, and Adam Chalmers (2023) take on the question of how governments respond to business interest mobilisation when negotiating contested preferential trade agreements. They argue that governments respond to lobbying by a greater range of business interests with more liberalisation. At the same time, they react with less liberalisation if a trade agreement becomes more publicly salient. This suggests that for governments, the dodging strategy dominates. The subtext explaining this strategy is once again the electoral vulnerability of governments and the institutionalised reliance on voters which forces them to 'dodge' in situations of increased salience by making concessions.

In the tenth and last contribution to the special issue, Scott Hamilton (2023) tests an empirical implication of resource mobilisation theory. Increased salience combined with a shift in public opinion is considered an incentive for contestation, especially by civil society actors whose survival depends on demonstrating their ongoing relevance to potential supporters. This implies that when interest organisations are engaging in noisy politics to get attention, they should stop if this strategy does not work. Zooming in on the internal dynamics of a policy bandwagon, the paper shows that its cascade dynamic is characterised by defection, division, and domestication. Organisations that fail to attract new political resources tend to stop bandwagoning and free ride instead. Meanwhile, organisations that succeed in attracting resources 'stay on the bandwagon'. The difference, however, shrinks in member states where civil society has a meaningful possibility of participating in policy formation. In open political systems, civil society organisations are found to stay on the bandwagon longer despite achieving low levels of organisational maintenance. This corroborates the expectation that both actors' vulnerability and political institutions affect strategy choices.

Lessons learned

Considering all contributions to this special issue, two lessons about actors' reactions to politicisation stand out. First, we observe much more dodging and bandwagoning than free riding and confronting. Actors that position

themselves against contestation seem to find it difficult to actively confront those contesting and hence opt for dodging. Those who are aligned with contestation, by contrast, generally seem to prefer going full in when they can bandwagon with the actors that engage in contestation. Second, actor characteristics clearly dominate as an explanation for variation in the choice of strategy in response to politicisation. Actor characteristics matter for governments, political parties, and interest groups in terms of both positions taken vis-à-vis contestation and level of activity. Although institutions have little impact on the preferences of actors, and hence whether or not they will align with contestation, they were instrumental in explaining the level of activity of civil society organisations; national and regional governments; political parties; and elected officials. The vulnerability of actors, moreover, is often linked to the institutional context in which they operate. Issue characteristics, meanwhile, play a limited role in explaining the reactions of elected and unelected policymakers. Still, it should be noted that perhaps the most important issue characteristic – whether an issue is politicised or not – is held constant across all of the cases explored in this special issue. The theoretical framework suggested above hence has considerable explanatory power for reactions to politicisation and might serve as a building block for future studies.

A still broader lesson that can be learned from this special issue is that politicisation seems to alter perceptions of threats and opportunities in such a way that contestation is likely to continue, at least as long as a politicised policy is on the table. Whereas many opponents of a policy actively bandwagon against it, supporters of the policy tend to prefer dodging rather than confronting contestation. As a consequence, once a policy gets politicised, its chances of moving forward without major changes are slim. What this means for a normative evaluation of politicisation, however, remains unclear. Some of the contributions suggest that politicisation enhances responsiveness to citizens. Indeed, politicisation often profoundly affects policy outcomes. Nevertheless, this neither ensures that final policy outcomes coincide with the policy preferences of the median voter or a majority of citizens, nor that these preferences reflect citizens' genuine interests with respect to a policy. Tackling these questions is an important avenue for future research.

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