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Principled Politicization: When Citizens Debate the EU and its Regime Principles

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Abstract

In this article, building on de Wilde (2011) and Schattschneider (1960), we elaborate on the notion of principled politicization, a process of politicization by which regime principles become salient in public debate in a way that also articulates or implies structural alternatives. First, we argue that in contrast to other conceptualizations of politicization, which focus on policy issues, or "issue-based politicization," principled politicization concerns another type of political conflict that differs in terms of topic (regime principles) and content (alternatives). As such, this type of debate is inherently related to the concept of democracy. Second, adopting an applied political theory approach, we put the notion of principled politicization to the test by empirically studying citizen discussions about the EU. We examine whether citizens draw on EU regime principles and discuss alternatives. To do so, we conduct a qualitative secondary analysis of four datasets, consisting of interviews and focus groups with participants from different socio-economic backgrounds and political leanings. This data was collected in Belgium, France, and the UK at four different points in time (1995–2019). We report that some citizens do engage with EU regime principles and consider alternatives to the principles they observe being implemented. This article suggests that politicization can strengthen EU democratization when debates include and, in fact, reflect the challenges to democratic principles themselves.

Keywords

citizen discourses; democracy; European Union; EU politicization; issue-based politicization; principled politicization; regime principles

1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, European integration has featured many episodes of intense politicization. Notable examples include the controversy surrounding the "Bolkestein Directive" in the early 2000s (Crespy, 2010), the failed attempt to adopt a Constitution for Europe in 2005 (Wiesner, 2024), the austerity measures imposed on some member states in the early 2010s (White, 2015), the recent debates over Eurobonds in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic (Schmidt, 2022), and the debates surrounding the coordinated group purchases of military equipment for Ukraine (Moise et al., 2023). These episodes illustrate that the role and decisions of the EU have consistently sparked public debate. What is equally evident is that such politicised events are not only topic-specific or policy-centred controversies. They also deal with regime principles and their alternatives, namely with what the EU is and what it should do. These episodes of politicization are times when political actors, sometimes including citizens, actively mobilise to challenge existing structures. They propose transformative changes, like a "more social" Europe by integrating alternative economic policies (Balibar, 2016; Tarragoni, 2019); a Europe focused on economic recovery after the pandemic through initiatives like the NextGenerationEU plan (Crespy et al., 2023) or an EU that launches a conference on the future of Europe to solve the democratic deficit (Alemanno & Nicolaïdis, 2022). These discussions point to the existence of debates about the principles that govern the EU.

Debates on the politicization of the EU are far from new. Since Hix and Bartolini (2006) sparked an extensive debate, the scholarship has made significant progress. Much of the literature builds on de Wilde's (2011, p. 560) influential definition of politicization as "an increase in polarization of opinions, interests or values and the extent to which they are publicly advanced towards the process of policy formulation within the EU." Considering the continued relevance of the topic and the advancement of the field, we believe it is timely to re-examine our collective conceptualization of the politicization of the EU. In this article, we thus take stock of key debates on EU politicization (Beaudonnet & Mérand, 2019; de Wilde, 2011; Hoeglinger, 2016; Hutter et al., 2016; Wiesner et al., 2019) and make two contributions to the discussion.

First, building on Schattschneider (1957, 1960) and de Wilde (2011), we elaborate on the notion of "principled politicization." We define principled politicization as a process of politicization by which regime principles become salient in public debate in a way that also articulates or implies structural alternatives. A crucial difference with other conceptualizations of politicization, which focus on policy issues, or "issue-based politicization" as we label it, pertains to the focus on principled politicization, namely, debates over regime principles. This type of debate is directly related to the concept of democracy. As Lefort (1988, p. 39) notes, democracy is an ongoing discussion about policymaking and a discourse about the boundaries of legitimacy itself—what is deemed legitimate and what is not. In other words, democracy truly functions when the debate about regime principles is recognised as an open-ended endeavour with no final answer. Ultimately, in a democracy, it is possible to call into question the principles of the regime and find alternatives to them. Debates on regime principles are associated with a particular kind of politicization which is regime-building, as it taps into the very foundations of the system (see also Müller, 2020). In addition, when citizens debate the EU, even in critical terms, this supports the democratization of the EU (Wiesner, 2024, pp. 297–300). This article aims to clarify our conceptualization of principled politicization and how we distinguish it from issue-based politicization.

Second, the article provides empirical illustrations of EU principled politicization. It adopts an "applied political theory" approach, combining political theory, which concerns ideational resources, with interpretative sociology, which focuses on what citizens consider as reference points (cf. White, 2011, pp. 40–41). Using this approach, the article shows how principled politicization provides a heuristic analysis of the underlying principles that shape political debates. Specifically, our empirical study is designed as a "hard test" of the concept of principled politicization. We study whether ordinary citizens engage with foundational principles and alternatives that shape the EU. Our empirical study rests on a comparative and longitudinal design, devised to probe the existence of shared understandings across national cases, time, and interviewees' socio-economic background, rather than studying the variations in these understandings. To do so, we designed a qualitative secondary analysis of four primary datasets, each focusing on how research participants relate to European integration, and in which, crucially, no discussion on EU regime principles was prompted. Our secondary dataset includes three countries (Belgium, France, and the UK), four points in time (from 1995 to 2019), 31 semi-structured interviews, and 45 focus groups. In total, 268 research participants are included, and were sampled by primary researchers to differ in their socio-economic background and political leanings. Belgium, France, and the UK exhibit variation regarding citizens' support for the EU that is meaningful theoretically. Furthermore, political elites have had distinct strategies when it comes to endorsing EU regime principles or not. We focus on EU policies as a way of grasping how citizens understand EU regime principles and alternatives, in order to improve our comprehension of (de)politicization of the EU.

We report that our conceptualization of principled politicization in the EU passes the test of citizen discourses as research participants debate principles of the EU and alternatives, while emphasizing the gap between these principles and their experiences. Our findings show that discussions about the principles underpinning the EU's political system emerge spontaneously across diverse socio-economic groups and partisan affiliations, in multiple national contexts and over time. The excerpts presented in this article illustrate that such principled debates are not only present but also salient to participants. Far from being abstract or imposed, these discussions arise unprompted and are frequently articulated with striking engagement. This level of involvement contrasts sharply with the commonly observed detachment in citizens' responses to European integration (Duchesne et al., 2013; Van Ingelgom, 2014), thereby stressing the empirical relevance of principled politicization. Our empirical analysis reports that alternatives to the EU's political system emerge in two distinct forms, echoing Schattschneider's insights. First, they may be competing interpretations of foundational principles, for example, divergent understandings of unity. Second, they take the form of proposals that seek to replace existing principles altogether.

In the remainder of the article, Section 2 presents our theoretical approach to politicization and introduces the distinction between issue-based politicization and principled politicization. In Section 3, we discuss our data and methods of data analysis of citizen discourses. Section 4 focuses on our empirical analysis, and Section 5 concludes the article.

2. Theoretical Approach to Politicization

2.1. Issue-Based Politicization and Principled Politicization

There has been extensive debate about the politicization of the EU (Beaudonnet & Mérand, 2019; de Wilde, 2011; Hoeglinger, 2016; Hutter et al., 2016; Wiesner et al., 2019). From the outset, politicization has been conceived of as occurring at two levels: On the one hand, conflict concerns policy issues and political preferences; on the other hand, it concerns the deeper structural boundaries of the EU polity. This distinction was introduced in a famous discussion between Hix and Bartolini (2006) about whether European issues should be politicised. Simon Hix and Andreas Føllesdal (2006) called for political conflict about the EU to be made more visible. Integrating discussions about the EU into a party political cleavage would be instrumental, they suggested, to making the EU more legible by ordinary citizens and, thereby, supporting their interest and engagement with EU politics. In that respect, public discussions about the EU, framed as partisan discussions embedded in a clear cleavage, were deemed able to fix the democratic deficit of EU institutions. However, Peter Mair (2007) pointed out that the very existence of such a partisan cleavage could open up the possibility for some citizens to oppose the EU as a whole, as a matter of principle. Stefano Bartolini (2005) took a further step and argued that such a politicization of EU issues could spill over into discussions on the very nature and legitimacy of European integration, labelled as "constitutional debates." The entire European project could thus be put at risk if the EU were to be politicised to an excessive degree. Consequently, scholars contributing to the normative debate favoured a "moderate" politicization of the EU, focusing on policy and party-political issues.

Whether desirable or not, public discussions about the EU have become more politicised, and constitutional—or structural—debates are part of them, as Bartolini anticipated they would be. In this context, Pieter de Wilde (2011, p. 560) elaborated on "an overarching meaning to the concept of politicization." His definition is now the most widely relied upon definition of the politicization of the EU. It is defined as "an increase in polarization of opinions, interests or values and the extent to which they are publicly advanced towards policy formulation within the EU" (de Wilde, 2011, p. 560). Importantly, this definition has provided an operational starting point for a large body of research on political parties, government communication, and the discussion of European issues in the mainstream media (cf. e.g., de Wilde et al., 2016; Risse, 2014; Staham & Trenz, 2013). Importantly, de Wilde's definition has mostly been treated not as a concept, but as the concept's operationalisation (Wiesner et al., 2019). It was formalised as "politicization = salience × (increase in number of actors + polarisation)" (Grande & Hutter, 2016, p. 10). Thereafter, measures of EU politicization have flourished in the literature, in the form of coverage of EU issues (de Wilde et al., 2016; de Wilde & Zürn, 2012; Staham & Trenz, 2013) and measures of support or opposition to the EU (De Vries, 2018). Crucially, while de Wilde's definition includes "opinions, interests, or values," the literature has primarily focused on the first two, paying less attention to values or the underlying principles of the EU. As a result, the literature has been almost exclusively concerned with issues and interests, largely neglecting the politicization of what de Wilde refers to as "values."

We propose to reassess the conceptualization of the politicization of the EU with a view to incorporating this overlooked dimension into the analysis. To do so, we turn to how the political is theorized. Following de Wilde's elaboration, most of the existing scholarship portrays EU politics as a political arena where visible, "punctuated" debates tackle contentious issues such as crises, elections, and referenda (Hutter et al., 2016; Kriesi, 2016). In that respect, politics is defined as visible conflicts happening within a specific institutional

space, i.e., the political sphere or field (Kauppi et al., 2016), and politicization is understood as a strategic game that political actors play by choosing to initiate or contribute to public discussions about specific issues, that is, to politicise or depoliticise these issues. This conceptualization of politicization can be labelled issue-based politicization.

This conceptualization is supported by Elmer Schattschneider's elaboration of both politics and politicization, which existing research takes inspiration from (for recent references, cf. de Wilde, 2011, p. 568; Grande & Hutter, 2016, p. 8; Wiesner et al., 2019, p. 256). Schattschneider considers that "at the root of all politics is the universal language of conflict" (1960, pp. 2–3). He defines politicization as "the contagiousness of conflict, the elasticity of its scope and the fluidity of involvement of people" (Schattschneider, 1960, p. 17), or in an earlier formulation, "the intensity, visibility, direction and scope of the conflict" (1957, p. 933). In that regard, politics is about choosing one's battles strategically in the "expanding universe of politics" (Schattschneider, 1960, p. 17).

Crucially, however, Schattschneider illuminated another dimension of politicization, that he refers to as the "conflict of conflicts" (1960, p. 68). For him, the political involves not only debating visible issues, but also deciding which issues and principles will be brought to the fore, thereby shaping the nature of the conflict and the actors involved. In the political realm, Schattschneider contends, the battle begins with the struggle to determine which battles are to be fought. In that sense, he suggests that politicization is not only the expansion of the political universe, but also the deliberate shift from one universe to another: it is a "war of worlds" as much as a world of conflicts, since "conflicts compete with each other" (Schattschneider, 1960, p. 65). In this war of worlds, political actors and citizens alike may question the issues that are discussed and imposed, as well as the alternatives that are accepted, tolerated, or suppressed. In other words, the war of worlds is about the principles of the regime.

This second, structural dimension of the political is of a different nature than the first, which focuses on issue-based political conflicts. The main reason is that the "war of worlds" affects the foundations of the regime itself. This is where principled politicization relates to democracy as a type of political regime. In theory, all political regimes are founded on particular principles. The defining feature of democracy is that discussions about principles are its core activity. In other words, principled politicization is an intrinsic part of the definition of democracy. Political activity involves expressing alternatives from a place that is not controlled by institutional power. Democracy is therefore open about its principles and alternatives. Building on Schattschneider's conceptualization of this meta-political process that brings the fundamental principles of a political regime and its alternatives into the public debate, rather than allowing them to remain implicit or taken for granted, we suggest that another politicization of the EU should be theorized. The next section elaborates further on the notion of principled politicization and discusses its broader implications for analysing the politicization of the EU.

2.2. Another Politicization (of the EU) is Possible: A "Schattschneiderian" Perspective

This other politicization, which we label *principled politicization*, can be defined as a process of politicization concerning regime principles and structural alternatives. In such a process, not only are regime principles salient in public debates, but their discussion also articulates or implies alternative principles. Building on Schattschneider (1960) and de Wilde (2011), principled politicization is understood as a type of politicization

that focuses on a *specific topic*, regime principles rather than policy and political issues, and a *specific content*, the alternatives to existing regime principles. Let us examine the defining features of principled politicization in turn.

First, principled politicization is about regime principles and discussions on what they are and what they ought to be. These discussions play a crucial role in *selecting the conflicts* that will be debated publicly. As Schattschneider (1960, p. 66) explains:

> There are billions of potential conflicts in any modern society, but only a few become significant. The reduction of the number of conflicts is an essential part of politics. Politics deals with the domination and subordination of conflicts. A democratic society is able to survive because it manages conflicts by establishing priorities among a multitude of potential conflicts.

This process is inherently democratic as the principles that stand at the foundation of the regime are not to be dictated but rather debated. Regime principles serve as reference points that shape and frame conflicts around EU decisions. In this way, principled politicization sets the boundaries of what is debated.

The crucial point is that this selection process is not based on either strategic considerations or on pre-existing consensus as to the principles to be discussed and their interpretation. It is not merely strategic because power is "multifunctional" (Schattschneider, 1960, p. 77). It cannot be comprehensively controlled by a given political actor, and the more hegemonic an actor may become, the less likely they are to be consistent across all their positions. Furthermore, the conflict of conflicts "is not like an intercollegiate debate in which the opponents agree in advance on a definition of the issues" (Schattschneider, 1960, p. 68). The reason is that power lies in the selection of which issues are to be addressed in public debates. Principled politicization is thus closely associated with the notion that politics is an "essentially contested" concept, that is, "concepts the proper use of which inevitably involves endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users" (Gallie, 1985, p. 169). In other words, "the nature of the fight" in a democracy "is not just given; the conflict is partly about how to define conflicts" (Müller, 2020, p. 102).

Second, principled politicization zeroes in on the discussion of alternatives to regime principles. Defining alternatives is a fundamentally conflictual endeavour. It plays a structural role in framing public discussions and shaping the issues that are subsequently debated. And it is, of course, linked to democratic plurality, to the equal expression of everyone's individual views. In fact, alternatives may either transform or legitimise the political world we inhabit. Following Schattschneider, alternatives can be understood in two ways. On the one hand, they may represent *competing interpretations of the principles* underlying the EU's political system as articulated by actors and institutions in public debates. For instance, think of how much the meaning of solidarity in a social Europe, or of sovereignty in a union of states, differs across political preferences. On the other hand, alternatives may entail *the replacement of existing principles* altogether. In this sense, they point to a reimagined political order that does not exist yet, but that is either called for to change current realities, or, conversely, is rejected as a negative vision of what could be. The definition of alternatives is essentially related to power allocation. In Schattschneider's own words:

> As a matter of fact, *the definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power*; the antagonists can rarely agree on what the issues are because power is involved in the definition. He who

determines what politics is about runs the country, because the definition of the alternatives is the choice of conflicts, and the choice of conflicts allocates power. (Schattschneider, 1960, p. 68, emphasis in the original)

Another perspective on principled politicization is provided by examining what this concept is not (Sartori, 1970). Hence, what is "principled *de*politicization"? Principled depoliticization occurs when the "conflict of conflicts," or the "war of worlds," is virtually absent, that is, when regime principles are so rigid or set that they cannot be discussed or challenged, or when the absence of alternatives results in a sense of fatalism and powerlessness that prevents any collective discussion. In this respect, the politicization of the EU depends on the salience of specific issues, the polarization of opinions about these issues and the extension of actors contributing to these issue-based discussions. Crucially, it also hinges on the malleability of the "war of worlds" and its capacity to accommodate the discussion of alternatives.

Last, we acknowledge that principled politicization and issue-based politicization may unfold at the same time and alongside one another. They refer to two levels of politicization, the former pertaining to the structure of political debates and the latter concerning the issues themselves that are debated. Fundamental discussions of regime principles and alternatives are not confined to highly visible episodes, such as crises, elections, or referenda. Rather, these discussions of regime principles unfold continuously in daily public debates. Actors navigate conflicts fluidly, addressing both issue-specific decisions as well as overarching principles and alternatives. We suggest that accounting for both levels of politicization and their interactions provides the grounding fora more compelling analysis of the processes of politicization in the EU. Table 1 summarizes the main conceptual features of issue-based politicization and principled politicization.

Table 1. Issue-based politicization and principled politicization.

	Issue-based politicization	*Principled politicization*
Politics as	Visible conflicts (Schattschneider, 1960, pp. 2–3, 17)	"Conflict of conflicts" (Schattschneider, 1960, p. 68)
Topics	Policy or political issues	Regime principles
Content	Salience and polarisation (and extension of actors)	Salience and polarisation (and extension of actors):
		+ Alternatives to regime principles: (a) competing interpretations of principles; (b) replacing existing principles altogether

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3. Analytical Approach and Method

3.1. Applied Political Theory as a Test

To advance our analysis of EU politicization, we adopt the perspective of "applied political theory" and put the concept of principled politicization to an empirical test. The "applied political theory" approach combines political theory with interpretative social theory. While the former focuses on the resources of ideas and "the exercise of moral and political evaluation by citizens," the latter considers the specific references people

invoke when discussing politics (White, 2011, pp. 40–41). Our empirical approach aims to support the relevance of the concept of principled politicization for understanding discussions about the EU. Specifically, we have designed and implemented a "hard test." First, our analysis focuses on the type of actors that are the least likely to engage in debates over regime principles, namely ordinary citizens. We study their discussions about EU regime principles, the interpretation of the principles they support, and the alternatives they propose, all in a context where they were not prompted whatsoever to discuss these themes. While one might argue that citizens are especially prone to general, abstract discussions about the EU, because of its perceived distance and their limited policy knowledge, we contend that this would not weaken the strength of our test. Our analysis does not code vague or superficial expressions of discontent as evidence of principled politicization; rather, it identifies instances where citizens substantively engage with core regime-level principles such as democracy, sovereignty, or the rule of law. Importantly, for a contribution to count as evidence of principled politicization, it must not only express the salience of a regime principle but also articulate or imply an alternative principle. This requirement sets a high empirical bar: It ensures that principled claims are not merely rhetorical or abstract. The quotes we cite in the empirical sections illustrate this. Second, because the scholarship on issue-based politicization has primarily focused on policy-related debates, our empirical analysis also zeroes in on how citizens discuss public policies. This empirical focus is instrumental in validating the concept of principled politicization: If there is empirical evidence that ordinary citizens discuss (EU) policies in terms of issues, but at the same time engage in debates about the principles of the EU, then the case can be made that the concept of principled politization captures a different dimension of politicization than its issue-based cousin does. Third, the interviews were all non-directive, allowing participants to speak freely on any topic. Since data collection was structured neither around policy-related questions nor regime principles, the datasets remain free of a priori policy selection or prompted discussions on regime principles. Policy discussions explicitly relating to EU regime principles reflect participants' own ways of engaging with interview questions and focus group discussions rather than the influence of research design.

3.2. Research Design

To test our conceptualization of principled politicization, we conducted a secondary qualitative analysis (Hughes & Tarrant, 2020). This approach involves utilizing pre-existing research data to investigate new questions or verify previous studies (Heaton, 2004, p. 16). Our dataset consists of four studies shared with us by primary researchers (see Table 2 and Appendices 1 and 2 in the Supplementary File for further details). It includes 31 semi-structured interviews and 45 focus groups with a total of 268 participants. As the principal asset of focus groups is to provide a tool for participants to discuss and debate, focus groups have proven useful for studying (de)politicization and, more precisely, to understand how citizens "talk politics" or resist the idea of discussing politics (Conover & Searing, 2005; Gamson, 1992). In this respect, focus groups, when designed appropriately, can generate data on how citizens get involved or not in political discussion (Van Ingelgom, 2020). In this perspective, the three studies that use focus groups to examine public reactions to European integration explicitly treat them as a test of politicization (Duchesne, 2017). In contrast, the interviews conducted by Céline Belot differ in nature. However, their semi-structured format allows for non-directional responses, which also provides a way to test the salience of the topics discussed. A key feature of these studies is their focus on how citizens perceive and understand the process of European integration. They also adopted a qualitative, comparative approach, which ensures sufficient comparability (Hughes et al., 2023).

Given our primary analytical objective, our focus is on identifying commonalities in the data across different national contexts, time periods, and socio-economic characteristics of the participants. The diversity in terms of specific data collection methods and research questions enhances the validity of the findings that emerge from our analysis of this independently conducted research. Therefore, our empirical test aims to document whether participants discuss the principles of the EU regime, and if so, how they do so, considering variations in time, space, and socio-demographic factors, rather than seeking a representative description. The value of our longitudinal and cross-national data lies in its ability to strengthen the robustness of this conceptual test by showing that such engagement is not confined to a specific context or moment in time.

Table 2. Datasets included in our corpus.

Primary dataset	Primary data collection	Research topic	Type/number of interviews and number of participants	Cross-national comparison*	Social composition
Belot (2000)	1995–1996	Citizens' attitudes towards European integration	Semi-structured interviews; 31 participants in individual interviews	France* and the UK*	Young adults (three categories of age) from varying socio-economic backgrounds (different levels of education and coming from different regions of UK and France)
Citizens talking about Europe (CITAE) (Duchesne et al., 2013)	2005–2006	Citizens' reactions towards European integration	Focus groups; 24 focus groups and 133 participants	Belgium*, France*, and the UK*	Participants from varying socio-economic backgrounds (working class, white collar, managers)
Mercenier (2019)	2014	Citizens' perceptions of the EU and their relationships to politics	Focus groups; 7 focus groups and 35 participants	Belgium*	Young adults from different neighbourhoods with distinct socio-demographics
Réseau transatlantique sur l'Europe politique (RESTEP; Beaudonnet et al., 2022)	2019	Citizens' politicization of EU issues	Focus groups; 14 focus groups and 69 participants	Belgium*, France*, Italy, and Portugal	Participants from varying socio-economic backgrounds (high and low education levels), including students

Note: * = Data from these countries are part of our secondary corpus.

3.3. Methods of Data Analysis

Initially, we coded our dataset using a collectively and abductively constructed codebook (Vila-Henninger et al., 2024). To operationalise participants' policy discussions, we used codes describing policy areas as defined in the Comparative Agenda Project. To identify extracts where participants mention and discuss

regime principles, we drew from a code group building on Easton's (1965) analysis of citizens' relations to their political system and, specifically, included the "regime principle" code. This code refers to core regime principles representing the values, virtues, and ideals of the political system as understood and explicated by respondents. The basic principles of democratic regimes are commonly understood to include such values, ideas, ideals, and principles, such as (not exhaustive) freedom, participation, tolerance and moderation, respect for legal-institutional rights, and the rule of law. Finally, we added a code from a group of codes that describe the level at which participants discuss policies, specifically the "Multilevel—EU" code.

Then, we identified extracts where research participants mentioned a regime principle while discussing policies at the European level. To this end, we constructed a code equation, presented in Table 3. This step is instrumental in identifying relevant segments of discussions and performing data reduction.

Table 3. ATLAS.ti query tool abductive code equations.

Code equation: EU regime principles	Public Policy Code—Agriculture | Banking and Finance | Circulation | Culture | Defence | Economy | Education | Employment | Energy | Environment | Euro | Health | Housing | Immigration | International Affairs | Justice | Rights | Sciences and technology | Social policy | Trade | Transportation	386 quotes
	AND Democratic Linkages Code—Regime principles	
	AND Multilevel code—EU level	

In total, we retrieved 386 extracts: 121 from the Belot dataset, 190 from the CITAE dataset, 31 from the Mercenier dataset, and 44 from the RESTEP dataset. Quotes can range from a few sentences to very lengthy discussions. By way of comparison, our corpus includes 413 quotes where political community is mentioned alongside policy experiences and perceptions and the EU level, 286 segments for political institutions, and 140 segments for political actors. Regime principles are thus well represented in our corpus when compared to other political objects. Our operationalisation of political community, regime principles, political institutions, and political actors, anchored in Easton's paradigmatic framework (Easton, 1965), was based on studies attentive to the relationship between citizens and democracy (Norris, 2011).

In a third step, we inductively analysed these 386 quotes to identify what regime principles and alternatives participants discussed, if indeed they did so. Rather than treating regime principles and alternatives as pre-defined categories imposed on participants' discussions, our approach allows regime principles to emerge from the empirical analysis. *Principles* are defined as the values, virtues, and ideals of a political system that participants understand and explicitly mention. In line with Schattschneider's definition, *alternatives* refer to either alternative interpretations of a given principle or alternative principles that challenge what participants consider to be the principles of the EU. To consider a quote as an expression of regime principles, one thus needs more than just a mention of a vague principle related to the EU; it requires a direct engagement with a principle that also articulates or implies an alternative principle.

4. Principled Politicization in Citizen Discourses

Do ordinary citizens engage in debates about principles of the EU when they have not been prompted to do so? To address this question and assess whether the concept of principled politicization has empirical traction,

our analysis investigates the topic and contents outlined in Section 2 (see Table 1) and provides empirical illustrations for each of them: (a) What regime principles of the EU, if any, do research participants engage with in their discussions?; (b) do they develop competing interpretations of these principles?; and (c) do participants discuss alternative principles to replace principles that they deem dominant in the EU? As illustrated by the quotes mentioned in this empirical section, citizens discuss regime principles and consider alternatives. They do so explicitly and sometimes vividly.

4.1. The Regime Principles of the EU in Participant Discussions

Across datasets, participants explicitly debate a range of regime principles they associate with the EU. Some of these principles align closely with those promoted by European institutions, while others have not been explicitly endorsed by institutional actors in the process of European integration. Discussions about the EU as a democratic regime illustrate this point. In the earliest research conducted by Céline Belot in the mid-nineties, shortly after the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty, Claire—a 19-year-old student in technical training who lives in Grenoble—envisions the EU political regime as a group of several countries headed by a pluralist government. We demonstrate this in Extract 1, from Belot's interviews, Grenoble, 1995 (Regime Principles Code—Public Policy Code—Euro), where underlined text segments identify regime principles that participants discuss; segments in italics point at discussions of alternative principles of the EU:

> Researcher: Because can you imagine that Europe, I don't know in how many years, could be a government for the whole of Europe?
>
> Claire: Yeah, I can see it that way. Because for me Europe is <u>both a group of several countries</u> and a <u>country that has its own name</u>, Europe. Like we'd say France, Spain and so on. And I'd see, and I'd see it with a government, that's for sure. A <u>very large government</u>, however. Precisely to avoid *the ultra-dangerous centralization of power by a dictator*. Precisely to make sure that there are enough voices, that there are enough opinions, that there are <u>enough parties that are represented</u>. Something broad, that is <u>broad in terms of the size of the government</u> and also broad in terms of the ambition to succeed. I think that it would be much <u>better to have several people</u> who have a big part to play in this to avoid the fiasco, you know. Because it's the same thing, you can very easily *set up a government that's not very large* in a big country and then well, like *it was in Germany with Hitler or in Italy with Mussolini it's the same*. I think it's the same because well I think that the currency can decline in Germany, I hope not (*laughs*), I hope not but, yeah, that's what I think.

Claire believes that the EU should take the form of a "very large government," "something broad," and she stresses the importance of including a diversity of opinions and political actors in this government. She adds that the latter must have "a big part to play." The reason for this, as she sees it, is the need to avoid a monopoly on decision-making by a select few. Strikingly, she paints a very bleak picture of the situation to be avoided, which would not only be a "fiasco," but which she considers would be comparable to the German and Italian fascist regimes of the 1930s and 1940s. Instead, very much in line with a principle widely promoted by European institutions themselves, Claire supports the principle of a democratic, specifically pluralist, EU which offers a broad representation of a diversity of voices. Her mention of the "ultra-dangerous centralization of power by a dictator" and the institutional design preferences she develops reflect a concern for institutional safeguards against illiberal tendencies and a clear engagement with

democratic principles. This engagement aligns with the notion of principled politicization, as Claire actively reflects on the foundational principles that ought to underpin a European government.

While Claire values inclusivity and collective decision-making, other participants highlight efficiency as a crucial principle for EU governance. This is the case of Christel, a 22-year-old university student, who was interviewed in Grenoble in 1995. Her interpretation of the principle of union in the EU foregrounds the absence of concrete achievements. She vigorously depicts a long-standing historical process that has yet to bear fruit: "It's all very well to have started, to have begun in 57, but if it's only to find ourselves more than thirty years later, still at the same point." She puts the blame squarely on the institutional arrangements and decision-making processes at the European level, clearly underlining their inefficiency: "Well, we're not done yet, if there have to be fifteen institutions combing through all the amendments, opinions, recommendations and so on." She adds that even when agreements are put into practice, "some go back on their decisions. Let's just say that there's no cohesion there either." See the following Extract 2, from Belot's interviews, Grenoble, 1995 (Regime Principles Code—Public Policy Code—Euro):

> **Christel:** I find that it's the slowness, the administrative slowness, which means that the whole process must be put back. And that seeing <u>all the treaties that have been signed and all that, what's the point</u>? To keep coming back to the same point! It's all very well to have started, to have begun in 57, but if it's only to find ourselves more than thirty years later, still at the same point....Let's say it is not a Europe that has really concretized if it takes a century to get to that point. No, I find that the institutions are....And then when you see <u>all the processes involved in passing a law, the shuttle problems, then the Commission must read it, after the Council of Ministers, after the European Council, after this, after that</u>. Well, we're not done yet. If there has to be fifteen institutions going through all the amendments, all the opinions, the recommendations. Well, if that's what it takes, then I think that yes Europe is being held back by all that. I think that in fact we're going round in circles. Because a lot of agreements have been made, but some are not respected, and then when they are put into practice, some go back on their decisions. Let's just say that <u>there's no cohesion there either</u>.

Where Claire emphasizes inclusivity and broad representation as essential to avoiding authoritarianism, Christel's perspective highlights the downsides of extensive procedural hurdles. She interprets the principles of governance through a lens of effectiveness, arguing that excessive institutional complexity hampers Europe's ability to act cohesively and decisively. This interpretation implicitly competes with Claire's vision. Claire advocates for diverse representation and institutional breadth to safeguard democracy, while Christel prioritizes streamlined functionality and questions whether the current institutional framework can deliver meaningful outcomes. This tension reveals a deeper debate: is it more important for the EU to ensure representation and inclusivity or to prioritize efficiency and clear progress? Both perspectives engage deeply with the principles underlying European governance but differ in their prioritization of these principles. Ultimately, their contrasting views enrich the debate on what principles should guide the EU, illustrating how ordinary citizens contribute to discussions about defining EU principles.

When participants discuss specific policies, they may also consider other principles rather than engage in deeper debates on EU core principles. Extract 3, from a RESTEP focus group with highly educated seniors in Grenoble in 2019, coded as Regime Principles Code—Public Policy Code—Agriculture, Environment, and Health, provides an illustration of this. While debating environmental protection and public health within the

EU, and the EU's evolving role in these areas, their discussion sheds light on the tensions between the EU's historical commitments to certain principles and its current practices, contributing to a broader debate about the EU's legitimacy and adherence to its foundational principles:

> Jean-Michel: The losers are the environmentalists, because…

> Sophie: Yes.

> Roger: Of course.

> Jean-Michel: And food safety, because the EU has threatened our food safety by once again authorising the marketing of farmed salmon.

> Sophie: Antibiotics.

> Jean-Michel: Which are riddled with antibiotics. For a long time, the EU was our environmental shield. It must be said. Most of the regulations on protecting natural areas came from Europe. And Europe was always accused of being overly protective of the environment. And, things have suddenly reversed in the last few terms of office, where on the contrary, they've become crime-pushers with pesticides. The challenges to our food safety, with, also the marketing authorisations for drugs that wouldn't be authorised here, and so on.

> Sophie: It's also thanks to England, isn't it? Because it's the UK, it's really the UK, I'm pissed off because it's, it's the UK which has been extremely lax on environmental issues, agriculture and so on, eh?

> Roger: Well, as far as fishing is concerned, it's particularly so, isn't it? Fishing is a real scandal.

> Sophie: Fishing, yes. So, they've got us into this and then they're off.

> Roger: A real scandal.

Jean-Michel begins by lamenting a perceived reversal in the EU's role as a guardian of environmental protection and food safety, describing how its historical function as an "environmental shield" has been undermined. He argues that recent EU policies—such as permitting the marketing of farmed salmon "riddled with antibiotics"—threaten principles like sustainability and public health. This critique goes beyond specific issues to challenge the EU's commitment to upholding its stated principles in practice. Sophie and Roger expand on this by emphasizing the role of the UK in weakening EU environmental standards, suggesting that collective responsibility within the EU has been compromised. Sophie's remark that "they've got us into this and then they're off" critiques not only the UK's influence but also the broader principle of solidarity, which has been destabilized by Brexit and divergent national priorities.

Overall, participant discussions on the principles of the EU cut across socio-economic groups and partisan preferences. They are observed at different points in time and in different countries. These comparative empirical observations, illustrated here by a few extracts, attest to the empirical relevance of principled

politicization: Participants do discuss the principles of the EU's political system without having been prompted to do so. These debates are salient to them, and they engage with them sometimes vividly, as illustrated by the previous quotes. Their comments are also very precise, which contrasts strongly with the distance that often characterizes citizens' reactions towards European integration (Duchesne et al., 2013; Van Ingelgom, 2014). These discussions have something else in common too: Participants stress the tensions between the EU's stated principles and their practical implementation. This suggests a sense of disillusionment with the EU's ability to adhere to its foundational principles, while also showcasing the capacity of ordinary citizens to articulate and debate these principles. In that respect, the empirical illustrations we have provided suggest that in this discrepancy lies the possibility for a richer analysis of EU politicization.

4.2. Competing Interpretations of EU Principles

Another theoretical feature of principled politicization is that citizens discuss alternatives to the EU principles, particularly in the form of competing interpretations of these principles. Indeed, the extracts cited already hint that participants may contest how the EU institutions define their own principles and may argue for a competing understanding of these principles. Extract 3 is a case in point: Jean-Michel and Sophie believe that to be in line with the principle of the protection of the environment, the EU should reaffirm its environmental leadership by returning to stringent environmental and food safety standards.

A focus group conducted in Paris in 2005 with working-class participants offers another compelling illustration, with free movement emerging as a central topic. The discussion quickly moves beyond policy details, revealing divergent interpretations of the principle itself. Jean-Marie's scepticism about the effects of border abolition raises doubts about whether the principle of free movement genuinely delivers meaningful change. In doing so, his critique questions the broader normative justification for removing internal borders within the EU. The following Extract 4 is from a CITAE focus group, in Paris, with participants from the working class (Regime Principles Code—Public Policy Code—Circulation and Employment):

> Jean-Marie (*towards Cédric then Jeannette*): What difference will <u>the abolition of borders make</u>? None. I don't see what the problem is. It's because you're going to change, we're going to change places that *it's going to be better because there are no more borders*.

> Jeanette: …(*Laughs*) French people can go and work wherever they like in peace, without too much paperwork and there are French people here who want to go and work in Switzerland, so we give them the [papers] (*mimes papers*).

> Jean-Marie: Pff….Try to go and work in Switzerland.

> Zahoua (*towards Jean-Marie*): <u>It's not as easy as that to go and work abroad</u>, is it?

> Jean-Marie: Yes, yes. In Switzerland.

> Cédric: All the formalities.

Jeanette: <u>If you want to work somewhere else, we must let you work somewhere else</u> if you work here, you work there.

Cédric: The administrative formalities are less complex than before.

Contrary to Jean-Marie, Jeanette, Zahoua, and Cédric endorse the free movement of workers as a principle that improves and facilitates the lives of French people. Jeanette points out that "French people can go and work wherever they like in peace" and compares this situation to the hurdles encountered by those who "want to go and work in Switzerland." Cédric agrees and stresses that in Europe "administrative formalities are less complex than they used to be." However, Jean-Marie questions the very point of the free movement of workers. For him, free movement changes nothing about their actual situation. After all, he points out, "it's [not] because you're going to change places that it's going to be better." Here, we see the development of divergent interpretations of the principle of free movement and whether it does in fact improve citizens' lives.

Extract 5 (Belot's interviews, Grenoble, 1995, Regime Principles Code—Public Policy Code—Euro) illustrates the emergence of competing interpretations of EU principles further, with discussions on the principle of the union of peoples that the EU would embody. This principle is frequently discussed in our secondary corpus (see also Extract 1). However, the meaning given to it differs widely. For instance, Nathalie, a 20-year-old student in technical training, in an interview conducted in Grenoble in the mid-nineties, interprets the principle of union as bringing both external and internal gains:

Nathalie: Because it's true that if we're always…well if each European country is closed in on itself that can't help trade. It's meant to be. Like that, I don't even know. <u>If Europe unites, it could be stronger with regards to other countries that are bigger than itself, like the United States or the USSR</u>, which is perhaps going to develop and then all the Asian countries too, Japan and all that. No, it's good because I think that each European country has its own problems and if they don't join forces, they won't be able to solve them on their own. We need <u>unity</u>. That I think will help them solve their problems.

The union of countries and peoples of Europe brings clear geopolitical advantages, since "if Europe unites, it could be stronger with regards to other countries bigger than itself, like the United States or the USSR." But the principle of unity, which she is not sure is yet a reality ("if Europe unites"), would also make it possible to overcome the problems faced by individual EU member states. Nathalie does not differentiate between member states, since she considers that "each European country has its own problems," and that unity is a sine qua non condition for solving them ("we need unity").

Nathan, a participant in a 2014 Mercenier's focus group held in a Brussels neighbourhood at the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum (Jette), discusses the principle of the union of the people from a very different perspective. While he suggests unity was initially associated with ideals like peace, democracy, and shared prosperity, he argues that it evolved into economic integration driven by market interests. His interpretation of the principle of unity in the EU is that it no longer exists. Extract 6 is as follows:

Nathan: That's a bit like what I've just explained. For me, it's <u>the business of Europe</u>. You had the ideal, as they say, of peace and so on. Well, it's the ideal that's always being sold because the reality is that we need a customs union for coal and steel. Well, I'm not going to give a history lesson, but Europe

is always being sold as something for rose-coloured: *peace, democracy, development aid*. The European Parliament, which is more the democratic side of things, doesn't have a say. It's always the Commission that decides and it's a Commission that's really labelled very right-wing in its policies. Before Barroso, it was Delors who was a Frenchman who was much more into the *European ideal of uniting peoples*. I could talk for hours about that. I think the problem is that Europe has lost its ideal over the last twenty years or so. I've just broken the mood here (*Laughing*).

Moderator: Excuse me, what?

Nathan: I've just ruined the mood suddenly (*small laugh*).

Catherine: I think that over the years, because of globalisation and all that, Europe isn't what it was at the beginning.

Nathan: Yes, <u>we're levelling downwards</u>. Before, the countries that came in, their standard of living rose and everything. Then now, finally, it's more <u>the standard of living in Europe</u> that's falling.

Nathan identifies the unity of peoples as a foundational principle, embodied in the vision of European leaders like Jacques Delors, who was truly committed to this principle. His comment that "Europe is always being sold as something rose-coloured: peace, democracy, development aid" highlights a disconnect between the stated principle and the EU's perceived focus on economic pragmatic decisions, such as the customs union for coal and steel. Catherine concurs and elaborates on Nathan's interpretation that the principle of unity in the EU is no longer a reality by arguing that globalisation further challenges the notion of a union of peoples at the EU level. Both critique the EU's foundational principle of uniting peoples, contrasting its idealistic origins with its current realities. This contrast echoes the participants' discussion of the freedom of movement principle.

Overall, these discussions underscore the capacity of ordinary citizens, from various socio-economic backgrounds, at different points in time, and in different countries, to engage with EU principles and advocate for alternative interpretations that differ, sometimes sharply, in their understandings.

4.3. Alternative Principles

Schattschneider's conceptualization of alternatives is based on the fact that principles endorsed by the EU, as understood by participants, are replaced by others. Is this theoretical dimension empirically relevant? Extract 7, from a RESTEP focus group conducted with white-collar workers in Grenoble in 2019 (Regime Principles Code—Public Policy Code—Euro), is a discussion between Delta and Golf about compliance with European monetary rules, and suggests that this is indeed the case. While they agree that national governments face institutional constraints stemming from the EU, they disagree on whether there are good reasons to accept them. Their disagreement rests on competing interpretations of the principle of compliance with institutional commitments, but also on Delta's argument that concerns for solidarity and public services should drive decision-making much more than compliance with the growth and stability pact:

Delta: I have more of a problem with Europe. In particular, the treaties, for example the fact that we can't go into debt beyond 3% of GDP, the fact that <u>we can't modify these treaties, that the European</u>

Central Bank is independent, a sort of chicken without a political head that dictates all the monetary policies of each country, in fact. And it turns out that these are *the levers that are vital for national public policies which can influence unemployment, all the economic activity of a country*, in fact, yes. With the government, well with the governance of Europe mainly, yes.

Moderator: Does everyone agree with that?

Golf: No, because if they do that, it's because there are good reasons. Like the 3% is to prevent countries from getting into too much debt and to avoid that it results in problems for the 27, and that destabilises the EU.

Delta: Well, that's one way of looking at it, but in fact it's mainly to increase competition and, finally, to participate in the dismantling of public services because, *basically, if a state can't exceed that amount, it can't invest in public spending*.

This quote engages with fundamental questions about the principles underpinning the EU, particularly the principles of governance, solidarity, and economic unity. Delta and Golf articulate competing interpretations of these principles, showcasing a broader debate about the EU's legitimacy. Delta makes the argument that the rules of the Growth and Stability Pact result in national governments' decision-making capacity being hollowed out, turning them into agency-less actors who cannot make appropriate choices to fight unemployment or foster the country's "economic activity." Golf's defence of these rules is grounded in the understanding that complying with them is the right thing to do to avoid "problems for the 27." Delta stresses Golf's common-sensical argument—"it's one way to look at it"—and further elaborates on the negative consequences of the Growth and Stability Pact rules: They hinder national governments' ability to "invest in the public services." He therefore clearly presents an alternative vision of the EU that prioritizes flexible governance and redistributive solidarity that reflects a vision of solidarity based on investment in social welfare and public goods. Golf's perspective, on the other hand, reinforces the existing framework, prioritizing rules-based stability over flexibility. This ability to debate the EU's regime principles demonstrates the dynamic nature of principled politicization.

5. Discussion

Our applied theory approach illustrates the fact that citizens actively engage in discussions about the principles underlying EU political regime, even without being explicitly prompted to do so. They explore alternative visions by either interpreting shared principles in divergent ways or advocating for entirely new principles to be (re)established. This indicates that principled politicization is indeed an aspect of citizen discourse that is worth studying. Principled politicization provides a valuable theoretical lens for understanding the discrepancies between various principles within the EU regime and the gap between these principles and the lived experiences of its citizens.

Through the analysis of quotes from Delta, Nathan, and others, we see that while the EU regime is perceived as being founded on principles of unity, solidarity, or democratic governance, its current practices often reflect a tension between these principles, or with specific policies or issues. For instance, Delta's critique highlights the restrictive nature of fiscal rules that undermine national sovereignty and social investment, contrasting

sharply with Golf's defence of collective economic stability. Similarly, Nathan's reflection on the EU's drift from its original ideals underscores a broader sense of disillusionment among citizens who feel disconnected from processes of decision-making. Jean-Michel, Sophie, and Roger express a similar gap between EU regime principles and concrete policies on yet another issue, here food safety and EU environmental standards.

Furthermore, our empirical observations illuminate that citizens do not engage with principles in abstract terms. Instead, they approach questions of principles through tangible issues in public policy, such as environmental regulations, freedom of movement, and monetary policy. In our analysis, citizen discourses thus intertwine the theoretical with the practical. These discussions shed light on how participants engage with and challenge the EU's regime principles. By engaging with the EU regime principles, citizens can critically evaluate these policies based on regime principles and their experiences, using them as a foundation to imagine and articulate alternative visions of the EU regime. This interplay highlights how the two dimensions of politicization—issue-based and principled—are mutually reinforcing, offering citizens a pathway to actively shape the political landscape. Ultimately, examining these discrepancies through the lens of principled politicization enriches our understanding of EU politicization and the building of its democracy.

On a theoretical level, our analysis thus demonstrates that while principled politicization focuses on the structure of conflicts and is inherently more abstract and theoretical than issue-based politicization, it plays a critical role in pre-selecting the alternatives available in political debates. This aligns with Schattschneider's insight that the supreme instrument of power lies in the definition of alternatives. In this respect, our empirical findings also show that challenges to the EU's political system take shape in two main ways, as Schattschneider theorized. On one hand, they rest on differing interpretations of core principles, such as contrasting views on the meaning of unity. On the other hand, they manifest as calls for fundamentally rethinking or replacing those principles entirely, such as prioritising solidarity over economic efficacy.

Principled politicization, therefore, stresses the essential interplay between principles and policy in democratic debates. This dynamic perspective, or fluidity, enriches our understanding of the relationship between both types of politicization. On the one hand, the "war of worlds" at the core of principled politicization shapes and influences the debates that unfold as part of issue-based politicization. On the other hand, the content of policies accessible to citizens through their experiences or through issue-based politicization enables them to revisit and question the principles underlying principled politicization. This recursive process allows citizens to contribute to the definition of new alternatives and the reconfiguration of the very structure of political conflicts. In that respect, principled politicization structures the debates of issue-based politicization, while issue-based politicization simultaneously informs and redefines the alternatives discussed through principled politicization.

To conclude, elaborating on the definition of politicization has an impact on our understanding of the democratisation of the EU. If alternatives and principles are particularly open to discussion in a democracy and are, therefore, to be found in citizen discourses, it is because the specificity of any democratic regime is to allow debate about the very principles of that regime. Democracy is a polity whose legitimacy is contestable, whose structures and norms could be called into question. This is expressed by the "indeterminacy" of the definition of democracy itself (Lefort, 1988): The meaning of core principles and their alternatives are constantly open to challenge and discussion. The level of politics that engages in this fundamental debate about the structure of democracy, that feeds and makes use of this "indeterminacy," is a

reflection on principles. Principled politicization drives and embodies the debate surrounding the challenge to democratic principles. Therefore, democracy is the precondition for debates on the foundations of the political system (Lacroix, 2024): Principled politicization is possible because democracy is established. Thus, by engaging in principled politicization, citizens set democracy in motion, because to debate about EU politics is also to debate democracy and its principles. The EU is no exception; principled politicization is not a threat to democracy as feared by some scholars in the earliest debates on EU politicization (Bartolini, 2005, 2006; Mair, 2007). Rather, it is evidence of democracy itself. The real threat is when the debate on principles is settled, and dissent is rejected. When the indeterminacy of democracy is not fed but settled in advance, the limits of possible structural conflicts are frozen and democracy declines (Arens, 2024). Political debates can therefore strengthen EU democratization when democracy itself and its principles are at stake.

Acknowledgments

Funding

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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