

Debating Europe: Politicization, Contestation, and Democratization

Claudia Wiesner ¹  and Meta Novak ² 

¹ Department of Social and Cultural Sciences, Fulda University of Applied Sciences, Germany

² Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

Correspondence: Claudia Wiesner (Claudia.wiesner@sk.hs-fulda.de)

Submitted: 4 July 2025 **Published:** 9 September 2025

Issue: This editorial is part of the issue “Debating Europe: Politicization, Contestation, and Democratization” edited by Claudia Wiesner (Fulda University of Applied Sciences) and Meta Novak (University of Ljubljana), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i452>

Abstract

This thematic issue focuses on how Europe and the European Union are debated, politicized, and contested. A key focus is set on the question of whether and how these debates and politicizations help to democratize the EU, or not. This rationale is based on the assumption that debate is a key democratic activity, and accordingly, “Debating Europe” is one of the bases for a democratic Europe and a democratic EU. This is also the key assumption of the Jean Monnet Network Debating Europe (DebatEU) that is at the outset of the thematic issue (see www.debating-europe.de; Grant No. 620428-EPP-1-2020-1-DE-EPPJMO-NETWORK). The process of debating enhances the legitimacy of the EU not only as a polity, but also as a policy-making process by regaining citizens’ trust in their ability to use political discussions to influence the policy-making process, including a wide range of policy actors.

Keywords

contestation; debate; democratization; Europe; European Union; politicization

This thematic issue is based on the assumption that debate is a key democratic activity and, accordingly, “debating Europe” is one of the bases for a democratic Europe and a democratic EU. Articles in the issue thus focus on how Europe and the European Union in particular are debated, politicized, and contested. In this, it is a crucial question whether and how these debates and politicizations help to democratize the EU.

There are a number of debate-oriented tools and practices that can enhance democracy and that the EU applies. Forums for dialogue and debate can be organized in various forms, following the ideal that citizens and representatives, through well-informed and reasoned discussion, discourse, and communication, are involved in decision-making processes. It can be assumed that this strengthens political trust, counters distrust, and

provides accountability, legitimacy, and effectiveness. The process of debating thus enhances the legitimacy of the EU not only as a polity, but also as a policy-making process by regaining citizens' trust in their ability to use political discussions to influence the policy-making process, including a wide range of policy actors.

However, despite the activities of the EU and national institutions, as well as intermediate institutions and actors, to bring citizens closer to policy-making, research and opinion surveys diagnose a gap between EU elites and EU citizens. Votes for populist, extremist, anti-EU, and anti-democratic parties and movements are on the rise throughout the EU and within EU institutions. At the same time, the Europeanisation of politics and decision-making continues to impact and transform the national democratic systems of the member states and citizens' everyday lives.

Can debates on Europe and the politicization of the EU help to close these gaps and democratize the EU? There are agreements and disagreements in the academic debate on EU politicization in these respects. While there is disagreement as to what extent debate on the EU, i.e., EU politicization, can indeed help democratize the EU, there is some agreement in that the academic discussion of EU politicization is itself rather recent, since the EU for a long time has been considered as not much politicized. Public discourses on EU policies and EU contestation have been rare. There is also some—although not complete—agreement in the academic debate in that the EU, since the 1990s, has become more politicized. The French EU referendum discourse in 2005, in this context, is considered one major instance of politicization, and it led to a “No” vote on the draft Constitutional Treaty (see Wiesner, 2025). A crucial question in the academic debate on EU politicization is thus whether it may be beneficial for the EU, detrimental, or if the truth lies somewhere in between. This debate is often linked to the question of whether politicization is beneficial for EU democratization. In both these respects, academic contributions show decisive disagreement.

This thematic issue dives into the field opened by the puzzle raised above, i.e., it focuses on the various normative and empirical linkages and interrelations between debate as a necessary basis for democracy in the European Union and Europe, politicization, and the consequences debate and politicization entail for the EU, democracy, and democratization. Most contributions focus on the European Union, but are not limited to the EU alone—some consider Europe altogether. Contributions tackle themes, issues, and questions in debates on the EU and Europe, via different media and channels and in different fora—such as citizen debates, parliaments, and (social) media; narratives and images linked to the EU and Europe; and politicization, contestation, and democratization via debates on Europe and the EU. This thematic issue focuses in particular on the following questions:

- How are Europe and the EU, and how is (liberal) democracy defined and contested in debates? How is it conceptualized and debated in various fora and by different actors?
- In what way are the EU and Europe, and in what ways is democracy contested? In which occasions and contexts?
- How are the debates and contestations contextualized, in which occasions do they occur, and are they linked to other issues or other significant concepts like nation, sovereignty, citizenship, representation, participation, autonomy, freedom, or power?
- How is democracy conceptualized in the framework of the European Union and its multilevel system, both by citizens and elites?

The contributions to the thematic issue each tackle these questions from various angles. A number of the contributions focus on *debates* and *rhetorical actions on the EU*, and the ways the EU, in general, democracy, and sovereignty in the EU in particular, are constructed or contested in them. Steuer (2025) focuses on the new controversies opened by the advancement of EU integration. He studies 120 original proposals by political actors from Czechia, Hungary, and Slovakia on how to structure the EU democratically. The analysis finds limited conceptual innovations in references to democracy in the proposals from across the three countries. Moreover, non-democratic actors also aimed to use the concept by presenting non-democratic ideas as embodying the spirit of democracy while accusing democratic actors of anti-democratic conduct. Democratic actors broadly failed to counter these hijacking attempts. In conclusion, Steuer (2025) finds that there are impoverished narratives on democracy in the context of EU integration.

In a similar approach, Beetz et al. (2025) discuss debates in the European Parliament that put forward ideas of EU democratization. They argue that MEPs in their arguments defend a logic of “trickle-down democracy,” which entails the belief that the creation of a traditional representative democratic infrastructure at the European level will Europeanise national democracies and citizen identities.

Góra et al. (2025) also discuss how the future of European integration is debated by political actors, how the concept of sovereignty is constructed by them, and how they contest the division of competencies in the EU. To do so, 45 plenary debates on the future of Europe from the national parliaments of Germany and France, from 2015 to 2021, were analysed. The timeframe marks a key phase of intense debate and redefinition of the EU’s 24 future.

Another set of articles focuses on *citizen participation* and *citizen views*, which are analyzed based on qualitative and quantitative empirical material. Wenzel (2025) discusses findings from 34 interviews with journalists, EU-correspondents, press-officers of the European Parliament and EUROPE DIRECTs, representatives from civil society, and 18 focus group discussions with Bulgarian, Croatian, Finnish, French, German, and Slovenian students in the project “Debating Europe.” The article presents how both groups of actors perceive EU-reporting in the media on local, national, and supranational levels and illustrates possible examples and ideas to improve EU-reporting that were highlighted in the interviews and focus group discussion.

Vidačak et al. (2025) focus on the dynamics of Croatian citizen participation in the European Citizen Initiatives (ECI). Since Croatia joined the EU, the engagement of Croatian citizens is comparatively low. Qualitative insights from focus group discussions with students of political science, journalism, and European studies are explored alongside perspectives from interviews with Croatian members of ECI organizing committees and supporting organizations, providing an insider view of the challenges and opportunities in mobilizing citizen participation in ECIs. The article identifies key barriers and opportunities for increasing Croatian engagement in ECIs. The findings point to a lack of awareness, perceived ineffectiveness, and procedural complexity as major obstacles, while strong NGO involvement and targeted communication strategies emerge as critical for improving participation.

Novak and Lajh (2025) analyse European identity among Slovenian teenagers. The analysis is based on a questionnaire-based research conducted among Slovenian elementary school students who participated in EU-related project activities. The measurements of the students’ self-assessment of their European identity

and its associated variables were made before and after these project activities. Their assumption is that students who participated in EU-related activities strengthened their European identity by way of the project activities. The results show that the students already expressed a high level of European identity prior to the project activities, leaving little room for a stronger identity, which nevertheless speaks in favour of placing permanent EU-related topics in the educational process.

EU politicization is in the focus of two other articles: Arens et al. (2025) focus on principled politicization, which they regard as a process of politicization by which regime principles become salient in public debate in a way that also articulates or implies structural alternatives. They argue that, in contrast to other conceptualizations of politicization, principled politicization differs in terms of topic (regime principles) and content (alternatives), and accordingly, principled politicization inherently concerns the concept of democracy. The authors put the notion of principled politicization to test by empirically studying citizen discussions about the EU and examining whether citizens draw on EU regime principles and discuss alternatives. The article is based on a qualitative secondary analysis of four datasets, consisting of interviews and focus groups with participants from different socio-economic backgrounds and political leanings that were collected in Belgium, France, and the United Kingdom at four different points in time (1995–2019). Findings indicate that some citizens do engage with EU regime principles, consider alternatives to the principles they observe being implemented, and that politicization can strengthen EU democratization when debates include and reflect the challenges to democratic principles themselves.

Pennetreau (2025) examines the politicization and framing of employment policies in public debates in France and Belgium. He regards mediatised public debate as a normative infrastructure of democracy. Therefore, he argues, the way employment policies are framed and discussed—in other words, (de)politicized—in the mediatised public debate informs us about the democratic quality of the political systems we live in. This is particularly true in the European context, as EU policies guide and sometimes constrain national employment policies, and they are also strategically used to (de)politicize national debates. The study relies on TV news sequences of public broadcasters as a proxy for the public debates. In total, 506 sequences in France and Belgium are compared in a diachronic perspective (across three periods 1995–1996; 2005–2006; 2019). Results indicate three framings of employment policies through which the EU is discussed in the Belgian and French broadcast public debates: labour market, social rights, and individual factors. Results reveal that the EU and its policies are neither blamed nor contested, but largely overlooked or depoliticized.

The last set of articles focuses on *how to conceptualise democracy and the democratization of the EU*. Wiesner (2025) focuses on European identity construction and EU democratization. Her article is based on the main methodological assumption that the formation of European identity in the sense of a self-identification of an EU demos, is key to EU democratisation, and that European identity, among other means, can be constructed in national EU discourses, as such discourses construct meaning for the EU. Against this backdrop, she presents the core findings of a comparative study on German and French national EU discourses around the ratification of the draft of the Treaty on a Constitution for Europe in 2005. The main part presents core results, finding that the French discourse was very intense and, hence, worked as a means of EU democratization. However, despite its intensity, did not construct identification with the EU but a distance between France and the EU, and it remained a national EU discourse. On the other hand, the German discourse was an EU discourse with a national base, but not very intense. It constructed EU identity, but was less a means of democratization.

Finally, Pusterla and Piccin (2025) investigate the potential responsibility of the EU for its ongoing state of permanent crisis. They argue that this condition is not merely incidental or externally imposed but rather fundamentally woven into the EU's political framework. Situated at the intersection of political philosophy and the conceptual analysis of the idea of Europe, the article reconceptualises crisis not as an exceptional anomaly but as an expression of a deeper moral and symbolic failure, engaging with academic debates on how Europeanness shapes the EU's identity, legitimacy, and integrative tensions, and drawing on the works of thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Rodolphe Gasché. The article concludes that the EU's recurrent crises reverberate a failure to articulate a form of sovereignty that is adequate to the uniqueness of the European historical and normative trajectory. In this context, the current rise of sovereigntism is read less as a genuine demand for enhanced state power and more as a manifestation of the EU's inability to offer a compelling political and moral alternative.

Acknowledgments

This thematic issue is partially based on the work of the Jean Monnet Network Debating Europe (DebatEU, see www.debating-europe.de; Grant No. 620428-EPP-1-2020-1-DE-EPPJMO-NETWORK), funded by the European Commission in the framework of the Jean Monnet Actions/Erasmus+. The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

- Arens, N., Dupuy, C., & Van Ingelgom, V. (2025). Principled politicization: When citizens debate the EU and its regime principles. *Politics and Governance*, 13, Article 10073. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.10073>
- Beetz, J. P., Pittoors, G., & Wolfs, W. (2025). How trickle-down democracy won the debate, and why it didn't have to. *Politics and Governance*, 13, Article 9905. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.9905>
- Góra, M., Thevenin, E., & Zielińska, K. (2025). Nested, pooled, or exclusively national? Contested sovereignty models in debates on the future of Europe. *Politics and Governance*, 13, Article 10017. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.10017>
- Novak, M., & Lajh, D. (2025). How European do young slovenians feel? *Politics and Governance*, 13, Article 10077. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.10077>
- Pennetreau, D. (2025). Debating employment in national TV news: Depoliticised discourses and overlooked EU policies. *Politics and Governance*, 13, Article 10120. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.10120>
- Pusterla, E. R. G., & Piccin, F. P. (2025). Sovereignty crises and the EU's moral challenge. *Politics and Governance*, 13, Article 10072. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.10072>
- Steuer, M. (2025). Hijacking democracy: Proposals for the future of the EU in Czechia, Hungary, and Slovakia (2015–2022). *Politics and Governance*, 13, Article 9775. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.9775>
- Vidačak, I., Munta, M., & Matan, A. (2025). Too far to reach? Explaining low Croatian participation in the European citizens' initiative. *Politics and Governance*, 13, Article 10041. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.10041>
- Wenzel, M. C. (2025). Reporting EU politics in news venues: An issue of democratic deficit? *Politics and Governance*, 13, Article 9869. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.9869>

Wiesner, C. (2025). National EU discourses in Germany and France and the construction of European identity. *Politics and Governance*, 13, Article 10094. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.10094>

About the Authors



Claudia Wiesner is a professor of political science at Fulda University of Applied Sciences. She directs the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence Europe in the World and the Point Alpha Research Institute (PARI), is PI in several international research projects, and has been a visiting fellow in various international research institutions. For more details, consult: <https://wiesnerc.jimdofree.com/english>



Meta Novak is an associate professor of policy analysis at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, a researcher at the Centre for Political Science Research and a coordinator of the PhD programme of policy analysis. She has led and participated in several Jean Monnet projects focusing on teaching EU related topics.