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Politicisation and Democracy: The Consequences of Contingency

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Abstract

The article develops the relation of politicisation and democracy theoretically, normatively, and conceptually. Politicisation is defined as marking something as collectively relevant and as an object of politics, and hence as debatable or contested. Democracy, and concretely liberal or representative democracy, means organised self-government of the citizens via elected representants. It is marked by a set of institutions and rights based on the rule of law on the one hand, and by political action and (regulated) controversies and processes of collective decision-making on the other. How do the two relate to one another? The article proceeds as follows. First, I conceptualise politicisation and its linkages to the concept of politics. Two ideal-typical conceptions of politics are developed, i.e., (a) a spatial understanding of politics as a system, area, field, or sphere, and (b) an understanding of politics as action. The following reflections are based on an action-oriented understanding of politics and politicisation, arguing that politics consists of political action(s) and politicisation is the act of marking an issue as political. Therefore, both politics and politicisation potentially can take place anywhere and anytime, inside and outside of the classical political system. The third section discusses conceptually and theoretically whether and to what extent politicisation is compatible with liberal representative democracy: if politicisation is action, then it can be both democratic and anti-democratic action, and the ensuing question is how liberal representative democracies react to this challenge. On this basis, the grey zones around populism, polarisation, and democratic backsliding are discussed, in order to further clarify existing and possible current interrelations between politicisation and liberal representative democracy. The article concludes with a typology of four types of interrelations between politicisation and democracy.

Keywords

anti-democratic politicisation; democratic backsliding; democratic institutions; Euroscepticism; polarisation; politicisation; populism; representative democracy

1. Introduction

This article focuses on the concepts of politicisation and democracy—in particular, liberal representative democracy—and on their complex interrelations. Politicisation will thus be defined and discussed as "marking something (an issue) as collectively relevant and as an object of politics, and hence as debatable or contested" (Wiesner, 2024, p. 3). Democracy, and concretely liberal representative democracy, is a form of political organisation of self-government of the citizens via representants that are elected in free, fair, and equal elections. It is marked by a set of institutions and rights that are structured as according to the principle of the rule of law on the one hand, and by political action and (regulated) controversies and processes of collective decision-making on the other.

The relationship between politicisation and liberal representative democracy is one of immediate contemporary relevance. The news reveal examples of political conflict and politicisation on an almost daily basis, and more and more processes and actions of politicisation seem to be directed against liberal representative democracy, as in the following prominent example: On January 6, 2021, a violent and angry crowd stormed the US Capitol. It was raging against the fact that Joseph Biden had been elected president of the US, not Donald Trump. The riot followed a narrative spread on social media and right-wing media channels, among others, by Donald Trump himself, that the presidential elections allegedly had been "stolen" from Trump and that the riot was a legitimate means of self-defence. The January 6 riots, in other words, were fuelled by what can be termed anti-democratic politicisation, i.e., political rhetoric and arguments that not only were based on a lie (since Trump had lost, not won the elections), but also directed—at the grounds of that lie—against the representative democratic institutions of the US.

However, there are other recent and prominent examples of politicisation that are not at all directed against liberal representative democracy and that may, on the contrary, even strengthen it: On August 20, 2018, a Swedish girl named Greta Thunberg sat down before the Swedish Riksdag. She, too, was critical of representative institutions and their policy outputs, because she found elected representatives not to be active enough to combat climate change. Her banner said she was on a "school strike for the climate." Greta Thunberg thus marked climate change as an important political issue. The "Greta effect" this politicising action had is well known. Thunberg's action, i.e., the initial singular action of one Swedish girl, laid the base for what she could not have known previously, a wave of protest that ultimately led to the founding of a political movement. More and more pupils and students, first in Sweden, then in an EU-wide and later worldwide scale, joined "Fridays for Future." They issued strong claims to the established liberal representatives, urging them to fight climate change better and more strongly.

As these examples underline, politicisation can have different effects on liberal representative democracy: It can be anti-democratic, it can enhance political participation and hence have a democratising character, and, as will be discussed in Section 3, it can also fall in between.

In the following, I will develop the relationship between politicisation and liberal representative democracy (a) in conceptual and (b) in normative terms. The reflections continue a train of thoughts that began in earlier works (Wiesner, 2019a, 2021a, 2021b, 2024) and aim to discuss three out of four fields of questions that are decisive for conceptualising politicisation (Wiesner, 2021a):

1. The theories, understandings, and/or definitions of politics and the politics that the conceptualisation of politicisation relates to.

2. The who, where, and what of politicisation, i.e., dimensions, actors, issues, objects, addressees, areas, arenas, and spaces.

3. The relation of politicisation to other concepts such as democracy, populism, and polarisation.

The fourth dimension—the approaches, dimensions, methods, and techniques of the empirical study of politicisation—will not be discussed in this article. This also means that I will leave out two possible levels of conceptualising politicisation, i.e., the meso-level as a first level of operationalization, and the micro-level of concrete empirical study (Wiesner, 2021b, pp. 20–21).

Against this backdrop, the article is presented as follows: In Section 2, I will conceptualise politicisation and how it relates to politics. Two ideal-typical conceptions of politics, i.e., a spatial understanding of politics as a system, area, field, or sphere, and an understanding of politics as action, will be discussed. In the remainder of the section, I will base my reflections on an action-oriented understanding of politics and politicisation, arguing that both potentially can take place anywhere and anytime. In Section 3, I will discuss conceptually and theoretically whether and to what extent politicisation is compatible with liberal representative democracy—if politicisation is action, then it can be both democratic and anti-democratic action. The question, therefore, is how liberal representative democracies react to this challenge. On this basis, I will continue discussing the grey zones around populism, polarisation, and democratic backsliding, to further clarify interrelations between politicisation and liberal representative democracy. I will be concluding with a typology of four types of interrelations between politicisation and liberal representative democracy.

2. Conceptualising Politicisation

Any discussion of politicisation needs to begin by thinking about the concept itself. However, the current academic debate shows that while politicisation has become a key topic in political and social sciences, many contributions to the academic field use the concept without much specification, theoretical reflection, or conceptual discussion (see Wiesner, 2021a). Furthermore, the academic debate is split into subfields and subdisciplines such as European Studies, international relations, (international) political theory, comparative politics, political sociology, and legal theory. These respective epistemic communities are largely disconnected and tend to follow their particular paths of conceptualising and operationalising politicisation.

However, if taken together, the contributions from these different subfields offer a great theoretical and conceptual richness around different understandings and operationalisations of politicisation. Since the fields have rarely been connected so far, this richness is present but has remained largely unexplored. Reading contributions from the different subfields in connection shows that the puzzle of politicisation, even if followed on different paths, leads to complementary answers. As discussed in the concluding thoughts to a comprehensive volume on politicisation that I had the pleasure to edit (Wiesner, 2021c), despite the different theoretical backgrounds and communities, the contributions to the debate on politicisation thus raise similar conceptual points and may be possibly related (Wiesner, 2019b, 2021d).

In most contributions in the current debate (see, e.g., Anders, 2021; de Wilde & Zürn, 2012; Gheyle, 2019; Hutter et al., 2016; Kauppi & Trenz, 2021; Selk, 2021; von Staden, 2021) and as discussed previously in Wiesner (2021d, p. 268), "politicisation refers to creating controversy, conflict, contentiousness, or contestation. It means an increase in visibility (in terms of both appearance and salience, quantitatively measured) of an issue, or an actor, and it refers to the notion of the public space and/or issues that are publicly shared." Politicisation also refers to the fact that an actor or an issue is, or becomes, an object of debate, controversy, or contestation. Politicisation is usually understood as being related to politics, as well as to collective action, or collectives.

This summary indicates important pillars for conceptualising politicisation: The first conceptual pillars are visibility and publicity—or the fact to have a public—and collectivity and relevance, which suggest that the issue or actor at stake is deemed relevant by a collective. There is debate, controversy, or contestation—i.e., there is disagreement and deliberation about the issues or actors at stake, or they are contested. All this might refer to both the productive disagreement in a peaceful deliberation and open conflict or even violence. Last but not least, politics is at stake, and in particular that an issue or actor is, or becomes, an "object of politics," i.e., of political debates, processes, institutions, or actions. But what does politics mean in this?

2.1. Politicisation and Politics

The concept of politicisation has a direct normative, theoretical, and conceptual relation to the concept of politics, or the political, as in any case (i.e., irrespective of the concrete definition used) it refers to political processes, actions, or conflicts.

The concept of politics itself has a long and rich history (see Palonen, 2006, 2007, for an encompassing discussion). A number of different understandings are used and current. In this, two ideal-typical accounts of theorising politics can be distinguished (Kauppi et al., 2016; Palonen, 2021; Wiesner, 2021b): politics can be understood on one hand spatially, i.e., as system, area, sphere, or field, but it can also be understood as action. The decisive conceptual difference between the two approaches is that while in the activity concept any issue, actor, or question can become subject or object of politics, in the spatial concept, only actors and issues present in the area or system are part of politics (Wiesner, 2021b, p. 23). Both understandings have consequences for conceptualising politicisation.

Spatial understandings of politics can differ, ranging from a classical political systems approach (Easton, 1953) with parties and institutions to broader understandings. But in any case, in a spatial understanding, politics is conceptualised as a fixed area with more or less stable borders. This leads to an equivalent understanding of politicisation: if based on a spatial conception of politics, politicisation means either that issues or actors enter or leave the system or area of politics, or the extension of the borders of politics.

Spatial concepts of politics and politicisation often go along with putting the conceptual and analytical focus on the classical political system, i.e., governments, institutions, parties, political elites, and mainstream media—rather than on politicising actions and processes as the ones described in the introduction. If operationalised this way, research focuses mainly on issues that are discussed in parliament or the mainstream news media, but tends to leave out issues and actors that are not (yet) salient in these arenas. They are hence not regarded and analysed as politics.

Such a view, accordingly, tends to lose sight of both the issues and actors that are (in the moment) active outside the political system, and of the actions related to politics and politicisation, i.e., the question of who moves the issue into the system or area of politics or out of it, how, and why. From a systems-based perspective, these actions will become relevant only if they cross a threshold that gives them a decisive impact on the core of the political system, i.e., visibility and salience there. Both the cases described in the beginning, the January 6 riots and Fridays for Future, have had such an impact.

But even if they had not had an impact on the system, they have to be considered politicisation in an action-based understanding. As said above, if politicisation is understood as action, it means to mark an issue or actor as political. This entails, at first, nothing more than to mark the issue as "playable" (Palonen, 2003, p. 171) in political actions. The issue is marked as a potential object of further politicising actions, of debates, votes, or protests—but whether and to what extent this will happen, and if it will have an impact in the core of the political system, is not to be predicted. The outcomes of politicisation, as with all politics, are contingent (Kauppi et al., 2016; Palonen, 2003).

The spatial and action-oriented approaches to politics are to be understood as ideal types, not in a simple either-or opposition (Wiesner, 2021b). There is no dichotomy at stake here. Political action in general and politicisation in particular can take place in the classical system as well as outside of it. In the academic debate, authors use various understandings "of system, sphere, and field notions of politics, in different combinations with, or in opposition to, action or conflict-oriented approaches" (Wiesner, 2021d, p. 268). But the two ideal types hint at theoretical and analytical distinctions which describe a horizon of interpretation:

A first dimension of distinction is whether politics is considered to be spatially bound and as a static kind of space with fixed borders, or as action and process, i.e., without boundaries.

A second, related, dimension of distinction is whether to put theoretical, conceptual, and analytical importance only on what happens in the core of the classical political system or to include what happens at its margins or outside of it, too.

A third dimension is the focus of research: On one hand, we can aim for the fact that an issue or actor is an object of public debate already, on the other hand, it is worthwhile focusing on the action that makes it such.

All these distinctions are decisive for analysing the relation between politicisation and liberal representative democracy.

2.2. Politicisation as Activity

If politics is action, everything can become political. This understanding of politics hence is the broader one, as it includes potentially all political actions at any time (Wiesner, 2021b). It is also an understanding that catches crucial dynamics in current liberal representative democracies, namely the actors and actions originating outside the classical political system (such as in the example of the January 6 riots and the Fridays for Future). The action-based approach, different from the spatial or systems one, allows to grasp conceptually and empirically both politicising actors and activities from scratch.

The following considerations thus rely on a conceptualisation of politics as action or activity (see Kauppi et al., 2016; Wiesner, 2017, 2021b, 2024). Furthermore, they build on Palonen´s (2003, p. 171) distinction of four sub-dimensions of politics (politics, polity, politicisation, and politicking) that is developed further. As per Wiesner (2021b, p. 21):

> In this conceptual classification, politics is the activity, polity is the institutionalised arena or form politics relates to (this can be the political system, but also another institutional form), policy refers to the regulating aspect of politics, politicking means the doing of politics, and politicisation is understood as the act of marking or naming something as political.

In the following, I build on Palonen´s typology but develop it further. Accordingly, the following conceptualisation differs from Palonen´s in certain dimensions. I understand political action as any action that marks an issue as political, drives political processes, builds, changes, or acts within a polity (e.g., the political system and its institutions), or shapes policies (Wiesner, 2021b, p. 21). Once more, politics as action can happen "at any time, any place, and in any situation, and anything can be marked as political" (Wiesner, 2021b, p. 21)—politics then has no boundaries. It concerns the actors' actions and not the system or area in which they act.

Based on these considerations, I will use the following definition: "politicisation means to mark something (an issue) as collectively relevant and as an object of politics, and hence as debatable or contested" (Wiesner, 2024, p. 3).

Importantly, all politics is contingent, and so are the consequences of politicisation. Once an issue is marked as political, there is no predetermined outcome of what will happen next. In each moment of political controversies and processes, it is always possible to act otherwise (Kauppi et al., 2016). Moreover, it is never a priori clear how the other players will take the respective political actions and how they will react.

3. Politicisation, Politics, and Liberal Representative Democracy

How does politicisation relate to liberal representative democracy? To further clarify this, I will, first, discuss the importance of the institutional and legal frameworks of politics, and second, the consequences of the fact that all politics are contingent.

3.1. The Framework of Liberal Representative Democracy

Importantly, and linked to the reflections in Section 2 above, I regard liberal representative democracy as a form of political organisation (or a polity) of self-government of the citizens via elected representants. It depends on both institutions *and* democratic activity. This means that liberal representative democracy does not simply consist in institutions and rights, as in narrow models of democracy (Wiesner, 2021b, p. 25). These institutions and rights also need to be filled with democratic practice. Without democratic practice, liberal representative democracy only is an empty institutional framework (Wiesner, 2021b, p. 25, 2024, p. 5, 23). In this understanding, liberal representative democracy is a structured and regulated form for defining, debating, and deciding upon collectively relevant questions via representative institutions and processes. It also is an arena for democratic practice.

Institutions and democratic practice have a specific relation in liberal representative democracy. Rules and democratic institutions build the legal framework for political action and structure its form in that they offer formalised arenas and pathways (Wiesner, 2021b, p. 26). Institutions, accordingly, fix the rules of the democratic game, and democratic activity fills them with life. This also means that institutions and laws both create and limit spaces for democratic activity—they structure, enable, limit, or hinder, politicisation and democratic practice. A crucial question is whether politicisation abides by these rules and institutions or is in opposition to them.

The above means that there is a latent tension between democratic practice and institutions. Concretely, rules such as election laws structure access to the institutionalised arenas of liberal representative democracy, such as parliaments. Election laws in liberal representative democracies give preference to some political actors over others—namely political parties as big, organised interest-representing organisations, rather than individual voices, activists, or protest movements. This entails that in formalised political arenas such as parliaments, parties are dominant, as are the interests that they represent. Both these tendencies taken together tend to establish institutionally relevant issues represented by big parties, and these issues might not be the ones judged relevant by population groups or citizens that are less represented in the institutions, or that have limited access to them. This means that democratic institutions in liberal representative democracies tend to channel and limit not only the chances for politicising actions, but also to influence which issues can obtain public relevance in the institutionalised arenas of the political system.

Importantly, a liberal representative democratic system must not close down but be open to political activity by the demos. This also means that it is decisive that there are ways to impact the core of the system from the margins, e.g., by politicisation from citizens or NGOs that take place in bottom-up ways. Liberal representative democracy therefore always includes the possibility for dissent; i.e., the possibility of openly debating, criticising, and contesting a governmental policy, a parliamentary majority, a law, or a political opponent. Such criticism is a legitimate part of liberal representative democracy. Concretely, to criticise a policy of the state a person lives in, to criticise institutions, and to be critical of the EU as a polity is by no means anti-democratic. On the contrary, it is democratic practice as well.

Accordingly, liberal representative democracies usually open institutionalised pathways and arenas for dissent in that they lay down rights and spaces for dissenting voices in the form of codified rights for protests and demonstrations, as well as demarcated powers for opposition groups in parliaments. There are also rights to free speech and minority rights and further channels for entering the institutionalised arenas, such as petitions or hearings. These rights and channels not only protect dissenters and minorities but enable them to express their standpoints. They also open possibilities for politicising actors and actions that originate outside the core of the system to enter it. These mechanisms nowadays are acquired liberal democratic standards (see Merkel, 2004).

When it comes to discussing how politicisation relates to liberal representative democracy, both the institutional thresholds and the spaces and rights for political actions from outside the core of the system are crucial. The key question is then how political actors make use of their rights and the rooms for action they offer (Wiesner, 2021b, p. 26).

3.2. Politicisation and Contingency

So far, I have argued that politicisation, as political action, is part of the activities that fill liberal representative democratic institutions with democratic practice. The institutional framework of liberal representative democracy fixes the rules for all political action and also for politicisation—but it also creates spaces and offers rights to politicise, as was just explained.

But despite this framework, as said earlier, politics and politicisation are contingent. This means we do not know what the outcomes and consequences of politicisation will be. As politics is contingent, the impact of politicisation on democracy cannot be determined in advance of a politicising action.

Following the definition introduced in Section 2 by Wiesner (2024, p. 3), "politicisation means to mark something (an issue) as collectively relevant and as an object of politics, and hence as debatable or contested." It is important to note that this does not speak of "democratic politics": Politicisation is not necessarily democratic politicisation, and neither is politics always democratic. The two examples introduced in the beginning illustrate this. Both examples represent cases of politicisation, both have a visible bottom-up component, but their relation to and effect on liberal representative democracy is opposed.

On one hand, the Greta Thunberg example, as said in the previous sections, illustrates a path in which politicisation can be beneficial for liberal representative democracy in that it leads to political activity, participation, and people being engaged. A simple politicising action led to young people across the world uniting, organising, going to the streets, and campaigning for a goal that is for the common good, i.e., combating climate change and saving humanity. All of this took place within the rules of the democratic game. The Fridays for Future activities benefited from the rules and possibilities liberal representative democracies offer, such as the right to demonstrate and to free speech. Young people who previously had not been politically active suddenly were, and their claims were taken up by mainstream political parties, i.e., they made their way into the very core of the political system. In sum, the early years of Fridays for Future are an example of what can be termed bottom-up politicisation as democratisation (see type 1 in the conclusion section).

On the other hand, the contrary is the case of the January 6 riots: a group of people that mobilised via social media and specific channels violated the very core of the political system and liberal representative institutions—the building of the two parliamentary chambers. Their aggression became not only material but also threatened the lives and health of politicians and policemen. The January 6 rioters actively aggressed liberal representatives of both the political system and the state. On top, the riot was driven by the person who had been president of the state in question until the day before, i.e., by the person who had only just left the position as the highest representative of the democratic system. In sum, the January 6 riots mark an example of bottom-up anti-democratic politicisation (see Type 3 in the conclusion section).

3.3. Limiting Anti-Democratic Politicisation

The above underlines that politicisation has no predetermined effect on democracy. Both politicisation and politics can be non-, or even anti-democratic. But what exactly is to be considered anti-democratic politicisation?

On one hand, politicisation can aim at enhancing societal polarisation (McCoy et al., 2018; Schedler, 2023) and this can endanger liberal representative democracy, because conflicts are no longer carried out peacefully by deliberation, but can also become violent, as on January 6, 2021. On the other hand, it is possible that politicisation attacks both the liberal representative democratic institutions and arenas, and the freedoms and protection rights (Wiesner, 2021b, p. 27).

As said in the introduction, all over the world there are political actors and movements that enhance political polarisation, criticise or abolish minority rights, and challenge political institutions and representative-democratic rules. In these cases, actors use their own constitutional rights and political freedoms to push forward an anti-system agenda and hence to attack these rights and freedoms. This is notably the case for several nationalist and/or right-wing populist movements and parties. In such cases, to reference a dictum attributed to Saint Just, "the enemies of freedom use their freedom—opponents of representative democracy use the very freedoms granted by representative democracies to fight against them" (Wiesner, 2021b, p. 27). The crucial question is how the actors, and the framework, of liberal representative democracies deal with such anti-democratic politicisation. Are there limits to anti-democratic politicisation? And how can they be set?

The answer is that, first, there is an awkward but necessary tension: liberal democratic freedom needs to be a principle that is valid for all. "If it is just conditional for persons that behave well in the eyes of a government, it is not freedom anymore" (Wiesner, 2021b, p. 28). As famously put by Rosa Luxemburg (1972, p. 69), democratic freedom has to be the freedom of dissenters:

> Freedom only for the supporters of the government, only for the members of one party—however numerous they may be—is no freedom at all. Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently. Not because of any fanatical concept of "justice" but because all that is instructive, wholesome, and purifying in political freedom depends on this essential characteristic, and its effectiveness vanishes when "freedom" becomes a special privilege.

Accordingly, as discussed in Wiesner (2021b), "representative democracies must guarantee freedoms and protection rights also for deviating opinions" (p. 28). This also means that "anti-democratic politicisation needs to be taken into account if democratic politicisation shall be enabled—up to a certain extent. To cut down democratic freedoms and arenas for political actions preventively to limit anti-democratic politicisation is a contradiction in itself" (p. 29). Importantly, "democratic freedoms, protection rights, and institutionalised arenas do not create anti-democratic politicisation, they just enable it" (p. 29).

Second, if politicisation is directed against the principles of liberal representative democracy itself, and hence against the rules of the democratic game, two ways of reaction are possible. On one hand, liberal representative democracy is a matter of the people, the citizens, and their political actions, and so defenders of democratic freedoms can, or must, act politically against enemies of democracy if they want to defend it—in a battle of opinions, in demonstrations and the public spaces.

On the other hand, the above claim—that freedom must be a principle valid for everyone—does not mean that there are no limits. Liberal representative democracies do not have to accept open breaches of their rules. From a certain point onwards, there are limits to anti-democratic politicisation via mechanisms of democratic self-defence (see Malkopoulou & Norman, 2018, for a critical discussion).

Germany is a case in point for relatively strong rules of democratic self-defence. First, Germany, in international comparison, has relatively strict limitations on freedom of speech. In reaction to National Socialism, based on the wish to defend German democracy against its enemies in the newly founded Federal Republic of Germany, and especially in recognition of the Shoa, several symbols (such as swastikas) and phrases (such as statements relativising the Holocaust) are judged as unlawful in Germany.

Second, the German constitution enables the interdiction of political parties by the Constitutional Court if their aim is to overthrow the liberal democratic system. This rule is an example of a possible institutional reaction against anti-democratic actors. Following Wiesner (2021b, p. 28):

> The logic behind this is to claim that only actors playing by the rules of the representative democratic system and accepting to support it are entitled to use the benefits of the system. If an actor, a party, or a movement, aims at destroying it, they thus can be taken out of the democratic game.

3.4. The Grey Zones

It is, however, difficult to determine when politicisation creates too much polarisation or endangers the system. It is important but difficult to clearly distinguish whether we deal with controversy or contests, with protest or conflict, and it is decisive whether these take on a peaceful character or become violent. It is also decisive whether and to what extent politicising actions do support democratic institutions and processes, whether they take place within their framework, or whether and when they aim at tearing them down.

What about cases of politicisation that are not outrightly anti-democratic? Representative democracies today are marked by various types of politicising actions that fit in between outright support and outright rejection of their principles. Especially populist actors today are frequently discussed as proponents of polarisation or anti-democratic politicisation (see Müller, 2016; Urbinati, 2019). But there are by no means simple equations at stake in this. The grey zones are decisive. Several authors have underlined that populists cannot simply be classified as enemies of democracy (see Jörke, 2021; Katsambekis, 2022). Furthermore, crises are drivers of populist reactions (Stavrakakis et al., 2018; see also the contributions of Ostiguy et al., 2020).

To further dwell into these grey zones, the following examples will show that populist actors may be agents of politicisation that tend to act in a polarising manner, and it can happen that they argue in anti-system ways. But this does not mean that they also act in anti-democratic ways. Focusing on empirical findings on two EU referenda (the French 2005 EU referendum and the 2026 Brexit referendum) it will thus be discussed whether and when politicisation turned—or not—into being polarising, anti-system oriented, or anti-democratic.

3.4.1. Populist Arguments, Populist Politicisation?

The two EU referenda and the related discourses each had a national history behind them. Jacques Chirac, then French president, called a referendum on the EU Constitutional Treaty in order to obtain a higher legitimacy for the Treaty, and David Cameron, then British Prime Minister, had given in to a lingering EU criticism in his own party when he promised to hold a Brexit referendum. Both referendum discourses thus were major instances of EU-related politicisation from the beginning. They were marked by populist and polarising arguments—and they had a major impact on EU politics, and hence in the core of the political system.

On May 29, 2005, France held a referendum on the EU Constitutional Treaty. 54.67% of those participating voted "No," only 45.33% voted "Yes" ("29 mai 2005 : Le non gagne," 2005; Conseil Constitutionnel, 2005). The question asked was "Do you approve of the law that authorises ratification of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe" ("Approuvez-vous le projet de loi qui autorise la ratification du traité établissant une constitution pour l'Europe?"; Conseil Constitutionnel, n.d.). In the end, the result for "No" even exceeded the forecast of the last opinion polls (Boy & Chiche, 2005, p. 94). On June 23, 2016, the UK held a referendum regarding its EU membership. The question asked was "Should the UK remain a member of the EU or leave the EU?" While 51.9% of those participating in the polls voted for "Leave," only 48.1% voted "Remain." Turnout had been 72% ("EU referendum: The result in maps and charts," 2021). While the French "No" vote led to the EU Constitutional Treaty never being ratified, the "Leave" vote ultimately led to the UK leaving the EU in January 2020.

When comparing the Brexit referendum discourse and results and the French 2005 referendum discourse and results, it becomes obvious that both discourses were marked by a critical politicisation of the EU—but the British discourse was "driven from the right when the French discourse was driven from the left" (Wiesner, 2024, p. 289). In both discourses populist arguments were decisive. There were also anti-system arguments (mainly arguments directed against the EU as a system) and polarising rhetoric—but only a few of the arguments had an anti-democratic character.

The Brexit discourse and vote represent a success of right-wing populism (Koller et al., 2019, p. 3). As discussed in Wiesner (2024, p. 288), the Brexit discourse was driven mainly by the United Kingdom Independence Party and its "Leave" campaign. The main "Leave" motives emphasised fear of immigration and claimed to protect the National Health Service by a Brexit. The EU was altogether depicted as an "other." While right-wing EU criticism thus drove the referendum discourse, left-wing EU criticism was less important (Cap, 2019; Demata, 2019; Koller et al., 2019; Smith, 2021; Zappettini, 2021). As opposed to this, in France in 2005, the discourse was driven and won by the left. Left opponents based their victory largely on an anti-liberal motif (Wiesner, 2014, pp. 264–268, 2024, pp. 170–172, p. 177, pp. 287–292) that depicted the EU as neoliberal. The left EU critics with this motif mobilised on the social situation which had been decisive in almost all previous election campaigns of recent years. The left Treaty opponents succeeded in linking classic left-wing arguments, social protests, and resistance to the Constitutional Treaty. This enabled to vote "No" out of opposition to neoliberalism, to the EU in its current form, or to make the referendum a protest vote against the government.

However, as discussed at some length previously in Wiesner (2024, pp. 287–292), despite this clear difference in the ideological camps and motifs driving the discourses, they show striking similarities. The decisive motifs relied on populist rhetoric, polarising arguments, and anti-system critique:

1. Protest and contestation against "the system" and "those above": Both proponents of the French "No" camp and the British "Leave"´ camp constructed an opposition against the system and governing elites. The UK "Leave" campaign built on the British tradition of contesting the European Union (p. 290), while the French "No" proponents built on the French tradition of protesting against elites in power (p. 289).
2. Black-and-white distinctions: With the anti-migration stance, the UK "Leavers" relied on a key topic of right-wing contestation (p. 290). In France, the anti-liberalism motif that depicted the EU as neoliberal combined traditional left-wing criticism, social protests, and opposition to the Constitutional Treaty (p. 170, 289).

3. Construction of oppositions: The UK "Leavers" successfully established arguments that constructed the EU as anti-National Health Service and pro-immigration. These lines of argumentation allowed for various reasons to advocate the "Leave" vote. Similarly, in France, opponents of the Constitutional Treaty successfully established a chain of argumentation that allowed for various reasons to advocate the "No" vote.
4. Linking EU criticism with protest traditions: The dynamics of the discourse created in this way worked in favour of the "Leave" campaign in the UK, and in favour of the opponents of the Constitutional Treaty in France. "Every current social issue and every criticism of the government was now linked to the referendum" (p. 177).
5. Weak opponents: Added to this was the weakness of the "Remain" and the "Yes" camps, which in both cases consisted of mainstream parties and politicians but were divided.
6. Weak pro arguments: On top of all this, both "remainers" and advocates of a "Yes" took up the topics of the opposite camp. While the "Leave" and the "No" messages were clear and simple, the "Remain" and the "Yes" camp had many different messages, all ambivalent. Both used few substantive arguments of their own and often only reacted to criticism. "Contentless meta-arguments tended to reinforce the impression of [elite] arrogance" (p. 177).
7. Exaggerations: The central goal of both the "Leave" and the "No" camps was not to present political alternatives, but to oppose the EU or the Constitutional Treaty. "Arguments on policy substance and political alternatives were less decisive than clear exaggerations (…) it was about clear and simple opposition, not about complicated alternatives" (p. 177).

In sum, the British discourse was strongly oriented around right-wing arguments, parties, and actors. These rather appealed to older voters. The French discourse was driven by left-wing EU criticism which tended to appeal to younger voters (Wiesner, 2024, pp. 287–292). Accordingly, the sociodemographic voter profiles of the two referenda showed striking similarities, as discussed previously (Wiesner, 2014, pp. 438–439, 2024, pp. 287–288). Both votes were very clearly aligned as according to regional and income structures. While 59.9% of those voting in London opted for "Remain," the economically less developed British regions in the majority voted "Leave" ("EU referendum: The result in maps and charts," 2021). The sociodemographic patterns of the French 2005 referendum were similar. In France, in 2005, the poorer and less developed regions also voted "No" in the majority (Fourquet et al., 2005, pp. 110–112). But when it comes to the age groups, the British outcome differs. In Britain, 73% of those aged between 18 and 24 voted "Remain" and 60% of those aged above 65 voted "Leave" ("EU referendum: The result in maps and charts," 2021). In contrast, 56% of French pensioners voted "Yes" as well as 54% of the students (IPSOS, 2005; Wiesner, 2014, pp. 439).

All this indicates that both EU referendum discourses were not only successful instances of politicisation of EU criticism but also clear successes of the populist, polarising, and anti-system motifs sketched above. In both cases, key motifs in the discourse distinguished "us" and "them" in society and were directed against the EU as a system. But does anything in the dynamics describe an anti-democratic tendency? The answer is no.

Two decisive distinctions need to be made here. First, importantly and again, any liberal representative democracy must be based on the possibility of openly debating, criticising, and contesting policies and political institutions. Such criticism is simply a legitimate part of democratic political culture, even if it is polarising, even if it can at times be mingled with populist arguments, and even if it can at times classify as Eurosceptic. Second, EU criticism is by no means to be confused with criticism of liberal representative

democracy as such or with populism—even if there may be arguments where the three, or two of them, go together. This discussion allows for a critical perspective on the concept of Euroscepticism that cannot be elaborated on here (see Wiesner, 2024, pp. 292–295).

All in all, both the French and the British EU discourse were not only major processes of EU politicisation, but they also were major instances of broad and open public deliberation about the EU. This means that both discourses also had a major democratising effect in terms of raising public discourse and exchange. Both can be classified as bottom-up and top-down driven examples of politicisation (scenarios 1 and 2 in the conclusion section).

As per Wiesner (2024, p. 299), "the point, then, is that politicisation and its democratising effects, the enhancement of public debate, and the preparation of democratic decisions, do not necessarily lead to the outcomes that EU scholars, politicians, or other persons would deem to be the best," i.e., support of draft Treaties or remaining in the EU. Nothing of this, however, is anti-democratic, it is not even dangerous for political systems—except maybe for the EU. All this indicates that the threshold for politicisation to be classified as anti-democratic is rather high.

3.4.2. Damaging Democracy From Within the Institutions

Having discussed these various examples and grey zones, we are left with politicisation becoming anti-democratic when it enhances polarisation and violence, or when it is directed against the principles and institutions of liberal representative democracy. This may, as in the January 6 example, happen from the outside and in bottom-up movements.

Another case in point is right-wing populists in government that drive anti-democratic politicisation, such as Victor Orbán. Orbán is a right-wing populist politician that can be termed a proponent of anti-democratic politicisation. The example of Orbán and his Fidesz shows the rhetorical element, i.e., anti-democratic politicisation in terms of rhetoric that enhances polarisation—and how these are linked to concrete steps from within the institutional framework after election successes that make anti-democrats take over government.

For one, in his rhetoric, Orbán fuels polarisation and criticises liberal representative democracy. For example, on July 22, 2022, in a speech he gave in Romania to Hungarian ethnic groups, he criticised the democratic West as being in decline (Oysmüller, 2022). But Orbán does not limit himself to words. Orbán´s party Fidesz has been in government for more than a decade. He won the last Hungarian parliamentary election again with a two-thirds majority (Tagesschau.de, 2022). Fidesz uses its political majority to cut down standards of liberal representative democracy such as minority protection and opposition rights, i.e., the possibilities for politicisation and democratic activity (Wiesner, 2021b, p. 28). The EU´s values from Article 2 TFEU are being increasingly restricted in Hungary (Freedom House, n.d.).

In cases like this one, both modes of democratic defence have been outplayed—political activity as well as institutional protection mechanisms. The actors of anti-democratic politicisation then have been successful not only in entering into the institutions but also in taking over government. The mechanism at stake is then democratic backsliding (Bermeo, 2016), i.e., the cutting down of democratic standards and institutions from a

government position. Democratic backsliding can be based on, and backed by anti-democratic politicisation. The EU has tried to counteract democratic backsliding in Hungary with several rule-of-law measures and complaints. This means that the EU has partly taken over the role of the institutionalised agent of democratic self-defence in this case.

4. Conclusion: Four Scenarios of the Relation Between Politicisation and Democracy

In sum, the relationship between politicisation and liberal representative democracy is complex. As discussed in the previous sections, liberal representative democracies need to enable politicisation as political action, even when it is critical of liberal representative democracies themselves. But politicisation, as politics, is contingent: the outcome of politicisation is never to be predicted beforehand. Politicisation can enhance debate and democratisation, but it can also be anti-democratic and enhance polarisation or violence. Liberal representative democracies have two possibilities to act against anti-democratic politicisation: via the political actions of the demos members, and via legal means of democratic self-defence. All in all, to delineate when politicisation enhances polarisation and endangers democratic institutions requires inquiring into grey zones.

The discussion and the examples mentioned therefore suggest conceptualising the interrelations between politicisation and liberal representative democracy in different pathways. Thus, I present below a taxonomy of four different scenarios (adapted from Wiesner, 2023, 2024, pp. 299–300):

1. A bottom-up democratisation scenario (politicisation as enhancing democratic activity): Politicisation brings democratic activity. Citizens participate, engage, debate, and politicise issues. There is an increase in democratic practice and participation which, in this case, strengthens social cohesion (instead of polarisation). The relationship between citizens and elites is dynamic, democratic institutions are filled with democratic practice. Most emancipatory social movements would be examples of this kind of politicisation, such as Fridays for Future in their beginnings. The French referendum debate also is an example of bottom-up democratisation.
2. A top-down democratisation scenario (politicisation as enhancing political debate): this scenario is mainly based on party-political activity that enhances political debate which in this case also strengthens social cohesion (instead of polarisation). There will be less interaction between elites, citizens, and activists than in the bottom-up democratisation model. But still, political parties and media may trigger public debate and politicisation. Democratic institutions are also filled with democratic practice. The referendum debates conform to this type.
3. An anti-democratic bottom-up scenario (politicisation as enhancing anti-democratic mobilisation in the sense of polarisation and anti-system actions): The processes are similar to the bottom-up democratisation scenario. Citizens and activists politicise issues, but either engage in order to polarise societies, or in a system-critical or even anti-democratic way, or both. Bottom-up activities and politicisation then may be directed against liberal representative democracy as such which may ultimately lead to violence. The US events of January 6, 2021 are an example of such an anti-democratic bottom-up politicisation.
4. An anti-democratic top-down scenario (politicisation as enhancing polarisation, anti-system votes, and anti-system actions): this scenario is mainly based on party-political activity, this time of anti-democratic parties. There will be less interaction between elites, citizens, and activists than in the

bottom-up obstacle scenario. Political parties and media that communicate and politicise liberal representative democracy critically may push polarisation and a decline of citizen support for democracy, and in consequence, also gather votes in elections. These dynamics run similarly to the ones in the top-down democratisation scenario but trigger criticism of liberal representative democracy instead of its support. Ultimately, it may lead to anti-democrats acceding into government. The Hungarian Fidesz is a case in point of this type.

To conclude, from a normative perspective, politicisation is a basic practice of democracy, which means that—for instance in the case of the EU, which is not very politicised, i.e., not very much marked by public political debates and actions—politicisation means democratisation. The final question thus is not how much politicisation is beneficial, but which kind of politicisation is beneficial, i.e., whether politicisation enhances democratic debate and practice, or whether it triggers polarisation or is linked to attempts to destroy democratic institutions from the inside.

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Conflict of Interests

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