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On the politicization of the European  
consociation: A middle way between  
Hix and Bartolini

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*On the politicization of the European consociation: A middle way between Hix and Bartolini*

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## Abstract

A debate has emerged between S. Hix and S. Bartolini on the plausibility and desirability of the politicization of the EU. By this it is usually meant a more important role for mass, competitive, and partisan politics both on the input- (expression of preferences) and on the output- (collectively binding measures and resource allocation) side of the European decision-making system. In this article, we argue that this debate does not sufficiently take into consideration the consociational nature of the EU. Comparing the EU to other consociational polities such as Belgium and Switzerland, we show that the politicization of the EU is not plausible along a bipolar logic, but that other forms of politicization are both plausible and desirable.

We argue that S. Hix's recipe for politicization is based on some incorrect assumptions and predictions. It is not obvious that the EU is evolving towards more Left-Right polarization. Even if this were the case, the nature of the EU implies that cooperation and compromises are indispensable, therefore Hix's suggestions will not suffice to clarify political choice and enhance accountability. Hix is not correct in believing that politicization along the Left-Right cleavage will alleviate euroskepticism. He tends to associate the latter with this dimension, which is partly wrong. Moreover, euroskepticism also has a social base ("losers of modernization") and does not only derive from the deficit of accountability in the EU.

At the same time, we think that the consociational nature of the EU also reduces the risks feared by S. Bartolini with regard to the consequences of politicization on governability. The politicization of constitutive issues can even be regarded as necessary, in order to integrate anti-system political entrepreneurs and euroskeptic segments of public opinion. Also Bartolini is only partially right in stressing the destabilizing potential of the politicization of opposition on these issues: it is true that consociational mechanisms are less effective – at least in the short term – in dealing with this kind of conflict, but it seems to us less risky to rely on them than on non-politicization.

As a remedy to the accountability deficit of the EU, consociational-type politicization is nevertheless not a panacea. Therefore we suggest the coupling of a system of politicized "negotiation democracy" with mechanisms of direct participation. With a number of institutional safeguards, such a coupling would help to cope with the limits of consociational systems, would remain compatible with the compound nature of the EU, and would provide value-added in terms of public legitimization of the European integration.

**Keywords:** accountability, democratization, legitimacy, participation, political parties, political representation, political science, polity building, public opinion, referendum

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## 1 Introduction

A debate has emerged in the academic community on the plausibility and desirability of the politicization of the EU. By this it is usually meant a more important role for mass, competitive, and partisan politics both on the input- (expression of preferences) and on the output- (collectively binding measures and resource allocation) side of the European decision-making system. In this article, we argue that this debate does not sufficiently take into consideration the consociational nature of the EU. Comparing the EU to other consociational polities such as Belgium and Switzerland, we show that the politicization of the EU is not plausible along a bipolar logic, but that other forms of politicization are both plausible and desirable.

We will take as a starting point the most elaborated expression of this discussion published in the recent past, namely the *disputatio* opposing Simon Hix and Stefano Bartolini, launched by Jacques Delors's Foundation "Notre Europe", in Spring 2006 and entitled "Politics. The Right or the Wrong Sort of Medicine for the EU?".<sup>1</sup> In this article we wish to critically discuss the line of thinking, conclusions and recommendations of both authors. We do this under the assumption that the social-cultural structure, institutional system, and political practices of the European Union share much with the consociational polities we are more familiar with, i.e. Belgium and Switzerland, and that loosing sight of this feature leads to both analytical and normative biases.

We view consociationalism as:

- a) a particular style of consensual politics that is a response to the socio-cultural background of heterogeneous societies characterized by centrifugal tendencies, and that
- b) is consolidated by a particular institutional architecture designed to ensure (through power fragmentation and "checks and balances") the preservation of the vital interests of the composing segments of these societies.

We are fully aware of the limits of consociationalism, be it in terms of governability ("veto points", "joint decision trap"), or in terms of representation ("cartel" politics). We do not aim at defending consociationalism as such, but argue that scenarios for the politicization of the EU should take into account its consociational features a) and b). We think that learning from politics in countries such as Belgium or Switzerland that we are familiar with is necessary before proposing formulas for the politicization of the EU. These two countries are indeed unique in Europe in cumulating – as to a large extent the EU itself (and for Belgium more recently) – an accommodative policy style with federalist institutions, by contrast for instance with the Netherlands where « pillarization » operates as a functional equivalent to federalism (Kriesi 1990). Of course, the social-cultural heterogeneity of the EU – especially after the last

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<sup>1</sup> This paper, which constitutes the apex of the undergoing debate, is in fact composed of a paper by Simon Hix ("Why the EU needs (Left-Right) Politics? Policy Reform and Accountability are impossible without it"), followed by a rejoinder by Stefano Bartolini ("Should the Union be 'Politicised'? Prospects and Risks") see [http://www.notre-europe.eu/uploads/tx\\_publication/Policypaper19-en.pdf](http://www.notre-europe.eu/uploads/tx_publication/Policypaper19-en.pdf).

enlargements – is higher than the heterogeneity of national consociational polities. But it is even much higher than the heterogeneity of majoritarian polities that most authors have in mind when thinking to replicate national institutional traits in the EU. By contrast, the EU comes close to the “plural societies” which are, according to Lijphart (1999: 32), “sharply divided along religious, ideological, linguistic, cultural, ethnic, or racial lines into virtually separate subsocieties with their own political parties, interest groups, and media of communication”. It can also be considered as coming close to Juan Linz’s concept of the “state-nation”, as opposed to the ordinary “nation-state”. We borrow here from Colomer (2006: 4-5), according to whom a “state-nation” in Linz’s perspective is:

“A multinational state with institutions of ‘asymmetric federalism’<sup>2</sup> and ‘consociational practices’ including actors’ mutual accommodation. These institutions and practices can make the state legitimate for the great majority of the population and, thus, collective decisions by democratic means viable and enforceable. The Linzian concept of ‘state nation’ may evoke the Habermasian concept of ‘constitutional patriotism’, as both are concerned with the conditions for a viable democracy in absence of favourable cultural factors (...). For Linz, a new type of ‘state nation’ might be ‘compatible with (several) nations under its rule. Under this kind of institutional framework, a democratic, multinational, multicultural, multilingual state is possible’ (Linz 1993: 367)”.

Initially the concept of consociationalism was employed to analyze nation-states – the Netherlands being the primary example – where the social-economic coexisted with the religious cleavage. As a result, the party system was bi-dimensional (left-right, and secular-religious), and parties were rooted in densely organized societal “pillars” (Lijphart 1974). The central features of these systems, in the language of Arend Lijphart who was the founder of the consociational theory, were that they protected the autonomy of the traditional societal segments, and favoured compromises between these segments instead of their confrontation. As regards political behaviour, elite-led politics and a civic culture favouring compromise over adversarial styles of opposition characterise consociationalism. Electoral proportionality coupled with mutual veto rights (formalised or *de facto*) and the frequent use of grand governmental coalitions are the major institutional features of consociational democracies (Andeweg 2000: 512-513), distinguishing them from classical majoritarian systems.

In a second stage, the concept of consociationalism was extended to other polities where a third cleavage (centre-periphery) had remained prominent, such as Switzerland, and Belgium since the revival of infra-national mobilizations in the late 1960s. It was argued that the autonomy of territorial segments could be compared to the autonomy of social-cultural “pillars” (“isomorphism”). Thus, the autonomy of territorially defined entities should be protected through federalist decentralization,<sup>3</sup> but

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<sup>2</sup> The EU is increasingly considered today as a “quasi-federal” system (see Schmidt 2006 : 47-54).

<sup>3</sup> An embodiment of the « subsidiarity principle » *en vogue* in the European discourse (also visible in “soft” governance mechanisms relying on cross-national learning such as the Open method of Coordination).

as broad self-government entails centrifugal risks, it is combined with mechanisms of representation “reconnecting the self-governing community to the larger federation” (Kymlicka 1998: 237n), and awarding it each time a significant voice on national politics (think for instance on the need to achieve concurrent majorities). Linguistic pluralism and cooperative behaviour, at least at the level of the governing elite, form for their part the civic background of the system. Because they combine denominational, ideological and territorial-linguistic cleavages, Belgium and Switzerland can therefore be considered as the types of consociational polities that more closely resemble the social-cultural structure of the EU. The same applies to their combination of horizontal and vertical power fragmentation,<sup>4</sup> much comparable to the “co-decision triangle” and “multi-level governance” structures in the EU (respectively horizontal and vertical institutional fragmentation). While Lijphart (1999: 32) himself has mentioned such an analogy without getting into more details, others have demonstrated convincingly that the EU presents the major features of a consociation.<sup>5</sup>

Simon Hix (1999) mentions in his book *The Political System of the European Union* the consociational features of the EU (p. 164: “a plural society”; p. 201: “the consociational cartel”). On the other hand, he finds Left-Right politicization of the EU both possible and desirable, and asserts that such a form of politicization would strengthen the public debate and clarify its terms. Yet one might reply here that politicization is to a large extent (but not thoroughly: see below) absorbed and tamed by consociational mechanisms. Therefore advocates of politicization along Left-Right lines should lower their expectations. To those, like Stefano Bartolini, who fear by contrast that politicization would lead to ungovernability and policy gridlock, it may be reminded that consociational mechanisms have an overall fair potential to prevent that, so that one should rather trust such mechanisms and rely on them instead of simply dismissing politicization from the agenda.<sup>6</sup> We suggest in this paper that politicization as a remedy to the accountability deficit of the EU (which is considered to be one of the most important roots of growing euroskepticism)<sup>7</sup> is at the same time less promising than Hix assumes, and less dangerous than Bartolini tends to believe. Understood in consociational terms, the politicization of the EU is both possible and

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<sup>4</sup> In Lijphart’s (1999: 248) comparative work, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Belgium ranked high on the dimension of power-sharing between parties. Among consociational countries Belgium ranked lower than the Netherlands or Austria with respect to territorial division of power, but since then “federalization” in Belgium has been much more pronounced than in Austria, not to speak about the Netherlands.

<sup>5</sup> Bogaards (2002); Costa & Magnette (2003); Papadopoulos (2005); Schmidt (2000) labels the EU « bureaucratic consociational » because of its lack of democracy.

<sup>6</sup> Schmidt (2000: tables p.50) closely relies on the facilitating and inhibiting factors developed by the consociational theory itself (according to which consociational regimes are more or less likely to engage positively into democratization processes) to assert that one should be rather optimistic about the systemic consequences of the democratization of the EU. The compromising style of elites at EU level appears here as a crucial variable.

<sup>7</sup> Between 1991 and 2003 popular support for the EU fell by about 17 per cent across the EU-15 (Mair 2007 : 2, quoting Catherine E. Netjes and Kees van Kersbergen, ‘Interests, Identity and Political Allegiance in the European Union’, paper presented at Euroscepticism Conference, Amsterdam, July 2005).

desirable, but its effects should be measured accurately, drawing lessons from other consociational contexts. Briefly stated, we would like to show that the effects of the “therapy” (politicization) prescribed are context-dependent, and should therefore be assessed in the light of the specific properties of the “sick man” (the EU).

## **2 The accountability deficit, and left-right politicization as an illusory remedy**

Accountability in the EU is today partial and indirect. As is well known, the European Parliament is directly elected but only in “second-order” elections (Reif & Schmitt 1980) whose outcomes are weakly, if at all, determined by European issues. Further, despite the expansion of its prerogatives and its fast-growing internal structuration, the EP has a much weaker legislative role than most of its national counterparts. Ministers making decisions at Council meetings belong to governmental parties who are accountable to their national electorates, but neither are European issues debated in this arena crucial for party competition within member states, nor is the Council accountable as such before European electorates. Accountability linkages are weaker for the Commission or the European Court of Justice, not to speak about the European Central Bank and the numerous independent agencies. The influence of citizens is thus essentially indirect, as it is primarily exerted through their national representatives (governments, and MEPs), or through organized interests lobbying in Brussels. The accountability deficit (Magnette 2003, Papadopoulos 2005) is closely related to the different dimensions of the democratic deficit of the EU (see Follesdal & Hix 2006: 534-537).

Hence, the divorce between “politique d’opinion” and “politique des problèmes” (Leca 1996) observed in national politics is accentuated at the EU level because the sphere of “politique d’opinion” is practically absent, apart from some sectoral and well organised interests (Eder & Trenz 2003). Virtually no public space of debate is available for European issues, so that even the influence of media control is weak in a period where national democratic systems are deemed to become “audience” democracies (Manin 1997), i.e. their rulers are subject to increased media scrutiny. Vivien Schmidt (2006) for instance refers in her recent book on European integration to “policies without politics” (p. 268), and to the lack of “communicative discourse” (pp. 39-43) at EU level.<sup>8</sup>

To these problems Hix offers a simple remedy: Left-Right politicization. This is a remedy whose utilization is unavoidable according to him, and besides it already started being “administered” spontaneously, however without a clear underlying goal-setting. According to Hix, the tendency in the EU nowadays is towards more politicization and ideological fights. He maintains that national specificities are less important than in the past: political parties in the European Parliament are increasingly divided along the Left-Right dimension and decreasingly along national lines, the same happens with governmental voting in the Council that is linked to “growing ideological

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<sup>8</sup> In a more optimistic tone Schmidt (2006: 42) also points out the beginnings of a true European public sphere, and on “eruptive” (suddenly salient) issues – such as the “Haider case” – scholars have observed a Europe-wide public sphere that was not merely sectoral (van de Steeg 2006).

battles” (p. 17), and the Commission is more partisan too. The left-right polarization might even according to him absorb the classic pro-/anti-integration cleavage, as most left-wing parties tend to support more regulation at the EU level, while right-wing parties tend to reject EU legislations that reduce market autonomy.

One line of critique would consist in analysing the way Hix and his co-authors (Hix et al. 2006) select and aggregate votes in the EP and in the Council, and in showing that, actually, votes are more volatile and national positions remain prominent in many areas. We will however leave this argument to specialists of partisan behaviour (for a synthesis see Lord 2006). Assuming that the trend towards more left-right voting in both the EP and the Council is correct, and that this affects the Commission's impartiality, Hix' argument still suffers from flaws. First and foremost, it tends to read the EU's political regime through the lens of an idealized model of parliamentary government that doesn't fit the EU. The “saga” of the Bolkenstein directive Hix refers to, a proposal which elicited one of the widest movements of politicization a EU directive has ever known, illustrates the structural differences between a classic parliamentary model and the EU regime:

- In the EP, the text first gave rise to a clear-cut left-right politicization, that was quite widely (and unusually) echoed by national medias; when the EP started to formulate its amendments, though, its members had to acknowledge that neither the left nor the right were in a position to reach a majority; the centre-left and centre-right thus gradually marginalised their more radical segments, and reached a centrist compromise that combined some liberal principles contained in the Commission's proposal with concessions to the social-democrats; left-right polarization did take place, but given the partisan structure of the EP and vote procedures, the final outcome was a “grand (legislative) coalition”;
- In the Council, the governments' positions were rarely determined by their partisan affiliation: while Blair's government and most social-democratic governments from Eastern Europe supported the Commission's proposal, several conservative governments (notably the French government) defended “public services” against the directive, hence standing closer to the EP's left;
- The Commission's deliberations reflected both partisan and national divisions; in the end, the Commission chose to accept the EP's centrist compromise, simply because it appeared that this was the only position that could reach a majority both in the EP and in the Council.

In a nutshell, this case reminds us that internal diversity within the three organs, the wide majorities required, and the necessity to make the respective positions converge, all combine to narrow bipolar oppositions.

To be sure, Hix argues that enhancing politicization precisely intends to curb this consensual behaviour, but this raises a second objection: we share Bartolini's argument that, even if this was possible, the circumstances under which the majorities of the three organs would converge would remain very rare, given the non-coincidence of the electoral cycles at the national and European levels. To support Hix's argument, one would need to demonstrate that a clarification of partisan oppositions at the EU level would trigger a realignment of national debates, so that the Council's discussions

would reflect those of the EP. So far, however, nothing corroborates this hypothesis, and the experience of consociational polities indicates, on the contrary, that such systems, protecting as they do the autonomy of their segments, tend to preserve the lack of coordination between the two levels.

### **3 The desirability of politicization: clarification of political choices and better accountability**

We have seen in the former section that the institutional features of the EU, combined with the segmentation of the electorates along national lines, make Hix's scenario of Left-Right politicization unlikely. In this section, we add that, even if Hix's scenario was plausible, it would not produce the effects the author assumes, given the consociational logic of decision-making in the EU.

Simon Hix finds politicization desirable, and even unavoidable. Stefano Bartolini for his part is not very explicit on his assessment of the current status, but finds that politicization will not yield the expected effects. What is worse, according to him it can lead to policy stalemate and even undermine the integration process. However neither Hix nor Bartolini fully take into account the impact of the consociational nature of the EU system on attempts at politicization. Hence it is worth trying to extrapolate more from our knowledge on existing consociational polities – notably Belgium and Switzerland, which both are multinational polities.

The first consequence of consociational politics is that it narrows the polarization of policy choices, hence reducing the virtues of politicization as stated by Hix. Whether left-right politics “will encourage policy innovation, will produce a mandate for reform, and so will increase the legitimacy of the EU” as stated in Hix's executive summary is debatable. We know that in reality even pure Westminster style politics does not operate with so much clarity, as innovation and reform require compromise even in the absence of any formal veto points in the policy process. Referring to the Bolkenstein “saga”, Hix thinks that “if ‘normal democratic politics’ existed in the EU (...) there would have been either an openly neo-liberal project or an openly socialist project”. Whether under strong international constraints an openly socialist project is tenable is not sure, and in spite of the UK Westminster type political system one cannot consider that New Labour's “third way” for instance is an exemplar of that. But even for neo-liberal reforms the literature on path dependency (Pierson 2004) has shown that they are difficult to implement in a drastic manner since they face opposition from numerous constituencies of potential losers that can be translated into electoral blame for the incumbent government. Hix acknowledges the moderating effects of checks-and-balances systems but fails to see that they undermine at the same time the clarification of policy choice he advocates. If even majoritarian systems do not lead to as much clarification of policy choices as Hix assumes, this is all the more true for consociational systems. In order to regulate politicization, consociational systems do not rely primarily on the dynamics of party competition as conceived by Hix. They contain institutional safeguards, which are more or less formalized, such as vertical fragmentation of power through federalist devices or horizontal diffusion of influence through mechanisms of proportional representation of subcultures (“Proporzdemokratien”). As a result, Hix overestimates the potential clarifying effect of politicization in the EU, and Bartolini overestimates its dangers.

The second lesson we can draw from consociational systems with power fragmentation is that “institutional gridlock” can indeed be overcome, as hoped by Hix. Bearing this in mind, Bartolini’s fears about the unintended effects of politicization can be nuanced. A major risk according to him is deadlock deriving from fights between institutions controlled by different partisan majorities (divided government). But Bartolini does not consider seriously that veto points can be overcome through elite cooperation. Consociational polities overcome inter-institutional paralysis (the so-called “joint-decision trap”) through cooperative mechanisms and behaviour. Crepaz (1994) has demonstrated that blockades due to the “competitive veto points” in such systems can be overcome through deliberation and negotiation in concertation procedures (that he somehow misleadingly labels “collaborative veto points”). These often informal procedures can be viewed as “escape routes” from deadlock, however at the price of incrementalism and of a lack of transparency (Benz 1998). Both Hix and Bartolini underestimate their role: the former fails to see that they inevitably undermine accountability, and the latter that they reduce the dangers of politicization.

Such procedures are widespread in so-called “negotiation democracies” (“Verhandlungsdemokratien”), something of an oxymoron with respect to democratic majoritarian rule. In such democracies the latter is coupled with influential negotiation systems, and decision-making results from the interpenetration of arenas that follow partly different rules of the game and operation logics (Lehmbruch 1999).<sup>9</sup> Note that – unlike consociational polities – all negotiation democracies are not socially segmented, but may develop a cooperative culture for other reasons (equifinality), for instance in order to surmount policy blockades due to federalism as in the German case studied by Lehmbruch. In negotiation democracies the coupling between electoral politics and policy-making is weak. Even politicized – and thus hopefully popularized, if not thoroughly democratized – the EU would remain a negotiation democracy. Hence Hix’s expectation that politicization would lead to more sustained participation of the public in the EU should be qualified: perhaps in “politics”, but not really in policy-making. As a matter of fact, increasing the choice for voters is one thing, but finding an agreement among decision-making institutions about how to translate “political mandates” into policies is quite another thing.

Hix has indeed in mind a somewhat abstract majoritarian model, and he neglects that (interinstitutional and transpartisan) cooperation that is necessary to overcome veto points inevitably dilutes the expected positive effects of politicization through competition (clarity of policy choices). He knows that in pluralist societies “a consensus-based design is preferable to a majoritarian design”, that policy change becomes thereby “difficult and broad coalitions need to be built” (p. 12). Nevertheless, he fails to see that the EU faces exactly the same dilemma – one could even argue that in the EU these features of existing consociations are accentuated. As Hix himself considers that the EU is “hyper-consensual”, one might await that he would make suggestions for reducing somewhat this bias without changing the overall logic of the

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<sup>9</sup> Negotiation democracies are defined slightly differently by Armingeon (2002). According to him they comprise three core dimensions: consociationalism and veto points (these are the cultural and institutional elements of the consociational nature of the EU that we consider relevant), plus a corporatist system of interest intermediation (less applicable in the case of the EU).

system. In spite of that he suggests a purely bipolar model of party competition without seriously considering how such a competition would be coupled with the consensual institutional system, or what kind of adjustments of the latter would be required in order to achieve such a coupling. The achievement of clarification through politicization seems to be just a function of the political will of partisan leaderships.

Still according to Hix, “European citizens have very little information about the emerging politics inside the EU institutions, and so cannot identify the protagonists and the positions they represent” (p. 23). Hix is right in pointing to the accountability problem that plagues the EU, but this problem derives from multiple causes: not only from informational asymmetries, but also from “the problem of many hands” (dilution of responsibility across several actors and institutions), and from an excessively lengthy “chain of delegation” that considerably weakens the impact of citizens’ preferences. Hix’s solution would in our view lead to a symbolic Left-Right politics that would not substantially affect the compound nature of policy-making in the complex EU system. Not only is it uncertain whether more publicity of partisan debates would create a genuine European sphere of “politique d’opinion”, but above all there would most probably be a divorce between that sphere and the sphere of “politique des problèmes”. For instance, even if the president of the Commission were elected by a clear-cut majority in both EU “Chambers” – the governments gathered in the Council being considered as a kind of European “Bundesrat” – she would have to compromise so much, notably to confront the problem of forging majorities in the EP and of adapting to shifting balances in the Council, that she would not be in a position to implement her programme. In other words, politicization would most likely bring the EU closer to the operation of national consociational systems, where the sphere of “politique d’opinion” is present, however loosely connected to the sphere of problem-solving. But it would not solve the problem of the weak influence of “politics” on policy-making that reduces accountability.

In the EU this does not have to do only with the dispersion of power between the elements of the legislative triangle: Commission, Council, and Parliament. Such a reading focusing only on institutional fragmentation is limited. The lack of accountability also has to do with the fact that a lot of decisions are in reality taken in weakly visible deliberations and negotiations within an extremely expanded committee system. However, similar phenomena are observed in national systems too, and not only in consociational, but also in majoritarian polities. This is highlighted by the literature on the growth of mechanisms of cooperative “governance” that tend to replace vertical steering from the executive, which is much based on the United Kingdom (Rhodes 1997). Interestingly, it seems that while the constraints of political competition lead to a general trend towards bipolarization, personalization, and party presidentialization (Poguntke & Webb 2005), the constraints of policy-making lead for their part to a general trend towards negotiation and cooperation.

As we already noted, if Hix’ expectations are too high, Bartolini’s fears are exaggerated too. He is right in pointing out that nothing guarantees that the three co-decision institutions will share the same preferences at the same time, which is the condition for Hix’s model not producing ungovernability. But he underestimates in turn that under conditions of divided government power-sharing institutions face strong incentives to mutually adjust their preferences or even internalise each other’s position (according to Carl Friedrich’s law of “anticipated reactions”). This is again amply

corroborated by the literature on co-decision in the EU (Raunio & Shackleton 2003). But according to Bartolini “the risks of politicization are highly underestimated” (p. 31), because they go in fact beyond the risk of ungovernability. The “first and foremost risk” in his view “is that the politicization process spills over from left-right policy issues to the constitutive issues of membership, competencies, and decision rules” (p. 44). We believe by contrast that such a “risk” can largely be managed through the consociational setting, as we shall seek to show in the next section. But let us remind at this point that Hix’s and Bartolini’s positive or negative anticipations are not correct: unlike Bartolini’s pessimism, policy convergence can be achieved *in spite* of politicization, but unlike Hix’s optimism, this would take the form of compromises that *reduce* the clarification effects of Left-Right polarization.

#### **4 Politicization and the management of euroskepticism**

So far, we have argued that the consociational nature of the EU narrows the scope for polarization, and thus reduces the effect in terms of clarification assumed by Hix. In this section, we move towards what we believe is one of the EU’s major problems of legitimacy: the elitism of the process of European integration. This makes us argue that Hix’s expectations that more Left-Right polarization would legitimise the EU miss part of the nature of current euroskepticism. But this also leads us to argue that Bartolini’s fears regarding the politicization of the EU’s constitutional foundations are unjustified.

Left-Right is today the most salient dimension in national politics, including in consociational systems, and including in the EU. Neither have we reached the end of ideology, nor converged to a neo-liberal consensus. In that sense Hix is correct when he holds that politicization on these lines is inevitable. However, the pro- and anti-integration cleavage is also inevitable and it does not overlap with the Left-Right divide. This has been made clear mainly by Hooghe’s and Marks’s empirical work (see for a recent description Hooghe and Marks 2006): the pro-/anti-integration cleavage overlaps with a “Gal-Tan” cleavage, and not with a Left-Right one, i.e. with a cleavage between Green/ Alternative/ Libertarians and Traditionalists/ Authoritarian/ Nationalists. Today Euroskepticism mostly emanates from the traditionalist and nationalist far-right parties, whereas only in Scandinavian countries is there a rather strong Leftist opposition to the EU, for fear that negative integration will weaken the Nordic welfare model.<sup>10</sup>

In this respect, Bartolini is right to remind us that a stronger politicization of the conflict around integration may undermine the latter because, unlike the Left-Right conflict, this conflict affects the constitutive dimension of the EU (in a not too dissimilar manner to ethno-regional oppositions with respect to nation-states). However, two objections can be raised against Bartolini’s argument.

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<sup>10</sup> This pattern is less applicable to new EU-members, but it would be premature to draw any conclusions as their party systems are still under consolidation. Apart from the Nordic countries, one may also think of the opposition to the Constitutional Treaty that manifested itself from the Far-Left during the French referendum.

First, from an analytical viewpoint, such tensions seem inevitable to us. Bartolini is certainly right in arguing that the structures of interest representation (and above all political parties) are too weak at the European level to act as efficient gatekeepers managing and channelling politicization. However, at national level too the role of parties in aggregating and mediating preferences is declining in favour of “advocacy-democracy” (Cain et al. 2003). Further, it is highly questionable how gatekeeping structures can become legitimate in the absence of politicization. After all in national settings too the constitution of a common public space often took place under a centre-periphery cleavage, and here we merely follow Bartolini who claims in his book *Restructuring Europe* (Bartolini 2005: xiii) that a lot can be learnt on European integration from national processes of centre formation: “This process of cultural homogenization and nation building was never peaceful, completed, comprehensive or uniform” (Bartolini 2005: 86). In sum, Bartolini is right in arguing that Left-Right politicization is not a remedy, but we can’t agree with him that politicization on constitutive issues should be dismissed because it entails risks for the pursuit of integration. True, this form of politicization refers to the most contentious issues (“the sleeping giant”: Van der Eijk and Franklin 2004: 47), but the latter cannot be solved if they are kept off the agenda. As Van der Eijk and Franklin (2004) argue, the European issue is now ripe for politicization, whether we want it or not. And we see no reason why the monopoly of politicization should be left to euroskeptical political entrepreneurs.

Besides, with the trend towards holding more often referendums on European issues, constitutive issues will inevitably be put on the agenda repeatedly, and referendums will reveal the cleavage on the constitutive dimensions of the EU. However, Bartolini’s belief that the politicization of constitutive cleavages may aggravate them seems too pessimistic: as suggested by Risse and Kleine (2007: 78) “one should not confuse politicization with populist politics”. In fact, both Hix and Bartolini focus too much on partisan behaviour. Hix applies too easily the Left-Right pattern of the EP to the Council and the Commission. And Bartolini’s argument relies on an overestimation of the (positive or negative) contribution of the party system to stability (Bartolini 2005: 348-349), and on an underestimation of the incentives for pragmatic behaviour that are provided by an institutional framework which is highly fragmented in the case of the EU. What we learnt from national consociational polities is that political actors adjusted their conduct in order to cope with the politicization of constitutive issues. They deployed strategies in order to integrate into the political system those who were skeptical with respect to its very constitution. For example, in Switzerland the catholic-conservative movement that initially opposed the creation of a federal system was gradually integrated into the federal executive.

A second objection can be raised against Bartolini’s point, this time from the viewpoint of normative democratic theory: politicization should be perceived as a value in itself, and not only as a positive or negative instrument for European integration. Bartolini’s idea that politicization should not spread over to “constitutive” issues has some elitistic tones. These are problematic not only on abstract normative grounds, but primarily because the elitism of the EU, which is part of that constitutive dimension, is indeed a political issue. Bartolini points out (p. 41) that “a considerable proportion of the European electorate has preferences on key European issues that are not represented by their respective parties”, that “the positions of those voters who are sceptical or opposed to integration are almost totally ignored”, or that “voters and their representatives live in two different worlds”. And he does not think that this state of

things can be alleviated through politicization, quite to the contrary he seems to believe that the latter would facilitate the manifestation of opposition and thus jeopardize integration. But Bartolini fails to consider that politicization may have the latent function of better integrating anti-European movements and at the same time anti-establishment parties into the system, thus depriving them of the major justification for their populist rhetoric. As Mair (2007: 6) wisely asserts, “when classical opposition is limited or constrained, it then becomes more likely that critics will mobilize around an opposition of principle”.

Hix by contrast believes that politicization will alleviate euroskepticism through the enhanced accountability that it will generate. This is in line with Crombez (2003: 114) who argues that dissatisfaction is probably generated more by the secrecy of procedures and by an excess of delegation than by outputs that would not be consistent with voters’ preferences. However, this should also be qualified: recent comparative research on the nature of euroskepticism shows that its motivations certainly have to do with the democratic deficit, but also with quite different reasons such as the lack of the social dimension, concerns about preservation of sovereignty, and also more narrowly utilitarian considerations (Sorensen 2006). Hix is confident on the virtues of public deliberation, and seems to believe that more public debate will alleviate euroskepticism. He is right in holding that open democratic politics is necessary to “win people back to Europe” (p. 11), but wrong when he thinks that democratic politics is necessarily conducive to that. It is not sure for instance that public deliberation suffices to favour more nuanced viewpoints, because pro- and anti-European positions are also a matter of interests, whose perceptions cannot be easily transformed by deliberation. In other words, such positions have – as cleavages in general – a structural basis, which is not seriously considered as Hix focuses on the salience of the Left-Right dimension without referring to its social bases. Today the social bases of Left-Right partisan competition differ from the social bases of the cleavage between “losers and winners of modernization” that is largely at the origin of pro- as opposed to anti-integration attitudes. And the Left does not represent the losers: its electorate is currently to a large extent composed by members of the new middle class.

Euroskeptic parties by contrast are strongly entrenched within the less favoured social groups (Kriesi et al 2006), and the problem is that anti-European actors are not easily integrable to the consociational system because they tend to be anti-establishment too: “It is those who stand away from the mainstream, or those who are outside the cartel, who tend to be the more Euroskeptic “ (Mair 2007a: 165). The difficulty to integrate anti-establishment actors has been confirmed by national experiences, even though consociational polities pursued different paths. In Belgium, consociational politics reached their limits when established political actors decided to establish a “cordon sanitaire” in order to insulate the xenophobic Vlaams Block (now Vlaams Belang). In Switzerland, consociational politics were continued with respect to the Swiss People’s Party (SVP), with the cooptation of his leader C. Blocher as a minister in the federal government. However this did not yield the expected effects in terms of a deradicalization of this party. In sum, the efficacy of consociational mechanisms with respect to the “taming” of opposition may well vary according to the nature of this opposition.

This leads us to the conclusion that in a heterogeneous polity like the EU the problem is how to ensure that a competitive game will not generate structural minorities, i.e. groups who may deny their support because they feel that they are systematically losers in political competition. Hix is aware of that, but argues erroneously in our view that the structural losers today identify with the Left, so that a bipolar competition would make them hope that they would win in the future, attaching them through that hope to the European undertaking. This underestimates the fact that, although opposition to integration is indeed sometimes channelled through left-wing parties, it is by far more often an issue that is captured by national-populist parties. If Euroskepticism only partly comes from the political Left, this is because the main social basis of the latter (new middle class) does not socially belong to the losers, is often ideologically “Gal” (see above), and favourable to European integration. The idea that the big parties of the Left would integrate the minorities that are the most likely to perceive themselves as structural losers does not find much empirical support. Bartolini is right for his part in suggesting that European electorates divide more on “constitutive” issues (by the way unsuitable for politicization according to him) under the banner of nationalist parties. The latter cannot realistically hope to become winners in a context of bipolar competition. This largely explains the difficulty to integrate them in consensual politics, but unlike Bartolini we do not think that preventing politicization can be a successful strategy to gain legitimacy for European integration. The complex architecture of the EU permits to avoid the marginalization of structural minorities having a regional-territorial basis (namely through institutional devices like qualified majority voting). Consociational style politics is less efficient in avoiding the formation of structural minorities that have no territorial basis, such as modernization losers. However a wider politicization of their concerns is less dangerous in our view than leaving the monopoly of their representation to anti-establishment actors.

## **5 How can a compound polity be politicized?**

We have argued so far that Hix’ expectations about the virtuous effects of the politicization of the EU are overestimated, while Bartolini tends to exaggerate the risks inherent to politicization. It remains to be seen whether a form of politicization that would fit the EU’s institutional and civic features is conceivable. Drawing lessons from Belgium and Switzerland, we argue in this section that the EU might afford a consociational politicization and would benefit from it in terms of legitimization.

Several scholars and political leaders tend to distinguish between a politicized democracy, which can only be majoritarian, and a consensus democracy, which is necessarily depoliticized. In other words, the majoritarian model would be the only alternative to the consensus style of EU decision-making and the lack of interest (or even discontent) that it generates. The comparative analysis of European national experiences shows however that the opposition between consensus and politicization is not so clear-cut. The classic distinction made by Lijphart (1999) between majoritarian and consensus democracies is often misunderstood. In several consociational countries, governments have often been made up of large coalitions, associating two or more parties from both the (centre-) Left and the (centre-) Right. This does not mean, however, that these countries have been dominated by consensus, the absence of public deliberation, or civic apathy. Political parties have

indeed been able to discuss their divergences in public, even though they were part of the same “majority”.

In Belgium for instance, vivid oppositions on taxation or social policies were frequent within the recent liberal-socialist government and publicly exposed. In Switzerland, participation of the nationalist SVP and of the social-democratic party in the collegial federal executive does not prevent each of them from playing the opposition “card” as well, in parliament or in referendum campaigns. Research on parliamentary behaviour in Switzerland shows that the Left-Right cleavage is by far the most prominent in rule-making, even in presence of an “allparty” government (Schwarz 2006). Regarding voting recommendations for referendums the Socialist party disagreed with the other governmental parties in 39% of cases since 1991, and the national-populist SVP in 19% of them.<sup>11</sup> However, and similarly to the case of the Bolkenstein directive mentioned above, Left-Right polarization that has indeed grown does not prevent majorities to be formed around centrist compromises, this being necessary to overcome the numerous veto points embedded in the system. Moreover, governments in majoritarian systems too are often coalitions of parties that publicly disagree, as shown a couple of years ago by the “plural left” in France or even very recently by Prodi’s government in Italy. In other words, a lively deliberation on public issues, opposing clearly distinguished visions, is not incompatible with a form of government based on compromise. So far, nothing has demonstrated that this kind of politicization produces less civic interest than the classic majoritarian kind does, simply because civic interest is not only a function of party competition. When compromises follow an appropriate public process of deliberation, and when their logic is clearly explained, the issues at stake and the responsibilities of the different actors can be understood by the mass public.

Yet it may be argued that compromises seldom fulfil such “ideal speech conditions”. Hence, though this cannot be empirically demonstrated, a majoritarian model might in principle remain the best solution: alternation limits corruption, offers the clearest political choice and convinces citizens that they can both select and dismiss their leaders, enhancing accountability (Przeworski et al. 1999). F.W. Scharpf (1993:27) adequately described why this model is normatively so attractive: the government is dependent on the citizens, and also in theory thoroughly controlled by them on all aspects of its activity that affect them. But given that a majoritarian bipolar model does not seem to be adaptable to the complex structure of the European polity, an alternative kind of politicization could be encouraged at EU level, and could take place under the existing Treaty framework.

The Commission could remain a large coalition of the major European parties, and thereby preserve its power to initiate and execute policies even when there is no clear majority in the EP or Council. But it would help clarify the issues if it decided to change the *style* of its actions. When it presents its programme or a given policy it could choose to explain the different possible options (see also Schmidt 2006: 47-54), rather

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<sup>11</sup> Own computation from data of Agence télégraphique suisse (published in *Le Temps*, April 14, 2007 : « Les partis au gouvernement de plus en plus désunis »).

than work out ready-made compromises.<sup>12</sup> In so doing, it would preserve its “neutral” profile: as a collegial organ, its role would be to identify a number of options based on different ideological assumptions, and to explain them in order to stimulate and structure deliberations.<sup>13</sup> Political parties within the EP – and national governments within the Council – would be encouraged to clarify their own positions, and justify the extent of their disagreement. Thus, European policies would appear not only more coherent, but also more open, and could generate public interest and civic mobilization. This requires some form of simplification of political discussions, but not necessarily a reduction of the debate into two opposed camps. If the majoritarian Westminster type model and the hyper-consensual model of the contemporary EU are the two extremes of a continuum, a middle position, where deliberation would be organised around a maximum of six or seven political identities (extreme-left, greens, social-democrats, liberals, christian-democrats, conservatives, national-populist right) should be possible. The EP party system is the matrix of this kind of politicization. True, some would argue that such a form of politicization would not give to the EU the majestic simplicity of Westminster politics, but it could nevertheless clarify the debates. And bipolar majoritarianism is not necessarily a factor of clarification either, because major parties usually compete for the centrist segment of the electorate and therefore have to water down their messages. In addition, the formula we propose would not require a constitutional revolution which is not supported by large political forces today, and which is probably not possible in a European polity characterised by increased variety.

## **6 Integrating direct forms of democracy into the EU consociational framework**

On the other hand the pathologies of consociational politics should not be ignored either. Although the establishment of causal links has not really been proved, the rise of populist movements in most consociational systems indicates that “collusion democracies” (Bartolini 1999) may generate high levels of dissatisfaction with politics (Papadopoulos 2005a). The “collusive” style of consociational politics and the complexity or lack of transparency of interpartisan compromises may be some of the causes of these pathologies – although majoritarian systems experience too similar phenomena of dissatisfaction and contestation. Anyway, we think that this is good reason to complement mechanisms of compromise-building in the representative circuit with more direct forms of political participation. The latter would however require a radicalization of the conception of participatory democracy currently *en vogue* in the European discourse.

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<sup>12</sup> Actually, this was already the case on some very sensitive questions such as the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy in 2002: when different Commissioners defend different options publicly, this helps understand the issues at stake.

<sup>13</sup> The suggestions made in the Commission White paper in order to clarify the framework of EU deliberation go in the direction of such a strategy of politicization. Cross-cutting policy agendas would broaden the issues instead of fragmenting them; the organization of key events that would reduce the number of occasions and places where deliberation takes place would also help to simplify the process of expression of oppositions and compromise thereafter.

The Swiss case shows that consociational elements can be combined with participatory elements obeying for their part to a majoritarian logic. The latter is not incompatible with the overall consociational logic, as the effects of participatory mechanisms are to a large extent absorbed (one could also say “domesticated”) by negotiation mechanisms. As a matter of fact, in complex decision-making systems such as “negotiation democracies” distinct institutional elements coexist in a sort of “mixed constitution”. Parliamentary politics can coexist with elements of direct democracy as in Switzerland, or with federalism and consociational devices as in Switzerland and Belgium. What is decisive is the kind of formal and informal rules that regulate their mutual coupling (Benz 2005).

Regarding the EU, an approach to a better accountability which rests mainly on the shadow of the replacement of governors (“throw the rascals out”) is precluded by the dispersion of power (Lord 2004: 195). We find a similar horizontal and vertical power fragmentation in Switzerland, but in this country accountability through direct democracy mechanisms replaces in practice accountability through parliamentary elections that are virtually non-competitive and deploy only indirect effects on government formation (Linder 1994). Weiler (1997: 152) suggests that more direct forms of citizens’ participation can be a substitute for the absence of governmental alternation at the EU level as an option for citizens dissatisfied with the performance of European authorities, and the members of the Convention who proposed a constitutional referendum did notice the possibility of its virtuous effects. They maintained: “While it is the case that a ‘European demos’ does not exist, it is equally clear that a Europe-wide referendum would create a common political space. It would be a means of bringing the peoples of Europe closer politically; it would ensure that the people were more engaged with and had a greater knowledge of the project”. The history of modern Switzerland teaches us too – in accordance with neo-institutionalist political theory – that institutions matter: the problem of the missing demos will remain unresolved if we do not opt for *demos-enhancing* institutions such as Europe-wide referenda.<sup>14</sup>

Let us take an example. Majone (2005) is right that there is no mass support for a federal Europe, and that it is through “integration by stealth” that European elites have promoted a “cryptofederalism”. Nothing similar to a process of “nationalization of the masses” happened at European level beyond the nation-state. We claim counterfactually that, had the European integration been less elite-driven, and had it provided for more demos-enhancing institutions, a process of “europeanization” of the masses would have occurred more easily. As a matter of fact, we do not think that consent can be produced primarily through the provision of public goods (the so-called “output-legitimacy”). We also disagree with Majone that there would be an inescapable trade-off between integration and democracy. Such a trade-off appears when democracy is not routinized and opposition manifests itself in eruptive forms (as in

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<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, in his book Hix (1999: 184-5) considers the option of Europe-wide referenda, but thinks that they would in reality be about national concerns, and grounds his belief on the fact that voting preferences differ depending on people’s support for government. Although this is indeed a good predictor of behaviour in referenda, it cannot be inferred from it that the latter are not above all votes about policy issues.

the referenda on the Constitutional Treaty) as a reaction to elite-driven processes. Attempting again a counterfactual argument, one might argue that the trade-off would not have existed if the European project were not inherently elitist (a property that Majone acknowledges) and if the mass public had been socialised to it.

Citizens' initiatives (on ordinary Pillar 1 European legislation) leading – under stringent institutional checks aiming to safeguard minority protection and stringent conditions aiming to ensure that their claims echo broad Europe-wide concerns – to binding referendum votes at EU level can be described as an institution of this type (Papadopoulos 2005). Direct democracy campaigns on Europe-wide issues would stimulate and popularize the debate on integration, because “publics have historically been mobilised into political arenas in response to ‘concrete’ experiences and problems” (Lord 2004: 227). Referendum votes seem indeed to provide a good opportunity in that respect: according to a study on the German press (reported in Landfried 2002: 87), the number of newspaper articles on Europe significantly increased in the period covering the Danish, Irish, and French referendums on the Maastricht Treaty. Direct democracy also forces political parties to take positions on European-wide policy issues, contributing thus to the formation of the stronger EU-parties that Hix wishes to see: direct democracy is a supplement, not an alternative to partisan representative democracy. Media coverage in turn contributes to accountability because it simplifies ‘the complex set of actors, policy networks, institutions and procedures’ (Magnette 2003: 153) that make decisions.

To be sure, even the availability of safeguards for minority protection would not prevent the emergence in these campaigns (or at the moment of the interpretation of referendum outcomes) of various cleavages, including cleavages along state lines, or about the depth (e.g. degree of liberalization) or breadth (enlargement) of integration. To state it somewhat bluntly, for the constitution of a public space there may be a certain price to pay in terms of European cohesion or in terms of the pursuit of integration (Risse & Kleine 2007: 78). Yet it can be plausibly hypothesized that the salience of cleavages will gradually be attenuated. Although some observers see in direct democracy a source of ungovernability – either an additional veto point, or a source of overload – it can be reasonably argued that these are short-term problems. One should consider the contribution of such mechanisms more broadly and in the long run, and in general the more frequent and unexceptional the utilization of direct democracy instruments, the more routinized it becomes, and referendum campaigns gradually become immune from excessive dramatization. As mentioned earlier, we tend to forget that the formation of national public spaces has not been immune either to deep social divisions, including along territorial lines. Such divisions cannot be managed without some willingness to manifest openness to citizens' claims. Instead of keeping delicate issues off the agenda, it seems wiser to stimulate public debate and hence contribute to a feeling of integration instead of alienation among the citizenry. In a recent article political theorist Amitai Etzioni (2007: 39) nicely describes the terms of the debate, referring to the “moral dialogue” that would be established thanks to EU-wide referenda: “The debate would surely be emotional and would likely produce different conclusions than a Commission committee. However, it would reflect the people, their values and their preferences and it would commit them to EU-wide policies and, in the process, to the EU itself”.

In any case the risk of ungovernability should not be exaggerated. In the EU where consociational decision-making is the rule, the Damoclean sword of direct democracy would probably above all (like in Switzerland and unlike polities with more competitive-oriented politics such as Italy or the US) allow outsiders to gain better negotiation positions in policy-making. Decision-makers would have to anticipate the risk of popular initiatives, and that would make them become more responsive either to opposition or to novel claims. As to the outsiders, experience from Switzerland teaches us that they would have to moderate their claims, either to obtain the consent of representative institutions of the Union and thus avoid expensive and time-consuming campaigns, or to achieve the required concurrent (super) majorities (see Papadopoulos 2005). The characteristics of the European political system make it plausible that the effects of direct democracy would be much similar to the Swiss model: fragmentation, checks and balances, and multi-level governance exert strong pressure to turn direct democracy instruments into negotiation devices that produce above all indirect effects. In a consociational polity they are largely incorporated into the overall negotiation framework, and strengthen it instead of acting as pure majoritarian devices (Papadopoulos 2001). Opposition is integrated, and thereby deradicalized: instead of remaining critical of the polity, it becomes critical of policies (for a related distinction see Mair 2007: 7). On the other hand, the existence of direct democracy instruments reduces accountability problems typical of consociational polities: direct democracy campaigns clarify political choices by their 'yes or no' logic.

To state it briefly, without idealizing direct democracy, it is worth specifying the conditions under which it is likely to produce virtuous effects. These are above all incentives for elite co-operation due to power fragmentation and diffusion, accompanied by a well-established consociational culture that allows elites to react to these incentives through mutual deliberation and negotiation. Such conditions are particularly present at the EU level. But gains in terms of legitimacy might be even larger. The Swiss example shows that the toolkit of direct democracy not only has an instrumental value, but also contributes to the formation of a common identity. Switzerland is portrayed as a paradigmatic case of political integration in spite of its heterogeneity (Deutsch 1976), and direct democracy played a significant role in that respect. Thanks to a more open opportunity structure embodied in the availability of direct democracy institutions, the citizens increasingly viewed the newly established federal system as 'theirs'. Such an identification might be more difficult in the far more heterogeneous and complex EU, but it is virtually impossible under the present state of affairs, characterized by a notorious deficit in politicization and accountability.

## **7 Conclusion: is the remedy worse than the disease? No, but its effects are limited. One has to consider the patient's "profile", and combine the therapy with additional remedies**

In this conclusive part we would like to summarize our argument. We first claim that Hix's recipe for politicization is based on some incorrect assumptions or predictions :

- it is not obvious that the EU is evolving towards more Left-Right polarization;
- even if this were the case, the nature of the EU implies that cooperation and compromises are indispensable (or inevitable), therefore Hix's suggestions

for politicization along Left-Right lines will not suffice to clarify political choice and enhance accountability (because of the consociational nature of the EU);

- Hix is also wrong in thinking that politicization along the Left-Right cleavage will alleviate euroskepticism. He tends to associate the latter with this dimension, which is partly wrong. Euroskepticism has a distinct social base (“losers of modernization”), it does not only derive from the deficit of accountability in the EU, and the latter cannot be overcome only through politicization of the debate.

At the same time, we think that the consociational nature of the EU also reduces the risks feared by Bartolini with regard to governability:

- The negative effects of politicized divided government can be offset by cooperative mechanisms;
- The politicization of constitutive issues can even be regarded as necessary, in order to integrate anti-system segments of public opinion;
- Bartolini is only partially right in stressing the destabilizing potential of the politicization of opposition on these issues: it is true that consociational mechanisms are less effective – at least in the short term – in dealing with this kind of conflict, but it is more promising to gamble on them than on non-politicization.

Ultimately, a somewhat strange commonality shared by the two disagreeing authors lies in the fact that both overestimate the impact of political design. Hix seems to believe that politicization can in a sense be “commanded” in a top-down manner, while Bartolini pleads for politicization to be avoided by equally elitistic means. Bartolini is right in pointing out that according to Hix the debate is merely seen as “a way to convince citizens” (p. 43). But we do not understand why it would be problematic – as Bartolini believes – if politicization would evolve “into informed and qualified opposition”. This is a conception of EU democracy that did not contribute so far to the popular legitimacy of European integration, defined in Bartolini’s (2005: 166) own terms as consent “by those who have not participated (in decisions), or, while participating, have not had their preference satisfied”. And this is indeed very surprising because Bartolini (2005: 361) himself critically asserted in his book: “Narrowing the adversarial political agenda may trivialize public life and make it useless. The integration process and institutions attribute the responsibility for actions to politically uncontrollable potencies, agencies, and networks of bargaining relationships. Problems are referred to international and intergovernmental institutions, courts, and technical regulatory bodies. Issues which are crucial for group identities and solidarity are depoliticized and transferred to higher or lower decisional loci because they are politically intractable, or because the political elite find it inconvenient to deal with them”.

We suggest for our part that consociational patterns of politicization are both desirable and possible in the EU system, but we do not believe that they are a panacea. As a remedy to the accountability deficit of the EU, consociational-type politicization is less promising than Hix assumes, and less dangerous than Bartolini tends to believe. Therefore we suggest for our part the coupling of a system of politicized “negotiation democracy” with mechanisms of direct participation. With a number of institutional

safeguards, such a coupling would help cope with the limits of consociational systems, would remain compatible with the compound nature of the EU, and would provide value-added in terms of public legitimization of the European integration.

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