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Critical Review

The Politicization of European Integration: More Than an Elite Affair?

Introduction

The article chosen for this critical review is “The Politicization of European Integration: More Than an Elite Affair?” by Achim Hurrelmann, Anna Gora and Andrea Wagner, published in volume 63 of the Political Studies journal in 2015. The topic of European integration has seen extensive growth in its academic literature, particularly claims of its politicization. Most research on this topic asserts this politicization among the political and societal elites however, leaving a gap of research among the broader citizenries. This article aims to bridge that gap by gathering data among the wider public through focus groups in key EU states, and discovering how politicized EU issues are among the people. In this critical review, I will seek to evaluate the quality and contributions of this article to political research by examining and assessing its theoretical framework and its choice of methodology and research, in this case being focus groups. Furthermore, I will evaluate the selection and recruitment of participants, as well as the methods of data collection and analysis. Finally, I will discuss the findings and results, and the strengths and weaknesses of the research.

Research Focus and Framework

We begin this review by examining the objective behind this article, as well its key concepts and the underlying philosophies which guide this research further. The article establishes an understanding of politicization as widespread political debate which shake up traditional agreements in a field, in our case being European integration. Furthermore, its focus on discovering politicization is targeted at specifically the general public, as there already is existing literature supported with compelling results on politicization of EU issues among the elite class, but not enough on the discourse among the common citizenry (Hurrelmann et al. 2015 pp.44). With this objective by itself, this article strives to fill a hole in its field and bring forth information that could alter the course of future political research in EU issues, as well as influencing processes of decision making within the EU, since knowing whether EU issues are a discourse among the EU citizenry is valuable insight for the decision-makers. Before we delve into the data, it is important to lay down the fundamental definitions of politicization, and what it really means in the context of European integration. A significant caveat to this research is that there does not exist a definition of politicization that is universal and all-encompassing, nor how it can be measured with known scientific methodologies. For the sake of exploring the research question, this article states that the concept of politics is “the cooperative or conflictive attempt at making collectively binding decisions for a group of people” (Hurrelmann et al. 2015 pp.44), and politicization as “An issue is politicized, then, if and when it is raised by the participants as a relevant object of – or factor in – the collective decision-making process” (Hurrelmann et al. 2015 pp.44). By establishing these definitions, the article provides a clear and concise meaning to the concepts it aims to analyse. Furthermore, the authors expand on their goals of assessing politicization of EU integration by clearly stating the fields in which politicization might occur, such as membership and all it entails for states, the structure and institutions of the EU, EU policy in all its jurisdictions, as well as nationally domestic issues that arise as a consequence of EU membership.

Additionally, one more important distinction regarding politicization is made, and that is the circles in which it can occur, that being in the very offices and institutions of the EU by politicians, professional arenas such as political parties and the media comprised of groups that are well informed and keep up with political discourse, and finally, the everyday discussions of EU citizenry (Hurrelmann et al. 2015 pp.45). The research is setup with a strong definition and framework of its key concepts and aims, as well as having an appropriately chosen method of using focus groups. Focus groups provide an effective process of gathering new knowledge due to its ability to explore and compare information and discourse through open-ended and free-flowing discussions as well as group interaction (Cyr. J, 2016 pp.233-34). And since the nature of our research question involves political discourse, specifically among the common public, which is easily accessible, diverse, and large in numbers, it is an aptly chosen research method for this analysis.

Research Design and Methodology

Conducting a critical analysis of the methodology of this research requires us to first understand what focus groups are and how they are utilized in gathering data within the social sciences. In recent years, focus groups have become a commonly utilized method of qualitative data gathering. A focus group is comprised of multiple individuals tasked with discussing a specific topic between each other. The interactive nature and the essence of groupwork is the crucial factor that earns focus groups its valuable place in the field of qualitative research (Cyr. J, 2016 pp.248). The article enforces the use of qualitative methods like focus groups as integral to developing the field of public studies, because of its compatibility with the nature of politics and political discourse. There are a few weaknesses of the focus group research method highlighted by the authors, one being that it is not an environment normalized among the populace, which could create a disconnect from reality, and another being that it cannot generate results that can be held as a representative answer for an entire population (Hurrelmann et al. 2015 pp.47). Despite this, qualitative methods are effective in filling in the gaps standard quantitative procedures might create, in our case, provide insight into differentiated fields of politicization and treat issues of European integration as the multipolar subject that it is (Hurrelmann et al. 2015 pp.47-48).

The process in which the focus groups were conducted in are as follows, firstly, the recruitment process begins with calling on local public opinion research firms to gather 8 to 10 participants in four times in four EU countries, that being the UK, Austria, Germany, and Ireland. The diversity of opinion and potential results were a clear priority for the researchers, as both the contrasts in their national origins and their demographic differences in age, income, education, and gender were present among the participants (Hurrelmann et al. 2015 pp.48). Secondly, three main areas of contention were sought after by the researchers, arguments and evaluations in economic prosperity, judicial and governmental standards and procedures, and the connection between the EU and the values upheld by specific groups under them (Hurrelmann et al. 2015 pp.49). The measurement used by the researchers to determine the degree of importance and polarization of political discourse related to EU integration was a system of behavioural expressions and reactions presented by the participants to the moderator's questions regarding EU issues. An extremely animated discussion prompted by a certain topic represented a high level of importance, a medium level of importance was determined if participants showed capability of forming and defending their positions after guidance by the moderator, and a low level of importance was

determined if even with moderator guidance, a lack of knowledge and interest, and engagement was observed among the participants. (Hurrelmann et al. 2015 pp.48).

Data, Analysis, and Implications

The data gathered by this research propose a multi-dimensional view on the saliency of EU issues among the public. EU matters were not a prioritized realm of discourse among the average citizen, and it certainly took a back seat to domestically national issues among the participants once they were provided an opportunity to give forth their most pressing political matters of their time. Without moderator prompts and direct questions related to EU issues, it was evident from the discourse held by the participants that matters of European integration were not particularly held in any significant regard. Nevertheless, the participants, were put through the established questions of the researchers and presented their views and opinions on the aforementioned fields of membership, constitutional structure, policy issues, and domesticated issues. The findings reported medium to high saliency in the membership category, low saliency among constitutional structure and policy issues, and high saliency in the field of domesticated issues. Certain and intriguing key trends can be identified, the overall negative attitude towards the EU polity, with participants separating the benefits of EU membership from the institutions of the EU, while vehemently crediting it for all its perceived faults, the consensus against further enlargement, and the purely pragmatic view of the existence of the EU, in contrast with the ethical and moral viewpoints of the elite class. When it came to the constitutional structure and EU-centric policy, most of the participants, except the group from a more extensive educational background, revealed glaring gaps in knowledge in these fields, yet it did not slow down the debate regarding the EU and its perceived institutional flaws, such as its inability to clearly represent citizen interests (Hurrelmann et al. 2015 pp.50). The same level of politicization could not be said for the field of EU policy. In terms of domestic issues, European integration drew little attention from the participants, choosing to focus on state-level policy and politicization instead. As a final result, the researchers conclude their findings as the subject of EU integration not particularly claiming a position of exceptional significance, however, still displaying a non-ignorable level of saliency among the EU citizenries (Hurrelmann et al. 2015 pp.51-56).

Strengths and Weaknesses

The article demonstrates a consistent research question and objective throughout the research and chooses an appropriate and effective method of qualitative data collection. It offers a nuanced perspective of politicization in different fields among a demographic not yet thoroughly studied, and conducts the process of focus groups appropriately, with a diverse range of participants and an established methodology of relevant topics to discuss. On the other hand, the natural qualitative inability to generalize these findings, as well as the potential of conformity pressures on participants are ever present (Cyr. J, 2016 pp.243). Moreover, the lack of academic consensus on the definition of politicization will always leave room for discourse and interpretation, and the benchmark of behavioural reaction to topics acting as a form of scientific measurement inherently can be addressed subjectively and is susceptible to bias. Despite these limitations, the use of focus groups and its ability to provide productive results when researching complex topics through its social and comparative nature leads well with the topic at hand for this research, providing a multilateral

view on the politicization of EU integration among the public, a view that quantitative methods simply cannot replicate (Cyr. J, 2016 pp.252).

Conclusion

In conclusion, "The Politicization of European Integration: More Than an Elite Affair?" by Achim Hurrelmann, Anna Gora, and Andrea Wagner fills a significant gap in existing literature by focusing on the wider public through the innovative use of focus groups. The authors provide a well-defined research framework, examining politicization among the public through various realms. Justifying the use of focus groups as a qualitative method, the research captures diverse perspectives on EU integration. The strengths of the study lie in its consistent approach to its research question and effective use of focus groups, offering valuable insights into nuanced public attitudes. While acknowledging limitations, the article adeptly navigates these issues, emphasizing the importance of qualitative methods in uncovering patterns of politicization. The research not only advances academic understanding of politicization but furthers the reputation of focus groups as a valid form of data collection, and as a final product, holds relevance for decision-makers aiming to comprehend the dynamics of EU-related debates among the citizenries.

Bibliography

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