

# The Politicization of the European Central Bank: What Is It, and How to Study It?\*

PIER DOMENICO TORTOLA   
 University of Groningen, Groningen

## Abstract

The politicization of the European Central Bank (ECB) is a recurrent theme in debates on the EU after the crisis, yet it is one that still suffers from a considerable degree of vagueness. This is unfortunate as it hinders the development of useful discussions on the place and legitimacy of the ECB within Europe's institutional order. To tackle this problem, this article presents a systematic analysis of the concept of ECB politicization and an agenda for future research on this phenomenon. After reviewing existing uses of the term in the form of three dichotomies – politicization versus independence, impartiality, and convention – the article proposes an alternative, preference-based definition of politicization as a deviation from technocratic policy-making in the ECB. Building on this definition, the article then indicates three avenues for the empirical study of politicization centred, respectively, on elite interviews and surveys, the analysis of central bankers' networks and the study of ECB language.

**Keywords:** European Central Bank; politicization; technocracy; Euro crisis

## Introduction

The Euro crisis has spurred a process of transformation in the governance of the eurozone and the EU as a whole, which so far has included, among other things, the strengthening of common fiscal rules and surveillance, the creation of new crisis management institutions and tools, and greater integration in the banking and financial sector. While this process still continues, one beneficiary of it can already be identified: the European Central Bank (ECB). For one thing, over the past decade the ECB has considerably expanded its policy toolbox to tackle crisis-related problems, both in the financial sector (for example, introducing long term refinancing operations and various asset purchase programmes, and relaxing collateral requirements for loans to banks), and in the public sector, with the creation of such lending-of-last-resort instruments as the securities market programme (SMP) and outright monetary transactions (OMT), and the more recent implementation of quantitative easing. For another, the ECB has acquired a more prominent role in the eurozone's institutional architecture, not just in the area of banking supervision, but also in macroeconomic surveillance through its role in the Troika, later formalized in the European financial stability facility and the European stability mechanism.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For more extensive accounts of the ECB's measures and transformations following the Euro crisis see Bastasin (2015) and Micossi (2015).

More generally, the crisis years have seen the ECB rise to a position of leadership in tackling Europe's economic woes, which has been especially visible under the presidency of Mario Draghi. Often more reluctantly taken on than actively sought, this leadership role has resulted above all from the asymmetrical set up of the European Monetary Union, which lacks a fiscal counterpart – and related institutions – able to provide a credible bulwark against economic havoc, and the paucity of proactive initiatives on the part of other powerful actors in the Union, particularly Germany. Together, these factors have left the ECB as the one actor possessing the institutional ability and wherewithal to help the eurozone weather the worst parts of the crisis, ultimately preventing, in the eyes of many, the breakup of the single currency (Schoeller, 2018; Tortola and Pansardi, 2019; Verdun, 2017).

The actions of the ECB during the crisis have not remained uncontroversial. Accompanying the ECB's new role within the EU have been mounting claims about its politicization. For instance, as the ECB reacted to the impasse on Greece's third bailout in the summer of 2015 by blocking emergency liquidity assistance to the country's banks, economist Jeffrey Sachs (2015) commented that the decision, 'forced by the ECB's highly politicised Executive Board, will be studied – and scorned – by historians for years to come'. Echoing Sachs, Greece's finance minister Yannis Varoufakis (in Khan and Chan, 2015) noted that '[t]he attempt to ringfence Frankfurt from politics has produced a highly politicised central bank'. A couple of years earlier, and from a different standpoint, the German conservative daily *Die Welt* dubbed the ECB's introduction of the OMT as 'the ultimate politicization of a young central bank' (in Smith, 2012). Analyst David Marsh (in Jones, 2015) later expressed similar concerns about the introduction of quantitative easing, by which the ECB had 'crossed a fateful line into the world of full-scale politicisation'. The list could go on.

But what, exactly, does it mean for the ECB to have become politicized? What is it, more precisely, that makes an ECB decision, instrument or statement a political act?<sup>2</sup> Beneath the surface of claims like the ones above, the concept of politicization remains elusive. To be sure, some conceptual fuzziness is to be expected in this debate due to the breadth and contested nature of politics as a social sphere, and the multifaceted character of most ECB actions, which make (alleged) politicization at least partly dependent on what aspect of a certain measure or policy one is looking at. Even so, the conceptual situation remains unsatisfactory considering the importance of the phenomenon of politicization. This hinders the development of a fruitful debate not only analytically, as regards the place, functions and possible malfunctions of the ECB within the EU system (and the mechanisms governing them), but also normatively, because of the implications of politicization for the legitimacy of the ECB and its policies.

To address these problems, this article presents a systematic analysis of the existing debate on ECB politicization and proposes a strategy for a more robust definition and operationalization of the concept. The article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews existing uses of the term politicization by summarizing them in three dichotomies

<sup>2</sup>It should be stated from the outset that in focusing on politicization as the attribute of an *actor* and its actions, this article leaves out the alternative and equally widespread notion of politicization as an increase in the public salience and contentiousness of an *issue* (see Calhoun, 2002). While these two types of politicization are connected (see de Wilde 2011), they nonetheless remain conceptually distinct (for example, a non-political actor can operate within a highly politicized policy area) and should not be confused or conflated with each other.

– politicization versus independence, impartiality, and convention – and highlighting their logical and empirical limits. To overcome these limits, the third section proposes an alternative, preference-based definitional approach that posits politicization as a deviation from technocratic decision-making in the ECB. Based on this definition, the fourth section presents three avenues for future empirical research on politicization centred, respectively, on elite interviews and surveys, the analysis of central bankers' networks, and the study of ECB language. The fifth section concludes.

## I. What Is a Politicized ECB? Three Dichotomies and Their Limitations

Generally speaking, in political and academic debates on the ECB the term politicization tends to be associated with deviations from some 'normal' behaviour to which the Bank is expected to conform. In analysing this phenomenon, therefore, it is easier to proceed by opposition, starting from the type of normality that the ECB (allegedly) violates. Three distinct, yet partly overlapping, dichotomies emerge from the existing debate.<sup>3</sup>

### *Dichotomy no. 1: Politicization versus Independence*

The single main way in which politicization is discussed in the literature on central banks is with respect to the latter's formal links to governments. In this version a central bank is politicized when it is legally subordinated to a country's majoritarian institutions (usually the executive), whose will the bank executes, more or less directly.

When it comes to formal independence, the ECB is particularly above suspicion due to the high degree of autonomy ingrained in its legal architecture. De jure independence, however, does not eliminate the possibility of informal relationships of dependence, which can occur for a number of reasons that transcend the letter of the law. In the ECB case, de facto dependence is most likely to materialize with respect to the Bank's main political principals, namely the eurozone's member states – or at least the more powerful ones. Charles Wyplosz (2015) expresses this idea well:

On paper, the ECB enjoys full independence. Its Board members cannot be revoked and their long eight-year mandate cannot be renewed, so that they do not have to please member governments. Yet, they reluctantly violated the no-bailout clause to please member governments. Then, it took three years to decide on the Outright Monetary Transactions (OMT) Programme – which brought immediate relief – because some member governments opposed it. For the same reason, they started QE seven years after the Fed, probably contributing to the longest period ever of no growth in Europe.

Taken to the extreme, what Wyplosz describes is a dynamics of total ECB subordination to (some) member states. While it is possible in principle, this type of relationship seems unlikely in our case, if for no other reason than it is inconsistent with the several cases of monetary policy disagreements between the ECB leadership and the German government – arguably the most powerful among the Bank's principals – in which the latter has found itself on the losing side.

<sup>3</sup>While many of the illustrations included in the following overview relate to monetary policy – the area in which the ECB politicization debate has developed most visibly – the analysis applies to the whole range of ECB activities.

More probably, those who see ECB politicization as a deficit of independence have a more balanced and nuanced type of relationship in mind than the one just described, in which the Bank is exposed to political pressures on the part of member states, but at the same time retains a significant degree of freedom in deciding whether or not to grant 'favours' to this or that government as a response to such pressures. So defined, this conception of politicization overlaps to a great extent with the next dichotomy.

### *Dichotomy no. 2: Politicization versus Impartiality*

A second type of debate on ECB politicization takes the latter to mean a violation of the principle of impartiality, whereby the Bank's decisions should not generate winners and losers. The beneficiaries of this type of politicization can be of different kinds: for instance, Genovese *et al.* (2016), attribute a political character to the ECB actions, primarily quantitative easing, that have ameliorated the conditions of the most distressed segments of the eurozone population.<sup>4</sup>

Most often, however, the distributive effects of ECB policies are interpreted in interstate terms, that is, being seen to benefit certain countries or governments over others. This is, for instance, the case of the OMT, an instrument designed to buy (under conditionality) bonds issued by specific countries in order to ease pressures on their budgets and bond markets. As Lombardi and Moschella (2016, p. 863) put it:

Since the programme implied support for sovereign bonds in only a few countries, rather than comprehensive support across the euro area as a whole, it politicized those 'deep cultural differences' that exist within the euro area.

Unsurprisingly, quantitative easing, too, is often interpreted along these lines; namely, as a political decision made by the ECB to help weaker eurozone economies over those (usually northern) member states that can do without quantitative easing.

Of course, peripheral economies can also be on the losing side of ECB policies. As mentioned above, when the ECB suspended emergency liquidity assistance to Greece many saw this as a politicized move against Alexis Tsipras's government. Wren-Lewis (2015), for example, argues that

[L]imiting funding on 28th June was the Greek government's punishment for failing to agree to the Troika's terms and calling a referendum the day before. The ECB was not, and never has been, a neutral actor just following the rules of a good central bank.

Similarly, the Bank's famous summer 2011 letter to the Italian government, urging the latter to implement a number of structural reforms to ensure the sustainability of the country's finances, has time and again been depicted by Silvio Berlusconi and his supporters as a political manoeuvre that facilitated Mr Berlusconi's later removal from power in favour of the more EU-friendly Mario Monti (Benvenuti, 2017).

As intuitive and rhetorically effective as the notion of politicization as partiality is, from a conceptual standpoint it is problematic. Even assuming that the distributive consequences of the ECB's actions can always be clearly detected – which is a big if, especially as one ventures beyond the short term – the fact remains that, as Fernández-Albertos

<sup>4</sup>This approach is consistent with a recent economic study by Lenza and Slacalek (2018), which shows that low-income households have benefited disproportionately from the ECB's quantitative easing.

(2015) notes, virtually anything a central bank does has some distributive effects, even though some are more tangible than others. So, unless we are ready to argue that the ECB is always politicized, partiality does not seem, by itself, a good basis on which to ground the concept.

A more viable interpretation of politicization as partiality should then rely not only on the effects of the ECB's decisions but also, and above all, on the motives underpinning them. Put differently, the Bank's actions should not be seen as politicized whenever they generate winners and losers, but when they do so on the basis of a deliberate decision rather than as a by-product of economic measures. This more comprehensive view may well be what most of those adopting this conception of politicization have in mind. Yet the fact that central bankers' intentions are hardly ever brought to the fore and properly discussed remains a problem, as shall be seen more in detail later on.

### *Dichotomy no. 3: Politicization versus Convention*

A third version of ECB politicization associates the latter with deviations from conventional policy means and objectives. In a way, this view of politicization is the mirror image of the first: in the former case, the ECB's 'pathology' was its lack of independence vis-à-vis its political principals; in this one, it is the Bank's expansion of its independence to the point of shirking the mission assigned to it by member states and formulating its own policies in an uncontrolled fashion (Elgie, 2002).

The most obvious way in which the Bank's conventional boundaries can be defined is legally, in terms of the Bank's price stability mandate (Art. 127(1) TFEU) plus other Treaty rules delimiting its scope of action, most notably the 'no bailout' clause (Art. 125 TFEU). Commenting on the reception of the ECB's SMP in Germany, for instance, Högenauer and Howarth (2016, p. 12) argue that '[t]he diversion from the pursuit of low inflation thus, in itself, politicised ECB monetary policy for a large section of the German political class and public'.

In principle, seeing politicization as the violation of the ECB's mandate is plausible. If the Bank transcends the perimeter set by its political creators, then it must, by definition, be following some other ultimate goals which it has, more or less deliberately, set autonomously. The limits of this view, however, are empirical. Identifying politicization as violations of its mandate makes detecting it a matter of a legal interpretation of the mandate itself; and so far it is at least questionable whether any such violation has in fact happened. As Sester (2012) and Beukers (2013), among others, have argued, even controversial measures such as the OMT and its predecessor the SMP can be seen as fully within the ECB's legal boundaries. More authoritative confirmations of this position have come from the European Court of Justice, most notably through its approval of the OMT (Case C-62/14: Peter Gauweiler and Others v. Deutscher Bundestag) and, more recently, quantitative easing (Case C-493/17: Heinrich Weiss and Others).

There is a broader way in which politicization as unconventionality can be defined, namely with reference to some set of policy measures generally accepted as the ECB's standard repertoire. Discussing the OMT, Scicluna (2014 p. 568) writes that

[g]iven that there is no consensus about what ought to be done to resolve the crisis and billions of euros riding on the outcome, it cannot plausibly be argued that the ECB has

simply selected the ‘best’ policy option in an objective or technocratic manner. Right or wrong, it is a profoundly political decision.

Similarly to the case of politicization as partiality discussed above, this version of politicization is appealing *prima facie*, yet unconvincing on closer inspection. Once legal aspects are removed from the notion of policy convention there is no apparent reason why violations of the latter should, on their own, make the ECB more political. In fact, breaking with convention may well be seen as a better way for the Bank to fulfil its legal mission (see Drudi *et al.*, 2012). Moreover, if followed to its logical consequences, the notion of politicization as unconventionality leads to paradoxical results, for what is new policy today will, if it is sustained, eventually enter the baseline against which to measure tomorrow’s politicization.

Finally, and more tangibly, seeing the breaking of new policy ground as an inherently political act sits uncomfortably with the language of the ECB itself, which refers to many of its anti-crisis measures as ‘non-standard’, while routinely and categorically rejecting all claims of its politicization. All things considered it seems, once again, that while unconventionality may be, in some cases, a symptom of politicization, it cannot define the phenomenon isolated from some consideration of what the intentions behind a given policy are.

## II. A Preference-based Approach to Politicization

To summarize the foregoing discussion, the notion of politicization is currently associated with three characteristics of the ECB and its actions – namely departures from independence, impartiality, and policy convention – each of which provides some insight into the phenomenon, but cannot be a solid basis for a definition of politicization, for logical or empirical reasons. What is needed in order to exit this conceptual impasse is an alternative definitional strategy for ECB politicization, which can overcome the limits of existing uses of the term while at the same time providing some common ground among them, so as to be able to function within and improve on the existing debate. In this section I will argue that for such an alternative strategy we should shift our focus to the decision-making preferences of central bankers.

As in the previous cases, a preference-based approach to politicization is more easily developed by contrast; namely, by first asking ourselves what non-political policy-making looks like. The answer is technocracy. The latter is most commonly defined as rule by experts. What is implied but often overlooked in this definition is that experts rule by expertise, that is, by rationally applying their knowledge (acquired by study and/or practice) to a certain area, in order to find optimal solutions to policy problems. To understand why technocracy is a depoliticized mode of decision-making we should contrast it to the notion of politics as ‘the activity by which differing interests within a given unit of rule are conciliated’ (Crick, 1962, pp. 16–17). While political decisions entail the application of, and compromises among, competing views about society’s values and priorities, technocracy ignores, in principle, partisan positions and their balance of power, to base its decisions instead on the state of the art in the relevant field of knowledge.

While inherently distinct from it, technocracy has a fundamental connection with the realm of politics, because it can exist only in a space between full and no autonomy *vis-à-vis* political forces and the majoritarian institutions through which they operate.



On the one hand, technocrats need a nontrivial degree of autonomy from politics in order to have decision-making room for manoeuvre. On the other hand, however, in and of themselves knowledge and rationality can only guide policy-making within the confines of broader societal goals – a mandate – that must be set politically (see Tortola, forthcoming). To quote Sartori (1987, p. 423), ‘[a] government of experts is admissible in regard to means, not ends’.

It is exactly by moving away from this space, de jure or de facto, that technocracy becomes politicized. More precisely, politicization can come in two forms (or a combination thereof): if technocrats lose autonomy with respect to politics, or if they acquire full independence from it. In the former case, technocrats stop deciding according to their expertise to start doing the bidding of some dominant partisan actor (at the extreme becoming mere administrators of political decisions). In the latter, they transcend their political mandate to replace it, more or less explicitly, with policy goals set autonomously, ultimately turning themselves into partisan players who further their own views of the good society.

Formally, the ECB is well placed as a technocratic actor: it has a rather clear mandate defining its goals and range of action, and within that mandate it enjoys ample autonomy to make policy guided by (macro)economic reasoning undisturbed by partisan political pressures. As explained, however, these are necessary but not sufficient conditions for technocracy: within this legal framework, the ECB can still deviate from technocratic policy-making and become politicized in the two directions described above, that is, if its decisions are determined primarily by the desire to favour certain states or other socio-political actors (whether under pressure or by its own volition), and/or if it pursues objectives other than those it has been mandated to follow. In either case, ECB decision-making ceases to be driven by techno-scientific considerations and starts following preferences and motivations situated in the realm of partisan politics.

Defining ECB politicization in terms of policy-making preferences increases both the coherence and the quality of political as well as academic discussions on the topic. The concept proposed here can be plugged into all three sides of the existing debate and overcome the shortcomings of their corresponding conceptualizations, thus making the distinction between what is politicized and what is not both clearer and sounder. So, for example, a non-standard measure by the ECB should not be deemed politicized just because unconventional, but only if its motivations transcend the Bank’s mandate. (In fact, if it is so motivated, even a *prima facie* conventional policy is to be considered politicized under a preference-based approach). In a similar vein, policies with clearly distributive effects should not be judged to be politicized just by virtue of their outcome, but rather based on whether helping certain socio-political actors has superseded macroeconomic reasoning as the Bank’s guiding principle.

Adopting a preference-based approach to ECB politicization is, of course, not without its own issues. The concept’s empirical operationalization, in particular, presents two orders of challenges. The first relates to the complexity of the ECB and the Eurosystem more generally, as decision-making systems whose interconnected parts may all be, potentially, loci of politicized preferences. While this complicates the study of politicization it is by no means an unsurmountable problem. It rather calls for analytical flexibility on the part of the researcher, and the ability to make case by case decisions on whether politicization (or the lack thereof) is most appropriately investigated at the apex of the ECB (the executive board and governing council) or somewhere else in its decision-making chain.

The second challenge relates to the intangible nature of preferences, which sets quite a high bar for their empirical observation – more so since relevant actors might have a strategic incentive to conceal or misrepresent their true policy-making motivations. Although this type of problem may never be eradicated in its entirety, there exist a number of research strategies that can go a long way towards gauging the preferences of ECB policy-makers, so substantiating politicization in a meaningful way. The next section examines the most prominent among these strategies.

### III. Taking Central Bankers' Preferences Seriously: A Three-pronged Research Agenda

While research on the ECB policy-making has expanded in recent years, the study of bankers' preferences – let alone political ones – is still a minority endeavour within this literature. Within existing scholarship, however, three strands can be identified that have tackled, more or less explicitly, the question of ECB politicization, building on distinct methodological tools. Taken together, they can be seen as the embryo of a promising research programme on which to expand for the future.

#### *Gauging Preferences Directly*

The most straightforward way to assess the politicization of the ECB is to attack the problem directly through surveys and interviews of the Bank's personnel. In-depth elite interviews, in particular, can be very effective not only as a tool for appraising central bankers' preferences, but also as a source of oral policy-making history (Tansey, 2007). This is especially important in our case, given the ECB's tight policy on access to its internal documents.<sup>5</sup>

Probably the most extensive attempt to date to examine preferences within the ECB through (among other things) elite interviews is Kaltenthaler's (2006) study of the mechanisms and dynamics of ECB policy-making. Kaltenthaler discusses issues connected to politicization, especially in a section devoted to the Bank's relationships with its socio-political environment, in which he rules out, based also on conversations with top ECB officials, the presence of systematic deviations from technocratic decision-making principles.

In a more recent reconstruction of the interactions between the ECB and eurozone member states during the crisis, Henning (2015) presents a more nuanced view on politicization. In dealing with the Greek debt problem, for instance, ECB president Jean-Claude Trichet adamantly defended the Bank's independence in the face of French pressures to implement the SMP before the creation of a lending facility. On the other hand, as it sent its summer 2011 letter to Italy, the ECB leadership acted with full awareness that its actions could be regarded as an undue intrusion into the country's domestic matters.

Schoeller (2018) reaches similarly mixed conclusions in his account of the creation of the OMT. While the latter was generally viewed, inside the ECB, as instrumental for

<sup>5</sup>While the ECB has become generally more transparent in recent years (for instance by increasing the frequency of its hearings before the European Parliament), it continues to follow a 30-year rule for the archival release of its records. During that term, applications can be filed to access specific documents, subject to a number of exceptions set by the Bank. Contrast this, for instance, with the Fed's policy of publishing complete transcripts of its Federal Open Market Committee with a five-year lag.



restoring the Bank's ability to influence price stability, more fine-grained rationales provided by the interviewees – above all, over the OMT's strong conditionality to influence recipients' economic policies – were much more dubious as regards their consistency with the ECB mandate.

The literature just mentioned exemplifies both the strengths and weaknesses of elite interviews and surveys. On the one hand, these are very flexible tools that can be targeted at different parts of the ECB's hierarchy and tailored to study broad policy-making dynamics as well as more circumscribed events. On the other hand, surveys and interviews pose a problem of access to policy-makers and are time-consuming methods. Both these aspects limit the amount of material and the number of observations on which this type of empirical work can be based.

By far the most important issue with these methods, however, concerns the researcher's ability to obtain truthful and reliable information from them. This is particularly the case in research on politicization, a phenomenon usually regarded negatively by central bankers, and which the latter therefore have an incentive to downplay or hide altogether, whether in good or bad faith. Needless to say, this places particular emphasis on the researcher's skills in crafting and presenting questions.

### *The Role of Central Bankers' Networks*

A second way to look at central bankers' policy preferences is to infer them from the networks to which they belong, based on the assumption that such connections play a major role in shaping policy-makers' ideas and disposition through a mixture of socialization and incentives.

Used primarily to look at central bankers' macroeconomic ideas through their intellectual networks, this approach has recently been applied more directly to the question of ECB politicization. A prominent example is Adolph's (2013) study of the influence of past and expected professional connections on central bankers' monetary policy decisions. Adolph's argument, tested on 20 central banks and later applied to the ECB, is that central bankers can be divided in two groups based on their career trajectories: financial types and government types. Socialization patterns and material incentives produced by their respective networks lead the former to prefer hawkish monetary policies that benefit the financial sector, and the latter to please governments by choosing more expansionary measures.

Working from a different angle, Ennser-Jedenastik (2014) analyses politicization as a result of central bankers' connections with political parties. Examining 30 central banks (including members of the European System of Central Banks) from 1945 to 2012, he concludes, among other things, that the existence of links between a central bank governor and a governmental party increases the chances of the former's survival in office, as a consequence of his greater responsiveness to governmental policy wishes.

Studying ECB politicization through networks solves some of the problems presented by elite interviews and surveys, for the empirical material employed in this case – in the first place information on bankers' professional links – is more readily available, easily quantified and produced without the participation of the subjects studied. The nature and availability of network-based evidence also increases the analytical breadth of this approach, allowing for extensive cross-sectional or longitudinal studies of the sort just described.

On the other side, gauging preferences via networks obviously moves the operationalization of politicization some steps away from its main locus, which in turn may affect the validity of the evidence. The biggest shortcoming of the network approach, however, relates to the rigidity of the data used, which works well for studying patterns of policy preferences over extended stretches of time, but much less so – if at all – for analyses of politicization (and variations thereof) in shorter periods or single episodes, during which bankers' networks are unlikely to vary much.

### *Language as an Indicator of Preferences*

A final strategy to study ECB politicization relies on language as an indicator of this phenomenon. This approach is adjacent to the first – interpreting interviews is, in a way, a form of linguistic analysis – but distinct from it because of its more direct focus on text as the object of study and, above all, its use of corpora (speeches, press releases, official documents, media interviews, and so on) produced independently of the researcher.

Unlike economists, who have by now an established tradition of analysing central bank communication (especially with respect to its hawkish or dovish content) and its effects on financial markets, political scientists, and especially ECB scholars, have come to the study of central banks' language only quite recently, but with some interesting results. Examining the ECB president's speeches and press conferences in the peak Euro crisis years, for instance, Schmidt (2016) detected a shift, under Mario Draghi's presidency, from a discourse of credibility to one of stability. This was symptomatic of an expansive reinterpretation (bordering on violation) of the Bank's mandate to legitimize its transformation into a lender of last resort. Along similar lines, Tortola and Pansardi (2019) analysed the entire corpus of ECB presidential speeches to show an increase in charismatic rhetoric as a result of the crisis, which in turn suggests that the Bank performed a political leadership role within the EU beyond the boundaries of technocracy.

Looking more closely into the ECB's decision-making mechanisms, Bennani (2012, 2015) examined reported statements by eurozone central bank governors and the ECB president to identify their preferences and policy priorities, and aggregated them through a coalitional analysis of the Governing Council. Finally, Van Esch and De Jong (2017) used speeches given by the ECB president and four additional Governing Council members in 2009–11 to trace their respective cognitive maps vis-à-vis a number of crisis-related topics, including ECB independence. They found that national preference patterns were clearly visible within the Bank's top decision-making body, but they did not significantly affect President Trichet, who displayed an overall neutral and supranational stance.

Methodologically, studying politicization through language is located somewhere in between the two previous approaches. Data plentitude and analytical flexibility are two clear advantages of this research avenue, as there is no shortage of text of various kinds to be combined and analysed in ways that best fit the analyst's needs. Language can, for example, be used to investigate long-term preference trends as well as specific ECB decisions, and be processed through a variety of techniques, ranging from the interpretive study of discourse to automated and quantitative content analysis.

On the downside, while language is arguably a closer proxy for preferences than bankers' networks, it remains an indirect, and therefore potentially less accurate way to

assess politicization than interviews and surveys. In addition, because language is, among other things, the primary way in which the ECB presents itself publicly, in certain cases this approach may present the same truthfulness issues as interviews, and ultimately lead to a similar risk of underestimating the Bank's politicization.

## Conclusion

The politicization of the ECB is a central and recurrent topic in debates on the EU after the crisis, yet one that still suffers from a considerable degree of conceptual vagueness. This article has brought some order to the theme of ECB politicization by mapping and appraising existing uses of this term, proposing a better alternative based on central bankers' policy-making preferences, and finally indicating three strategies for the operationalization of politicization based on, respectively, elite interviews and surveys, the analysis of central bankers' networks and the study of ECB language. Using these methodological tools intelligently – that is, remaining fully aware of their possibilities and limits – can take us a long way towards approaching the topic of ECB politicization with the clarity it deserves.

While this study has focused primarily on the definition and detection of politicization, a few concluding remarks can be made about possible research avenues to be built on the preference-based approach proposed here. Three such avenues, in particular, seem both salient and underrepresented in the emerging research programme described above. The first is a close and critical analysis of the relationship between crisis and politicization. Further research should keep problematizing this connection not only, as already suggested here, by checking the veracity of ECB politicization where it has been assumed in recent years, but also, and conversely, by investigating the extent to which politicization should be seen as a phenomenon emerging predominantly in times of economic and institutional crisis. This question could lead to interesting research into the existence of politicized policy-making by the ECB before the Euro crisis, as well as its possible persistence after it, as eurozone economies gradually return to normal times.

Connected to these questions, the preference-based approach described in this article could also be taken as a starting point for more fine-grained inquiries into the nature of ECB politicization than that conducted here. Key questions are, for example, what particular set of societal and political goals may be factored in policy deliberations by central bankers; which constituencies and stakeholders may be *de facto* prioritized in ECB decision-making behind the veil of formal neutrality; and whether all these politicization dynamics, if detected, vary across components of the Eurosystem.

Finally, more attention should be devoted to the normative questions raised by the possible politicization of the ECB. One particularly salient aspect in this area concerns the legitimacy dilemmas that may arise at certain junctures between the ECB's duty to operate in a fully depoliticized and mandate-bound fashion and its pursuit of objectives that, while not strictly speaking within its remit, may nonetheless have high political importance, such as safeguarding the values and stability (and perhaps even existence) of the EU as a polity.

*Correspondence:* Pier Domenico Tortola, Faculty of Arts, University of Groningen, Oude Kijk in 't Jatstraat 26, 9712 EK Groningen, The Netherlands  
email: p.d.tortola@rug.nl

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