

Politicized policies? The cases of employment policies in Belgian and French televised public debates

Abstract

Employment policies are central to contemporary social models. According to liberal democratic principles, public debate around policies must be characterized by politicization, understood as a discursive process marked by contingency and controversy. Given the far-reaching transformations in employment policies, this study examines how they are (de)politicized in Belgian and French television news through a framing analysis of coverage from three points in time: 1995-96, 2005-06, and 2019. We then test differences between countries, time points, and speaker types using multinomial analysis. The results show that discourses are predominantly depoliticized, without significant country differences, but a decrease in the share of depoliticized frames over time. Moreover, trade unions and policy beneficiaries are more likely to produce politicized discourse as compared to other type of actors. These findings raise questions about the democratic quality of policymaking for employment and challenge taken-for-granted conceptions of liberal democratic theory.

Introduction

On 1 May 2023, a public holiday for Labor Day, Belgian Liberal Prime Minister Alexander De Croo spoke at a rally organized by his party:

The problem in our country is not that the strongest shoulders do not carry enough. Our real problem is the lack of shoulders and this lack of people contributing to society increases the pressure on the people who work. This is the real inequality in our country, the inequality between those who participate and those who do not want to work.

This prompted strong reactions from other parties in the government coalition, notably the Socialist Party, whose president Paul Magette replied that we shouldn't pit workers against the unemployed, but instead increase low wages by “making those who can afford to pay do so”. On the same day, in France, where Labor Day is also celebrated with a public holiday, there was a larger than usual mobilisation for May Day. Rather than celebrating the social rights in labor that May Day marks, the French were mobilizing to protest against the adoption and enactment of a highly contested pension reform.

These events illustrate how different views of welfare and employment policies coexist in public debate and among citizens (Eriksen and Molander 2019; Garritzmann, Neimanns, and Busemeyer 2023; Thurm, Wenzelburger, and Jensen 2024). The example above suggests a politicization of employment policy in public debates. But is it the case: are employment policies politicized in the public debate?

Politicization is understood here as a discursive process marked by contingency and controversy (Hay 2013; Wiesner et al. 2019). We define contingency as the acknowledgment that a political action can be undertaken to change the current (employment) situation and controversy as the acknowledgment that there are different ways to act and solve the (employment) problem. Therefore, for an issue to be politicized in public debate, it must be recognized that something can be done (contingency) and that alternative solutions coexist (controversy) and conversely for it to be depoliticized.

Reforms to social systems and employment policies are indeed much debated both in the public arena and in academic literature (Garritzmann, Neimanns, and Busemeyer 2023; Jensen and Wenzelburger 2021). However, while the (de)politicization of justifications for economic governance and social policies have been much studied (Burnham 2001; Eriksen and Molander 2019), less attention has been paid to the (de)politicization of discourses on employment policies, which intersects with these two fields. Despite this, it is widely acknowledged that alongside structural and institutional constraints (Hassel and Palier 2021a) the myths and narratives carried by discourses influence the legitimacy of welfare and employment policies (Greve 2020).

The (de)politicization of public policies is important because democratic policy-making takes place in the interaction between politicization and depoliticization (Schmidt-Gleim 2021; Wood and Flinders 2014). The possibility for everyone to participate in setting political priorities and to suggest (alternative) political solutions is one of the necessary conditions for a political system to be considered democratic within the framework of liberal democratic theory (Rudolph 2022). In this context, the article focuses on the second condition. More specifically, we examine whether employment policies are (de)politicized and whether their (de)politicization varies according to legislative developments (i.e. over time), according to the type of economic and media structures (i.e. the country) or depending on the type of actors who speak.

To study the politicization of employment policies empirically, we analyze discourses in public debates, where television news is used as a proxy for public debate on employment policy. On this basis, we assess the politicization of TV news through a framing analysis which combines qualitative and quantitative methods. More specifically, we adopt an abductive approach (Vila-Henninger et al. 2024) to manually and qualitatively code public debates. Following an approach used elsewhere (Pennetreau and Laloux 2021), we first identify the main frames mobilized in the news to assess their level of politicization, which were then processed quantitatively to identify emergent trends.

The (de)politicization of public policies is strongly influenced by the context (Wood 2016). We therefore take into account three key dimensions that are likely to influence the (de)politicization of employment policies. Firstly, the diachronic dimension allows us to take account of the changes in employment policies (individualization and contractualization). Three periods are analyzed - 1995-96, 2005-06 and 2019. Secondly, a comparison between France and French-speaking Belgium makes it possible to take account of the economic and media structures likely to influence employment policies' politicization. It also makes it possible to compare different contexts by eliminating the linguistic dimension, thus avoiding the possibility of discursive tonalities being explained by linguistic differences (Van Gorp 2007). Thirdly, to account for the position of the actors who express themselves, five groups of actors are distinguished: journalists, politicians,

experts, trade unions and the target groups and beneficiaries of employment policies. This makes it possible to observe whether an individual's position influences the (de)politicization of his or her discourse.

The results of the analysis reveal that public debates in French-speaking Belgium and France are largely similar. Discourses about employment policies are similarly depoliticized, with more than half of the speeches characterised by the absence of controversy, and only one-fifth emphasize the contingency of employment policy and acknowledge the controversy surrounding the various possible solutions. Although depoliticization tends to slightly decrease over time, it remains predominant. The analyzes indicate that economic and media structures do not influence politicization. Instead, it suggests that the evolution of employment policies and the degree of social conflict—that is, how trade unions, intermediary bodies, organized civil society, and citizens mobilise to influence the government—affect the politicization of employment policies. The results also show that the position of actors in the policy-making process and in the public debate influences, albeit moderately, the degree of politicization of their discourse.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The next section provides an account of our conception of politics as one that can be observed in discourses, which we use to define (de)politicization. We then present our data and methodology based on a mixed method approach that complements our notion of politics developed in section two. Section four elaborates on the analysis and discusses the results, before we conclude the article and consider the results and put them in perspective.

Politicization of policies: a matter of contingency and controversy

Liberal democratic theory postulates as a fundamental principle that democracy requires the assent of the governed (Rudolph 2022). In this respect, the way in which public policies are justified is at least as important for their legitimacy as their content itself (Lynggaard and Triantafillou 2023; Wood 2016). Thus, as Stone (2012) argues, the definition of the public problem absorbed by the policy makes it possible to promote and justify certain

solutions over others (Stone 2012). For instance, the more protectionist EU legislation failed to generate a conversion of UK employment policy (Copeland 2023). This can be partly explained by a public discourse which argued that EU employment policy undermines competitiveness within both the UK and the EU. This framing legitimized the less protectionist, more market-wage-driven British employment strategy, and facilitated the justification of measures based on the same rationale. Similarly, the way in which target groups are presented, helps to justify whether they should be taken care of and supported, or ignored and even punished (Schneider and Ingram 1993). In particular, the alleged (un)deservingness of beneficiaries is an important criterion in (de)legitimizing policies. In other words, discourses may serve to justify and legitimize public policies that are not supported by the majority of citizens or favour certain groups to the detriment of others.

(De)politicization also matters with regard to public deliberation and justification of political choices by enabling policy preferences to be expressed and solutions to be debated. Not all politicization or depoliticization is necessarily desirable or undesirable from a democratic point of view. The objectives of certain politicizing discourses may be considered undesirable or anti-democratic (Schmidt-Gleim 2021). Many populist discourses call for political empowerment and propose alternative policy solutions, but often with the aim of removing contingency by imposing political views that do not tolerate policy controversies. In other words, behind much of the rhetoric promoting the restoration of the general will and the (re)politicization of political choices lies the risk of establishing a "democracy without rights" to replace the "rights without democracy" of liberal systems (Mounk 2018). The (mediatised) politicization or depoliticization of policies can thus reveal the democratic (or lack of) quality of policymaking.

Politics as an activity and (de)politicization as an (un)democratic process

Yet, what (de)politicization is, or is not, is debated. Although it is rarely made explicit, the conception of politics on which (de)politicization research is based, influences the definition of it (Hay 2007; Wiesner et al. 2019; Wood 2016). This underlying conception of

politics also matters as it equally influences the normativity associated with (de)politicization.

We distinguish between two broad conceptions of politics. First, politics can be conceived as a specific domain; often narrowly defined as a political system, which corresponds to a set of political institutions and the people who work in them. From this point of view, politicization is an extension of the domain of politics: issues not initially covered by political institutions are taken in hand by these institutions and are regulated through policies. Secondly, politics can also be seen as an activity. In this sense, politics corresponds to a repertoire of actions that can be mobilized by companies, civil society actors or individual citizens that ask for new or alternative policies. From this point of view, politicization is defined as a process. Following a wide range of works, we adopt the second conception of politics as an activity and thus define (de)politicization as a process (Hay 2007; Wiesner et al. 2019; Wood and Flinders 2014).

This approach does, however, hold an important implication, namely that politicization as a process is primarily a discursive phenomenon (Hurrelmann and Wendler 2023; Wood and Flinders 2014). Conceiving politics as an activity implies that politicization can be best understood as the act of identifying something as political (Wiesner 2021b, 21). The polity institutionalizes the political; politics translates political struggles and compromises; and public policies implement these decisions and compromises. In this regard, politicization is a process of political input: "an action that constitutes something as political through an act of speaking, marking or naming" (Kauppi, Palonen, and Wiesner 2016, 81).

The discursive dimension of the (de)politicization process is a key one in terms of the democratic principles in the context of mediatised public debates. To put it briefly, the mediatization of politics refers to the fact that an increasingly large proportion of politics depends on and occur via the media (Esser and Strömbäck 2014). The actors involved in the policy-making process, and more broadly those intervening in the public debate, depend on the media for access to information (Koch-Baumgarten and Voltmer 2010). Most of the time, it is through the media that the actors involved, and the public, become aware of the visions of the world being defended, the political objectives being established and the

actions being taken to achieve them. Discourses conveyed in the public debate about employment policies are thus crucial as they provide for public justification and policy legitimation in the complex, mediatised societies of Western Europe. By making visible, and reporting on public policies, the media enable democracy to operate on a large scale (Michailidou and Trenz 2013).

(De)Politicization of public policies: a matter of contingency and controversy

This discursive dimension of politicization is widely recognized across a great deal of politicization studies of the arenas of public debate, such as parliaments (Laloux and Pennetreau 2019; Palonen 2019), the media (e.g. de Wilde 2023; Hurrelmann, Gora, and Wagner 2013; Statham and Trenz 2013) and new media and social networks (e.g. Haapala 2023; Laloux, Pennetreau, and Versailles 2022; Maia 2017). If politicization is a discursive process, then the criteria for identifying (de)politicization in discourse are contingency and controversy (Hay 2007; Wiesner 2021a). Politicization, in this sense, is the action of marking employment policies as contingent, which is to say, the recognition that something can be done about it. However, the recognition of the need for action is not of itself sufficient, for politicization to be effective there also needs to be alternative solutions. In other words, it must be possible to propose and deliberate on different policy options. By definition, this means that controversy can only occur when there is prior contingency. Using these criteria offers three main advantages.

First, contingency and controversy permit an analytical trajectory beyond what are often used to identify the degree of politicization - salience, visibility or agenda-setting (de Wilde 2013; Laloux, Pennetreau, and Versailles 2022). Focusing on saliency based on text mining techniques does not fully capture the way employment policies are publicly justified and legitimized. Similarly, such techniques struggle to capture the political orientation that discourses around employment policies are embedded in, simply because one may talk a lot, or a little, about a policy to (de)politicise it (Burnham 2001; Wood 2016).

Secondly, relying on contingency and controversy avoids the risk of confusing the competitive, or competing, dimensions of the discourses politicizing a policy with a more

substantial opposition (Hurrelmann and Wendler 2023; Lynggaard and Triantafillou 2023). Two arguments can compete for public recognition without opposing each other on the policy solution advocated. On the one hand, employers' federations may argue that renting and maintaining office space is expensive and jeopardizes the viability of business. On this basis, they can suggest that legislation on teleworking should be relaxed. On the other hand, environmental organizations or NGOs may argue that commuting to work generates pollution that jeopardizes the transition to sustainability. They might also suggest that legislation on teleworking should be relaxed. It is therefore possible to make different diagnoses based on different worldviews, or even ideologies, and yet propose the same solutions in terms of public action. Conversely, it is also possible to agree on the diagnosis but to propose different solutions.

Third, contingency and controversy used together enable the articulation of politicization and depoliticization (Hurrelmann and Wendler 2023; Wood 2016). Our conceptualization of politicization as a process, means that it is necessarily intertwined with depoliticization, which implies denying the existence of other solutions, or even further the possibility of taking action. Defining the latter in its different forms is an essential condition to study (de)politicization empirically as a process (Dupuy and Van Ingelgom 2019, 272). Like politicization, depoliticization is primarily a discursive strategy used by political leaders to justify the public policies they have implemented, and to protect themselves from the adverse (electoral) public opinion. This function of depoliticization is consensual (Burnham 2001; Copeland 2023; Dupuy and Van Ingelgom 2019; Lynggaard and Triantafillou 2023; Hurrelmann, Gora, and Wagner 2013; Wood and Flinders 2014). It even seems that the discursive dimension of the phenomenon is more systematically indicated when it comes to depoliticization than it does for politicization. Depoliticization, then, occurs in the absence of both contingency and controversy in discourses about employment policies. The Table 1 below summarizes the relationship between politicization, contingency and controversy.

Table 1 – Criteria to identify (de)politicization

	Contingency		Controversy	
	Denies the need/capacity for action	THUS	Impossible	Depoliticized
Discourse	Acknowledges the need/capacity for action	BUT	Refuses alternative solution	Depoliticized
		AND	Proposes alternative solution	Politicized

Methodology

Our dependent variable is the (de)politicization of employment policies in public debates. To assess the (de)politicization of employment policies, we relied on a frame analysis which is the most frequently used method to analyze media content (D'Angelo 2018). In practice, we first identified the main framings present in TV news, and then assessed their level of (de)politicization to enable quantitative analysis.

Data: TV news bulletin

The media is one of the most widely used materials for studying public debates (Cushion 2022), specifically those on public policy matters (Soroka and Wlezien 2019). Four reasons justify our use of television news: first, they lend themselves well to comparison (Wiesner 2022); secondly, they constitute a benchmark in terms of political information for the public (Chen 2023); thirdly, they remain the primary source of political information in both France and Belgium today (European Parliament 2023); and finally, they are one of the main channels through which the actors involved in the policy process justify thus (de)politicize employment policies (Soroka and Wlezien 2019). We therefore selected the main TV channel of the public broadcasters in each country; the news bulletins of French-speaking broadcaster *LaUne* in Belgium and those of *FR2* in France. More specifically, we selected the evening news program (*Le JT 19h30* on *LaUne* and *Le 20h* on *FR2*), which is the main news program of the day and attracts the largest audience for the two public channels (Arcom 2024; CSA 2024).

We chose public television channels because they offer more comprehensive, more nuanced and less negative information than commercial television channels (Cushion 2022; Horowitz et al. 2022). Analyzing public broadcasters thus maximizes the chances of capturing the diversity and nuance of discourses on employment policies. This choice means that populist or aggressive framings that would be used on commercial channels may not appear in the analysis. Nevertheless, it is better suited to the definition of politicization adopted here, which does not focus on the adversarial dimension of politics but on its deliberative dimension. Such a perspective presupposes that policies are discussed in a nuanced rather than polemical manner. Finally, whether in Belgium or France, public television stations have a duty of reserve and political neutrality to ensure that their coverage is not politically biased, thus avoiding the over-representation of certain points of view that we see on commercial channels (Cagé et al. 2022).

We considered all the evening news programs for the periods analyzed. In other words, our data is not merely a representative sample; rather, it constitutes the entirety of the evening news programs relevant to the periods under study, for both France and Belgium.. *LaUne's* news programs were accessed via the *Sonuma*, the company that manages the channel's archives. Similarly, FR2's news programs were accessed via the online platform *Inamediapro*, which manages access to archives for researchers. In both cases, four keywords were used to identify the relevant sequences: employment, work, unemployment, and unemployed. The four keywords were chosen to produce a broad selection that ensures as many relevant sequences as possible are included in the query results. Table 2 below shows the number of reports for French-speaking Belgium and France for each of the periods studied. In brackets is the number of framings identified, which are part of the coding operations.

Table 2 – Number of relevant TV sequences analyzed (and frames identified)

	1995-96	2005-2006	2019	Total
LaUne	105 (163)	72 (123)	86 (131)	263 (417)
FR2	99 (177)	110 (184)	104 (196)	313 (557)

Total	201 (340)	182 (307)	190 (327)	576 (974)
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Coding: abductive framing analysis

Once the sequences had been collected, we took three steps to establish the degree of politicization of the discourses on employment policies.

First, the collected TV sequences were refined to include those that dealt specifically with employment policies and not with employment as a broader issue. Four criteria were identified as relevant (Dupuy, Teuber, and Van Ingelgom 2022). An abductive approach was used to select the relevant criteria to identify policies (Vila-Henninger et al. 2024), and relevant categories were established based on the literature and then revised according to the results of the preliminary analyzes¹. For a TV sequence to be considered as speaking of employment policy, it had to include at least one of the following: 1) a specific public employment policy measure or instrument; 2) the target groups or beneficiaries of the policy; 3) the logic of the public policy; 4) the experience of the policy (e.g. if an unemployed person talked about control mechanisms).

Secondly, to build a matrix of the frames, we performed a framing analysis of discourses that referred to employment policies. Framing analysis allowed us to look at the way in which those who question or, on the contrary, defend the status quo are able to forge a common understanding of a problem, articulate an alternative approach and encourage others to join them (Kitzinger 2007, 136). It therefore makes it possible to study the extent to which discourses on employment policies are marked by contingency and controversy. A further advantage of this method is that it can be applied in the same way to different types of actors (Baumgartner and Mahoney 2008). It can therefore be used to study the policy discourses of different actors in public debate, particularly in the media, which is one of the areas studied most through the prism of the method (Cairney 2023; Kitzinger 2007; Van Gorp 2010).

¹ Several iterations between the literature and the preliminary analyzes were necessary to arrive at the codebook.

To be more precise, the relevant discourses were transcribed to constitute a ‘matrix of frames’, that is a coding grid that includes the relevant dimensions of a frame (Van Gorp 2007). In the case of public policies these relevant dimensions are the causal story (cause and consequence of the problem that the policy tackles) and target groups and beneficiaries of the policy (Schneider and Ingram 1993; Stone 2012). The cells in the matrix are therefore coded according to what each discourse conveys about these dimensions, which enables the gradual identification of the frame conveyed by the discourse. The coder does not identify the frame immediately, rather it is discovered as a function of the elements identified for each relevant dimension. This method makes coding as objective as possible and limits the researcher’s influence on the identification of the frames (Van Gorp 2007; Wiesner 2022).

Thirdly, the analysis of the causal stories conveyed by the different frames enables us to build a (de)politicization index displayed in Table 3. An actor’s speech is considered contingent when it stresses the need to adopt a new employment policy or new provisions. A discourse is considered controversial when it points out that new solutions or alternatives to existing ones are possible and desirable. For a discourse to be politicized, it must be characterized by both contingency and controversy. In this case, it is assigned a score of 2. When it is characterized solely by contingency, it is considered as uncontroversial contingency (controversy is impossible without contingency) and assigned a 1 score. Finally, when a discourse is neither contingent nor controversial, it is considered depoliticized and assigned a 0 score.

Table 3. (De)Politicization index

Discourse	Contingency	Controversy	Score
Depoliticized discourse	0 (Absent)	0 (Absent)	0
Uncontroversial contingent discourse	1 (Present)	0 (Absent)	1
Politicized discourse	1 (Present)	1 (Present)	2

Multinomial logistic regression was selected to test for differences in the politicization of public debates on employment policies between countries (France and Belgium), over time, and between the different type of actors identified in the TV sequences (activists and

analysts; journalists; politicians; policy targets; trade unionists). Multinomial regression works by estimating a separate set of coefficients for each category relative to a reference category. This allows for a clearer understanding of how the predictor variables influence the probability of each possible category as compared to the reference category. Multinomial regression estimates how the predictor variables influence the likelihood of choosing each possible outcome compared to a reference category. It is preferred over a series of logistic regressions when analyzing categorical outcomes with more than two categories, as it simultaneously estimates parameters for all comparisons relative to the reference category. This ensures consistent and efficient results. The method improves both interpretability and statistical power by providing smaller standard errors and enabling a comprehensive significance test of the model (Agresti 2013). This enables us to examine the difference between the three categories of politicization, without necessarily considering them as a continuum.

Although our dependent variable is ordered, we chose to use multinomial regression over an ordinal regression to gain a more fine-grained understanding of our independent variables' (IVs) effect on the different levels of (de)politicization, better accounting for the distinctiveness of each level. Politicization, as we define it, refers to the opportunity for individuals to engage in debate, advocate for political action, and propose alternative solutions (Hay, 2007). It emerges only when discourses are both contingent and controversial (Hay, 2007; Wiesner, 2021). Therefore, it is crucial to distinguish between discourses that either acknowledge or propose alternative solutions and those that call for political action while rejecting any alternative perspective. There is not only a difference in degree but also in nature. The latter align with post-politics (Buller et al., 2019) or anti-politics (Fawcett et al., 2017). An ordinal regression could have blurred this distinction by calculating an overall difference in politicization between two categories of an independent

variable, even in case it was driven by a change in CNC frames without a substantial change in politicized ones².

Factors influencing the (de)politicization

Given that politicization is highly context-dependent (Wiesner 2021b), we analyze the politicization of employment policies using a comparative model that considers three key factors: national differences (between French-speaking Belgium and France), diachronic variation, and actor categories. We anticipate that politicization will vary across these dimensions for the following reasons.

The first contextual factor is twofold, encompassing economic structures and media systems. We selected two cases—French-speaking Belgium and France—to contrast employment policy discourses across these dimensions. Social reforms are shaped by a state's growth regime. As this model remains under government control, it makes it easier for government to implement social reforms through adjustments to economic policy (Hassel and Palier 2021a). Belgium, characterized by an export-led growth regime, differs from France's consumption-driven model. These contrasting economic structures lead to different employment policy strategies. Belgium focuses on maintaining industrial competitiveness and its policies are geared toward optimizing labor costs and productivity. France prioritizes policies that stimulate internal consumption and services and its policies focus on maintaining domestic consumption and social stability (although it changed in recent years). These economic divergences are likely to influence media coverage of employment policies and, consequently, the degree of politicization.

In terms of media systems³, France and Belgium also differ significantly (Hallin and Mancini 2004; 2017). France is a polarized pluralist system, which tends to emphasize conflict and

² Yet as a robustness check, we also ran an ordinal regression (see annex), in which the same variables remained significant, supporting the findings from the multinomial regression.

³ Critics of Hallin and Mancini's typology argue that it is geographically limited and fails to fully account for the complexities of media systems and the role of economic factors (Castro Herrero et al. 2017). However,

opinion in news coverage. Belgium is a democratic corporatist system, balances facts and opinions, leading to more neutral reporting (Esser and Umbricht 2014; Umbricht and Esser 2016). Note that in Belgium It follows that they are likely to generate different degrees of politicization, with the polarized model bringing the conflict over employment policies more to the fore, while the corporatist model delivering a more "neutral" reading of the facts.

The second contextual factor pertains to the evolution of employment policies over time, which has led to varying degrees of social conflict. Our diachronic comparison spans three key periods—1995-96, 2005-06, and 2019. These three points in time make it possible to chart the evolution of employment policies over time, which have led to an overall decrease in employment-related social rights. Using an inclusive definition, employment policies (Erhel 2020, 7) are here understood as measures aimed at regulating the behavior of employers and workers, the relationship between them, and labor taxation. This definition encompasses work-related social rights, thereby allowing for the inclusion of debates that resonate broadly within society and the media, such as those on the financing of pensions systems. From the 1990s onward, European employment policies shifted due to budgetary constraints, resulting in "activation" policies that made social rights conditional on individuals' behavior (Nordlund and Greve 2019). These reforms, increasingly marked by individualization and conditionality, changed the rationale from the right to the duty to work (Dermine and Dumont 2014)..It is important to note that these policy changes triggered much more contestation in France than in France. Therefore, the articulation between the first and second contextual factors allow us to compare how similar policy evolutions were politicized differently depending on the degree of social conflict.

The third contextual factor relates to the categories of actors who discuss employment policies in the media. The media has been criticized for reflecting elite discourses

given that our analysis focuses on public broadcasters, economic factors play a less significant role compared to commercial media. Furthermore, recent research confirms that the French media system is indeed marked by a high degree of conflict and political proximity (Cagé et al. 2022). Moreover, recent typologies, which account for digital developments, continue to support the validity of the democratic corporatist and polarised pluralist models (Humprecht et al. 2022). These typologies remain applicable despite the evolving media landscape.

(Mayerhöffer 2019; Mayerhöffer and Pfetsch 2018). However, actors involved in mediatized policy debates should not be treated as a homogenous group. Politicians, employers' representatives, trade unions, analysts, and journalists each play distinct roles and are likely to hold different views, thereby politicizing employment policies in varying ways. Journalists, in particular, may shape the discussion through their informative role. To account for these differences, we categorized actors appearing in media coverage into five groups: analysts, politicians, trade unions, journalists, and policy target groups or beneficiaries.

Results: Contingency without controversy

The qualitative framing analysis reveals that employment policies are framed in four different ways in Belgian and French public debates. They are framed in terms of the *labor market*, in terms of *social rights*, in terms of *individual factors*, and in terms of *conflicts and strategies* (see Table 4). These framings are observed in each period studied and in both countries. Employment policy framings are thus characterized by their permanence throughout time and their dissemination across countries.

Table 4. (De)Politicization of employment policies

Frame variants	Contingency	Controversy	(De)politicization score
LABOR MARKET FRAMES			
Consequences on employment	0	0	0
Cost of labor	1	0	1
Human capital	1	0	1
Public spendings and debts	0	0	0
SOCIAL RIGHTS FRAMES			
Consolidation	0	0	0
Undermining	1	1	2
INDIVIDUAL FACTOR FRAMES			
Abuses of the system	1	0	1
Individual profiles	1	1	2
Reforming behaviors	1	0	1
CONFLICTS AND STRATEGIES FRAME			

Conflicts and strategies	0	0	0
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The *labor market*, *social rights* and *individual factors* frames can be broken down into several variants, which emphasize different elements, albeit based on a common rationale. In the case of the framing by the *labor market*, the underlying rationale is economic. Based on this rationale, the declination by the *consequence on employment* focuses on the impact of the general economic conditions on 'job creation'. Similarly, the *public spending and debt declination* emphasizes the specific question of public debts and spending in degrading employment opportunities. The *cost of labor* declination criticizes employers' taxes and contributions for making it too expensive for employers to hire or employ workers. Finally, the *human capital* declination of the *labor market* frame considers workers' 'employability' as a capital they should increase through skill acquisition and development.

In the case of framing by *social rights*, the underlying rationale is legal. The *consolidation* declination of the frame emphasizes the increase of existing rights or the creation of new rights for workers through employment policies, while the *undermining* declination highlights the limitation or suppression of workers' social rights.

The third frame by the *individual factors* considers employment as an individual responsibility, and its declination by the *abuses of the system* underscores the need for the control and sanctioning of workers whose behaviors are considered deviant. The *reforming behaviors* declination emphasizes that employment policies should prioritize influencing workers' behaviors (predominantly through 'activation'). These two declinations underscore the individual responsibility of workers, while the *individual profiles* declination highlights the socio-economic conditions that affect individuals and explain their employment status (among other elements).

As far as the fourth frame is concerned, the rationale behind the *conflicts and strategies* frame is political with politics considered as a strategic game between interest-driven actors.

Table 4 lists the different frames identified with their politicization score (for a more detailed discussion of the framings see Pennetreau 2024). In descriptive terms, Table 4 shows that a small half of the frame's declinations identified are completely depoliticized and do not recognize the political contingency in terms of employment nor the controversy. Another small half of the variations are contingent and non-controversial. It emphasizes contingency, i.e. the need to adopt new policies, new provisions or modify existing ones, but does not recognize the existence of alternative employment solutions. Only two of the ten declinations both emphasize the need for action and recognize the existence of alternative solutions. However, to assess the (de)politicization of employment policies in the debate the question that arises is: how are these discourses mobilized in public debates? Are there variations according to the evolution of employment policies, according to the economic and media structures or according to the type of actors who express themselves?

Depoliticized public debates about employment policies

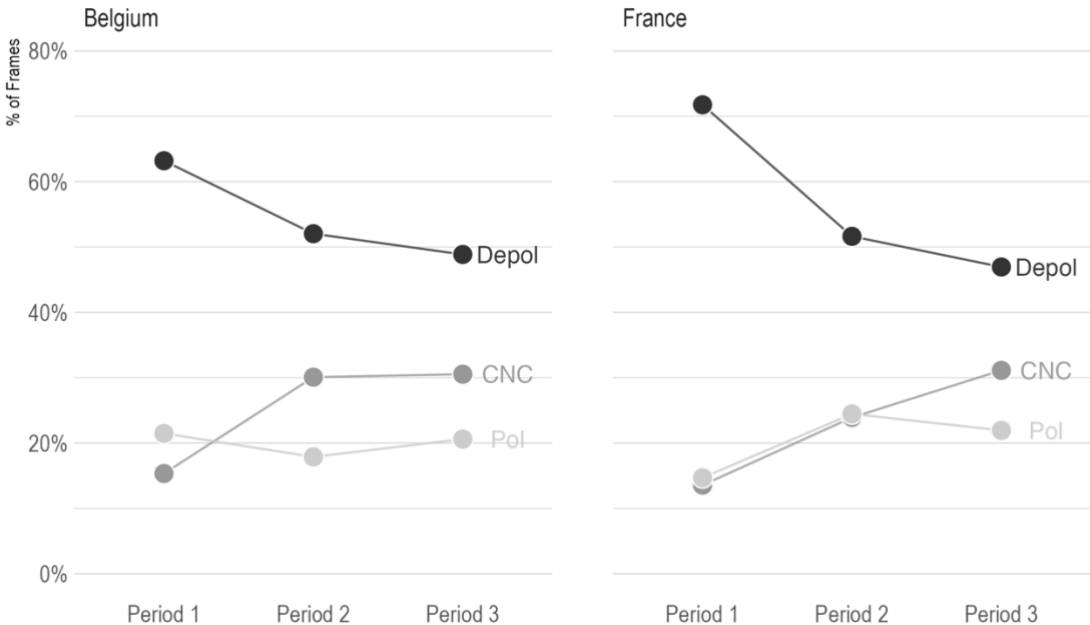
Figure 1 below shows the (de)politicization of speeches between countries and period. It distinguishes between Belgian and French trends for each period (left-hand column: 1995-96; middle column 2005-06; right-hand column 2019). While the two countries implemented different strategies to adapt their employment policies in response to globalization and European integration (Hassel and Palier 2021b), they display similar depoliticization patterns regarding the way employment policies are discussed on the news. However, there is a clear difference in terms of politicized frames, which increase in France between periods 1 and 2 whereas they decrease slightly in French-speaking Belgium. For both countries, the proportion of uncontroversial contingent discourses is lower in the first period than in the next two. However, while this proportion remained stable in Belgium between periods 2 and 3, it continued to increase in France.

Excerpt 1 – Unionist (FR2 – 26/12/05)

If there aren't many of them, there's no point in issuing a decree. That there should be controls as there have been up to now is perfectly logical. Nobody is justifying fraud. But by doing so, we run the risk of stigmatizing a population group, which helps us to forget that the main problem of unemployment is the lack of job creation.

This may again be linked to the trend towards reducing employment rights (Avlijaš, Hassel, and Palier 2021) which can also be seen in other countries (Copeland 2023; Lynggaard and Triantafillou 2023). This would mean that the observed increase in the politicization of employment policy framings results from reactions provoked by restrictions on employment rights, rather than from a desire to promote other visions and policy solutions. This suggests that if cuts generate more media attention (Jensen and Wenzelburger 2021), they also generate politicized discourses, which emphasizes the contingency of politics and the need for other types of employment policies. This type of politicized rhetoric is characteristic of trade union discourse, which emphasizes the need for alternative approaches (Excerpt 1).

Figure 1 – Distribution of politicization score across countries and periods



Excerpt 2 – Journalist (*LaUne* – 07/05/19)

How many jobs have been created in the private sector by the Michel government thanks to the tax shift and the index jump [...] According to the Michel government, more than 157,000 jobs have been created in the private sector; according to the FEB, the employers, 140,000; according to researchers at the KUL, 75,000. And today, UCLouvain tells us that only 27,500 jobs can be attributed to the Michel government. The other jobs created are due to the economic situation, growth and the effects of the previous government. [...] The

Swede⁴ could only claim 20% of the jobs created during this legislature. [...] But with 3 weeks to go before the elections, it is difficult for a government to attribute the jobs created to others.

The results by categories of actor, displayed in Figure 2 (below) also highlight the tendency to depoliticize employment policies, with all groups tending to depoliticize employment policies. With the exception of the trade unions, the proportions of speeches characterized by an absence of contingency and controversy (score 0), or those characterized by uncontroversial contingency (score 1) are always higher. Only unionists have a higher proportion of speeches where the need for action on employment and proposing solutions are stressed (score 2; see Excerpt 1). In contrast, journalists and politicians have the highest proportions of depoliticized speeches (score 0). In the case of journalists, this tendency can be partly attributed to journalistic routines and the aim of presenting neutral information (Firmstone 2024). Such practices may result in detailed yet disembodied and depoliticized analyzes (Excerpt 2). As far as politicians are concerned, this can be explained by the need to provide justifications for actions taken, and to claim that a problem has been resolved in order to avoid reputational or electoral consequences (Jensen and Wenzelburger 2021; Thurm, Wenzelburger, and Jensen 2024). The analyst group shows similar patterns. The group of targets and beneficiaries of employment policies tend to talk about employment policies in a more diverse manner, although their speeches are also predominantly it is also depoliticized, since barely a quarter of them are politicized.

Figure 2 – Distribution of politicization score across categories of actors

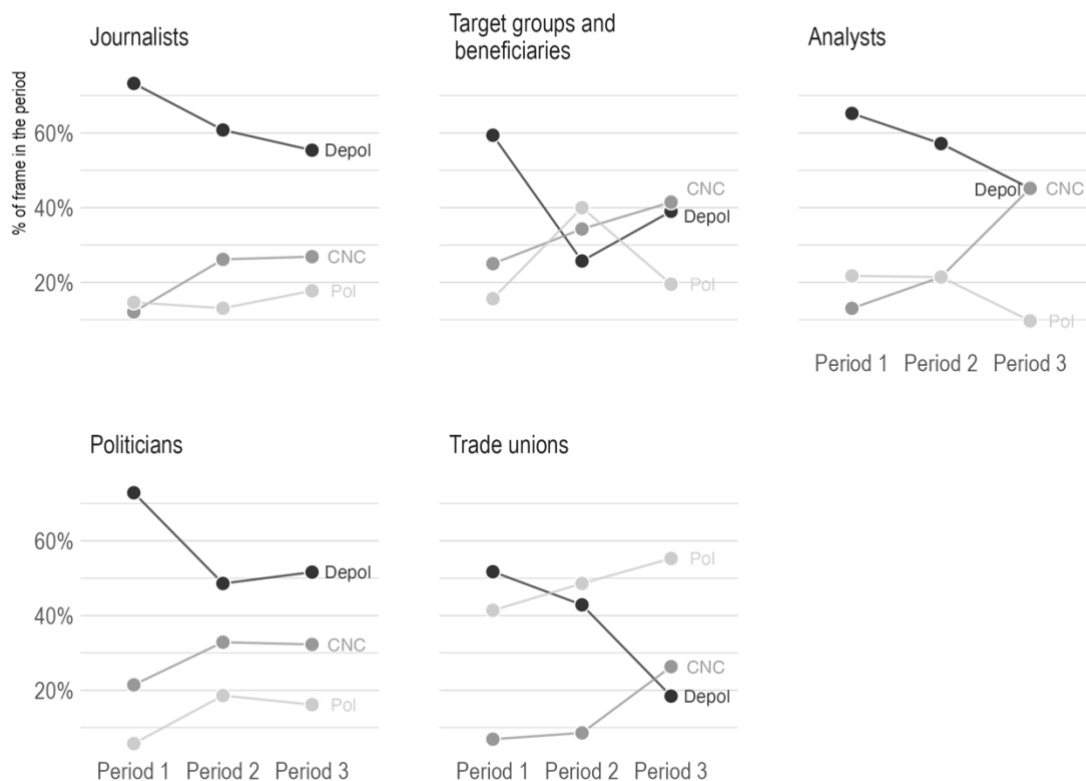


Table 5 displays the result of the multinomial regression. As can be seen, there is no significant difference in discursive (de)politicization of employment policies between the two countries. One explanation might be that the objective of the policies to be implemented matters more in their justifications, than the design of the policy itself. Employment policies are depoliticized to same extent in the French and French-speaking Belgian public debates. If France and Belgium implement different employment policy mechanisms, they both aim to translate EU objectives and incorporate ‘best practices’ from multilateral cooperative bodies such as the OECD (Greve 2019; 2022a). In this sense, understanding why the degree of (de)politicization is similar is easier to unpick, even when the policies are not. The similarities between France and Belgium may also be explained by similar journalistic routines (see below), cultural proximity, as well as the necessity to justify reforms aimed at meeting the same objectives.

Table 5 – Multinomial regressions model

	0 relative to 2		1 relative to 2	
	Odds Ratio	Estimates	Odds Ratio	Estimates
France (Ref: Belgique)	1.03 (0.18)	0.03 (0.18)	0.86 (0.20)	-0.15 (0.20)
Period (Ref: Period 1)				
Period 2	0.54*** (0.22)	-0.61*** (0.22)	1.32 (0.26)	0.28 (0.26)
Period 3	0.52*** (0.22)	-0.65*** (0.22)	1.68** (0.26)	0.52** (0.26)
Actors (Ref: Journalists)				
Beneficiaries and Targets	0.39*** (0.28)	-0.94*** (0.28)	0.97 (0.30)	-0.03 (0.30)
Activists and analysts	0.80 (0.37)	-0.22 (0.37)	1.26 (0.41)	0.23 (0.41)
Politicians	1.04 (0.27)	0.04 (0.27)	1.67' (0.30)	0.51' (0.30)
Trade unions	0.19*** (0.23)	-1.68*** (0.23)	0.20*** (0.31)	-1.60*** (0.31)
Constant	6.20*** (0.21)	1.82*** (0.21)	1.12 (0.25)	0.12 (0.25)
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,841.45		1,841.45	
N	974		974	

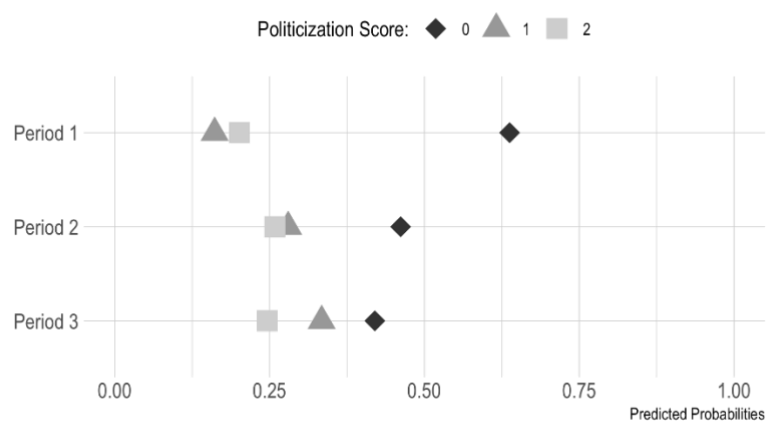
Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.. Standard Errors in parentheses.

As shown in Table 5, (de)politicization varies significantly across the three periods. The model indicates that the odds of encountering depoliticized frames (as opposed to politicized ones) is significantly lower in periods 2 and 3 compared to period 1. The odds ratios reveal that, relative to period 1, the odds of falling into category 1 (depoliticized) rather than category 2 (politicized) decreases by 46% in period 2 and 48% in period 3. The

similarity of the odds ratios for periods 2 and 3 suggests no strong differences between these two periods. Regarding the comparison between CNC and politicized frames, there is no significant difference between periods 1 and 2. In contrast, the odds of finding CNC frames rather than politicized ones increase by 68% in period 3 compared to period 1. This suggests that the increase in CNC frames between periods 2 and 3 is greater than that of politicized ones, which likely stagnates or decrease.

Figure 3 displays the predicted marginal probabilities for each category in each period. It confirms that there is a significantly higher level of depoliticized frames during the first period (1995-96) compared to the second (2005-06) and third (2019) periods. In other words, the proportion of politicized and uncontroversial contingent discourses is significantly higher in the two most recent periods than in the earliest one. At first glance, one possible counter-intuitive explanation lies in the strong social mobilizations that took place in France during winter 1995-96. The Juppé plan, named after the French Prime Minister at the time, sought to reform the social security system and prepare certain sectors, such as the railways, for liberalization. The plan provoked a social crisis that led the French government to back down and abandon or postpone some of the planned measures. This period in France is marked by the highest degree of social conflict among those analyzed here. Although it was arguably less contentious in Belgium, this first period also corresponds to the most contentious one in Belgium with similar reforms underway (relevant in our case are the reforms of the status of railway workers, teachers and civil servants). This means that the period with the highest level of depoliticization is the most conflictual.

Figure 3 – Estimated Proportions of frames' (de)politicization over time



Excerpt 3 – Politician (FR2 – 07/05/19)

The second half of 1995 was a period of consolidation. We had to do things that were difficult, unpopular but had to be done. [...] What have we been doing for several months now? First of all, we've been trying to reduce social security contributions, which has worked with the employment initiative contract. [...]

This social conflict may have led to numerous uses of the *depoliticized* discourses to describe the political stakes of this crisis. Instead of discussing what should be done in terms of employment policies, people intervening in the news reports mainly discussed the social and political dynamics at work or emphasized that no other solution is feasible, from an economic perspective (Excerpt 3). In this context, the contingency of employment policies and the controversies over the solutions to be implemented took a back seat. This possibly explains the significant difference we found. Similar reforms did take place in Belgium at the same time, that also generated conflict that contributed to the observed difference, even though they did not give rise to the same levels of mobilization as witnessed in France.

The figure 3 also supports an increasing difference across periods between the use of uncontroversial contingent and politicized speeches. While the proportion of uncontroversial contingent discourses increases over all periods, this is not the case for politicized frames, the proportion of which even decrease slightly between the second and third periods. It explains why the odds of finding a politicized speech compared to an uncontroversial contingent discourse decreases significantly between periods 1 and 3, despite an absolute increase in both cases.

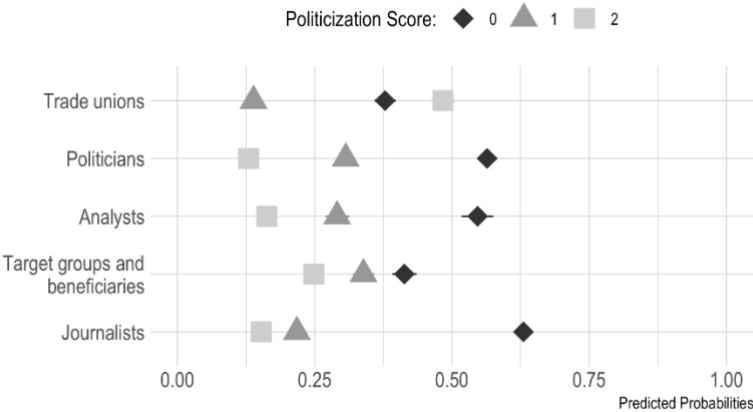
From the point of view of analyzing political dynamics, this result suggests that current political events may help to explain the (de)politicization of employment policies. Employment policies are not only justified and discussed from the point of view of their design, or objectives, but also according to the needs of the political balance of power at the time of the debates, and the influence that the discourse is assumed to have. During periods of strong social conflict, speakers in the news reports tended to avoid highlighting political contingency and the diversity of possible options. If the politicization of the discourses varies depending on the type of actors who speak and the intended audience (Hurrelmann and Wendler 2023; Lynggaard and Triantafillou 2023), it also depends on the political context. When employment is contentious, discourses about employment policies tend to be more depoliticized.

Finally, turning to the variation according to the category of actors who spoke in the news reports, the results show that the position of the actors in the policy-making process and the public debate do influence the degree of politicization in their discourse, but this effect is only significant for the “trade union” and “target group and beneficiaries” groups. For the trade union, the significant odds ratios of 0.19 and 0.20 indicate that, in the discourse of these actors, the odds of encountering depoliticized and CNC frames, compared to politicized frames, are significantly lower than in the discourse of journalists, with odds reduced by 81% and 80%, respectively. On the other hand, although target group and beneficiaries tend to use more politicized frames than depoliticized frames (odds ratio of 0.39, which means that the chances of meeting politicized frames are 61% lower than depoliticized ones), there is no significant difference between politicized and CNC frames for those actors.

Figure 4 shows the predicted probabilities for each actor’s speech to be (de)politicized. Journalists, whose mission is to report on the process as accurately as possible, tend to formulate significantly more depoliticized discourses. This can be attributed to their aim to meet professional ethics standards of neutrality and objectivity (Firmstone 2024). However,

one could argue that this comes at the expense of their more strictly political role, which would also involve highlighting possible alternatives.

Figure 4 – Estimated Proportions of frames’ (de)politicization by categories of actors



The same tendency was found for analysts. Their professional position and skills tend to incline them to focus on the causes and consequences of employment policy measures, whilst saying little about their political dimension (Pennetreau 2024). This prompts them to depoliticize employment policies, even when their discourse reveals some criticism of the policies implemented (Excerpt 4). Politicians also tend to depoliticize employment policies using the *labor market* frame, but as mentioned earlier, they do so because of political dynamics, to ease tensions or justify their actions and claim credit.

Excerpt 4 – Analyst (FR2 – 14/02/06)

Unemployment insurance reforms that have reduced the length of time people are entitled to benefit mean that some unemployed people are no longer entitled to benefit and are now on RMI. We'd rather have fewer people on benefit and a few more on RMI, which is more or less the policy we're implementing.

It is also noteworthy that journalists tended to produce fewer uncontroversial contingent discourses than politicians and analysts and have the largest predicted proportion of depoliticized speeches. This means that discussions of alternative solutions are rare in the discourse of the three groups, but activists and politicians are more inclined to recognize the contingency of politics than journalists. Hence, both analysts and politicians tend to produce more depoliticized frames in general, but more uncontroversial contingent

discourses than journalists. The former, who could also be labeled as experts, produce discourses that tend to dissociate the analysis of employment dynamics from the political dimension. Hence, they do not discuss potential actions that could be taken regarding employment policies. The latter arguably seek to legitimize their actions: they justify the policies that have been adopted and assert that further action is no longer necessary. This willingness to legitimize the policies they implement mechanically leads them to use depoliticized or uncontroversial contingent discourses about employment policies. Similarly, their discourse aims to present the solutions adopted or envisaged as the best possible, favoring uncontroversial contingent discourses.

The other two categories of actors tend to politicize employment policies to a greater extent. First, trade unionists frame employment policies in a significantly more politicized way than journalists or politicians. Figure 4 shows that this difference is substantive. In other words, the group whose position in the policy-process is to defend workers' interests is the one who politicized employment policies the most. Secondly, target groups and beneficiaries also tend to produce a larger share of politicized frames as compared to depoliticized frames, yet to a lesser extent than syndicate. Moreover, as contrast to trade union, they are not significantly more likely to produce politicized discourses than uncontroversial contingent ones. In other words, they are more prone than journalists, politicians or analysts to engage in discussions regarding alternative solutions. But they do not significantly m These results indicate that being a beneficiary or target of employment policies also influences the way one talks about them. In other words, their experience of the policy suggests that they play a role in the way they perceive it (Ares 2022; Dupuy, Teuber, and Van Ingelgom 2022).

Overall, the results indicate that employment policies are largely depoliticized in news reports in both Belgium and France. This result is even more surprising given that the periods chosen for analysis correspond to periods during which more acute polemics were evident, particularly in France (social and markets reforms of the 1990s; vote on the Services Directive in 2006; social movements in 2019). The degree to which public debates in Belgium and France were depoliticized underlines the difficulty of formulating alternative

solutions. This is the case even for those not directly involved in the political process and therefore are not professionally accountable for these positions. The finding that the discourses of target groups, and beneficiaries that are only slightly more politicized, illustrates this particularly well. This is also the case when those who speak do so to defend workers, as illustrated by unionists' speeches. This puts into perspective the depoliticization of the discourse of the other categories of actor, where it is difficult to formulate alternative solutions. At the same time, the difference also indicates that the discourses of journalists, analysts, and politicians could be more politicized, since people who have no political role (targets and beneficiaries) hold more politicized discourses and are more able or willing to suggest alternative solutions.

Discussion and conclusion

Contrary to the controversy mentioned in the introduction, our analysis reveals that the televised public debates on employment policies in both Belgium and France are predominantly depoliticized. The vast majority of discourses about employment policies are characterized by the absence of debate about alternative solutions to those implemented or suggested by the government, resulting in a lack of controversy. Similarly, most of these discourses are marked by an evident lack of contingency, as there is no recognition of either the necessity or possibility of doing more than what is currently being done.

While there is no headline difference between the two countries, the analysis reveals finer-grained variances over time, and with the category of actors who spoke in news reports. With regard to the diachronic dimension, the findings reveal that employment policies reflected greater depoliticization during the first period (1995-96). One possible explanation lies in the highest degree of social protest in both Belgium and France during this period relative to the second and third periods. In this instance, the actors speaking in public debates arguably sought to depoliticize employment policies to appease protests, in line with what has been observed for other policies (Perkiö 2020). While this implies a larger share of politicized discourses during the following periods (2005-06 and 2019), only the proportion of uncontroversial contingent discourses monotonically increases across the

period. The proportion of politicized discourses slightly decreases between the second and the third period.

The results also highlight that the degree of (de)politicization varies according to the category of actor who speaks. Trade unionists, as well as target groups and beneficiaries, politicize employment policies to a larger extent than politicians, journalists and analysts, who tend to depoliticize them. We suggest that this is explained by the respective institutional roles played by actors in the different categories. For example, in their role as defenders and mobilizers of workers, trade unionists stress the need for action and alternative employment solutions, whilst politicians are attentive to justifying their actions and emphasizing either that the problem has been tackled properly, or that there is no alternative. Similarly, journalists stick to their core role and report on what is happening, while analysts play a similar role by limiting most of their discourses to the analysis of possible or actual causes and consequences of employment policies.

From the point of view of the principles of liberal democratic theory, these results are rather negative. Employment is at the heart of our social models, and employment policies have a strong influence on people's careers and life paths. Liberal democratic principles imply that everyone should be able to discuss alternative political solutions in the debates that define such rules that influence their living conditions (Habermas 1996). While television news is one venue within a broader deliberative system (Mansbridge et al. 2012), it arguably plays a crucial role in this regard, remaining not only a key source of information but also an important channel for justifying policy positions. However, public debates as they occur in television news in Belgium and France do not meet these criteria when it comes to employment policies. Political contingency is only occasionally acknowledged or emphasized, and when it is, it is rarely accompanied by controversy. Debates about possible solutions were found to be even rarer than recognition of the necessity for, or possibility of, action. Yet, for political contingency to be real everyone must be able to participate in and contribute to debate on the various possible solutions, meaning that any solutions must be discussed. In practice, this is rarely the case in our television news sample.

Although we are examining only one venue within the deliberative system, and it is possible that politicization occurs in other venues (such as social media), our findings—especially given the continued importance of television—raise important questions about how the role and dynamics of public debate are understood within liberal democratic theory. Can we reasonably expect politicians, who must defend and justify their political actions, to use public debate on employment policies as a platform for genuine deliberation? Likewise, can journalists or analysts be expected to present arguments that could potentially harm their reputations or careers? These considerations challenge whether certain principles of liberal democratic theory should be reevaluated in light of the realities of public debate dynamics (Trenz 2023). In particular, the reality that expressing oneself publicly can generate risks that many actors want to avoid.

In the long term, various avenues can be explored to further our results. Regarding the politicization of employment policies, more nuanced media systems or typologies with refined categories could be explored to determine if other institutional contexts yield different outcomes. This approach could also be applied to growth regimes, where variations in institutional frameworks might lead to divergent policy implications and thus different dynamics of politicization. Similarly, other public policies could be analyzed in the same manner. More broadly, in terms of the dynamics of framing in public debates, our study is limited to a single venue—television news. It would therefore be beneficial to examine other forms of media and venues for deliberation within the system (such as the press and social networks) in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the politicization of employment policies and to see if storytelling routines vary (Firmstone 2024). This approach has the potential to assess how the technical aspects of debates influence the democratic dynamics of politicization. The debate could be expanded to focus on broader issues rather than specific public policies. All these research avenues would contribute to understanding how the politicization of public policy and framing dynamics can shape conceptions of liberal democratic principles.

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