

# The Changing Discourses of EU Enlargement: A Longitudinal Analysis of National Parliamentary Debates

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## Abstract

Domestic support for EU enlargement across existing member states is understood to have shifted significantly since 2004. But, how? Here, we explore how enlargement has been framed discursively in the national parliaments of eight member states. Our dataset comprises over 18,000 statements from 1989 to 2019. We link our exploration to alternative explanations for change: IR-based shifts in how applicant states are perceived and, from comparative politics, the ‘politicisation’ of EU membership in domestic party systems. We analyse changes in salience, sentiment and thematic foci. Our results confirm shifts in the perceptions of individual applicant states over time and an increased concern with issues of ‘identity’ in relation to enlargement. We find that whilst salience has declined, sentiment has turned negative and explore the distinctive discourses of ‘challenger parties’ in this regard.

**Keywords:** European Union; enlargement; discourse; norms; interests; party competition

## Introduction

The Ukrainian crisis has reignited debates about the purposes of European Union (EU) enlargement and the criteria for entry. It has also evidenced differences in approach amongst EU member states. Yet, setting these debates in historical context is somewhat difficult: we know relatively little about how political discourses on enlargement across EU member states have evolved over time. Here, we investigate the trends and how they have been constituted. This can better inform current debates.

Our exploration of the trends goes further to consider explanations for the changes identified. Changes in attitude may be prompted by IR-based shifts in how the applicant states are perceived and/or by the politicisation of EU membership in domestic party politics. Either may reflect an assumed enlargement fatigue or resistance within member states, but their derivation and timing across their domestic politics remain largely unexplored. The ‘politicisation’ thesis (De Wilde and Zurn 2012; Hooghe and Marks 2009) asserts that EU policies have become more prominent and the source of competition in the domestic (party) politics of member states (Kriesi 2007) with ‘challenger parties’ adopting a distinctive stance (De Vries and Hobolt 2020). Indeed, inter-party competition on EU enlargement may reflect a new cleavage on ‘identity politics’ (Kriesi 2007). Yet, seemingly, whilst the salience of enlargement has fallen since 2004, political opposition to it has risen. If so, what has been going on?

This paper assesses different explanations. We examine how far sentiment – and the content of discourses – is structured by the member state perceptions of the different applicant states over time and how far by the dynamics of domestic party competition. Such explanations may be inter-related. To distinguish the discursive content, we assess their

key thematic foci. This can inform our understanding of how discourse has differed according to the applicant state in question and how far the concerns differ by party.

Much of the literature on EU enlargement has been time-bound and case-specific. This provides a depth of understanding but is partial in its coverage. It lacks a general, longer-term perspective on change and its causes. A recent study (Bélanger and Wunsch 2022) is a rare exception in charting how the enlargement issue has entered party politics. Their focus is limited, however, to the European Parliament – showing primarily an increasing cohesion amongst populist radical right parties.

Here, our concern is with enlargement as an issue in the domestic politics of EU member states, across successive ‘rounds’ from the 1990s to the recent past. We analyse textual data of over 18,000 statements on enlargement by Members of Parliament (MPs) from 1989 to 2019 in the national parliaments of eight member states: Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom, whilst each was an EU member. The case selection is limited by data availability, but it enables us to assess changes by time, applicant cases and party grouping. The member states included are diverse: they are located in both the northern and the southern parts of Europe; include larger and smaller as well as older/newer member states; comprise Eurozone and non-Eurozone countries; some border candidate countries, whilst others do not. The inclusion of the Czech Republic acknowledges the geopolitical relevance of central Europe: it is part of our data from its entry in 2004 onwards. To be clear: our concern is not EU decision-making on enlargement. Nor do we examine the discourses of the applicant states themselves. Our focus is with enlargement as an issue in the domestic politics of the EU and what explains its shifts.

Our contribution begins with the exploratory: to distinguish the key trends over time. The results confirm the contrast between declining salience – the levels have halved – and a clear increase in negative sentiment since 2004. They underscore the sense of fatigue and resistance in existing member states. Secondly, we go further to show how perceptions have shifted for individual applicant states over time: in notable cases, the same states are viewed more negatively and attract different concerns. Thirdly, in line with this, we find that enlargement has been placed, discursively, within the broader cleavage on EU integration by being imbued with a greater concern over ‘identity’ issues. This is, then, a discursive space in which significant shifts in both sentiment and the issues raised occur – reflective of an increased politicisation of EU integration – even whilst salience declines. We find, fourthly, that the contrast correlates with party type – challenger parties have promoted a distinctive enlargement discourse – serving to shift the content of debates, as mainstream parties move their attention away. This contrast of strategies is consistent with that found on other EU issues (e.g. Aylott, 2002; Rovyny 2012; Rauh et al. 2020) and as challenger parties struggle to create a ‘wedge issue’ (Hobolt and de Vries 2015).

The paper is structured as follows: Section I considers the dominant discourses of successive enlargement rounds and the increasing domestic opposition in EU member states; Section II sets the conceptual frame and the hypotheses for the analysis; Section III outlines the methodology and data; Section IV examines the empirical results; and the conclusion elaborates the implications and conclusions. Appendix S1 offers supplementary statistical analysis.

## I. The EU Enlargement Process

Each EU enlargement round has had a distinctive political discourse, seemingly often heavily determined by systemic changes and their effects. This is especially true of the post-Cold War, post-Maastricht era, when the EU adopted specific guidelines on membership, as highlighted by the Copenhagen criteria.

The first enlargement of this kind in 1995 brought in Austria, Finland and Sweden. This was an easy accession of 'small states' with developed liberal democracies and market-based economies with long participation in the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) and the European Economic Area. The discourse here was one of 'like-minded states' with highly compatible politico-economic systems, which would be readily accommodated in both the value and institutional/administrative structures of the EU.

The second post-Maastricht enlargement of 2004 was much more complex with far-reaching consequences. 'Big Bang' enlargement, centred on the post-Communist states in Central and Eastern Europe (CEEC), was certainly systemic in origin: the end of the Cold War. The political discourse framing this round of enlargement was that of 'transformative power' Europe: the EU's ability to engage with accession countries in a deep-seated reform programme, transforming them into modern liberal democracies, grounded in the rule of law with a market-based economy and, more importantly, into member states able to accept the *acquis communautaire* and function in the EU's regulatory framework (Grabbe 2006). This narrative neatly dovetailed with the depiction of the EU as an attractive model of behaviour, standard-setting and expectations – later labelled 'Normative Power Europe' (Manners 2002). The political discourse was based on a positive sentiment – the EU and its member states had the vision and the tools to ease the 'return to Europe' of the CEECs and mould them into functioning EU members. The end result would be the completion of Europe in geographical and well as ideational terms, with a liberal peace guaranteeing European security.

Later, a secondary discourse emerged parallel to that of 'transformation', as the 2004 enlargement gave rise to questions of 'enlargement fatigue'. Here at stake was the functioning of the EU itself post-enlargement. In its most practical form, this discourse was about the EU's 'absorption capacity', its ability to institutionally, procedurally and materially digest new member states without disrupting and diluting the integration process (Emerson et al. 2006). In turn, this led to the 'widening versus deepening' debate: did members we want 'more Europe' in the geographic sense or the integration sense? There was no doubt about the salience of the debates on enlargement, but what appeared to change in the aftermath of the 2004 enlargement was the nature of sentiment about this process.

The impact of the debates on the 2004 enlargement linger as reference points. Börzel and van Hullen (2011) argued that transformative power Europe is dead: attraction is on the wane, emulation is no longer a sustainable argument, the erosion of EU power in its neighbourhood is a reality. The evidence is in the EU's inability to transform prospective members in the Western Balkans (20 years on from the delineation of their 'European perspective' in the Thessaloniki Summit of 2003) and Turkey (over 20 years since it became a candidate country).

Now the dominant discourse appears to be one of 'enlargement resistance' (Economides 2020): the salience of enlargement on the policy agenda is diminished;

sentiment is negative. The EU and its member states resist enlargement in the face both of internal fragmentation and the questioning of the ‘Europeanness’ of candidate countries: issues of identity take precedence over material and functional concerns. Opposition to Turkey’s entry has grown – Pim Fortuyn’s anti-Muslim stance in the Netherlands symbolised the increased controversy. ‘Uneuropean behaviour’ in the form of illiberal democracy and state capture in Serbia and elsewhere in the Western Balkans have entered enlargement debates.

## II. Conceptual Frame

The ‘politicisation’ thesis argues that, as European integration has grown in scope and depth, issues associated with it have figured more prominently in the domestic politics of EU member states. Previously, integration had been largely a non-issue for the public: opinion was superficial; integration had low salience; and the issues seemed *sui generis* and ‘therefore unrelated to the basic conflicts that structured domestic political competition’ (Hooghe and Marks 2009: 7–8). By the late 1990s, none of these conditions held: a ‘permissive consensus’ had been replaced by a ‘constraining dissensus’. Moreover, there was a developing cleavage around ‘identity’ across European party systems (Kriesi 2007).

Yet, as noted above, within the same period, the salience of enlargement on the decision-making agenda of EU institutions and governments waned after the 2004 ‘Big Bang’. Politicians talked of it less. However, those that did talk of it – often eurosceptic parties – were more likely to oppose it. What was happening in this changing equation between salience and sentiment? Our starting point, in the empirical analysis, will be to clarify these two trends over time.

One explanation for these trends is that the focus of enlargement changed: the countries with applications outstanding were different. Rather than the former EFTA states of 1995 or the post-Communist states of central Europe of 2004, the unresolved applications of Turkey and, later, the Western Balkans raised greater – and different – concerns. Thus, we test how far sentiment varies by country and by time. Our first hypotheses are:

*H1a*: The sentiment attached to enlargement in member states varies according to the applicant state(s) concerned.

*H1b*: In the aggregate, the sentiment attached to enlargement in member states has declined over time.

If the variation is primarily by time, this suggests that a general enlargement fatigue or resistance has set in. If the variation is by country, then further investigation is also warranted into the themes raised in the relevant discourses to distinguish the concerns.

Indeed, an additional explanation, following the politicisation thesis, is that these trends reflect an increased concern with ‘identity’ as per Kriesi (2007), negatively impacting on how applicant countries are viewed. Thus, our second hypothesis is:

*H2*: The political discourse on enlargement in existing EU member states shows an increasing focus on issues of cultural identity.

This will indicate how far an increase in negative sentiment is associated with rising concerns about identity.

Further, distinctions between party type may be instructive. De Vries and Hobolt (2020) argue that political change results from ‘the strategies that parties employ to succeed in the political market’, a competition that distinguishes ‘mainstream parties seeking to protect their dominance’ and challenger parties ‘with innovative strategies to break this dominance’. Shifts in enlargement discourse may thus reflect such contrasts, with challenger parties distinguishing their appeal. We add the hypothesis:

*H2a*: The dynamics of party competition in member states have seen ‘challenger’ parties adopt a more negative discourse on EU enlargement.

To distinguish discourse content for H2 and H2a, we examine the extent to which the discourses were concerned with any of four thematic foci. Some years ago, Diez (1999) argued the importance of ‘discourse analysis’ to an understanding of the European integration process. It has also been applied to EU foreign policy (Carta and Morin 2016). Our approach is confined by referring to ‘discourse’ we mean the oral statements made by MPs in their respective parliaments, and our analysis is quantitative to discern trends and contrasts.

We eschew a simple, stark distinction between ‘norms’ and ‘interests’ in political statements (Rosamond 2016). Norms may hide strategic power interests. But the statements point to different priorities. Thus, a prime emphasis on matters of democracy when considering a candidate country, for example, legitimises certain types of action different from that following a stress on economics.

The first thematic focus is concerned with the economy. In becoming an EU member, applicant states join the single European market and, potentially, the single European currency. Entry pre-supposes the readiness of the applicant for the market competition that will result. The entry of new members may be consistent with the liberal norms or interests of existing member states in gaining better access to markets and/or supporting market transitions in the applicant states: either way, the focus indicates the significance of economic concerns.

A second focus is ‘realist’-inspired and concerns the *security* issues at stake. Enlargement intrudes on the geopolitical interests of existing member states, individually or collectively, with respect to their exercise of power and influence, their security and the stability in their neighbourhood. How far applicants raise concerns over security will vary, with the potential to affect attitudes towards their applications for membership.

Post-2004, a discourse has emerged on the ‘quality of government’ (Rothstein 2011), and these have entered both pre- and post-accession debates within the EU, amidst concerns of ‘illiberal’ turns. Here we test how far the discourse on different rounds of enlargement has been concerned with matters of ‘*governance*’, our third thematic focus. The focus is rights-based, concerned with the applicant(s) being democratic/undemocratic; upholding or abusing the rule of law and human rights; and their levels of corruption and transparency.

Our final thematic focus is ‘identity’, drawing on Kriesi (2007) and Hooghe and Marks (2009). This appears particularly relevant to Turkey’s application. Scherpereel (2010) examined public survey data to assess the perception of Turkey’s cultural ‘otherness’ finding evidence of such. The relevance of public perceptions of cultural differences with Turkey across 27 EU member states was confirmed by Gerhards (2011). Dostál et al. (2011) posited that attitudes towards her accession may be determined by a ‘thick’ conception of the EU/Europe based on a cultural identity. The articulation of an oppositional and essentialist ‘cultural identity’ by representatives of the main centre-right party bloc (EPP-ED) in the European Parliament was found by Aydın-Düzgüt (2015). Further, Kaya (2020) explored the impact of right-wing populism and Islamophobia on EU–Turkey relations.

Thus, we test what variation there has been in the proportionate attention given to each of the four thematic foci over time: economics, security, governance and identity. We test this variation both by applicant country and by party type. Our foci extend beyond the ‘Copenhagen criteria’ set by the EU in 1993 by incorporating the theme of ‘identity’ to reflect later concerns taken up in relevant literatures.

### III. Methodology and Data

#### *Identifying References to EU Enlargement*

To test our hypotheses, we identify references to EU enlargement in the parliamentary debates of eight member states and analyse these using a combination of automated and hand-coded content analysis (for an overview, see Grimmer and Stewart 2013). Parliamentary debates provide a fruitful venue for studying domestic political contestation on the EU (Rauh 2015). These EU enlargement references are our unit of analysis and are passages of three sentences in representatives’ speeches that make explicit reference to the enlargement process. To identify these enlargement references, we proceed as follows: First, we draw on an original dataset developed by the authors of over one million references to European integration made in parliamentary debates (see Appendix S1 for details on the construction of the dataset and Table A1 for an overview of the corpora). We then use this dataset to identify references to EU enlargement and include parliaments from Austria, Germany, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Netherlands, Greece, Spain and the Czech Republic. The EU references are translated into English using machine translation (see de Vries et al. 2018 for validation of the use of machine translation for comparative study of political communication). As already indicated, these eight countries reflect different types of EU member state, and their parliaments include both mainstream and challenger parties. Parties are classified according to party family in the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) with Conservative, Christian Democratic, Socialist and Liberal parties classified as mainstream and Green, Radical Left (RL) and Radical Right (RR) parties classified as challengers (Jolly et al. 2022).

To identify enlargement references, we then use unsupervised latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) topic models (see Blei et al. 2003), which simultaneously estimate the categories in a document, and then classify documents into these categories. As the tokens (words) used to refer to enlargement may differ from country to country, we run a separate LDA topic model for each parliament and use measures of topic coherence to identify the

optimal number of topics for each parliament. These range from 35 topics (for the Czech Republic) to 55 topics (for Germany). In each of the national parliaments under investigation, a clear enlargement topic emerges from the LDA models and is used to classify EU references as enlargement references. Altogether, this method identifies 18,247 enlargement references between 1989 and 2019. Table A2 outlines the predictive tokens for the enlargement topic, as well as the number of enlargement references, in each parliament.

Finally, we identify which enlargement round each individual enlargement reference refers to using a dictionary approach. We capture the country names and nationalities of

Table 1: Exemplary EU Enlargement References.

Country	Speaker	Date	Party	Enlargement Reference	Enlargement Round
Germany	Angela Merkel	2011/06	CDU	Therefore, <b>Serbia</b> 's path to the EU will only lead through normalisation of its relationship with <b>Kosovo</b> . The EU and the federal government formulated expectations in the form of concrete steps at an early stage. I very much regret that <b>Serbia</b> has not yet adequately met these expectations and that the requirements for being awarded candidate status have not yet been met	Balkan
UK	John Marshall	1997/03	Con	Would any Greek Government survive if they did not react similarly to the applications by <b>Poland</b> , <b>Hungary</b> and the <b>Czech</b> lands? As one who wishes the European Union to expand to <b>Cyprus</b> and those democracies, I say it is wrong to suggest that anyone should have a right of veto over whether the legitimate Government of <b>Cyprus</b> and the people of <b>Cyprus</b> join the European Union. To say that, in the absence of a settlement, there will be no accession of <b>Cyprus</b> to the European Union provides an inducement to those in the north not to settle	Big Bang
Greece	Thanos Plevris	2008/03	LAOS	So I call on you to freeze all negotiations tomorrow morning. Ask the European Union for a freeze. It is not possible for the occupation to continue, for the churches to have become mosques, cafes, stables and hotels, such as the palace of Constantine Paleologos and the Orthodox Church of Hagia Sophia to function as a bazaar or whatever else this supposed <b>Turkish</b> culture has!	Turkish
Netherlands	Geert Wilders	2004/09	VVD	My first theme is <b>Turkey</b> . <b>Turkey</b> may never, never, ever become a member of the European Union. <b>Turkey</b> is not a European country, but an Asian and also Islamic country	Turkish

each candidate country and consider that an EU reference refers to this enlargement round if it mentions either the candidate country or the candidate country's nationality. For instance, an enlargement reference that makes mention of 'Turkey', 'Turkish' or 'Turks' would be classified as referring to the Turkish enlargement. Note that these categories are not mutually exclusive: an enlargement could refer to several enlargement rounds at once, for example, if it included mentions of both 'Poland' (Eastern Enlargement candidate country) and 'Croatia' (Balkan enlargement candidate country). Table 1 provides exemplary EU enlargement references, as well as which enlargement round each reference has been classified as. Table 2 presents descriptive statistics of the sample and a breakdown by party and country.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics.

<i>EU Enlargement References in Parliaments</i>			
<i>Parliament</i>	<i>Observations</i>	<i>Unique Parties</i>	<i>Unique Speakers</i>
AT Nationalrat	1480	BZÖ (78), FPÖ (441), Grüne (167) ind. (21), LIF (67), NEOS (23), O VP (373) PILZ (3), SPÖ (302), STRONACH (5)	296 unique speakers
CZ Poslanecka snemovna	385	ANO (2), CMUS (1), CSSD (110), KDU-ČSL (28), KSČM (52), Nezářazeň (2), ODS (100), SPR-RSC (10), TOP09-S (8) US (8), US-DEU (3), VV (1)	234 unique speakers
DE Bundestag	2473	AfD (7), CDU/CSU (906), FDP (296) GRUENE (327), PDS/LINKE (166), SPD (720)	358 unique speakers
ES Congreso	630	GC-CiU (87), GCC (26), GCs (3), GER (3) GER-ERC (15), GIU (41), GMX (28), GPP (230) GPSOE (143), EAJ-PNV (19), GV-PNV (33)	119 unique speakers
GRC Hellenic Parliament	1857	KKE (207), LAOS (45), ND (530), PASOK (511), OP (8), POLAN (9), SYRIZA (186), ANEL (12)	592 unique speakers
IRL Dail	4397	ANEL (45), DIMAR (12), KINAL (12) DL (2), FF (2907), FG (531) GP (50), Ind (40), PD (66), SF (42) SFWP (21), SP (4), LP (507), WP (226)	213 unique speakers
NLD Tweede Kamer	1623	50PLUS (19), CDA (332), CU (106), D66 (127) DENK (2), FvD (3), GL (72) GPV (17), LPF (19), ind. (81), PvdA (233), PvdD (4), PVV (145) RPF (5), SGP (46), SP (109), VVD (237)	245 unique speakers
UK House of Commons	5402	Change (1), Con (2505), DUP (19) GPEW (3), Ind. (21), Lab (2327), LibDem (337) other (13), Plaid (28), SDLP (13), SDP (7), SNP (111), UUP (13)	762 unique speakers



*Analysing References to EU Enlargement*

We use a combination of automated and hand coded content analysis to analyse these references to EU enlargement. We use automated methods to operationalise both the *salience* and *sentiment* of enlargement discourse. To operationalise the *salience* of enlargement, we capture the number of EU references that are classified as enlargement references within a given year, in each national parliament. To capture enlargement *sentiment*, we make use of the Lexicoder sentiment dictionary (Young and Soroka 2012) and capture the net sentiment of individual enlargement references. The LSD is a bag-of-words dictionary designed for the automated coding of sentiment in news coverage, legislative speech and other text. It is discussed and tested in detail in Young and Soroka 2012. Put simply, the LSD contains a long list of positive and negative tokens. So, tokens such as ‘brilliant’ or ‘inspiring’ count as positive tokens, whereas ones such as ‘dangerous’ or ‘risky’ count as negative tokens. Net sentiment captures the difference between the number of positive tokens (words) in a statement and the number of negative tokens (words) in that statement. A higher net sentiment score therefore signifies a more positive tone when discussing enlargement, whereas a lower score is indicative of a more negative tone. Importantly, research has demonstrated that multilingual sentiment-based approaches yield valid results and therefore greatly facilitate comparative work on legislatures (Proksch et al. 2019).

Finally, to test hypotheses about the different discursive foci (economy, security, governance, identity), we use human hand coding. Human hand coding remains the gold standard in content analysis (Grimmer and Stewart 2013) and is particularly suited to capturing more nuanced categories, which may be difficult to fully automate. For each national parliament, a hand coder was given a list of all stemmed tokens that appear in enlargement references and asked to classify them according to the four categories. Once these tokens had been collected, an extensive discussion took place across the research team about whether these tokens were indeed the right ones. This included viewing some of the more debatable tokens within the context of the relevant speeches. These extensive discussions led us to dictionaries that accurately capture the concepts of interest. For instance, stemmed tokens such as ‘eurozon’, ‘import’ and ‘trade’ are coded as economic tokens, ones such as ‘cultur’, ‘islam’ and ‘homeland’ are coded as identity tokens, ones such as ‘nato’, ‘geopolit’ and ‘invad’ are coded as security tokens, and ones such as ‘law’, ‘condit’ and ‘criteria’ are coded as governance tokens. Appendix S1 contains the list of economy, security governance and identity tokens for each parliament as well as the total counts of tokens across all parliaments (Figure A1) and the co-occurrence of tokens in enlargement references (Figure A2). In particular, Tables A3–A10 in Appendix S1 demonstrate the strong face validity of the dictionaries, which were carefully developed separately for each of the eight parliaments.

The combination of these automated and hand-coded methods of content analysis allows us to measure the salience, tone and substantive content of enlargement discourse across countries and across different enlargement rounds.

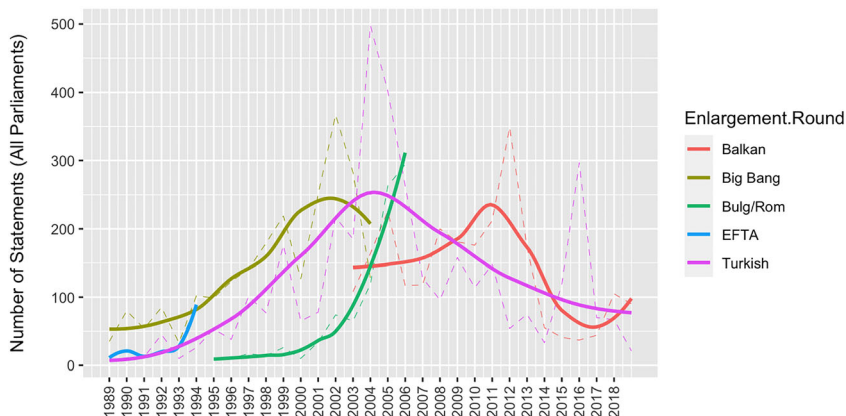
#### IV. Empirical Analysis

Our starting point is to clarify the trends in enlargement discourse in terms of salience and sentiment to determine the validity of the interpretations often given. Figure 1 shows the number of EU enlargement references across eight national parliaments over time, distinguishing between enlargement rounds to showcase the complexity of the data and the case-by-case variation. The salience of enlargement continued to rise after 1989, reaching a peak prior to the ‘Big Bang’ enlargement of 2004, but declined thereafter. In terms of sentiment, Figure 2 plots the net sentiment of EU enlargement discourse over time, again distinguishing between enlargement rounds. For both sentiment and salience, the aggregate trends (dashed lines) fluctuate considerably, hiding inter-applicant country contrasts (and possibly the discontinuities of parliamentary schedules). For the early ‘EFTA’ round of enlargement in 1995, net sentiment fluctuated significantly in a short period. The more general picture is indicated by the trend lines, and there is a clear decline in net sentiment after the 2004 ‘Big Bang’ accessions. The remaining enlargement rounds (Turkey and the Western Balkans) begin to be discussed with less positive and more negative language. The data therefore confirm the contrasting trends in salience and sentiment. Moreover, sentiment both falls over time (H1b) – with 2004 as an approximate turning point – and by country, with shifts on Turkey and the Western Balkans (H1a). The data confirm enlargement ‘resistance’ and prompts further investigation of the discursive foci.

Our second hypothesis (consistent with the politicisation thesis) was that discourses would reflect an increased focus in domestic politics on identity (H2). We therefore delve further into how each enlargement round was structured by our four discursive foci.

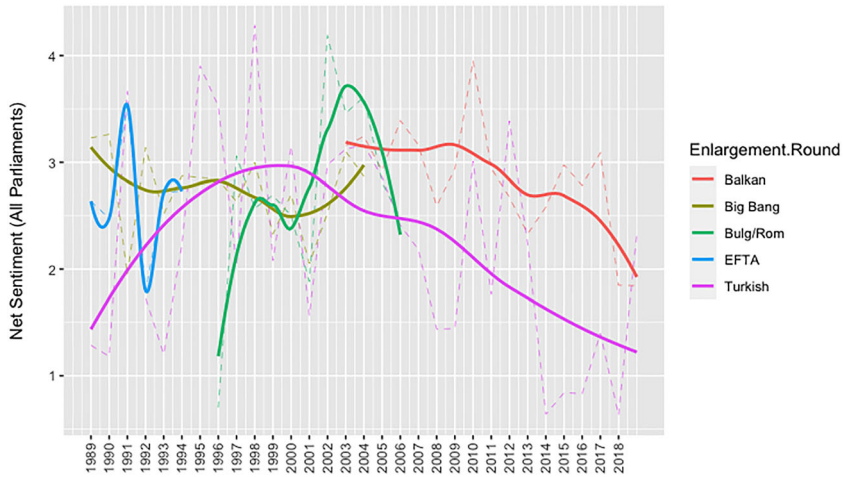
We test our hypothesis H2 statistically. The unit of analysis is the individual EU enlargement reference, with 18,247 observations. We run four separate models using as

Figure 1: The Salience of EU Enlargement in Parliamentary Debates. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]



Note: Figure based on 18,247 enlargement references collected by authors in eight legislatures. Dashed lines are aggregated yearly values. Bold lines are smoothed trend lines.

Figure 2: Net Sentiment of EU Enlargement Discourses in Parliamentary Debates. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]



Note: Figure based on 18,247 enlargement references collected by authors in eight legislatures. Dashed lines capture the average net sentiment (pos. sentiment – negative sentiment) for each year. Higher values signify more positive/less negative language. Bold lines are smoothed trend lines.

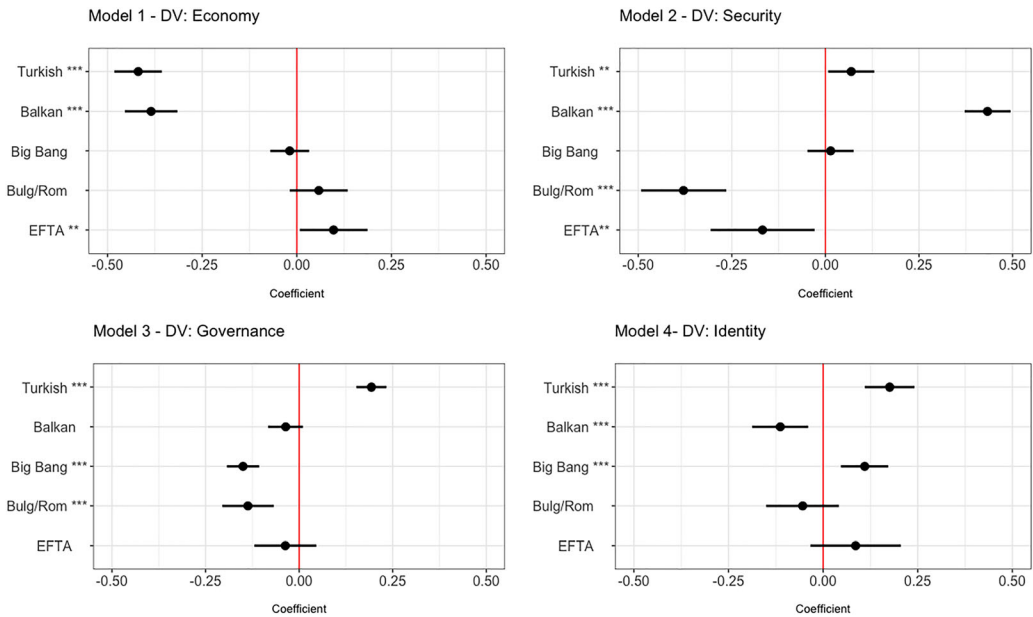
dependent variables the number of economy tokens (model 1), security tokens (model 2), governance tokens (model 3) and identity tokens (model 4) in each enlargement reference.<sup>1</sup> The five enlargement rounds are the binary independent variables (the EFTA enlargement, the Bulgaria/Romania enlargement, the Balkan enlargement and the Turkish enlargement).

As our dependent variables are count variables, we run a series of *Poisson* regression models that include country dummies to control for difference across countries, year dummies to control for time and random effects for speakers to control for the fact that several of the enlargement references are made by the same members of parliament. Appendix S1 also includes robustness tests from a series of polynomial models (see Tables A11–A14).

These analyses in Appendix S1 reveal interesting cross-country differences. For instance, it shows how the Greek parliament is particularly likely to mention security considerations in their enlargement discourse, unsurprising given the conflicts around their borders. By contrast, the German parliament is particularly likely to emphasise identity considerations, and Spain particularly likely to emphasise economic considerations.

<sup>1</sup>These four dependent variables are *count* variables, measured on the same unit of analysis (EU enlargement references,  $n = 18,247$ ). These range from 0 to 14 for the number of economy tokens (mean = 0.68), from 0 to 9 for the number of security tokens (mean = 0.49), from 0 to 11 for the number of identity tokens (mean = 0.45) and from 0 to 13 for the number of governance tokens (mean = 0.99).

Figure 3: Coefficient Estimates from Poisson Regression Models (IV = Enlargement Round). [Our figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]



Note: Figure displays coefficient estimates for enlargement round covariates from Poisson regression model. Unit of analysis is individual EU enlargement references made in parliament ( $n = 18,247$ ). Models include country dummies, year dummies and random effects for speakers. sig.: \*\*\*,.01, \*\*,005, \*,.1.

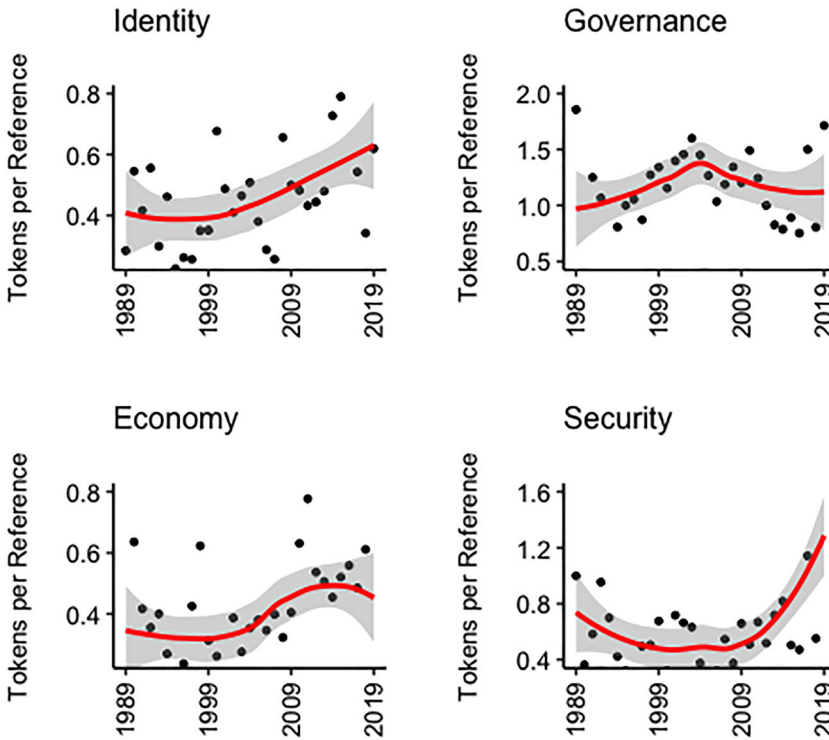
The results in Figure 3 give further credence that the later enlargement rounds (those that are still ongoing) differ significantly to previous enlargement rounds in their language and foci.<sup>2</sup> In model 1, we show that the Turkish and Western Balkan enlargement are significantly less likely to be discussed using economy tokens than previous enlargement rounds. References to identity (H2) are also contrasting: model 4 shows them to be particularly significant for the Turkish enlargement, as the politicisation thesis would suggest. But, for the Western Balkans, the discourse also shows an increasing concern with security matters. This is perhaps not surprising given the geopolitics of the recent military conflicts in the Balkans.<sup>3</sup>

To test whether there have been changes in the discursive foci over time *within* the Turkish and Western Balkan enlargement rounds (a further test of H2), we also plot our metrics for identity, governance, economy and security tokens over time. In the case of the Balkan enlargement, graphs are plotted from the time of the earliest application (2003 – application of Croatia). In the case of Turkey, we plot the graph from the earliest date in our investigation period (1989) as Turkey submitted its application in 1987. Figures 4 and 5 show not simply that these latest enlargement rounds are discussed

<sup>2</sup>Note here that the levels of statistical significance (0.05 level, 0.01 level and 0.001 level) for the different enlargement round variables are noted on the y-axis. Regressions in Figure 5 follow the same presentation.

<sup>3</sup>In Appendix S1, we provide evidence that there are also differences in the way different individual candidate countries are discussed *within* enlargement round that contain several candidates (see Tables A15–A19).

Figure 4: Turkish Enlargement – Discursive Foci over Time. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]



differently to previous ones (see regression results Figure 3) but that these differences have accentuated over time. In particular, Figures 4 and 5 show how both the Turkish and Balkan enlargement rounds have seen a steady and gradual increase in identitarian language (as in H2 and the politicisation thesis). In the Turkish case, these shifts are – perhaps unsurprisingly – associated with the arrival in power of Erdogan, first as prime minister (2003–2014), then as president (2014 ongoing), and the gradually more socially conservative and populist policies he espoused. Indeed, these shifts are a reminder that the applicant states and their situation are not ‘static’: what is being observed by EU politicians is changing over time.

The politicisation thesis suggested not only an increased focus on identity but also that challenger parties would adopt a more negative discourse on enlargement (H2a). To test this hypothesis, we run another series of *Poisson* regression models. Once again, the unit of analysis is the individual EU enlargement reference, with 18,247 observations. The number of negative (model 5), economy (model 6), security (model 7), identity (model 8) and governance (model 9) tokens in each enlargement reference are the dependent variables, and party family is the categorical independent variable. The models include a dummy for countries, a dummy for year and speaker random effects. Figure 6 plots the regression results for the five models.

Figure 5: Balkan Enlargement – Discursive Foci over Time.

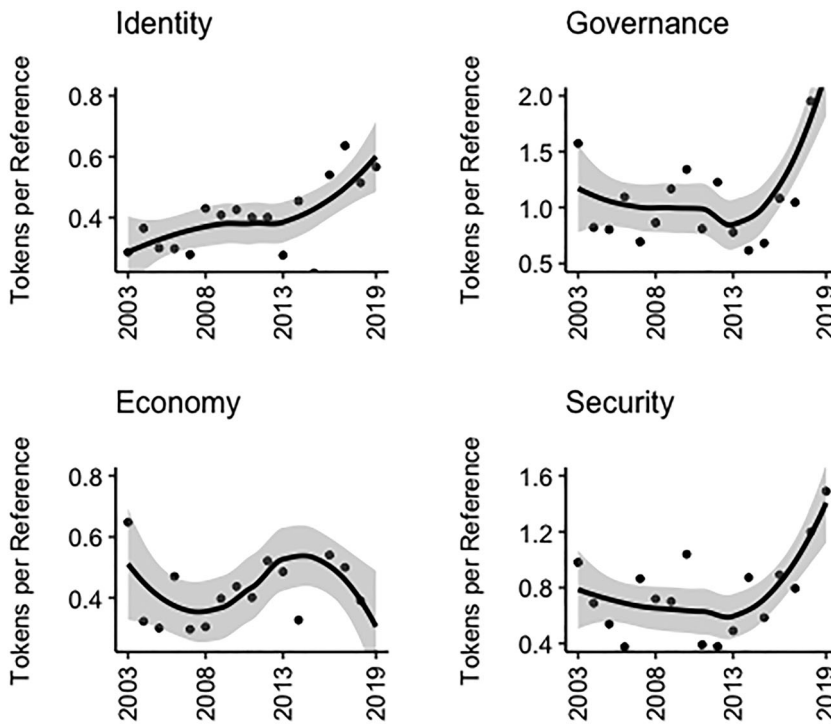
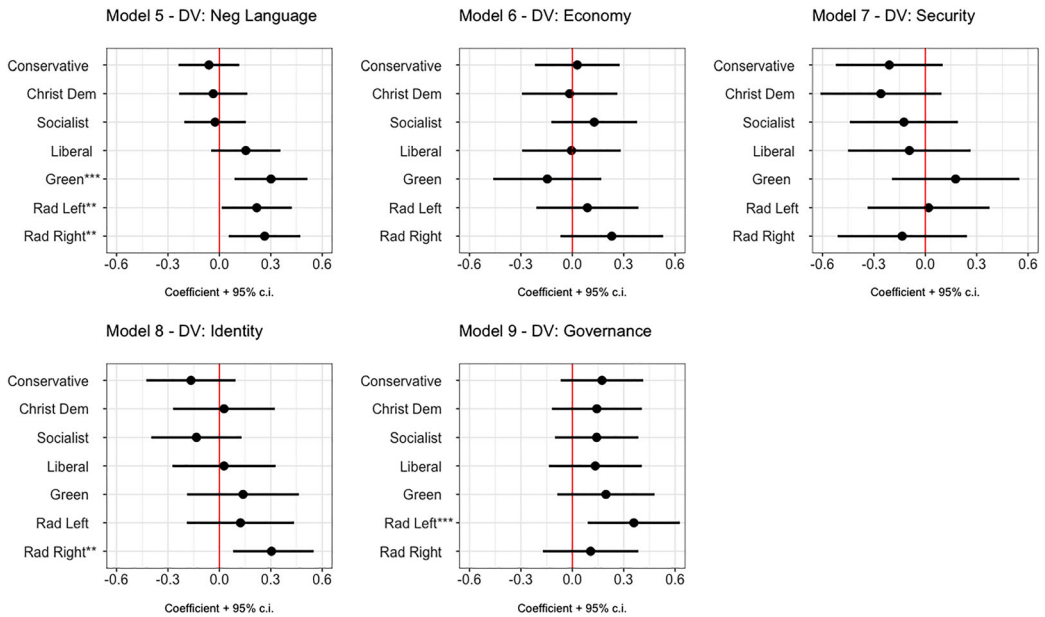


Figure 6 confirms H2a by showing clearly how challenger parties (radical right, radical left and green party families) are significantly more likely to use negative language in their enlargement discourse than mainstream parties (Conservative, Christian Democratic, Socialist, Liberal party families). In Appendix S1, we also show that the mean yearly salience of enlargement is higher for challenger parties (particularly for radical right parties) and that the share of enlargement discourse made by challenger parties has increased over time (see Table A20 and Figure A3). Whilst these parties are not in government, they do contribute to the ‘constraining dissensus’ (Hooghe and Marks 2009) that oblige governments to be more sensitive to their domestic audiences.

Regression results also reveal cross-party variation in terms of the tokens used from our governance, economy, identity and governance dictionaries. Model 8 in Figure 6 plots the coefficient estimates using identity tokens as the dependent variable. The figure shows how challenger parties from the RR are significantly more likely to refer to identity when discussing enlargement than other party families. Consistent with Bélanger and Wunsch (2022), these results support the view that challenger parties, specifically radical right parties, mobilise issues of identity to drive a wedge within mainstream parties (De Vries and Hobolt 2020). Model 9 in figure 6 plots the results using governance tokens as the dependent variable. These show how parties of the radical left are most likely to use these tokens. Finally, the difference in the use of economic tokens between party families is insignificant. Thus, whilst challenger parties do use more negative language when discussing EU enlargement (H2a) than their mainstream counterparts, different

Figure 6: Coefficient Estimates from Poisson Regression Models (IV = Party Family). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]



Note: Figure displays coefficient estimates for party family covariates from Poisson regression model. Unit of analysis is individual EU enlargement references made in parliament ( $n = 18,247$ ). Models include country dummies, year dummies and random effects for speakers. sig.: \*\*\*.01, \*\*.005, \*.1.

challengers emphasise contrasting concerns: radical right challengers emphasise cultural identity, as suggested by Hooghe and Marks (2009). Radical left parties are more likely to emphasise issues relating to governance.

Whilst the results presented in this section are in many ways clear, we should be wary about extrapolating too much, particularly about the size of these effects. The unit of analysis (18,257 individual enlargement references) is rather fine-grained, with noise and variation that can result from case to case. Additionally, the independent variables are relatively broad (enlargement rounds for the regressions in Figure 3, party family dummies for the regressions in Figure 6). Nonetheless, the relationships uncovered are significant, even if the effects might be rather small. Later enlargement rounds are discussed differently in parliament than earlier ones, and different parties use different discourses when referring to EU enlargement. Of course, there may be ample variation left beyond the correlates explored in this analysis. For those more concerned with the behaviour of individual parliamentarians, the constituency, gender and age of parliamentarians might affect the discourse used when discussing applicant states, whilst IR scholars might relate the discursive patterns to shifts in the geopolitics of the time. We leave these as promising avenues for future research.

## Conclusions

What has changed in the domestic politics of EU enlargement across member states? Our analysis was prompted by two considerations. Firstly, the existing literature has tended to focus on the short-term and on specific cases. The 2004 enlargement round has cast a long shadow and may have obscured longer-term trends. Secondly, to understand political shifts on enlargement, we can examine the discourses of national parliamentarians. Our data confirmed a contrast: since the 2004 ‘Big Bang’, the salience of enlargement has declined, whilst the sentiment has turned increasingly negative.

The decline in sentiment was not only by country (*H1a*) but also for these same countries over time (*H1b*). It supports the depiction of there being an enlargement fatigue or resistance that grew after 2004, a pivotal year (Economides 2020). At the same time, it also highlights how the perceptions of the prospective entrants have changed.

The differences in discourse warranted an investigation into the thematic foci in relation to the applicant states and by time. We found that the foci by country diverged increasingly over the years. The enlargement cases still outstanding (Turkey and the Western Balkans) involved a greater focus on matters of identity (*H2*), offering support to notions of an emergent cultural cleavage (Hooghe and Marks 2009; Kriesi 2007) and concerns with how they equated with ‘who we are’. The changed perceptions of Turkey parallel the shifts in the political stance of its leader, Erdogan.

The findings offer some support for a ‘constraining dissensus’ and the politicisation of EU issues. Yet, it is qualified: alongside identity, the discursive focus on governance and security also increased (variously), suggesting concerns emanating from the situation of the specific applicant states themselves. Our analysis found contrasting trends between sentiment and salience and that these correlated with party type – challenger parties promoted a different enlargement discourse from that of their mainstream rivals, with the effect of shifting the content of debates. Challenger parties (Liberal; Green; RR; RL) viewed enlargement more negatively than others (*H2a*). Further, those on the RR have been more concerned with issues of cultural identity, as posited by Hooghe and Marks (2009). By contrast, unlike the RR, the RL was much more likely to talk of governance. Overall, the discursive contrast is consistent with challenger parties – across EU issues – seeking to create a ‘wedge issue’ and posing strategic dilemmas for established parties (Aylott, 2002; Hobolt and de Vries 2015; Rauh et al. 2020; Rovyny 2012), who may try to deflect, blur or ignore sensitive issues.

The consideration of entry applications can also prompt a self-reflexion on what the EU sees itself as standing for (Sjursen 2017). Rather than enlargement being a matter of economics (and market access) or of some grand foreign policy frame (a Europe ‘whole and free’), there has been a heightened concern with identity and governance and their potential exclusivity. The legitimation of enlargement had shifted, and the remaining applications were more easily ‘de-legitimised’. Questions of identity and governance were framed very differently from the enlargements of 1973, the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, the southern European accessions were seen as an opportunity for the EU to directly strengthen their domestic governance: membership was a means for doing so, as much as good governance being an entry qualification.

Our analysis, then, has been both exploratory in empirical terms and evaluative of conceptual frames. We drew on literatures in both comparative politics and IR. In reality,



these explanations for change may be inter-related. Politicians attribute interests and norms, develop a discourse and compete in the domestic party arena in a manner in which various factors may reinforce and justify each other, however consciously or not. Future research might mirror this investigation by examining trends within the applicant states themselves. And, as we write, the Ukrainian crisis is reinvigorating a debate about the terms of entry and the purposes of enlargement. That ‘new’ debate can be better understood by being placed within the EU’s enlargement history and understanding how and why the associated discourse has shifted is a useful starting point.

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## Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

## Appendix S1. Supporting Information.