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A “More Political” Commission? Reassessing EC Politicization through Language

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Abstract

This article contributes to the study of the European Commission’s (EC) politicization by examining this phenomenon from the angle of communication. We elaborate a novel approach based on two linguistic indicators – charisma and technicality – which we then apply through a content analysis of 8,947 speeches delivered by Commission members between 1999 and 2019. Contrary to the narrative of an ever more political Commission, we find that the linguistic politicization of the EC decreased over the period under exam, reaching its nadir during Jean-Claude Juncker’s presidential term (2014–19). Our findings raise the question of whether language is yet another ordinary dimension of politicization, or rather it is used strategically by the Commission to underplay its underlying politicization as measured in more traditional institutional, policy, and individual terms. Either way, our study highlights the multi-faceted nature of the politicization concept, and the need for deeper and more nuanced analyses of it.

Keywords: European Commission; politicization; technocracy; charisma; political communication

Introduction

The European Commission (EC) has always had a dual nature – partly technical, partly political – within the institutional order of the European Union (EU). On the one hand, the Commission is entrusted with *super partes* guardianship of European treaties, a number of regulatory functions and, more broadly, a key role in executing EU legislation. On the other hand, ever since its inception the EC has departed from the ‘secretariat’ model in a number of traits and competences, which are closer to the classic setup of a national government: for instance, its comprehensive policy remit, its central role in legislative initiation, and more generally its habitual role as a participant in negotiations, and broker of agreements among the Union’s main institutional actors (Coombes, 1970; Christiansen, 1997; Cini, 2015).

In recent years, scholars and analysts have increasingly noted a shift of the Commission away from the technocratic side of its hybrid configuration, and towards the political one. This ‘politicization’ of the EC is most often attributed to the presidential tenure of Juncker (2014–19), who presented it quite openly as a recipe to help revamp the Union after the tumultuous years of the eurozone crisis (Juncker, 2014). More generally, however, the politicization of the Commission is a process that can be traced back to at least the Maastricht Treaty, in connection with broader political and institutional transformations, such as the progressive parliamentarization of the EC (Wille, 2012; Russack, 2019), and the increasing salience of EU affairs among European voters (De Wilde, 2011; Schmidt, 2019).

Behind the seemingly straightforward notion of Commission politicization, a rich debate has developed among EU scholars over this topic. Discussions centre not only, as mentioned, on where to place the beginning of this phenomenon, but also, and more importantly, on how to precisely define and measure politicization, and ultimately to what extent we can say that this process has occurred in the first place. As will be further elaborated below, when examining EC politicization operationally, scholars have looked primarily at attributes and transformations in three distinct spheres: the Commission's institutional setup, its policy action, and the individuals serving in it. This discussion testifies, on the one hand, to the importance of this subject vis-à-vis the shape and legitimacy of the EU's institutional and decision-making setup, and on the other, to the multi-layered, multi-dimensional and at times contested nature of the concept of EC politicization.

This article intervenes in the debate on the politicization of the Commission by examining this phenomenon from the hitherto unexplored angle of communication. It does so by presenting a novel approach for the detection of politicization through language, accompanied by a content analysis of Commission speeches spanning two decades and four Commissions: Prodi, Barroso 1, Barroso 2, and Juncker. The article therefore contributes to the politicization literature and debate from a theoretical, methodological, and empirical standpoint.

The rest of the article proceeds as follows: the next section overviews the existing debate on EC politicization by identifying three main approaches to it: 'institutional', 'policy', and 'individual'. The third section then complements this debate by presenting our linguistic approach, which centres on two composite indicators of politicization/depoliticization: *charisma* and *technicality*. The latter, in particular, is developed *de novo*, and stands out as a key methodological contribution of our analysis. The fourth section introduces our research design, and presents the results of a software-assisted content analysis of 8,947 speeches delivered by the presidents and members of the four Commissions under exam. In it, we find that, contrary to expectations, the Commission has become *less* linguistically politicized over the period under exam, reaching a nadir during Juncker's term. The fifth and final section recaps our findings, and discusses their implication for the broader subject of Commission politicization. More precisely, our results demonstrate that politicization is an even more complex phenomenon than hitherto argued, and raises the important question of how the communicative dimension of politicization relates to the remaining ones on which the literature has concentrated so far.

I. The Politicization of the European Commission: An Overview of the Debate

Reflections on the hybrid nature of the European Commission have accompanied this institution since its inception. The EC's powers, argued Coombes (1970, p. 101) in his classic study, 'fall some way short of those associated with the executive branch of a federal government. ... [y]et ... go far beyond those normally associated with an international secretariat or civil service'. Similarly, the idea that the balance of emphasis between the EC's political and the technical-administrative missions may vary across time and topics is not new in studies of the Commission (for example Cini, 2015; Hartlapp, 2015). It is only in recent years, however, that the Commission's 'politicization' has become a recognizable topic of scholarly analysis and debate, concentrating

particularly on the top layer of the EC, namely President and Commissioners. At their core, discussions over the politicization of the EC refer to this institution's (alleged) move away from the procedures, mechanisms and objectives of a technocratic decision-making model and towards those of a political decision-making model. Simplifying, the former entails the use of knowledge and expertise to make decisions that implement certain political mandates, while the latter concerns itself with the ultimate goals of a political community, to be defined via balancing and reconciling different ideas, values and views on 'the good society' (Crick, 1962; Radaelli, 1999; Tortola, 2020a). Needless to say, the two models also rest on different normative underpinnings: while technocracy is legitimated, in democracy, by the deployment of expertise within a clear rule-based perimeter, the legitimacy of political decision rests on their (albeit indirect) reflection of the will of a popular majority.

Although the technocratic and political models are seldom completely separated in actual policy-making – even the most distinctly political institution would find it hard to completely ignore technical considerations, and vice versa – the Commission is notable in this respect, for it is located, by design, in the middle of the technical/political continuum as regards its competences, composition, and relations with other EU institutions. This hybrid nature multiplies the ways in which EC politicization may, at least in principle, take place, and therefore the angles from which it can be observed. Looking at the existing debate, three such approaches to EC politicization can be identified: 'institutional', 'policy', and 'individual'. In the remainder of this section we will examine each in greater detail.

As its name suggests, the institutional approach examines politicization as a result of, and more generally in connection to, formal or informal institutional changes involving the Commission. The most prominent, or at least most frequent, of the three approaches, the institutional approach can be further divided into two subcategories. The first looks primarily at the Commission's relations with other EU institutional players, and generally its position within the Union's institutional setup. Politicization here is usually linked to transformations that have moved the EC closer to the European electorate(s), thus enhancing its democratic legitimacy, but also its partisan character. The steadily increasing role of the European Parliament (EP) in EU policy-making in the past few decades, and above all in the appointment (and potential dismissal) of the Commission are often cited as developments that have politicized the EC by intensifying partisan constraints on its action (Bauer and Ege, 2012; Egeberg *et al.*, 2014; Dinan, 2016; Kassim and Laffan, 2019). Building on these transformations, the introduction of the informal *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure in the 2014 EP election, and the subsequent appointment of Jean-Claude Juncker as Commission President, culminated the 'parliamentarization' of the EC, establishing a clearer link between this institution and European voters (Tortola, 2013; Dinan, 2016; Peterson, 2017). This, in turn, provided the newly appointed President himself with grounds to present his prospective Commission as a 'highly political' one, in his maiden speech before the EP (Juncker, 2014).

Because the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure gave Juncker a stronger political mandate than his predecessors, it also strengthened the Presidency vis-à-vis the rest of the college. This accelerated a process of centralization within the Commission that had already begun in previous years (Bauer and Ege, 2012; Kassim, 2012; Wille, 2012; Kassim *et al.*, 2017), and which many scholars indicate as a second institutional factor of politicization. Under

Juncker, this centralization took a number of forms: most notably an increase in his role in selecting Commissioners, and allocating portfolios to them; the creation of stronger vice-presidencies (above all the one held by Frans Timmermans) for coordinating and filtering policy initiatives; finally, the strengthening of the President's own staff, headed by the powerful *chef de cabinet* Martin Selmayr (Dinan, 2016; Peterson, 2017; Kassim and Laffan, 2019). Taken together, these transformations made the EC's action in policy-making and implementation more selective and coherent under the strategic leadership of the presidency – as reflected also in the relatively small number of legislative initiatives produced by the Juncker Commission (Zabkiewicz, 2018) – and, more generally, shifted power from the administrative level (in the first place the directorates general) to the political level of the Commission, thus moving this institution closer to the model of a traditional executive branch (Kassim, 2017; Kassim and Laffan, 2019; Russack, 2019; Bürgin, 2020).

Almost inseparable from reflections on the internal reorganization of the Commission are discussions of the actual initiatives channelled through the EC's new and more centralized structure. These policy-oriented analyses constitute a second angle from which EC politicization is examined. Similar to the institutional approach, the focus here is largely on the Juncker commission, and particularly its emphasis on a number of high profile and/or innovative initiatives that are seen as transcending technocratic boundaries (Peterson, 2017; Nugent and Rhinard, 2019). Among these initiatives are, for instance, the quota system introduced in 2015 to tackle the refugee crisis, the 2014 Investment Plan for Europe, the EC's decision to introduce greater flexibility in the application of the Stability and Growth Pact (so altering the European Semester framework), but also the Commission's efforts to steer the broader debate on the post-crisis EU through its *White Paper on the future of Europe*, and related work (European Commission, 2017). Taken together, these initiatives point to Juncker's attempt to take a leading role in bringing Europe out of its 'polycrisis', and push it towards a more supranational equilibrium, compared to the lower and more intergovernmental profile of his predecessor Barroso (Bickerton *et al.*, 2015; Schmidt, 2019; Tömmel, 2020).

A distinct branch within the policy approach has looked at EC politicization from the different perspective of day-to-day policy-making and implementation. Leveraging the availability of larger scale, quantifiable data, and usually expanding beyond the Juncker Commission, these analyses have interpreted politicization not so much in terms of leadership as in terms of the Commission's alignment with – if not subservience to – certain societal actors and partisan interests. Studies by van der Veer and Haverland (2018) on the EC's country-specific recommendations, Rauh (2019) on consumer policy, and Koop *et al.* (2021) on legislative prioritization, for instance, have all shown an increase in the EC's responsiveness to societal and political dynamics over the past two decades or so, which is at odds with a pure technocratic model.

A final approach to politicization looks at the characteristics of the individuals holding EC jobs. Observers have highlighted how, over time, Commission members have been drawn less from bureaucratic and more from political ranks, and above all how the public profile of the persons selected for office has steadily risen (Wonka, 2007; Hartlapp, 2015). These takes on politicization often concentrate on the EC presidency: it has become normal, up to and including Juncker, to appoint a political heavyweight (often a former prime minister) for the job. Some, however, extend the observation to the entire college, noting

how the overall political standing of the Commission has also increased over the years. Once again, it is the Juncker Commission that is usually seen as culminating this trend, with its unprecedented number of high-profile members (Wonka and Döring, 2014). Individual characteristics link to politicization not only because they influence the priorities and *modus operandi* of office holders, but also because they impact on the Commission's sway within the EU system, by affecting its components' (and in the first place the President's) leadership skills, and their effectiveness in negotiating with and persuading institutional and political counterparts – above all member state governments (Russack, 2019; Tortola and Tarlea, 2021).

The brief overview just presented testifies to the multi-layered and multi-dimensional nature of politicization, both in general terms, and especially when applied to the European Commission. And yet the existing debate does not fully capture the complexity of this phenomenon. What is missing, in particular, is a serious analysis of the communication, and specifically language dimension of Commission politicization. This gap is especially notable considering the frequency with which Juncker's above-mentioned utterances about the political nature of his commission are used as an anecdote in discussions on EC politicization. That this prominent speech act has been followed up by virtually no systematic study of Commission communication is surprising (however, see Müller 2022, Pansardi and Battagazzorre, 2018 and Vesan and Pansardi, 2021 for partial exceptions).

More generally, looking at the language of the Commission would benefit the analysis of its politicization by adding an important new dimension that is connected to, yet independent from the three just examined. Language would, moreover, afford us a uniquely subjective vantage point from which to study EC politicization, by providing us with information on the way the Commission perceives and presents itself. Given the institutionally hybrid setup of the EC, which makes a certain degree of ambiguity inescapable when assessing politicization solely 'from the outside', this is a significant analytical value added. In the next section we build on these reflections by proposing a novel approach to politicization based on the public language of the Commission.

II. Assessing Politicization Via Language

How do we tell the politicization of the Commission from its language? However tempting, relying on open self-assessments *à la* Juncker is not a viable strategy: even assuming that they can be taken at face value, statements of this sort are too few and far in between to be a solid starting point. Nor do we find much help in the abundant theoretical and analytical scholarship at the intersection of language and politics, which has been generally more concerned with examining different elements and varieties of political language than with distinguishing the latter from other types of language – technocratic, in this case – in a clear and operationalizable way (for example Wilson, 2015; Wodak and Forchtner, 2018). This leaves us no option but to proceed through a more indirect route. In building a reliable language-based approach to EC politicization, we would argue that three criteria are important: first, the approach should be grounded on existing linguistic research; second, it should be generalizable across time and contexts; third, it should be subject-independent, in order to avoid spurious detection of politicization that is driven mostly by the topic being discussed, as well as reflect the fact that each subject matter

can be talked about in a more or less politicized way. We submit that these criteria are satisfied by an analysis of the tone and style of Commission communication. More precisely, we propose an approach based on two stylistic attributes connected to politicization in opposite ways: charisma and technicality. We elaborate on each in the remainder of this section.

Charisma

Charisma is a longstanding concept in sociology and political science. It was famously elaborated by Max Weber (1978), who borrowed it from the realm of religion to describe a type of social relation between a leader and his/her followers, in which the former is perceived as possessing extraordinary abilities, on the basis of which s/he is attributed leadership, and therefore followed. One of three kinds of social authority, next to traditional and rational-legal authority, charisma is different from the other two because it depends not on history or law, but on the leader's ability to inspire awe and faith among people. Charisma is primarily an individual attribute, although it can also be carried by certain institutions, which endow their holders with 'charisma of office' by virtue of their prominent or high position within the socio-political system (Shils, 1965; Weber, 1978).

Language has a central place in the emergence and exercise of charisma. It is primarily through language that charismatic leadership manifests itself by signalling extraordinary abilities, and expressing new ideas, values and vision that resonate with the followers. Accordingly, language is a key aspect in the detection and analysis of charismatic leadership. The study of charismatic language has by now a fairly established tradition in disciplines such as sociology, leadership studies, and linguistics. A focal point in this literature is the work of Shamir and coauthors (Shamir *et al.*, 1993, 1994), who have compiled a list of seven linguistic traits of charismatic language:

1. More references to collective history and to the continuity between the past and the present;
2. More references to the collective and to collective identity, and fewer references to individual self-interest;
3. More positive references to followers' worth and efficacy as individuals and as a collective;
4. More references to the leader's similarity to followers and identification with followers;
5. More references to values and moral justifications, and fewer references to tangible outcomes and instrumental justifications;
6. More references to distal goals and the distant future, and fewer references to proximal goals and the near future; and
7. More references to hope and faith (Shamir *et al.*, 1994, p. 29).

Generally speaking, charisma and the use of charismatic language do not perfectly coincide with politicization: not all charismatic social relationships are political in nature, and not all political relationships involve charisma. However, we argue that the first of these two statements is weakened, if not void, in the specific case of the Commission, due to the latter's structural position within the EU order as a hybrid – partly political, partly technical – public institution. In other words, we posit that the detection of

charisma in the Commission's language can be taken as evidence of its politicization. Given the affinities between the linguistic traits of charisma – which connect to the sphere of emotions, initiative, values and visions – and the logic and style of public rule pertaining to the political side of the technical/political continuum, charismatic language can be seen as a reliable sign of the EC moving towards that end of the continuum. By the same token, charisma suggests a move away from the mode codified and instrumental logic of public rule that characterizes technocratic decision-making. In the final analysis, charisma can be used as an (albeit imperfect) indicator of EC politicization. This is especially so in this study, where charisma is accompanied and complemented by a second linguistic indicator of politicization – that is, technicality, to which we now turn.

Technicality

Unlike the case of charisma, the relationship between technicality and politicization is rather straightforward. In this article we have defined that between politics and technocracy as a continuum along which the EC can move, so that each step towards the political end is a step away from the technocratic one, and the other way around. Moving to the sphere of communication, we can therefore take the degree of technicality in the Commission's language as an inverse indicator of its politicization – or, put differently, as a direct measure of its linguistic depoliticization.

Things get more difficult when it comes to defining what, exactly, make up technical language. Here we lack a widely accepted and operationalizable set of traits of the sort described above for charismatic language. We can, however, build on a sizeable scholarship on the features of technical (and scientific) language and discourse, developed across a range of disciplines, which include not only (socio)linguistics, but also applied fields such as technical writing, on the one hand, and more theoretical ones such as rhetoric, on the other hand. Despite the differences in their objectives, methodological approaches, and even normative stance vis-à-vis the nature of technocratic decision-making, these literatures display a remarkable degree of consistency as regards the characteristics of technical language. More precisely, their overlaps can be synthesized in the following four stylistic traits:

1. *Objectivity*. Technical language is characterized by a strong reference to facts and the explicit reference to evidence and data (including the use of mathematical expressions) (Kurzman, 1988; Thibault, 1991; McKenna and Graham, 2000; Lemke, 2005).
2. *Value-neutrality*. Technical language is characterized by the use of a strictly denotative language, with a lack of references to values and value judgements, as well as unambiguous, unemotional expressions (Coney, 1984; Thibault, 1991; Moore, 1996; Lemke, 2005).
3. *Complexity/opacity*. Technical language is opaque and obfuscates. It is strongly characterized by the use of unfamiliar terms (based on the assumption of knowledge on the part of the reader), and the repetition of key terms, arguments and mantras (Kurzman, 1988; McKenna and Graham, 2000; Lemke, 2005).
4. *Impersonality*. Technical language removes human agency, and is characterized by the use of the third person rather than the first or second person, the prevalence of verbs in passive forms, as well as the use of nominal and nominalization of verbs (Miller, 1979;

Kurzman, 1988; Thibault, 1991; Lemke, 2005; Biber and Conrad, 2019; McKenna and Graham, 2000).

Reading these four traits alongside the seven traits of charismatic language reveals only minimal overlap between the two indicators. In other words, measured against these traits, a certain piece of communication can, in principle, be very charismatic and very technical (or not so charismatic and not so technical) at the same time. This is noteworthy because it makes our two indicators genuinely independent from one another, and any empirical results based on them more solid – which is all the more important for a study like this, which ventures into uncharted territory, methodologically and empirically. In the next section we will use these indicators to assess the linguistic politicization, or lack thereof, of the Commission.

III. Research Design and Empirical Analysis

The operational research question of this study is whether the language of the European Commission has become more political over time, as measured through our two indicators (that is, more charismatic and less technical), and more specifically whether politicization reached a peak during the years of the Juncker Commission. This research question is to be seen as descriptive and long-term in nature. The kind of language used by the Commission (including its level of politicization) can vary rapidly, guided, among other things by the specific context within which EC members speak, as well as the major political, economic, and social challenges of the day (the Eastern enlargement for Prodi, the debt crisis for Barroso, and the refugee crisis for Juncker, just to mention a few). Here, however, we are not concerned with such a fine-grained and explanatory type of analysis, which we leave for further debate. Rather, we aim to “zoom out” and see whether we can discern a temporal trend of linguistic politicization on the part of the EC, consistent with the other modes of politicization examined in the literature reviewed above. To answer our question, we conduct a content analysis of all public speeches delivered in English by all members (that is, Presidents and Commissioners) of the last four Commissions to have completed their terms, namely the Prodi (1999–2004), Barroso 1 (2004–09), Barroso 2 (2009–14), and Juncker Commission (2014–19).¹ Our sample consists of 8,947 speeches, distributed as detailed in Table 1.

Speeches do not exhaust the forms of verbal communication by the Commission. However, they do present a number of methodological advantages that justify concentrating on this type of text. The two most obvious pros are plenitude and comparability – two characteristics that are particularly precious for this analysis, which covers *all* members of the four Commissions. In addition, as the least mediated, most unilateral, and most public form of EC communication, speeches are the place where linguistic politicization, if present, can be expected to appear most clearly. More generally, of all possible Commission

¹Speeches were downloaded from the European Commission’s online press corner: <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/home/en>. Speeches delivered in languages other than English were manually removed from the corpus, and so were Commission messages and statements released in written-only form. Our analysis focuses exclusively on Commission presidents and commissioners (to the exclusion of high-ranking career officials, above all Directors General) because this is the most distinctively hybrid sphere of the Commission, and therefore the one for which the politicization question, as presented here, is most salient.

Table 1: European Commission Speeches Breakdown

	<i>Prodi</i>	<i>Barroso 1</i>	<i>Barroso 2</i>	<i>Juncker</i>	<i>Total</i>
President's speeches	318	198	708	132	1,356
Commissioners' speeches	1868	2,900	1934	889	7,591
Total speeches	2,186	3,098	2,642	1,021	8,947

corpora, speeches are the one that is most likely to display the EC's communicative style in a full and unadulterated fashion.

We analyze our corpus of speeches through DICTION 7, a content analysis software built for the purpose of assessing the tone and style of political language (Hart, 2001). More precisely, DICTION 7 assigns scores to portions of text based on 31 dictionary-based variables, which can be computed individually or combined into constructs via pre-defined formulas. Like all automated and dictionary-based tools, DICTION 7 presents both advantages and shortcomings when compared to alternative methods. Among the latter are its lower sensitivity to nuance and context, while among the former are its high degree of coding reliability and its ability to handle large volumes of text, as is needed in this case.

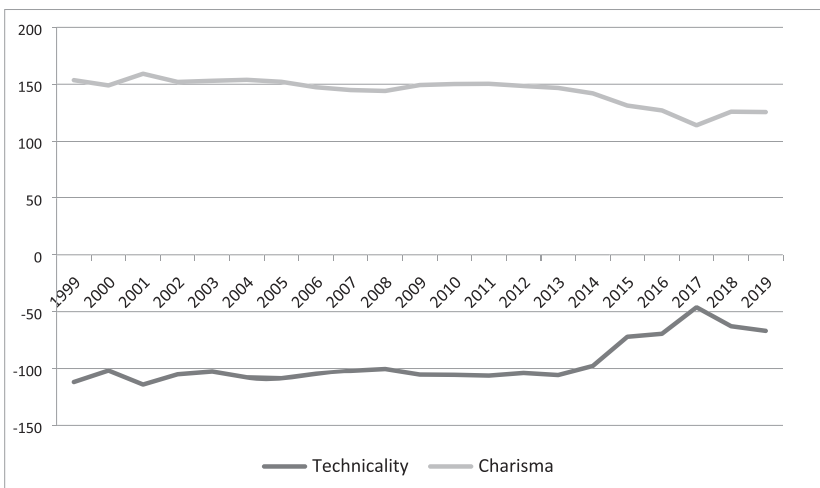
As a first step in our empirical analysis, we translate the traits of charismatic and technical language identified above into DICTION 7 constructs. This is easily done in the case of charisma, whose seven traits have been translated and tested in a number of previous studies covering different actors and contexts (for example Bligh *et al.*, 2004; Davis and Gardner, 2012; Bastardo *et al.*, 2015; Olsson and Hammargård, 2016; Tortola and Pansardi, 2019; Müller and Pansardi, 2015). To these, we add four constructs for technical language, formulated for the purposes of this study, and previously validated against a corpus of 343 texts (see Online Appendix A for details). Table 2 presents an overview of the DICTION 7 formulas for, respectively, charisma and technicality.

For each of the two indicators of politicization, text can be scored trait by trait, or in the aggregate by adding up the scores of each construct (with the sole exception of the charismatic construct *tangibility*, whose value is to be subtracted from the sum of the remaining six). Figure 1 presents an overview of the two aggregate indicators throughout our corpus by plotting the yearly average calculated on the entire set of speeches (that is, by the President and the Commissioners). The first aspect to be noted about the data is the weak correlation between the two indicators in the sample ($R = 0.021$), which confirms empirically their mutual independence highlighted in the previous section. More importantly, the figure shows surprising trends for both indicators, namely a generally decreasing one for charisma (Prodi = 153.579; Barroso 1 = 147.642; Barroso 2 = 149.054; Juncker = 126.464), and a generally increasing one for technicality (Prodi = -106.548; Barroso 1 = -104.271; Barroso 2 = -105.561; Juncker = -65.742; values for technicality are negative as a result of the preponderance of negative terms in the DICTION 7 formulas). Taken together, these figures suggest, at least *prima facie*, decreasing, rather than increasing EC politicization over time, with the Juncker Commission being the least linguistically politicized of all four.

Table 2: DICTION 7 Formulas for Charismatic and Technical Language

<i>Charisma</i>	<i>DICTION 7 formula</i>	<i>Technicality</i>	<i>DICTION 7 formula</i>
<i>Collective focus</i>	Collectives + People references – Self-reference	<i>Objectivity</i>	Concreteness + Accomplishment + Numerical terms – Cognitive terms
<i>Temporal orientation</i>	Present concern + Past concern	<i>Value-neutrality</i>	Centrality – Ambivalence – Inspiration – Praise
<i>Followers' worth</i>	Praise + Inspiration + Satisfaction	<i>Complexity/Opacity</i>	Complexity + Insistence – Familiarity – Human interests
<i>Similarity to followers</i>	Levelling + Familiarity + Human interest	<i>Impersonality</i>	– Self-reference – Past concern – Present concern
<i>Tangibility</i>	Concreteness + Insistence – Variety		
<i>Action</i>	Aggression + Accomplishment – Passivity – Ambivalence		
<i>Adversity</i>	Blame + Hardship + Denial		

Figure 1: European Commission's Linguistic Charisma and Technicality – 1999–2019.



As a further step, we run a series of analyses of co-variance to test for the statistical significance of the differences in levels of charisma and technicality across the four Commissions, while controlling for other potential causal factors (covariates). Simply put, this kind of test will tell us whether differences observed in our samples are likely to reflect similar trends in the underlying populations or, on the contrary, might be due to chance. First, we run two univariate analyses of co-variance (ANCOVA) on the differences in aggregate scores for charisma and technicality described above, using speech length (measured as the total numbers of words in each speech) as a covariate. Then, we add two multi-variate analyses of co-variance (MANCOVA) on differences in the scores of each of the charisma and technicality constructs taken individually, still with speech length as a covariate. Results are shown in Table 3.

The results of the two ANCOVAs confirm the statistical significance of the observed differences in aggregate scores for both charisma and technicality. Differences by individual construct across the four Commissions, analyzed in the two MANCOVAs, are also significant both for charisma (Wilks's Lambda = 0.871, $F(7, 8,936) = 60.172$, $p < 0.001$) and technicality (Wilks's Lambda = 0.852, $F(4, 8,939) = 123.368$, $p < 0.001$). The results of the multivariate analyses, however, are not always consistent with the aggregate picture. While the overall increasing trend observed for technicality is generally confirmed across the four constructs (with only some marginal variations in *value-neutrality* and *complexity/opacity*, where the trend is more U-shaped), the picture of the charismatic constructs is more varied. Focusing only on Juncker, we can see that his Commission scores the highest in *collective focus*, and second to highest in *action* and *adversity*. While these more fine-grained results do not, clearly, invalidate the aggregate picture, they do highlight that the components of linguistic charisma move less uniformly than it is the case for technical language.

While politicization, or the lack of it, is an attribute of the Commission as a whole, quite often discussions and analyses of this phenomenon put particular emphasis on the EC Presidency, whether explicitly or implicitly. This is not only due to the formal pre-eminence, and greater public exposure of the President compared to the rest of the college, but also – and connected to the foregoing – to the fact that virtually all of the modes of politicization described earlier in the article revolve around the Presidency first and foremost. On that account, we replicate our analyses of co-variance on the speeches of the three Commission Presidents taken in isolation. Results are presented in Table 4.

On the whole, results for the Presidents are consistent with our findings on the entire Commissions. Once again, observed mean differences in our indicators of linguistic politicization across the four Commissions are statistically significant when measured in the aggregate, confirming the general trends for both charisma and technicality. Results of the two MANCOVAs are also statistically significant for both the charisma constructs (Wilks's Lambda = 0.733, $F(7, 1,345) = 21.057$, $p < 0.001$) and the technicality ones (Wilks's Lambda = 0.852, $F(4, 1,348) = 18.566$, $p < 0.001$). Here too, while the aggregate trend is mostly confirmed across the four technicality constructs (with the partial exception of *value-neutrality* and *impersonality*, which display a more U-shaped pattern), the charisma constructs show a higher degree of variability. This is particularly the case for *collective focus*, *tangibility*, and *adversity*, where Juncker's is the second to most charismatic of the four presidencies.

Table 3: European Commission's Linguistic Charisma and Technicality – ANCOVA and MANCOVA Results

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Univariate F(3, 8,942)</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Univariate F(3, 8,942)</i>
	Charisma			Technicality		
Prodi	153.579	38.272	111.940***	-106.548	45.535	224.111***
Barroso 1	147.642	36.998		-104.271	43.036	
Barroso 2	149.054	38.129		-105.561	44.621	
Juncker	126.464	39.186		-65.742	48.198	
	Individual constructs:			Individual constructs:		
	<i>Collective focus</i>			<i>Objectivity</i>		
Prodi	3.315	6.148	97.404***	37.235	17.672	367.167***
Barroso 1	1.288	6.585		37.474	13.752	
Barroso 2	1.330	6.313		40.071	15.446	
Juncker	4.221	6.017		56.803	23.141	
	<i>Temporal orientation</i>			<i>Value-neutrality</i>		
Prodi	13.855	4.982	51.381***	-15.436	7.706	83.171***
Barroso 1	14.749	5.238		-15.993	9.585	
Barroso 2	14.927	5.662		-17.190	10.677	
Juncker	12.899	4.738		-11.904	6.870	
	<i>Followers' worth</i>			<i>Complexity/opacity</i>		
Prodi	16.225	7.791	93.064***	-19.204	6.584	119.746***
Barroso 1	17.245	9.112		-21.165	7.273	
Barroso 2	19.101	9.016		-21.802	7.525	
Juncker	14.123	5.826		-17.700	6.569	
	<i>Similarity to followers</i>			<i>Impersonality</i>		
Prodi	161.591	18.953	184.860***	-109.142	32.998	52.381***
Barroso 1	159.867	17.511		-104.587	32.699	
Barroso 2	162.071	18.811		-106.641	32.703	
Juncker	146.360	23.488		-92.942	33.156	
	<i>Tangibility</i>					
Prodi	57.621	29.071	11.828***			
Barroso 1	61.850	28.565				
Barroso 2	63.624	29.310				
Juncker	65.608	32.599				
	<i>Action</i>					
Prodi	8.315	9.915	8.641***			
Barroso 1	9.231	10.835				
Barroso 2	5.771	11.681				
Juncker	8.641	12.716				
	<i>Adversity</i>					
Prodi	7.861	5.092	8.240***			
Barroso 1	7.388	4.411				
Barroso 2	7.285	4.560				
Juncker	7.483	4.390				

Notes: Prodi $N=2,186$; Barroso 1 $N=3,098$; Barroso 2 $N=2,642$; Juncker $N=1,021$. *** $p < 0.001$.

To complete our analysis, we run two further ANOVAs and MANCOVAs on the speeches of Commissioners only, the results of which are largely consistent with the foregoing analyses, as detailed in Online Appendix B. When looking at these results together with the Presidents-only analysis, an additional interesting aspect emerges: while Prodi

Table 4: Commission Presidents' Linguistic Charisma and Technicality – ANCOVA and MANCOVA Results

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Univariate F(3, 1,351)</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Univariate F(3, 1,351)</i>
	Charisma			Technicality		
Prodi	160.891	36.388	36.182***	-115.435	39.441	25.591***
Barroso 1	145.702	42.702		-91.798	42.254	
Barroso 2	142.094	39.161		-104.395	45.077	
Juncker	118.261	53.251		-78.922	57.052	
	<i>Individual constructs:</i>			<i>Individual constructs:</i>		
	<i>Collective focus</i>			<i>Objectivity</i>		
Prodi	5.373	5.819	30.358***	36.370	11.397	25.577***
Barroso 1	2.980	6.584		43.839	14.483	
Barroso 2	1.062	6.257		42.472	14.991	
Juncker	3.184	8.691		49.156	20.358	
	<i>Temporal orientation</i>			<i>Value-neutrality</i>		
Prodi	14.520	4.289	14.030***	-15.459	6.290	26.886***
Barroso 1	14.924	5.966		-16.240	9.083	
Barroso 2	13.687	4.845		-20.768	12.692	
Juncker	11.691	4.725		-14.866	7.785	
	<i>Followers' worth</i>			<i>Complexity/opacity</i>		
Prodi	17.360	8.993	37.408***	-116.636	31.601	17.000***
Barroso 1	19.244	9.955		-98.163	34.664	
Barroso 2	22.924	8.834		-104.227	33.370	
Juncker	15.672	8.031		-94.218	45.283	
	<i>Similarity to followers</i>			<i>Impersonality</i>		
Prodi	165.903	17.365	30.497***	-19.710	5.739	10.016***
Barroso 1	157.369	24.906		-21.234	8.200	
Barroso 2	164.721	21.134		-21.871	7.052	
Juncker	146.589	34.134		-18.995	7.827	
	<i>Tangibility</i>					
Prodi	56.331	26.657	12.486***			
Barroso 1	67.917	34.114				
Barroso 2	71.840	31.326				
Juncker	68.421	44.785				
	<i>Action</i>					
Prodi	6.022	8.090	24.062***			
Barroso 1	11.540	9.946				
Barroso 2	4.781	13.344				
Juncker	1.691	8.473				
	<i>Adversity</i>					
Prodi	8.043	4.573	3.550*			
Barroso 1	7.562	4.394				
Barroso 2	6.758	4.438				
Juncker	7.854	5.066				

Notes: Prodi $N = 318$; Barroso 1 $N = 198$; Barroso 2 $N = 708$; Juncker $N = 132$. *** $p < 0.001$; * $p < 0.05$.

outdoes the rest of his Commission on both indicators of politicization (in other words, he is more charismatic and less technical than his Commissioners), the same is not true for the other two Presidents. Juncker is less charismatic but also less technical than the average of his Commissioners, while Barroso is both less charismatic and more technical than

Table 5: Commissioners' Linguistic Charisma and Technicality by Thematic Cluster – ANCOVA Results

	Charisma mean	SD	Univariate	Technicality mean	SD	Univariate	N
<i>Agriculture and fisheries</i>	F(3, 736)			F(3, 736)			
Prodi	153.724	44.533	3.352*	-110.193	61.694	7.118***	269
Barroso 1	149.960	33.829		-122.390	41.612		361
Barroso 2	156.909	28.191		-122.242	31.966		107
Juncker	131.848	15.606		-58.050	42.606		4
	F(3, 745)			F(3, 745)			
<i>Energy and environment</i>							
Prodi	148.288	37.745	14.001***	-101.491	39.239	34.791***	136
Barroso 1	145.303	41.262		-79.595	44.110		251
Barroso 2	157.147	40.384		-104.071	43.118		236
Juncker	128.818	39.289		-60.283	49.305		127
	F(3, 394)			F(3, 394)			
<i>Research and human capital</i>							
Prodi	139.254	41.265	2.605 ns	-103.336	48.452	6.242***	71
Barroso 1	149.015	33.049		-115.807	36.544		181
Barroso 2	148.805	40.283		-103.238	46.421		125
Juncker	133.468	32.883		-78.267	49.364		22
	F(3, 728)			F(3, 728)			
<i>Regional and social policy</i>							
Prodi	155.176	33.397	14.677***	-106.688	36.644	28.799***	166
Barroso 1	146.874	34.374		-105.449	39.486		272
Barroso 2	142.463	34.826		-93.805	46.466		180
Juncker	127.612	36.668		-62.715	47.619		115
	F(3, 808)			F(3, 808)			
<i>Internal justice, security, and safety</i>							
Prodi	154.634	30.631	9.535***	-111.889	42.446	24.293***	187
Barroso 1	133.827	40.400		-89.575	43.502		210
Barroso 2	145.391	40.576		-102.341	43.825		242
Juncker	136.840	36.647		-68.760	48.180		174
	F(3, 429)			F(3, 429)			

Table 5: (Continued)

	Charisma mean	SD	Univariate	Technicality mean	SD	Univariate	N
<i>Budget and administration</i>							
Prodi	142.874	60.434	7.067***	-94.013	54.323	11.736***	55
Barroso 1	148.905	31.398		-110.794	41.576		212
Barroso 2	158.334	36.211		-115.157	37.475		114
Juncker	130.714	29.282		-78.691	42.149		53
	F(3, 613)			F(3, 613)			
<i>Macroeconomic affairs</i>							
Prodi	139.414	44.265	36.577***	-87.397	47.260	48.843***	84
Barroso 1	144.066	34.328		-93.151	36.034		124
Barroso 2	141.835	33.723		-93.898	50.816		168
Juncker	109.514	35.538		-45.323	41.889		242
	F(3, 1,625)			F(3, 1,625)			
<i>Economic development and regulation</i>							
Prodi	146.467	36.258	3.296*	-91.696	40.009	20.739***	497
Barroso 1	143.670	37.730		-103.766	42.929		616
Barroso 2	149.198	36.617		-104.816	46.267		384
Juncker	141.316	23.950		-82.922	34.351		133
	F(3, 1,468)			F(3, 1,468)			
<i>External relations</i>							
Prodi	164.061	33.033	3.781*	-120.861	41.127	7.292***	403
Barroso 1	155.992	35.597		-108.943	41.315		674
Barroso 2	160.657	35.888		-115.349	40.590		377
Juncker	156.572	33.173		-92.158	54.628		19

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, ns = non-significant.

his Commissioners, in both his terms. Looking at these results, in sum, there does not seem to be a clear ‘politicization quotient’ inherent in the Presidency as compared to the rest of the college.

To further delve into the examination of the Commissioners, we also ask whether the differences in linguistic charisma and technicality observed across the four Commissions remain uniform across policy areas or, on the contrary, we can identify specific parts of the Commission that are more responsible than others for the overall results. Due to the changing configuration of Commission portfolios over time, we cannot answer this question at the level of single Commissioners. As a second-best solution, we conduct ANCOVAs on nine thematic clusters gathering adjacent portfolios (clustering details are presented in Online Appendix C).

The cluster-level analysis results presented in Table 5 reveal a few interesting deviations from our overall findings, in particular concerning the Prodi and Barroso 2 Commissions. As regards linguistic charisma, the former scores lower than the latter in six of the nine clusters. This in turn suggests that the Prodi Commission’s higher overall scores are pulled for the most part by the remaining three clusters: regional and social policy; internal justice, security and safety; and external relations. Trends in linguistic technicality also show a number of deviations from overall results when examined at the cluster level, although in this case without any obvious pull of the overall results on the part of a minority of clusters.

What is more interesting in these results, however, is that the Juncker Commission scores the lowest in charisma and the highest in technicality across the entire set of thematic clusters. The results are statistically significant at various levels, with the sole exception of the charisma ANCOVA on the research and human capital cluster. This confirms, once again, the surprisingly low degree of linguistic politicization of the Juncker Commission compared to its predecessors, which we have observed across all foregoing analyses.

Discussion and Conclusion

To recap, our analysis of the Commission’s speeches in the two decades between 1999 and 2019 has revealed, on the whole, a decrease in charismatic language, and an increase in technical language over time. These results are statistically significant, robust across the two indicators, and consistent across the three analyses conducted on, respectively, the entire colleges, the EC Presidents, and the Commissioners. Finally, our cluster-based comparison of the four Commissions has revealed no notable idiosyncrasy in the distribution of linguistic charisma and technicality across different portfolio groups (with the only partial exception of the Prodi/Barroso 2 comparison vis-à-vis charisma, discussed above). Going back to our research question, these results indicate, contrary to expectations, that the EC has generally become *less* political in its communication over the period under exam, with linguistic politicization reaching its lowest point with the Juncker Commission.

What do these findings mean when read against the existing debate on Commission politicization overviewed at the beginning of the article? We sketch two possible interpretations, roughly corresponding to the two analytical functions of language mentioned above, namely to provide information on how the Commission: a) perceives; and b)

presents itself. These readings are not to be seen necessarily as mutually exclusive. In fact, it is realistic to think that the dynamics described by them may coexist, with either of them prevailing depending on what specific components of the Commission (down to its individual members), policy areas, or aspects of its decision-making process one focuses on. Further research, more qualitative and in-depth in nature, should identify the likelihood of each of these two interpretations, and their respective scope of applicability.

The first, and simpler, interpretation is one that takes language as a genuine reflection of the way the Commission sees its own nature, objectives, and overall place within the EU. This type of information is particularly precious in the case of the EC, whose overall setup remains, as mentioned above, a mixture technical and political aspects despite all its recent transformations. In this ambiguous context, the analysis of EC politicization hinges to a significant degree on an assessment of the preferences behind the actions of the Commission, and ultimately on the latter's self-perception as an institution (Tortola, 2020b). In this reading, language is then to be seen as a dimension of politicization that is at least as important as the remaining three – institutional, policy, and individual – and contributes with them to the overall measurement of EC politicization. The conclusion we should draw, in light of our empirical results, is that the Commission has simply not politicized as much as many observers claim, and especially not during Juncker's term. In problematizing EC politicization, this interpretation would support more skeptical takes in the literature, which acknowledge recent politicizing transformation in the Commission's structure and policies, but nonetheless caution against generalizing from these – not least because the Commission has, at the same time, also acquired stronger technocratic powers, for instance as part of the European Semester (for example Christiansen, 2016; Tömmel, 2020). Needless to say, this interpretation would also alleviate any normative challenge arising from politicization, in the first place those related to the lack of adequate institutional and extra-institutional mechanisms to make a more distinctly political Commission fully representative of and accountable to European voters (Follesdal and Hix, 2006).

A limit of the foregoing interpretation is that it does not have much to say about the generally negative correlation between the EC's politicization as measured through the three more traditional criteria and its linguistic politicization, which we have observed in this study. In order to make sense of this aspect, we need to switch to a more 'representational' view of language, in which the latter indicates not so much how the Commission sees itself as the way in which it presents itself to the external world. In this second interpretation, our findings on linguistic politicization do not clash with the prevailing takes, but on the contrary confirm and complement them. The Commission has indeed become a more political actor over time, in institutional, policy and individual terms. However, it has counterbalanced these transformations at the rhetorical level by employing an increasingly depoliticized public language, so as to underplay or even hide its actual politicization. This could be seen as a generalized version of the strategy of discursive disguise highlighted by Schmidt (2016) in her analysis of the Commission's 'stealthy' macroeconomic initiatives during the euro crisis.

This linguistic strategy, in turn, may serve a number of objectives, of which two seem most plausible: first, minimizing the politico-institutional conflicts with actors whose role may be threatened by a more political Commission, above all member states and the Council; second, mitigating the legitimacy issues that may emerge as the EC moves

towards a supra-national executive model in the absence of fully fledged and functioning mechanisms of democratic representation and accountability (Tsakatika, 2005; Rauh *et al.*, 2020; Schimmelfennig, 2020). We would posit, however, that this more self-reflective logic of language can also be applied in reverse: for a Commission that is deemed less political as measured through traditional criteria – for instance the colleges led by Barroso – using a more politicized language may be a way to seek a higher and more assertive profile, in the eyes of other political actors or the wider European audience (Pansardi, 2018; Bunea, 2020).

Regardless of which interpretation one chooses, our findings confirm that politicization is a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon, the various dimension of which, moreover, do not always move in unison. This, in turn, should call for greater analytical depth and nuance in the study of this subject. Our conclusion pertains most immediately to cases in which the Commission is seen as turning more political, as we have demonstrated extensively in the case of Juncker – whose oft-cited politicization claim is, ironically, inconsistent with both interpretations of our findings. But it should equally caution us against labelling too quickly a Commission as non-political. This latter observation might apply to the current Commission led by Ursula von der Leyen, whose appointment – done, among other things, in violation of the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure – has been depicted by many as a blow to the longstanding process of EC politicization (for example Keating, 2019). It is still too soon for a comprehensive assessment of the von der Leyen Commission; however, we should not dismiss the possibility that it could find alternative routes of politicization, including a communicative one. This is particularly the case given the times of crisis the European Union is once again facing due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which may open new opportunities for the exercise of political initiative, including from the European Commission.

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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 A: Validation of the four technicality constructs;

APPENDIX B: Commissioners' linguistic charisma and technicality – ANCOVA and MANCOVA results;

APPENDIX C: European Commission thematic clusters.