Politicisation, Business Lobbying, and the Design of Preferential Trade Agreements

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Politicisation in Comparison: Actor Responses to Contestation in Transatlantic Trade Politics

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Abstract
Our paper addresses the question of how governments respond to the politicisation of preferential trade agreements (PTA). How have governments responded to business interest mobilisation while negotiating PTAs? Moreover, if there has been an increase in the salience of a trade agreement, has this changed the government response? First, we assess politicisation in terms of the mobilisation patterns of private sector interests during PTA negotiations. Our central argument is that governments liberalise more when a broad range of business interests involving a large number of sectors mobilise in response to trade negotiations, as this would provide legitimacy to their policy positions. Second, we study governments’ reactions to the level of salience of the trade agreement at hand. We argue that governments liberalise less when the agreement in question is highly salient and provokes increased public debate. We take an actor-centred and comparative approach to our research questions and use a novel dataset of 157 PTAs covering the period from 2005 to 2018. Both of our hypotheses are supported by our analysis. Our results also reveal an important difference between PTA ‘depth’ and ‘rigidity’, which are often perceived as closely correlated in assessing trade openness.

Key words: business interests, contestation, issue salience, mobilisation
Introduction

Trade has caused some of the fiercest public debates in the last decades. Both the complex nature of economic arguments on trade agreements and the competing social objectives involved in trade contribute to the politicisation of the issue (Rodrik, 2018b). The ever-expanding trade agenda amplifies these aspects. Although trade has always had implications for social norms, from the mid-1990s its inherent political content gained wider popular resonance (Eagleton-Pierce, 2019: 7). Trade became much more visible since 1994, with the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the establishment in 1995 of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), and the 1999 Seattle protests which argued explicitly that the WTO suffered from a democratic deficit. Importantly, the new generation trade agreements such as Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) go beyond customs duties, involve issue areas such as regulatory standards or access to government procurement and have more complex distributional and social implications. As a result, trade agreements are no longer being discussed only by experts, and can easily become the centre of heated public debates, which provide a promising area of research. In the recent years, scholars have started focusing particularly on how trade became ‘trade and’, and how new concepts such as ‘democracy’, ‘environment’ or ‘beyond-the border regulation’ gained prominence over time (e.g., Dingwerth & Weinhardt, 2019).

As part of this Special Issue, we adopt an actor-centred perspective and ask: How have governments responded to business interest mobilisation while negotiating trade agreements? Moreover, if there has been an increase in the salience of the trade agreement at hand, has this changed the government response? In answering these questions, we are firstly interested in understanding governments’ reactions to diverse versus concentrated interests. We argue that governments liberalise more when a broad range of business interests (rather than concentrated, vested interests) mobilise in response to trade negotiations, as this provides legitimacy to their policy positions. Secondly, we are interested in studying governments’ reactions to the level of salience of trade agreements. Our argument is that governments liberalise less when the agreement in question has high salience and provokes increased public debate. Finally, we also question whether high levels of salience affect the impact of diverse interests on government action. Exploring this interaction effect, we propose that governments are less keen to liberalise if a high degree of
salience is combined with a wide range of business interests, since salience incentivises governments to be more responsive to public interests.

We take a comparative approach to our research questions and use a dataset of 157 international preferential trade agreements (PTA) covering the period from 2005 to 2018. Our sample of PTAs is drawn from version 2.1. of the Design of Trade Agreements (DESTA) database and brings together all PTAs included in DESTA for this period (Dür et al., 2014). Our objective is not to examine why trade agreements are formed, but why some agreements favour greater trade liberalisation than others. To capture the degree of ‘trade openness’, we rely on ‘depth’ (i.e., the strength of commitments) and ‘rigidity’ (i.e., the degree to which countries cannot escape their commitments) from the DESTA database. The reasoning is that there is high trade openness, i.e., high trade liberalisation, when trade agreements are deep and do not allow governments to back out of their obligations, although research has found that deep agreements are often more flexible than they are rigid (Rosendorff & Milner, 2001; Baccini et al., 2015). To measure business interest mobilisation patterns and issue salience, in turn, we use a novel dataset gathered using Factiva and searching news media articles within a specific time-period.

We find support for our first two hypotheses when we conceptualise trade liberalisation based on a PTA’s ‘depth’, in other words, based on the amount of liberalisation the agreement entails. We find that governments are indeed more likely to negotiate a more liberalised PTA when business interest mobilisation involves a large and diverse set of interests and is not concentrated around just a few private sector actors operating in a small number of industries. Moreover, we show that high levels of PTA salience not only increase the probability of negotiating a PTA with limited degree of trade liberalisation but also decrease the probability of negotiating a PTA with high degree of trade liberalisation. For our third hypothesis, we find that salience levels do not change the impact of business interest mobilisation on government decisions.

Our three hypotheses also help us tackle the issue of reverse causality, in other words, the idea that greater PTA liberalisation leads to more diverse mobilisation patterns. Our second and third hypotheses allow a nuanced understanding of the relationships between these concepts. If such reverse causality was the case, we would see an association between high PTA liberalisation, high business diversity and high issue salience. We do not find evidence of such a pattern.
Furthermore, we find that none of our hypotheses are supported when we rely on ‘rigidity’ as the main feature of trade liberalisation. This implies that the ‘depth’ and ‘rigidity’ of a PTA are not necessarily interchangeable, which is consistent with the findings of Baccini et al. (2015). Although trade openness is conceptualised as a combination of these two dimensions, often pitching deep and rigid agreements against shallow and flexible ones, these two concepts do not operate in the same way.

This Special Issue conceptualises politicisation as a combination of an increase in salience (including actor expansion) and contestation (including polarisation) (De Bièvre et al. in press). In our contribution, we focus only on the first (salience) and not on the latter (contestation). But we focus on salience by studying two different aspects of it. The first is an increase in salience in terms of the expansion of actors (increase in the diversity of business interests mobilised), while the second is an increase in salience through media attention (increase in salience of the PTA). As such, we expect increased politicisation to have a differential impact on PTA liberalisation: politicisation (through actor expansion) leading to higher trade liberalisation while politicisation (through increased salience) leading to lower trade liberalisation. Our analysis also assesses the relationship between these two components, actor expansion and salience, testing whether the combination of high-level salience and a wide variety of business interests would trigger a different (more conservative) governmental reaction toward trade agreements. We do not, however, find evidence of such an impact.

Below, we first review the growing literature on the determinants of trade liberalisation. We then examine how trade liberalisation is also determined by business interest mobilisation and issue salience. Next, we present our research design and discuss our results, concluding with potential avenues for future research. Our findings have implications for the future of trade agenda, and the mobilisation and politicisation patterns around PTAs.

Explaining PTA Liberalisation

 Preferential trade agreements have been on the rise for decades, with a significant increase occurring in the 1990s resulting from the ambitions of the European Union (EU) and the United States (US) to negotiate agreements with different sets of trade partners and to go

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1 We take a limited view of ‘actor expansion’ in this particular paper. Our focus is the diversity of business interests and not that of non-business actors such as civil society organisations.
beyond the obligations set by the GATT and WTO (Brown, 2017). PTAs, insofar as they reduce obstacles both at and behind the border, result in deepening economic integration between countries (Lawrence, 1996). The growth of PTAs throughout the world has prompted researchers to study the formation of PTAs (e.g., Fernandez & Portes, 1999; Mansfield, 1998; Mansfield and Milner 2012), as well as their effects on trade flows (e.g., Kohl & Trojanowska, 2015; Kohl et al., 2016), foreign investment (e.g., Gamso & Grosse 2021; Lechner 2016; Osnago et al., 2019), environmental protection (e.g., Martinez-Zarzoso & Oueslati, 2018) and firms’ revenue across different types of labour market institutions (Baccini et al., 2022).

Existing studies often place strong emphasis on countries’ political characteristics to explain why some countries are more open to international trade than others, as well as the characteristics of trade agreements (Chase, 2005; Grossman and Helpman, 2005; Ehrlich, 2008; Manger, 2009; Mansfield & Milner, 2012; Vicard, 2012; Allee & Elsig, 2017; Eckhardt & Lee, 2018; Postnikov & Bastiaens 2020). For instance, ‘domestic institutions are important determinants of the design of international institutions and international organizations (Manseld et al., 2008)’ (cited in Baccini et al., 2013: 14). Similarly, Vicard (2012), in his analysis of regional trade agreements (RTA), argues that the development of trade agreements is primarily determined by geopolitical factors such as interstate conflicts. Specifically, he suggests that pairs of countries involved in many interstate disputes and that have low trade costs are naturally more open to trade and are more likely to create deep trade agreements to pacify interstate relations. Pointing to the role of regime type, Mansfield and Milner (2012) show that democratic countries are more likely to favour liberalisation than autocratic countries. The rationale is that signing a trade agreement demonstrates to voters that governmental leaders are committed to adopting measures and implementing policies that promote their welfare. Majoritarian governments, as opposed to proportional governments, are also more likely to favour protectionism, according to Grossman and Helpman (2005). Their explanation is that majoritarian electoral systems represent fewer electoral districts and are, therefore, likely to maximise the welfare of those districts. Allee and Elsig (2017) add to this literature by examining the role of veto players, which are defined as domestic political actors whose approval is needed to pass legislation. More veto players, they show, are associated with fewer liberalisation commitments, weaker dispute settlement and more opt-outs in the form of trade remedies.
Explanations emphasising the role of economic factors in trade liberalisation are also prevalent in the literature. Examining the utility gains derived from a PTA between pairs of countries, Baier and Bergsrand (2004) identify several key determinants of trade liberalisation. In particular, they find that countries are more likely to develop trade agreements if their transportation costs are low, and if their economies are large and similar. For instance, Baccini et al. (2013: 14) note that ‘[l]arger and richer countries might be able to negotiate agreements with a higher degree of depth and less flexibility compared to poorer or smaller countries.’ Other economic determinants of trade agreements include foreign direct investment and countries’ participation in global value chains (Manger, 2009; Baccini & Dür, 2015; Osgood, 2018). While studies placing an emphasis on countries’ political and economic characteristics provide compelling arguments, they mostly overlook the role of private interests.

On the other hand, explanations of trade liberalisation based on private interest pressures tend to overlook governments’ role. Several scholars argue that trade agreements are shaped by the preferences of the most powerful interests, such as trade unions or, more commonly, business groups (Grossman & Helman, 2002; Dür, 2008; Chase, 2008; Manger, 2009; Eckhardt & Lee, 2018; Kucik, 2012; Lechner, 2016; Raess et al., 2018). The preferences of business interests, as the evidence suggests, are primarily determined by economic factors, like integration in global value chains or trade balance (Chase, 2003, 2008; Kim, 2017; Osgood, 2017 2018; Eckhardt & Lee, 2018; Anderer et al., 2020; Poletti et al., 2021; Dür et al., 2022). But explaining trade liberalisation as a result of (business) interests’ pressures is only one part of the story. The design of trade agreements is also about policy-makers’ demands for legitimate policy stances in international bargaining. Also missing from the literature is an account of how varied patterns of business mobilisation impact trade liberalisation, particularly when negotiations enter the public spotlight. In what follows, we develop explanations of how the mobilisation of business interest groups and issue salience shape PTA liberalisation.

**Business Diversity and Policy-makers’ Demand for Legitimacy**

The influence of business groups’ mobilisation on trade policy is frequently explained by their possession of critical resources needed by decision-makers (Fordham & McKeown, 2003; Dür and De Bièvre, 2007; Dür, 2008; Eckhardt & Poletti, 2016). When it comes to access to
decision-makers (i.e., a prerequisite to influencing policy), business group representatives often possess valuable technical expertise, allowing for a mutual exchange of information for influence (Bouwen, 2002). Trade is frequently regarded as a highly technical policy issue due to the regulation of the risks it involves (e.g., protecting public health and the environment in trade agreements) and its economic consequences (Colli & Kerremans, 2021). Business influence can also be explained by the logic of collective action (Olson, 1965), which posits that concentrated interests more easily mobilise than diffuse interests like consumer protection groups. But research has demonstrated that diffuse interests more easily articulate their concerns and policy positions than specific business groups (De Bruycker et al., 2019).

Another critical source of business influence is the plurality and diversity of actors in lobbying (e.g., Atikcan & Chalmers, 2019). Examining financial industry groups, Pagliari and Young (2014) show that when specific business interests are able to tie their interests to those of other private sector groups, this helps them to amplify, or ‘leverage’, their influence over the policy-making process. They argue that diversity in lobbying notably means more contacts and channels of access to the policy-making process, increasing influence. They also contend that plural mobilisation indicates widespread support of the claims made by business interests, legitimising their demands. The relationship between diversity and influence is, however, far from being a linear one (Pagliari & Young, 2014: 586). A greater diversity of mobilising actors also has the potential to limit influence since it implies increased competition between conflicting interests (Olson, 1965; Schattschneider, 1975; Salisbury, 1992; Chalmers, 2015).

But decisions over trade liberalisation are not only a matter of business interests’ mobilisation and competition (or lack of it). As Woll compellingly argues (2007, 2008, 2012, 2013), influence eventually depends on how business demands fit into governments’ strategies. As such, the link between business lobbying and governments’ decision is far from one of unilateral influence. The design of trade agreements is notably about policy-makers’ demands for legitimate policy stances in international bargaining. To prevail in international negotiations, governments assign great value to the legitimacy of the policy positions they defend and actively seek to establish coalitions (Woll, 2013). They also seek to avoid legitimacy loss, protest, and electoral retribution (De Bruycker, 2020). Importantly, the mobilisation of a greater number of diverse business interests reduces the risk of undue
business influence, while increasing the likelihood that regulation reflects more legitimate processes of policy-making (Tyler, 1994; Underhill & Zhang, 2008; Mattli & Woods 2009; Chalmers, 2015). This does not mean that diverse business interests systematically and uniformly support free trade. It is likely that some business actors will advocate for increased trade liberalisation, especially as the globalisation of production has led new companies to support free trade (Anderer et al., 2020), and regulatory changes promoting competition have altered firm identity (Woll, 2008). While diverse business actors may campaign for greater trade liberalisation, they can also be divided on the matter, especially import-competing and expert-oriented interests (Dür et al., 2022). However, broad mobilisation patterns mean that diverse groups are involved and heard by governments, bringing legitimacy to these processes vis-à-vis domestic actors.² Governments can then defend the interests that are aligned most closely with their agenda (Woll, 2013). Apart from withdrawing from or renegotiating trade agreements, governments would not start trade negotiations if they were not inclined to liberalise in the first place. According to this argument, governments liberalise more when a broad range of business interests mobilise in response to trade negotiations since this business diversity undergirds and legitimises their trade preferences for greater liberalisation. Conversely, if a limited number of interest groups representing concentrated, vested interests mobilise, governments may be more hesitant to liberalise. Taken together, these points lead to the following hypothesis:

\[ H1: \text{The greater the diversity of business interests mobilising to lobby a PTA, the greater the degree of PTA liberalisation}. \]

Salience

Alongside the diversity and concentration of business interests, the degree of PTA liberalisation can also be shaped by issue salience to which governments respond. Research suggests that, in the context of highly politicised negotiations, governments are particularly responsive to the public’s interests (Zürn, 2004; Rauh, 2019; De Burycker, 2020; Hurrelmann and Wendler, 2023). All definitions of politicisation involve expansion of the scope of conflict, making an issue the subject of public debate (e.g., Grande & Hutter, 2016; Hutter et al. 2016; Wilde & Zürn, 2012; de Wilde et al., 2016).

² Domestic legitimacy also has implications at the international level because it can be used to strengthen the government’s stance in trade negotiations.
The literature has widely shown how, in the context of the EU trade agreement negotiations in particular, there has been significant domestic political turmoil (Dür & Mateo, 2014; Bauer, 2016; Ciofu & Stefanuta, 2016; Siles-Brügge, 2017; Eliasson & Garcia-Duran, 2017; Eliasson & Garcia-Duran Huet, 2018; De Bièvre, 2018; Gheyle & De Ville, 2019). This increase in salience takes place in a broader context in which developed countries appear to be experiencing a reaction against globalisation and, importantly, the delegation of authority to international institutions (Rodrik, 2018a; Zürn et al. 2012; Zürn, 2014; Grande & Hutter, 2016). This backlash is the consequence of numerous and complex factors, and it has resulted in different degrees of salience across PTAs and across countries (de Wilde et al., 2016; Hurrelmann et al., 2019; De Vries et al., 2021). Thus, the emergence of a more sceptical public opinion regarding the benefits of free trade (Elsig et al., 2019) and its compatibility with the pursuit of legitimate domestic policy goals (Rodrik, 2018a; Gheyle & De Ville, 2019) is key in understanding PTA liberalisation. Dür et al. (2019) argue that this has the potential to trigger more protectionist trade policy preferences while making it more difficult for policy-makers to negotiate mutually beneficial trade agreements. In other words, governments might be less willing to liberalise when trade negotiations are under the public spotlight. These insights lead to the following hypothesis:

**H2: The greater the salience of the trade negotiations, the lesser the degree of PTA liberalisation.**

The increasing salience of a PTA also has implications for how business group mobilisation affects liberalisation (e.g. Dür and Matteo, 2023). As increasing salience incentivises governments to be more responsive to public interests, business mobilisation become less important (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Culpepper 2010; Trumbull, 2012; Woll, 2013). In contrast, when trade agreements are discussed out of the public eye, business mobilisation patterns are far more important for governments’ strategy, and the degree of PTA liberalisation pursued by governments is positively related to the mobilisation of diverse business groups. Increased salience thus makes the public interests a central determinant of trade liberalisation, reducing the positive effect of business groups diversity. The insights lead to our final hypothesis:

**H3: As the salience of the trade negotiations increases, there is a decreasingly positive effect of business diversity mobilisation on PTA liberalisation.**
Table 1, below, maps out the relationship between the mobilisation of diverse business interests, issue salience, and PTA liberalisation.

**Table 1. Business diversity, Salience and Liberalisation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Business diversity</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>High</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Salience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low liberalisation (H1)</td>
<td>High liberalisation (H1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low Liberalisation (H2)</td>
<td>Low liberalisation (H3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Research Design**

We test our hypotheses using a novel dataset of 157 international preferential trade agreements spanning the period 2005 to 2018. Our sample of PTAs was drawn from the Design of Trade Agreements (DESTA) database and constitutes all PTAs included in version 2.1. of DESTA for our time period (Dür et al., 2014). DESTA provides an impressively comprehensive list of PTAs by bringing together information from the World Trade Organization, the World Trade Institute, the Organization of American States’ Foreign Trade Information System, the Asia Regional Integration Centre, the World Bank as well as a systematic web search of foreign, trade, and economic ministries (DESTA codebook, p.1). Our time period corresponds to data availability on our indicators for business lobbying and salience, which we detail below, as well as the relative lack of variation in DESTA indicators, especially as it pertains to our key independent variables, prior to 2000.³ A full list of all PTAs included in our analysis can be found in our appendix. It is important to note that we only include negotiations and PTAs that have been agreed upon by all signatories in our analysis. A study of the causes of failed agreements is beyond the scope of this paper. However, we argue that this is not an issue for our analysis as we primarily aim to examine the factors determining liberalisation in trade agreements rather than agreements’ formation. Finally, a key assumption we make regarding hypothesis 1 is that governments engaging in trade

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³ Consider that ‘the depth of PTAs remained relatively stable for half a century after the end of World War II (with considerable variation across agreements) but has increased significantly over the last twenty years’ (Dür et al. 2014, 360).
agreements have some inclination to liberalise trade. In other words, compared to the status quo of no trade agreement, any trade agreement will mark some degree of trade liberalisation. This assumption is consistent with DESTA, which aims to assemble data on agreements that ‘have the potential to liberalise trade’ (DESTA codebook, p.1). This necessarily excludes withdrawn or amended PTAs.4

Dependent Variable: PTA Liberalisation – Depth and Rigidity

Testing our hypotheses requires data on degrees of PTA liberalisation. What is trade liberalisation and how can we measure it? A growing body of research, primarily interested in investigating the factors shaping the content of PTAs, has made some headway in operationalising degrees of liberalisation or ‘trade openness’ (e.g., Allee & Elsig, 2017; Raess et al., 2018). The two main dimensions of PTA liberalisation generally distinguished by scholars are ‘depth’ and ‘rigidity’. While depth refers to strength of commitments, rigidity refers to the amount of state discretion. Together, depth and rigidity characterise liberalisation. First, depth is the average tariff cuts required from states (Baccini et al., 2015: 766). Other barriers that a deep trade deal may remove include cumbersome technical requirements, inadequate protection of intellectual property rights, and competition rules that discriminate against foreign traders. Second, rigidity prevents states from breaching their liberalisation commitments. Common constraints include time and size limits on any new entry barriers as well as restrictions on the goods that can be targeted by an action (Kucik, 2012: 99). As opposed to rigidity provisions, flexibility provisions are devices included in an agreement that allow states to anticipate and respond to domestic contingencies, or to adjust their policies for other purposes (Baccini et al., 2015). According to Downs et al., (1996), enforcement is necessary to deepen interstate cooperation. Bearce et al. (2016) furthermore suggest that PTAs including some rigidity increase trade more than flexible PTAs. Shallow and flexible agreements thus tend to restrict liberalisation and favour protectionism, whereas deep and rigid agreements tend to favour liberalisation.

Following the literature, and using indicators from the DESTA dataset,5 we operationalise PTA liberalisation in terms of Depth and Rigidity. Depth is operationalised in

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4 One example of a PTA that marks less liberalisation is the USMCA. However, this is an example of a renegotiated or amended PTA (the base trade is NAFTA) and would not be included in our analysis.

5 DESTA data can be found here: https://www.designoftradeagreements.org/ (accessed 2.9.2022).
the DESTA dataset as an additive index comprising seven provisions that can be included in a PTA. ‘The first provision captures whether the agreement foresees that all tariffs (with limited exceptions) should be reduced to zero (that is, whether the aim is to create a full free trade area). The other six provisions capture cooperation that goes beyond tariff reductions, in areas such as services trade, investments, standards, public procurement, competition and intellectual property rights. For each of these areas, we code whether the agreement contains any substantive provisions. A substantive provision, for example, is a national treatment clause in the services chapter. A statement that the contracting parties desire to open their services markets, by contrast, does not count as a substantive provision’ (Dür et al., 2014: 359). Depth ranges from 0 to 7, with higher values indicating more depth and hence greater liberalisation. Next, we assess Rigidity using the index Rigidity in the DESTA data set. Rather than measuring rigidity specifically, this index captures the rigidity of flexibility clauses, providing a sense of the extent to which states are constrained and cannot escape their obligations. This is an index comprising eight indicators related to rules on the use of antidumping duties, the provision of subsidies, and the use of safeguard provisions (which are used to temporarily suspend some aspect of a PTA to protect a specific domestic industry). Rigidity ranges from 0 to 7, where higher values represent greater rigidity. While we test both Depth and Rigidity as separate dependent variables, we also combine them into one additive Liberalisation index. Figure 1, below, plots the values for all three dependent variables from 2005 to 2018. We can see a moderate degree of correlation between Depth and Rigidity (r = 0.52, p<0.001) with major differences occurring around 2015 when Rigidity suddenly decreases from about 5 to 3 on the original 7-point ordinal scale.
Independent Variables

*Business Diversity*

Our first hypothesis relates to patterns of business lobbying on PTAs. In particular, we are interested in whether business lobbying is *diverse* or *concentrated*. By diverse, we mean a situation where a larger number of business interests from a variety of different sectors of economic activity mobilise in response to PTA negotiations. By concentrated, we mean a situation where only a few business interests largely from the same sector of economic activity mobilise in response to PTA negotiations.

We gather these data using news media articles in Factiva, a searchable index of global media and communications data. Using news media coverage for these purposes is a well-established method for assessing lobbying mobilisation patterns (Bernhagen and Trani, 2012; de Bruycker and Beyer, 2015). While lobbying certainly can take place behind closed doors, diminishing venues providing direct access to decision-makers and a crowded public lobbying space both make gaining prominence in the news media an increasingly important part of business lobbying strategies (Binderkrantz, 2012: 117; see also de Bruycker, 2018).

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6 Factiva can be accessed here: [https://professional.dowjones.com/factiva/](https://professional.dowjones.com/factiva/) (accessed 31.08.2020)
Data collection proceeded in several steps. The first step was creating detailed search strings for each of our 157 PTAs. This included the names of each PTA trade partner within a specific word proximity to two key terms ‘free trade agreement’ and/or ‘FTA’ and finally within a specific time-period, namely 10 years prior to the start of the PTA negotiations and ending when the PTA entered into force.\(^7\) Searching news media articles 10 years prior to the commencement of a PTA’s negotiations acknowledges that lobbying activities can long precede the official start date of negotiations. Our search criteria include all types of news media sources but was limited to English language news. This, we argue, is justified since we are concerned with how business located in both trade partner countries mobilise in response to the specifics of PTA negotiations. Indeed, many of the business interests that lobby on a PTA are multinationals, operating in several and sometimes a great number of different countries. These activities would be mainly reported in internationally oriented English-language trade media sources. In the appendix, we also present detailed information on the trade partners involved in each PTA, showing that there are are only five instances where both partners are English speaking, which decreases chances of a systematic bias.\(^8\) We were also very careful to ensure that only relevant news sources became part of our dataset. Research assistants performed quality control measures on our search results, manually filtering out any news media articles that were not relevant to the specific PTA in question. Our search strings and filtering method resulted in a conservative measure of news media attention for each PTA.

In a second step, we downloaded data from Factiva’s ‘Discovery Pane’, which provides aggregated data of the search results including a list of the specific ‘economic industries’ mentioned in each article. Factiva automatically classifies companies mentioned in news articles (i.e., reported statements and actions) according to their industry. Factiva takes a very broad view of economic industry, ranging from the production of accessories for electronic goods to the manufacturing of wooden furniture. A total of 489 different industries were mentioned in relation to our sample of PTAs. To consolidate these data, we coded industries

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\(^7\) An example search string for a bilateral PTA is this: ((free trade agreement or FTA) near10 (chile near6 turkey)) or hlp=(free trade agreement near6 (chile and turkey)); and for multilateral PTA: (EFTA or European Free Trade Association or European Union) near10 (free trad* near5 agree*) near5 Canada

\(^8\) We have, however, included a robustness test where we re-ran our main regression models but exclude these five specific PTAs. The results, which are presented in the appendix are, unsurprisingly, very similar to the results for our main regression analysis.
using the International Standard Industrial Classification Scheme (ISIC rev.4), a United Nations system for classifying different sectors of economic activity. The ‘section level’ of the ISIC scheme comprises 21 different economic activities. These range from Agriculture to Manufacturing, and Finance to Transportation. A full overview is provided in the appendix. In a final step, we calculated the diversity of these sectors of economic activity using a Herfindahl index, which takes the sum of the squared proportions of industries mentioned per PTA and produces a single value for Business diversity per PTA. This index ranges from 0 to 1, where values close to 0 reflect concentration (e.g., very few businesses from one dominant industry), while values close to 1 reflect very high levels of diversity (e.g., many different businesses from many different industries). It is important to note that our level of observation is at the ‘sector level’ rather than the level of the individual firm.

Concerns about reverse causation are warranted. It could be argued that trade agreements’ characteristics drive mobilisation patterns (i.e., the greater the liberalisation, the greater the mobilisation of diverse business interests). However, we analyse the role of salience to help reduce this risk of reverse causality, as high salience and high business diversity would then be associated with high liberalisation rather than low.

**Issue Salience**

Our second and third hypotheses are about the impact of PTA salience on PTA liberalisation. We measure Issue salience using data from Factiva, as detailed above. Issue salience is measured as the total number of news media articles for each PTA averaged over the number of years in our media search. It is presented as organised panel data, based on mean issue salience for each PTA and each year. This approach is consistent with existing work using news media data to measure issue salience (Pagliari, 2013; Kastner, 2017).

Figure 2, below, illustrates our two main independent variables, Business diversity and Issue salience, for all PTAs in our dataset and averaged for the years spanning 2005 to 2018. First, there are some significant changes in Business diversity across these years with several large increases in business diversity around 2012 and between 2014 and 2016 but, at the same time, with a more subtle overall trend toward greater business diversity. For Issue salience we can see a major increase in average issue salience around 2015-2016. This is primarily the result of news media coverage of the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP). The TPP, a multilateral trade agreement involving Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan,
Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, and Vietnam, was notable for being highly contested. However, when we exclude TPP from the dataset, we still see a marked increase in issue salience around 2015. Nevertheless, and given that the TPP is a clear outlier for issue salience, we have run several robustness tests in our regression analysis where we exclude the TPP. The results, presented and discussed in the appendix, differ only marginally from analyses that include the TPP.

**Figure 2. Business Diversity and Issue Salience / Year (2005-2018)**

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**Control variables**

Our regression models include several control variables related to the political and economic factors identified above. Since PTAs involve two or more country signatories, many of these control variables are dyadic (i.e., calculated as the difference between signatories). This is straightforward for bilateral PTAs that involve only two country-signatories. For plurilateral PTAs (including three or more country-signatories) we use mean values for all the signatories involved to calculate our indicators. Our first series of control variables relate to political explanations for PTA liberalisation, namely that democratic countries tend to favour PTA liberalisation while autocratic countries tend to favour protectionism (Mansfield and Milner 2012). We operationalise democracy and autocracy using two indicators: *Rule of law* and *Democracy*. In both cases, we expect both indicators to be positively correlated with our dependent variable. *Rule of law* draws on the rule of law indicator from the World Bank Governance Indicators database. Rule of law ‘[r]eflects perceptions of the extent to which
agents have confidence in and abide by the rules of society, and in particular the quality of contract enforcement, property rights, the police, and the courts, as well as the likelihood of crime and violence’.\(^9\) We calculated the differences between each PTA member’s scores using data from the year when PTA negotiations commenced. Democracy uses the ‘polity 2’ indicator from the Polity IV database and measures the differences in scores between PTA signatories. As before, data was collected for the year when PTA negotiations commenced. A third indicator is related to the extent to which government executive branches face constraints from other legislative bodies, i.e., Veto players, when it comes to making decisions about PTAs. High ‘constrained’ executives will enjoy less leeway when it comes to negotiating PTAs and would be less capable of responding to business lobbyists. We created our Veto players indicator using Henisz’s widely-used ‘Political Constraint Index’, in particular POLCONIII, which measures the political constraints on executives in the form of the multiple political actors, including legislative chambers and courts, involved in decision-making processes. Since our data are dyadic, we took the difference in the total number of governmental constraints between trade partners. As with our other variables, for regions, we first took the average for all member state countries and then used this to calculate our indicator.\(^10\)

Next, we include control variables related to economic explanations for PTA liberalisation. First, we control for the Geographical distance (in kilometres) between the state capitals of each PTA signatory. To do this, we use data from the Centre d’Études Prospectives et d’Informations Internationales (CEPII) database.\(^11\) The general expectation is for a negative correlation between distance and PTA liberalisation. Distances between countries also relate to cultural and/or linguistic ‘distance’ (or differences) (Selmier and Oh, 2013). We measure Linguistic proximity between trade partners also using CEPII data. In this case, Linguistic proximity is based on language tree-differences, and different language’s position on the language tree. More specifically, this variable is measured ‘calculating linguistic proximities on the basis of the Ethnologue classification of language trees between

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\(^10\) A further control variable would relate to security alliances between PTA partners. We coded all 157 PTAs in our dataset to look for instances where both partners were NATO members. Interestingly there were no instances where this was the case, leading to no variation.

Linguistic proximity values range from 0 to 3. A value of 0 is given when two languages belong to separate family trees, 1 when two languages belong to different branches of the same family tree (e.g., English and French), 2 when two languages belong to the same language tree branch (e.g., English and German), and 3 when two languages belong to the same sub-branch (e.g., German and Dutch). Finally, we also control for GDP difference, which is measured as the difference between each country-signatories’ GDP (constant 2010 US$). Data for this were gathered from the World Bank Development Indicators. As noted above, the basic expectation is for a positive correlation with PTA liberalisation. Next, we control for export dependence between trade partners. Using World Bank Development Indicators data, we created Export dependence by calculating the average of ‘exports of goods and services (constant 2010 US$)’ at t-1 (i.e., lagged by one year) for PTA partners. For regions, like the EU and ASEAN, we first took the average for all member state countries and then used this to calculate our indicator. We did the same for FDI dependence, this time using ‘foreign direct investment, net inflows (% of GDP)’ from the World Bank Development Indicators dataset. Unfortunately, the inclusion of these final two control variables significantly reduces the number of observations in our regression analysis (~ 62%, going from 157 to just 97). This also leads to some issues with degrees of freedom. We have thus opted to use Export dependence and FDI dependence in our robustness test, which can be found in the appendix.

Moving beyond these standard political and economic indicators, we also include several control variables in our regression models to aid in dealing with confounding factors. This first includes a control variable for the Number of Business Interests that mobilise on a given PTA. This is measured as the total number of business actors (firms and business associations) mentioned in news media articles averaged over the number of years of our media search. It is important to note that this indicator differs from Business diversity since it does not capture differences in terms of the concentration or diversity of business sectors mobilised during PTA negotiations (the correlation coefficient between the two variables is -0.22, p<0.01). We include this variable to assess whether the raw number of business actors mobilising to lobby on a PTA is driving our results rather than business diversity. Next, several of our control variables are about the characteristics of each PTA and draw on DESTA data.

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First, we include a categorical variable indicating the Geographical Location of the PTA signatories. This comprises six categories: Africa, Americas, Asia, Europe, Oceania, and Intercontinental (i.e., signatories are located across continents). Here our interest is in controlling for differences related to regional trade agreements. Second, we include a categorical variable measuring a PTA’s Type of Agreement according to its membership. This takes one of three categories: Bilateral, Plurilateral, and Plurilateral and third country. While we have no specific theoretical expectations related to this control variable it is important to see if the number of trade partners impacts our results. Next, we add a variable capturing the Length of Negotiations; longer negotiations allow more time for business to mobilise on a given PTA. This control variable is measured as the difference between the date a PTA enters into force and the official start date of PTA negotiations. The average number of years for negotiating a PTA is nearly 5 years. A table of summary statistics for all variables used in this analysis can be found in the appendix.

Analysis

In this section we bring together the data discussed above and test our hypotheses in a series of regression models. Our three dependent variables (Depth, Rigidity, and Liberalisation index) are non-binary ordinal variables. Following best practice in existing studies using the same indicators from the DESTA dataset (Elsig & Klotz, 2021: 32; Allee & Elsig, 2017; Dür et al., 2014) we estimate three ordered probit regression models corresponding to our three different dependent variables: Depth, Rigidity, and Liberalisation index. Testing Depth and Rigidity separately provides insight into how business diversity and issue salience differently affect these different dimensions of PTA liberalisation. Our full regression results are presented in Table 2. Models 1-3 test H1 and H2, and models 3-6 include the interaction term and test H3.

Table 2. Ordered Probit Regression Analysis of the determinants of PTA liberalisation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(1) Depth</th>
<th>(2) Rigidity</th>
<th>(3) Liberalisation</th>
<th>(4) Depth</th>
<th>(5) Rigidity</th>
<th>(6) Liberalisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>H1. Business</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diversity</td>
<td>2.596*</td>
<td>0.940</td>
<td>2.166</td>
<td>3.556*</td>
<td>1.145</td>
<td>3.071*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.07)</td>
<td>(-0.13)</td>
<td>(1.72)</td>
<td>(2.46)</td>
<td>(0.26)</td>
<td>(2.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H2. Issue</strong></td>
<td>0.988*</td>
<td>1.007</td>
<td>1.001</td>
<td>1.016</td>
<td>1.024</td>
<td>1.031</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>saliency</strong></td>
<td>(-2.38)</td>
<td>(1.78)</td>
<td>(0.37)</td>
<td>(0.77)</td>
<td>(1.21)</td>
<td>(1.62)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**H3. Business diversity #**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue salience</th>
<th>0.966</th>
<th>0.980</th>
<th>0.964</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(-1.37)</td>
<td>(-0.89)</td>
<td>(-1.59)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Control variables

<p>| | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rule of law</td>
<td>1.242</td>
<td>1.068</td>
<td>1.152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.47)</td>
<td>(0.45)</td>
<td>(1.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veto players</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(-1.04)</td>
<td>(1.69)</td>
<td>(0.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geo. Distance</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>1.000**</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>(2.87)</td>
<td>(0.95)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linguistic prox.</td>
<td>0.904</td>
<td>0.874</td>
<td>1.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
<td>(-0.49)</td>
<td>(-0.70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>1.054</td>
<td>0.994</td>
<td>1.022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.05)</td>
<td>(-0.13)</td>
<td>(0.48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. business interests</td>
<td>1.060***</td>
<td>0.997</td>
<td>1.012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3.55)</td>
<td>(-0.49)</td>
<td>(1.86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTA type: Bilateral</td>
<td>0.642</td>
<td>0.881</td>
<td>0.689</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(-1.52)</td>
<td>(-0.44)</td>
<td>(-1.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTA type: Plurilateral</td>
<td>1.050</td>
<td>1.194</td>
<td>1.561</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.10)</td>
<td>(0.39)</td>
<td>(1.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region: Americas</td>
<td>6.071*</td>
<td>2.179</td>
<td>5.737*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.25)</td>
<td>(0.96)</td>
<td>(2.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region: Asia</td>
<td>3.858</td>
<td>1.705</td>
<td>3.113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.69)</td>
<td>(0.66)</td>
<td>(1.46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region: Europe</td>
<td>6.416</td>
<td>4.684</td>
<td>9.311*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.85)</td>
<td>(1.52)</td>
<td>(2.27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region: Intercnt.</td>
<td>7.245*</td>
<td>1.266</td>
<td>4.934</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.33)</td>
<td>(0.28)</td>
<td>(1.93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of negotiations</td>
<td>0.949</td>
<td>1.068</td>
<td>0.999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(-1.37)</td>
<td>(1.77)</td>
<td>(-0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exponentiated coefficients; t statistics in parentheses

* Africa is the base category for region

** Plurilateral and third country is the base category for PTA type

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

We are using ordered probit regression models, and hence we can only interpret the statistical significance and ‘direction’ of the regression coefficients. With exponentiated regression coefficients, which are presented in Table 2, a positive effect is indicated by values greater than 1 and a negative effect is indicated by values less than 1. In model 1, using Depth as our dependent variable, we see clear support for hypotheses 1 and 2. Business diversity (where higher values correspond to greater diversity) is positively correlated with Depth, and Issue salience (where higher values correspond to greater salience) is negatively correlated with Depth. In both cases, the effects are statistically significant with p-values less than 0.05.
However, we do not find support for H3, which is tested using an interaction term between Business diversity and Issue salience (models 4-6).

To get a sense of the magnitude of these statistical results, we need to estimate predicted probabilities of the impact Business diversity and Issue salience for our Depth dependent variable. The results, based on model 1, are presented in Figure 3, below. We focus on two extreme outcomes for Depth: outcome 0 is the lowest amount of PTA liberalisation in terms of Depth, and outcome 7 is the highest amount of liberalisation. The y-axis indicates the probability of these two outcomes at different values for our independent variables, which are indicated on the x-axis.

Figure 3. Predicted Probability of Business diversity and Issue salience for PTA Depth

Let us first consider Business diversity on the lefthand side of Figure 3. The general trend across the two outcomes is very little change regardless of the values of Business diversity. Outcome 0 indicates PTAs that do not even meet the first basic provision of PTA liberalisation: tariff reduction with limited exceptions. In Figure 3, we can see that as Business diversity moves from values close to 0, indicating a small and concentrated number of different business interests lobbying on the PTA, to 1, indicating a large and diverse number of very different interests lobbying on the PTA, that the probability of a PTA without tariff reductions decreases by just a few percentage points (from about 5% to less than 1%). For outcome 7,
which corresponds to PTA depth where all seven depth provisions are in place and which indicates an extremely liberalised PTA, an increase in Business diversity from very concentrated (0) to very diverse (1) increases the probability of an extremely liberalised PTA from 12% to more than 30%. In summary, while we are seeing clear evidence supporting H1, the changes in the predicted probabilities are modest.

Changes in the predicted probabilities of PTA Depth are much more pronounced for Issue salience (see the righthand side of Figure 3). For outcome 0, PTA liberalisation is absent and we are seeing a form of trade agreement protectionism. In this case we can see that as Issue salience increases from 0 news media articles to about 1000 articles, the probability of outcome 0 increases by nearly 100%. In real world terms we can say that increases in media salience can significantly increase the probability of a PTA that is more protectionist in nature (i.e., not even involving a reduction in most tariffs). We should note, however, that this effect does appear to require very high levels of issue salience, well above average issue salience on most PTAs in our dataset. The impact of issue salience furthermore indicates a limited risk of reverse causality, although this cannot easily be dismissed. Scholars have shown how the widening scope of trade agreements has attracted the attention of many European civil society organisations (De Ville & Siles-Brügge, 2015; Eliasson & Garcia-Duran Huet, 2019; Ghyele and De Ville, 2019). If PTA characteristics were driving politicisation, more PTA Depth would be associated with increased salience, for which we do not find evidence. Finally, Figure 3 also shows how outcome 7, when PTAs would be most liberalised and would include all seven depth provisions, that issue salience has a pronounced negative impact. The probability of a PTA containing all seven depth provisions decreases from about 32% to nearly 0% as Issue salience increases. To summarise, issue salience can both increase the odds of greater protectionist PTAs (outcome 0) and decreases the odds of more liberalised PTAs (outcome 7).

Returning to our main regression results in Table 2, we can see that our results using Depth as our dependent variable are not consistent with those when replacing that variable with Rigidity or the Liberalisation index. First, model 2 shows no statistically significant differences for the impact of Business diversity or Issue salience on Rigidity. Next, our Liberalisation index shows, as we would expect, a mix of models 1 and 2. In this case, using the Liberalisation index as our dependent variable in model 3, we see support for H1 but not H2 or H3. In other words, we see a positive and statistically significant effect of Business
One key finding here is that Depth and Rigidity, the two key components of PTA liberalisation, are clearly differently impacted by Business diversity and Issue salience. These results are robust across different regression model specifications and using a step-wise approach to the inclusion of our independent and control variables (see appendix). The question is what explains these differences. As discussed above, depth and rigidity are routinely linked with regards to PTA liberalisation. At the same time, however, the causal nature of this relationship is potentially problematic in the context of regression analyses. Rosendorff and Milner (2001) show that countries are less inclined to sign deep agreements which do not provide avenues for escape, i.e., are rigid. Rigidity may thus hinder the formation of deep agreements. Alternatively, deep agreements may lead to increased domestic demands for protection, reducing the degree of rigidity (i.e., increasing the degree of flexibility). As Baccini et al. (2013: 2) point out, it is also the case that ‘depth […] creates demand for more flexibility’. In other words, and using the language of our indicators, Depth may result in less Rigidity which may therefore potentially be a confounding variable in our regression models. Either way, our results call into question assumptions about the correlation between depth and rigidity.

Tellingly, the results for our control variables are also inconsistent across our three regression models. This gives further purchase to our conclusion about the differences between the two components of trade agreement liberalisation, namely Depth and Rigidity. While the Number of business interests that mobilise to lobby on a PTA does seem to significantly increase PTA Depth it does not appear to impact Rigidity. Equally, there are no significant differences when using our Liberalisation index as our dependent variable. We also find that the greater the Geographical distance separating PTA members, the greater PTA Rigidity. PTA members who are further away opt for PTAs that reduce members’ flexibility. However, distance has no significant impact on Depth or the Liberalisation index. Several controls, including Length of negotiations, Linguistic proximity, GDP (difference), and Rule of law (difference) do not seem to be significant determinants of PTA Depth or Rigidity in any of our regression models. Finally, there are some mixed results for the PTA Type and Region.
Politicisation has been studied widely in International Relations and European studies for more than a decade (e.g. Hooghe & Marks, 2012; Hurrelmann et al., 2015; Koopmans & Statham, 2010; Marks & Steenbergen, 2004; Zürn, 2014). Among these studies, politicisation of trade agreements is a substantial field (e.g. De Bièvre, 2018; Dür & Mateo, 2014; De Ville & Siles-Brügge, 2016).

Although there is consensus on the importance of the concept of politicisation, there are only a few studies that empirically tease out the components of politicisation (e.g. Hutter et al., 2016). Along with the rest of the articles in this Special Issue, our actor-centred and comparative approach allows us to analyse policy-makers’ reactions to politicisation in 157 international PTAs. Our results discuss how governments in trade negotiations respond to two components of politicisation: firstly to business interest mobilisation, and secondly to increased salience. We find that governments are more likely to sign a highly liberalised PTA when business interest mobilisation is diverse, involving a large number of sectors from a range of industries. They are also likely to respond to increased salience in making their decision. In cases where the PTA at hand has increased salience, governments are less likely to sign a more liberalised PTA.

Our research design enables us to explore in-depth the relationships between our key variables: PTA liberalisation, diversity of business interests and issue salience. The fact that we do not observe a combination of high PTA liberalisation, high business diversity and high issue salience provides reassurance that the causal relationship among our variables is not reversed. If PTA characteristics were to drive politicisation patterns, we would not see the nuanced relationships we do. The probability of signing a highly liberal PTA increases when there is diverse mobilisation of business interests, but this probability decreases when there is increased salience.

This Special Issue conceptualises politicisation as a combination of an increase in salience (including actor expansion) and contestation (including polarisation) (De Bièvre, Dür, Hamilton, in press). As such, our findings speak to the salience component through both actor expansion (diversity of business interests) and PTA salience. We find that increased politicisation surrounding a PTA does not have a unidirectional impact on governments’

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14 In the definition of politicisation advocated by Hutter et al., (2016: 10), there are three main components: salience, expansion of actors, and polarisation. Our findings speak to salience and actor expansion but not to polarisation.
behaviour. The impact is varied, as discussed in detail above, governments responding to increased actor expansion (business diversity) with more liberalised PTAs, and to increased salience with less liberalised PTAs. Our analysis also tests the relationship between these two angles of salience, actor expansion and PTA salience, to assess whether high PTA salience and a high diversity of business interests would lead to a different (more conservative) governmental reaction toward trade agreements. There is, however, no evidence for such an interaction effect.

Future research could bring the other component of politicisation, contestation (polarisation), into this framework, by collecting data on the ‘direction’ of business interests mobilised. In our dataset, our focus is solely on the diversity and concentration of business interests. A more detailed dataset, with a different theoretical framework, could measure how the specific positions of the different interest groups might affect polarisation patterns, and how governments respond to those dynamics in negotiating trade liberalisation.

Such an approach might also be interesting to study the differences between ‘depth’ and ‘rigidity’, which our study revealed. Arguably, ‘rigidity’ has a more sector-specific content than ‘depth’, and the existing measures do not fully capture the details of the protected sectors. A future, comparative dataset with fine-tuned information on which industries mobilised in which direction on specific PTAs, coupled with additional information on ‘rigidity’ (which specific sectors have been protected in these PTAs), might provide a more nuanced analysis of politicisation (salience and contestation) patterns.

Finally, our results have implications for the future of trade politics. Assuming that the trade agenda will continue to be potentially contentious in the future, it is likely that both the diversity of mobilised business interests and the level of salience will also continue to play a systematic role. But governments appear to react to them differently, by liberalising more when faced with business diversity and liberalising less when faced with higher PTA salience. This suggests that they will continue to be torn in their trade policy, weighing different values against one another.
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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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