The European Committee of the Region's political representation: How does the internal politicization of the CoR influence its political representation of the interests of regional and local governments within the European Union?

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How does the internal politicization of the CoR influence its political representation of the interests of regional and local governments within the European Union?

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Date: 5-1-2024

Number of words: 22186

Abstract

This master thesis investigates the internal politicization of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) and its influence on representing local and regional interests within the EU. Through interviews and a comparative case study, this study challenges assumptions about politicization leading to a prioritization of political party interests over local concerns. Contrary to expectations, findings reveal that internal politicization grants CoR members the freedom to represent both local government interests and those of their political party. The cooperative institutional setting emphasizes substantive representation over symbolic representation, showcasing the CoR's unique role in the European Union. The study addresses a literature gap and contributes valuable insights into the nuanced dynamics of internal politicization within the CoR.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1: European Committee of the Regions

The European Committee of the Regions (CoR), often hailed as the EU's best-kept secret, is an advisory body tasked with representing the interests of regional and local governments within the EU. The CoR is designed to be a consultative body without legislative powers and is officially according to the European treaties not a European 'institution' (Wassenberg, 2019). The CoR has undergone a gradual process of politicization over its nearly thirty years of existence. Both externally through a process of what other scholars call 'institutional activism' (Nicolosi & Mustert, 2020) and internally through a more politicized institutional setting. This thesis will focus on the internal politicization of the CoR. This internal politicization involves a transformation introducing political groups and altering the institutional setting and decision-making structures to accommodate these political groups. Despite its consultative nature, the CoR has more strongly configured itself as a political body, and several members hail the body as a political body instead of an advisory body.

The landscape of European integration has undergone many changes. Moving from a permissive consensus to a constraining consensus which reflects the changing nature of European institutions (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). This evolution sees a departure from the initial technocratic view, where supranational bodies operated with relative autonomy, towards a landscape marked by political contestation and ideological debates (Hooghe & Marks, 2009).

Politicization involves the transformation of non-political or technocratic matters into politically salient ones (Statham & Trenz, 2015), this has left its imprint on the internal operations of major EU institutions. However, little attention has been given to the CoR. This research aims to fill this gap, explaining how politicization within the CoR influences its role as a representative of the interests of local and regional governments.

The puzzle at the heart of this research lies in understanding the implications of the CoR's internal politicization on its main purpose the representation of the interests of regional and local governments. When political parties reached more prominence in the early years of the CoR, some CoR members were worried the CoR would change into what some describe as a European Parliament 'light' (Christiansen & Linter, 2005). With heightened polarization and debates over political interests, questions arose regarding its efficacy in serving as the voice of regional and local governments (Christiansen & Linter, 2005). Concerns have been voiced in literature about this shift potentially compromising the CoR's legitimacy and ability to represent local governments effectively (Christiansen & Linter, 2005).

This potential shift towards prioritizing political party interests over the local and regional government's interests poses a significant challenge. According to some authors politicization can pose a constraint on the effectiveness of EU institutions (Moravcsik, 2004). Public organizations like the CoR are designed to be responsive to the needs and aspirations of the constituencies they represent. If internal politicization results in a distortion of this representation, with political party interests taking precedence, it could undermine the effectiveness and legitimacy of the CoR as a voice for local and regional governments within the EU.

Central to the puzzle is the potential limiting effect internal politicization has on the substantive representation of the interests of local and regional governments. With no prior literature shedding light on this possible effect within the CoR the assumption can be made that the multiple aspects of politicization will take hold in the CoR. These are an expansion of actors, a strong polarization of opinion and intensifying debates. And the political parties will take prominence over the national delegations. With one of the main assumptions being that the politicization process might lead to forms of representation that prioritizes the interests of political parties over the substantive representation of local and regional interests. While existing literature acknowledges the spread of

politicization within the EU and its impact on the CoR's position within the EU decision-making framework (Nicolosi & Mustert, 2020), it falls short in examining how this process alters the internal dynamics of the CoR and its ability to advocate for local and regional governments. This thesis aims to test these assumptions to the empirical reality of the CoR, by interviewing CoR members and delving into the political process of the formulation and adoption of CoR opinions.

Approximately 70 percent of EU policies are implemented by local and regional governments (European Parliament, 2021). The CoR was established to provide these layers of government with a voice in EU decision-making framework (Wassenberg, 2019). Any hindrance to the CoR's effectiveness in representing the interests or implementation concerns of local and regional governments could have consequences on the ability of the EU to effectively implement policies across all levels of governance.

From an academic standpoint, existing literature acknowledges the existence of politicization within the CoR. And significant research has been done on what effect politicization had on the position of the CoR in the EU. The internal politicization of the CoR has been taken effect since the early 2000's and still no literature expands on the effect this had on the internal operations of the CoR, and its representation of the interests of local and regional governments. Therefore, a major gap in literature remains in understanding how politicization influences the CoR's internal operations and how politicization affects its representation of the interests of local and regional governments. Adding to this from a theory-building perspective, very little literature exists on the effect politicization has on political representation. Despite the very specific context of the CoR, this research also aims to provide insights on the theoretical relationship between politicization and political representation.

1.2: Research question

This research seeks to unravel the influence of the internal politicization of the CoR on its representation of the interests of regional and local governments. The central question guiding this thesis is:

How does the internal politicization of the CoR influence its political representation of the interests of regional and local governments within the European Union?

To answer this research question qualitative measures are used, because of the ambiguous nature of both politicization and political representation. First semi-structured interviews have been conducted with CoR members from the Benelux area. And to validate and deepen the findings from the interviews a comparative case study of the formulation and adoption of two CoR opinions has been done. With one case showing an observable high level of politicization and the other a low level of politicization. To note differences in CoR members' representation.

The independent variable in this research question is internal politicization. An important distinction this thesis makes is between internal and external politicization. With internal politicization of the CoR focusing on the political and institutional developments within the CoR and external politicization of the CoR focusing on the expansion of its institutional role within the EU framework. Politicization is both conceptualized and operationalized using the frameworks of De Wilde and Hutter & Grande. This thesis in a broader context refers politicization to the process in which issues that were previously considered technical or non-controversial become subjects of political debate, contention, and public discussion. And where polarization of opinion and intensifying debates are observable.

The dependent variable of the research question is political representation. Political representation is defined as the acts of 'standing for' and 'acting for' a constituency through making claims on their behalf (Saward, 2006). Because of the ambiguous nature of political representation and to operationalize the concept more effectively it has been divided into two distinct forms of

representation: symbolic and substantive representation. Symbolic representation involves the symbolic aspect of representation, where the representative symbolizes the represented and their values and interests in a specific manner, with emotional appeals or framing policies in a certain light (Lombardo & Meier, 2019). Substantive representation involves acts of denouncing disadvantageous situations, claiming rights for their constituents and advocating for solutions for disadvantageous situations their constituents face (Severs, 2012).

To answer the research question three expectations were formulated:

Expectation 1: Internal politicization may lead to a greater emphasis on the representation of the interests of political parties, potentially deemphasizing the representation of the interests of local and regional governments.

Expectation 2: The internal politicization of the CoR increases the symbolic representation of local and regional governments.

Expectation 3: The increased symbolic representation of local and regional governments constrains the substantive representation of the interests of local and regional governments.

These expectations aim to answer three basic questions about the influence of internal politicization on the CoR's representation of the interests of local and regional governments. Namely what interest is represented, how these are represented and why. The first expectation relates to how internal politicization influences *what* interest is being represented. The second expectation relates to how internal politicization influences *how* interests are being represented. And the third expectation aims to shed light on *why* interests are being represented in a certain manner. These expectations were formulated using existing literature and informed assumptions. The formulation of these expectations are further explained in the theoretical framework.

1.3: Structure of the thesis

This thesis is divided into six chapters. The first chapter consists of the thesis's introduction. The second chapter outlines the role of the CoR within the EU, how the CoR operates, and the political and institutional developments of its almost thirty years of existence will be elaborated on. This chapter aims to provide ample background information to understand the workings of the CoR and how it has undergone a process of politicization.

The third chapter contains the theoretical framework of this thesis. In this theoretical framework politicization, political representation, and both symbolic and substantive representation will be conceptualized. The theoretical framework also entails the formulation of the expectations above. The fourth chapter contains the research methodology for this thesis. The chapter will outline the research design, the case selection, the operationalization of concepts, the data collection and analysis, and lastly the chapter will delve into the validity, reliability, and limitations of the research design.

The fifth chapter outlines both the empirical results from the interviews and the comparative case study and the analysis of these results. This chapter is structured along the line of the expectations. The sixth and last chapter closes the thesis with a conclusion and summarizes the results and analysis of the fifth chapter. And aims to answer the research question. Alongside the conclusion is a discussion of the results and the research design. The last section of the thesis contains the references and appendixes.

Chapter 2: The European Committee of the Regions

This chapter delves into the CoR's role in the EU. Shedding light on how the CoR operates and how it has politically and institutionally developed over the years. The discussion on the procedures of the CoR is important, specifically the formulation and adoption of opinions is vital for the understanding of the comparative case study. An overview of the CoR's political and institutional development sets the stage for the examination of internal politicization and its influence on the representation of the interests of local and regional governments.

The CoR is an important player in EU decision-making, the CoR ensures that local and regional governments have a meaningful role in shaping EU policies. The CoR had it first meeting in 1994, it was brought to life in the Treaty of Maastricht to give local and regional governments a voice in the European Union (Wassenberg, 2019). Thereby injecting a local and regional perspective into the EU's decision-making processes. The driving force behind its creation was the desire to enhance democratic legitimacy and address concerns, particularly in the aftermath of German reunification (Wassenberg, 2019). Because there were concerns over the possible lack of influence of the German Länder within the EU. The CoR functions as an advisory body, providing a platform for local and regional government representatives to contribute to EU decision-making.

2.1: Role of the European Committee of the Regions

The European Committee of the Regions (CoR) is often referred to as the best kept secret of the European Union. The CoR is an advisory body within the EU framework, modelled after the European Economic and Social Committee but the CoR has taken a more political turn (Kaniok & Ďadová, 2013). The CoR is established as a political assembly of local and regional representatives, these can range from municipal council members to governors to elected members of subnational parliaments (European Committee of the Regions, 2023). The CoR has around 329 members which are grouped into national delegations and European political parties (European Committee of the Regions, 2023). The CoR strives to grant representatives of local and regional governments a role in EU policy and decision-making, both through formal and informal channels. The formal aspect is that the European Commission and the Council of the European Union are required to consult the CoR when drawing up policy on matters that concern local and regional governments (European Committee of the Regions, 2023). During these consultations members of the CoR get access to informal means of communication with Commission and Council officials, granting local and regional governments both a formal and informal role in EU decision making (Domorenok, 2009).

Representatives of the CoR are appointed by member states, but the appointment process differs per member state. In for example the Netherlands the centralized authority for local governments appoints members of the CoR, in France through deliberation with local governments the Minister of the Interior appoints members and for example the Flemish subnational parliament directly appoints members of the CoR (European Committee of the Regions, 1993). The representatives are grouped in national delegations and their respective political party within the CoR. Since its early days the political parties of CoR have gained a more prominent role in CoR decision-making (Wassenberg, 2019). These parties closely resemble those of the European Parliament and the allocation from national party to European party mostly follows the same route. The political parties of the CoR are: European People's Party (EPP), Party of European Socialists (PES), Renew Europe, European Conservatives and Reformist Group (ECR), European Alliance (EA) and The Greens (European Committee of the Regions, 2023).

CoR has an advisory role within the EU, it has no formal decision-making power. This advisory role has several elements consisting of mandatory and non-mandatory consultation and own initiative opinions (European Committee of the Regions, 2023). Apart from this advisory role, since the Treaty of Lisbon the CoR has the right to bring a proposal of the European Commission to the European

Court of Justice if it threatens the subsidiarity principle (Nicolosi & Mustert, 2020). Which in essence means that the EU should not take decisions on a subject if the local and regional governments can do so themselves (Nicolosi & Mustert, 2020).

The European Commission and the Council of the European Union must consult the CoR whenever new proposals are made in areas that have repercussions for local or regional governments. Which are the following: economic, social and territorial cohesion, Structural Funds, European Regional Development Fund, European Social Fund, employment and social affairs, education, youth, vocational training, culture and sport, environment, energy and climate change, transport, trans-European networks, and public health (European Committee of the Regions, 2023). Outside these areas the European Commission, the Council and the European Parliament also have the option to consult the CoR, but outside the afore mentioned areas it is not mandatory (European Committee of the Regions, 2023).

The output of this consultation is an CoR opinion. The CoR provides an opinion on the proposed legislation, this opinion consists of insights and recommendations based on the experiences of the representatives of local and regional governments. An important aspect to note is that the CoR's opinion is not binding, and the European Commission or the other EU institutions are not required to take it into consideration. But it rarely occurs that opinions of the CoR are not taken into consideration (Nicolosi & Mustert, 2020). The CoR also has the right to propose own-initiative opinions and forward them to the EU institutions, with the aim to address challenges local and regional governments are facing that are not on the EU's radar (European Committee of the Regions, 2023).

An opinion is drafted by members of the CoR within the different commissions. Each CoR commission is responsible for specific policy areas (e.g., economic policy, social policy, environmental policy). The president of the CoR will allocate a dossier, for example a proposed revision of an EU directive to the fitting CoR commission (European Committee of the Regions, 2023). When an opinion needs to be developed within a commission, the commission members decide on the appointment of a rapporteur (European Committee of the Regions, 2023). Members of the commission, particularly those with expertise or interest in the specific topic, may express their interest in becoming the rapporteur. The rapporteurs are eventually appointed during commission meetings through a political point system, with a shadow rapporteur from a different political party and in most cases an external expert is appointed from for example a university or an expert from a local or regional government to help in drafting the opinion.

The rapporteur will be in close contact with European Commission and Council officials during this period, granting the rapporteur a position of strong informal influence (Domorenok, 2009). During the different stages of debate in both the commissions and the plenary meeting officials from the European Commission or for example the rapporteur from the European Parliament for the same dossier are invited to provide CoR members more information. And give them the opportunity for further questions.

The first step in formulating and opinion is an exchange of views between the rapporteur and the members of their commission, here the rapporteur provides information about the proposed policy and gives points of interests and discussion for a debate. Through this debate and often through deliberation with experts, local and EU officials a draft opinion is created and presented to the commission for discussion and approval. Commission members may provide input and propose amendments during this stage, during this stage commission members will also vote on the different amendments. Once the commission is satisfied with the opinion and all amendments have been taken into consideration, it is submitted to the CoR plenary session for the final vote. Where amendments can also be submitted. Once the opinion is adopted in the plenary meeting, the opinion is sent to all EU institutions (European Committee of the Regions, 2023).

2.2: Institutional and political developments

The CoR was officially established by the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 as a consultative body within the European Union, aiming to represent regional interests and contribute to EU policy-making. Initially tasked with responsibilities in social and economic cohesion, public health, trans-European networks, education, and culture (European Committee of the Regions, 2014). The CoR had its first meeting in 1994. The "Pujol Report" in 1995 signaled the CoR's ambition to evolve into the EU's "subsidiarity watchdog," while also witnessing the formal recognition of different political groups (European Committee of the Regions, 2014).

The Amsterdam Treaty in 1997 marked a significant expansion of the CoR's consultative areas. Another change was the extension of the advisory role of the CoR to the European Parliament (Kaniok & Ďadová, 2013). The Amsterdam Treaty's entry into force solidified the CoR's administrative and budgetary autonomy from the European Economic and Social Committee (Kaniok & Ďadová, 2013).

From 2000 onwards the CoR focused on forging closer links with the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers. A notable development during this time was the establishment of the Conference of the Presidents (CoP) in 2000, a central forum for political dialogue and consensus-building among the committee's political groups. Consisting of the CoR president, the vice-president, and the presidents of the CoR's political groups, the CoP marked a shift towards a more political orientation (European Committee of the Regions, 2014). Simultaneously, the introduction of more political groups brought a structured framework for members sharing similar political ideologies to collaborate effectively (Kaniok & Ďadová, 2013). These groups became instrumental in shaping the CoR's stance on regional and local issues, reflecting a collective effort to enhance the committee's democratic representation and decision-making (Wassenberg, 2019). The integration of political groups and the establishment of the CoP were strategic steps, emphasizing the CoR's evolving role as a politically aligned body within the EU (Kaniok & Ďadová, 2013).

In 2001, the Treaty of Nice marked a pivotal moment for the CoR. This treaty introduced crucial reforms, mandating that CoR members must hold local or regional mandates and allowing their appointment through a qualified majority vote (Kaniok & Ďadová, 2013). Simultaneously, the White Paper on European Governance, adopted in the same year, underscored the significance of the CoR's active participation in decision-making processes (European Committee of the Regions, 2014).

In 2004, a historic vote transformed the CoR's plenary sessions, aligning them with political group affiliations rather than alphabetical order. This change emphasized the CoR's political nature and facilitated more decision-making across political lines over the coming years (European Committee of the Regions, 2014).

Since the Lisbon Treaty came into force on 1 December 2009, the treaty also gave the CoR the right to institute proceedings at the Court of Justice in the event of the subsidiarity principle being harmed (Kaniok & Ďadová, 2013).

According to the CoR itself the CoR has: "In twenty years developed from a body consulted on a limited number of topics into the guarantor of local and regional involvement in the European legislative and political decision-making process. The other institutions recognize this political role and ability to mobilize local and regional authorities and the CoR is now a political partner in a wide variety of initiatives." (European Committee of the Regions, 2014).

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

This theoretical framework aims to conceptualize the variables of the research question, addressing both the independent variable, politicization, and the dependent variable, political representation. Which is consequently divided into symbolic and substantive representation. Furthermore, this theoretical framework lays the groundwork for explaining the relationship between internal politicization and the political representation of local and regional interests within the CoR.

Given the ambiguous nature of politicization, its different aspects and categorizations will be highlighted. Drawing insights from the analytical frameworks of De Wilde and Hutter & Grande, an index of politicization is introduced to assess the degree of politicization within an issue. This conceptualization of politicization will then be applied to the CoR to determine how politicization has affected the institution. Specifically, the role of the political parties and how their interests are being represented will be a matter of discussion.

The dependent variable political representation is divided into two distinct dimensions for the CoR context: symbolic and substantive representation. Because of this division the ambiguous nature of political representation can be explained with more nuance because both the symbolic attributes of representation and the tangible policy outcomes delivered by representatives can be explained. The subsection on political representation begins with Pitkin's classic work on political representation, extending to the constructivist claim-making approach introduced by Saward. Symbolic representation, which is an understudied field in political representation literature, has no prior frameworks. Therefore, a list of materializations of symbolic representation is formulated for the CoR context. Substantive representation has had more attention in literature. Substantive representation is further elaborated through Severs' framework for detecting substantive representation. The relationship between symbolic and substantive representation will also be examined within this framework.

Lastly, the possible relationship between politicization and political representation which is a mostly unexplored field of study will be expanded upon. Drawing insights from existing literature and informed assumptions, expectations are formulated to answer the research question. Three expectations have been drawn up, the first will be presented in the subchapter Politicization and the second and third in the subchapter Politicization and Representation. The first expectation aims to shed light on how politicization affects *what* interests are being represented in the CoR. The second expectation aims to shed light on how politicization affects *how* interests are being represented in the CoR. And the third expectation aims to shed light on *why* interests are being represented in a particular manner within the CoR.

3.1: Politicization

The definitions of politicization are often ambiguous in literature, resulting in different working definitions. Politicization is often put in the context of European Integration in this context it is defined as: "an increase of opinions, interests and values and the extent to which they are publicly advanced towards the process of policy formulation within the EU" (De Wilde, 2011). And it is defined as "an expansion of the scope of conflict within the political system" (Hutter & Grande, 2014). In a broader context politicization refers to the process by which issues that were previously considered technical or non-controversial become subjects of political debate, contention, and public discussion. In this case it involves the transformation of non-political or technocratic matters into politically salient matters of conflict (Statham & Trenz, 2015).

For the case of the CoR this thesis differentiates between internal and external politicization, a differentiation not made in literature. With internal politicization of the CoR focusing on the political and institutional developments that resulted in a more politically organized CoR. And external

politicization of the CoR referring to the expansion of the institutional role of CoR as an actor in itself within the EU framework.

Research on the CoR mainly revolves about the expansion of its role within the EU framework to move beyond its symbolic participation within the EU framework (Nicolosi & Mustert, 2020), which is referred to by some as 'institutional activism' (Nicolosi & Mustert, 2020). The expansion of its role is what this theoretical framework refers to as external politicization. External because the institution as an actor itself is increasing its influence within the EU framework by taking on a more politically active role within the EU framework, with own initiative opinions and the ability to direct proposals of the European Commission to the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) if they conflict with the principle of subsidiarity (Nicolosi & Mustert, 2020).

The research question highlights the internal politicization of the CoR. Internal politicization refers to the politicization within the CoR. A phenomenon that is very much related to external politicization, but which is not often seen as an independent phenomenon in CoR literature. The internal politicization of the CoR has materialized with the introduction of political parties, changing decision-making procedures to accommodate these political parties and in turn resulting in polarization of opinion (Wassenberg, 2019).

To further conceptualize politicization the different aspects of politicization will be discussed using the analytical frameworks created by De Wilde and Hutter & Grande. Based on these aspects an index of politicization will be presented. Following from this the different categorizations of politicization will be discussed. And finally, the conceptualization of politicization will be applied to the case of CoR.

3.1.1: Aspects of politicization

De Wilde and Hutter & Grande have discussed similar specific aspects of politicization. First De Wilde highlights three aspects of politicization: Polarization of opinion, intensifying debate, and public resonance (De Wilde, 2011). Hutter & Grande highlight three aspects of politicization: actor expansion, actor polarization and issue salience (Hutter & Grande, 2014). To understand politicization of the CoR four of these aspects will be discussed: issue salience, actor expansion, polarization, and intensifying debate. The argument can be made that the CoR is a matter of low public resonance. Because the CoR consists of representatives appointed by governments, not directly elected by citizens and the accountability mechanisms for CoR members are ambiguous. Its advisory role, limited media coverage, lack of decision-making power, focus on local issues, and the complexity of EU governance make the CoR a matter of low public resonance (Schönlau, 2017).

Issue salience

The argument can be made that only issues that are frequently raised by representatives in public debates can be considered as politicized (Hutter & Grande, 2014). If an issue is rarely debated these can only be politicized to a limited extent. This makes salience the foremost aspect of politicization (Hutter & Grande, 2014).

According to Hutter & Grande salience is essential to speak of politicization, it is regarded as a necessary, although not sufficient condition for politicization (Hutter & Grande, 2014). A highly salient public debate among a broad range of actors does not necessarily result in politicization. To complete the sum of politicization the other aspects of actor expansion, polarization and intensifying debate need to be multiplied with salience. The more apparent each aspect the more likely the level of politicization will rise (Hutter & Grande, 2014).

Actor expansion

The expansion of actors mostly relates to the expansion of the scope of political or policy conflict, which according to Hutter & Grande is central to politicization in the context of European integration (Hutter & Grande, 2014). Similarly, Hooghe & Marks in their "Postfunctionalist theory on European Integration" highlight that an expansion of actors in the form of political parties is a key dimension of politicization and salience of European integration (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). When very few actors are allowed to participate in political debates the level of conflict will be low and accordingly the level of politicization will also be low (Hutter & Grande, 2014). When the number of actors expands, the number of differing opinions will expand, most likely resulting into conflict. In the context of political arena's, the distinction can be made between actor expansion across political arena's and within political arenas. The first relates to the visibility of actors from civil society in public debates (Hutter & Grande, 2014). In the case of the internal politicization of the CoR the focus will be on actor expansion within a political arena, for example the introduction of political parties in the early years of CoR and their expanding secretariats.

In sum politicization involves actors presenting themselves as representatives publicly and thereby contesting other representatives. The more representatives and other actors supporting them the higher the scope of conflict in the given arena (Hutter & Grande, 2014). It is this practice of competitive representative claim-making that may function to realize the polarization of opinions, interests and values and the dimensions of conflict (De Wilde, 2011).

Polarization

Politicization can only occur when there are at least two opposing sides on a subject. These opinions have to be articulated by representatives who think they, their political party or their constituency have an interest to be represented in the topic at hand (De Wilde, 2011). Polarization in this context can be defined as "the intensity of conflict related to an issue among the different actors" (Hutter & Grande, 2014). The most polarizing debates can be found when two representatives or sets of representatives present completely opposing issue positions with about the same intensity (Hutter & Grande, 2014). Structural polarization of opinions in which the same groups of representatives or societal actors disagree on multiple issues will most likely result in several dimensions of policy or political conflict (De Wilde, 2011).

Intensifying debate

There may be a high level of polarization of opinions and demands on policy, but if these are not represented or voiced, one cannot speak of politicization (De Wilde, 2011). When this polarization of opinions gets increasingly highlighted and discussed the specific issue gets more politicized. The intensity of debate consists of two aspects. It relates to how much, long, and often an issue is discussed by political parties and their representatives or other societal actors. And building on this it also relates the aspect of actor expansion (De Wilde, 2011). When more actors get involved and more resources are spent this could also result in intensifying debate and further politicization (De Wilde, 2011).

It is important to highlight that polarization of opinion and intensifying debate are analytically independent but very much interrelated components of politicization in the analytical framework of De Wilde (De Wilde, 2011). If there is no intensification of debate following a noticeable polarization of opinions or beliefs the total sum of politicization would be limited.

Index of politicization

Hutter & Grande have proposed an index of politicization, for this thesis some aspects of De Wilde's framework are added to this index. This is done to highlight the interrelation between polarization and intensifying debate. This index is specifically helpful to identify when one can speak of politicization of issues within a political arena. Salience is regarded as a necessary but not sufficient condition.

Therefore, salience is at the core of the index (Hutter & Grande, 2014). Hutter & Grande propose to multiply salience with the sum of actor expansion and polarization (Hutter & Grande, 2014), to which this theoretical framework adds intensifying debate:

Politicization = salience X (actor expansion + (polarization + intensifying debate)).

Salience cannot be substituted by the other three aspects, and its relation cannot be additive. The main alteration for this theoretical framework is the addition of the aspect intensifying debate, in the index polarization and intensifying debate are interrelated following the framework of De Wilde (De Wilde, 2011).

3.1.2: Categories of politicization

Politicization in literature is often categorized in three different groups: institutions, decision-making processes, and issues (De Wilde, 2011). These three groups are often connected, when one gets politicized another may follow (De Wilde, 2011).

Institutions could become politicized when political parties or party politicians gain a tighter grip on their operations leading to increasing prominence of political party conflict. The increasing prominence of political parties means decision-making is increasingly subjected to pressure by different advocacy coalitions consisting of political party representatives raising the controversy surrounding the issue at hand (De Wilde, 2011).

The second category includes the decision-making procedures, rules and practices that make up the day-to-day functioning of these institutions. Politicization in this sense refers to increasing influence of elected or appointed politicians in decision-making processes at the expense of professionals or experts, like bureaucrats or lawyers (De Wilde, 2011).

Finally, politicization of issues refers to an increase in salience and diversity of opinions, possibly resulting in a higher level of conflict within the institution. If issues become more contested and there is an increasing public demand on public policy, these issues are then considered to be 'politicized' (De Wilde, 2011). The index helps to indicate when an issue is politicized and to what extent.

3.1.3: Politicization of CoR

According to a history of the CoR, commissioned by the CoR politicization has been taking place within the CoR. Which in this history is mainly attributed to the increased prominence of political parties and changing decision-making to accommodate these political parties, for example the political appointment of rapporteurs (Wassenberg, 2019). Hooghe and Marks also highlight the prominence of political parties as a main factor of politicization in matters relating to European Integration (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). And when the framework discussed above is used, the argument can also be made that the CoR has politicized internally, but not to the fullest extent possible.

Political parties are often attributed to be a main factor in politicization, and this leads members of CoR to represent two often conflicting interests within the CoR. Political parties have stronger support networks then national delegations, especially in the case of smaller member states. This could lead to members putting a greater emphasis on the representation of interests of political parties within the CoR.

Using the combined framework of De Wilde and Hutter & Grande politicization can be confirmed within CoR. First according to the framework, the most essential part of politicization: salience. Because of the external politicization or what other scholars refer to as institutional activism (Nicolosi & Mustert, 2020), consultation with the CoR regarding a proposal of importance for local and regional governments is mandatory for the European Commission. Therefore, the argument can be made that the CoR is discussing politically salient issues. Because the three major European

institutions and the different European political parties are also to varying degrees discussing the same issue or proposal. Second actor expansion. As mentioned before political parties have been gaining prominence within CoR, this alongside the involvement of local and regional governments and the large number of members within the CoR, the argument can be made that there are many actors involved in CoR decision-making. Third polarization of opinion, apart from the apparent territorial differences between representatives, the political parties also introduce a larger polarization of opinion. And lastly the intensifying debates. Using the index of politicization for the CoR the argument can be made that this is the least prominent factor. Debates within commissions or the plenary of the CoR consists of presenting a standpoint without further questioning by other members. This makes the debates very formal and 'well-behaved' and not as conflictual as for example the European Parliament. Therefore, the argument can be made that one cannot speak of intense debates within CoR.

In conclusion, based on the index of politicization the CoR is not at a high level of politicization. The total sum of politicization is not as high as it could be, because the factor of intensifying debates is missing within the CoR. But all other factors are fully apparent within CoR, therefore we can speak of politicization within CoR, but not of a high level of politicization like for example the European Parliament.

The internal politicization of the CoR is partly because of the increased prominence of political parties, but in turn the internal politicization is adding to the prominence of political parties within the CoR (Wassenberg, 2019). Members of the CoR represent their local government, region, and/or nation, but also their political interest. They are grouped in their national delegation and a political party within the CoR. The internal politicization has granted the political parties more resources, all parties have secretariats supporting their members and national delegations often only have a handful of supporting staff. These two do not always share the same view, this introduces a conflict for members. Members could choose to represent the interests of their party over their national delegation. For example, when a member is a socialist, but the national delegation he or she represents is more right-wing.

The first expectation of this thesis is that the internal politicization of the CoR may lead to members prioritizing representing the interests of their political parties over representing the interests of their local or regional government. The internal politicization leads to an expansion of actors, in the form of political parties. This gives members the choice to align themselves with actors that are more in line with their own political interests. And the polarization of opinion following from the internal politicization could drive members to find their own group of people that think alike and represent that specific group. Members of political parties within the CoR have access to party resources, support networks, and expertise. This can create a dependency on party structures, leading members to prioritize party interests to maintain access to these resources. In a politicized CoR, members could possibly face consequences for not representing the interests of their political party, creating a strong incentive to represent party interests over local and regional government interests. These assumptions result in the following expectation:

Expectation 1: The internal politicization of the CoR may lead to a greater emphasis on the representation of the interests of political parties, potentially deemphasizing the representation of the interests of local and regional governments.

This expectation looks at the main factor of politicization within CoR and aims to find out if the presence of political parties within the CoR leads to a deemphasizing of the representation of the interests of local and regional governments. More specifically it strives to explain how politicization within the CoR influences *what* interest is being represented by representatives.

The political parties of the CoR will all say they are there to represent the interests of local and regional governments, but it is all through a specific political lens. By greater emphasis on the interests of political parties, this thesis relates to their specific political view of the interests of local and regional governments. For example, a green or conservative view of the interests of local and regional governments might not be the same as the direct 'neutral' or practical interests of local and regional governments.

3.2: Political representation

Political representation is a widely discussed subject in literature, but it often remains ambiguous in nature and differs per specific political context. Most of the literature on political representation is based upon the classical work "The Concept of Representation" from Pitkin, published in 1967. Pitkin defines political representation as the act of 'standing for' and 'acting for' a constituency. She introduces four different forms of representation: formalistic, descriptive, symbolic, and substantive representation (Pitkin, 1967). In the case of CoR only symbolic and substantive representation apply. Because formalistic representation is related to democratic processes and descriptive representation is related to the personal and physical characteristics of the representative and if they resemble the group they represent (Pitkin, 1967). Which is not fully possible in the case of the representation of regions and local governments. Because of the ambiguous nature of political representation when discussing political representation this thesis will use the distinction symbolic and substantive representation to discuss political representation for the case of the CoR.

Standing for relates to the symbolic and communicative aspects of political representation (Pitkin, 1967). When a representative "stands for" their constituents or a particular group, it means that they serve as a symbol or a visible presence of the represented group in the political process (Pitkin, 1967). Acting for goes beyond the symbolic aspects and focuses on the active role of the representative in making decisions and taking actions on behalf of their constituents (Pitkin, 1967). When a representative is "acting for" their constituents it relates to the substantive aspects of representation. Where their primary objective is to make decisions and pursue policies that advance the interests and values of the group they represent (Pitkin, 1967).

The classic work of Pitkin has received criticism in the last twenty years in which the literature on political representation has taken a more constructivist and discursive approach introduced by Saward. This constructivist and discursive approach mainly focus on the political representation of both the substantive and symbolic kind of minorities in politics. But they have created analytical frameworks to better understand political representation. Saward defines political representation as an act of claim-making on behalf of a constituency (Saward, 2006). These can be both symbolic claims and substantive claims.

3.2.1: Symbolic representation

Pitkin relates 'standing for' to three forms of representation: formalistic, descriptive, and symbolic. Formalistic relates to democratic processes in which the representative is directly chosen to act on behalf of the represented (Pitkin, 1967). Descriptive representation focusses on the personal characteristics of the representative and if they relate to the represented based on for example race or gender (Pitkin, 1967). These two forms of representation are not applicable to the case of CoR. Because firstly, the local and regional governments cannot directly choose the representatives, because in most member states this is decided by centralized bureaucratic authorities (European Committee of the Regions, 1993). And second local and regional governments are not a group of people representatives can represent by their personal or physical characteristics.

Symbolic representation remains, this form of representation involves the symbolic aspect of representation, where the representative symbolizes the represented and their values and interests in a specific manner, but no substantive realization of interests is taking place (Lombardo & Meier, 2019).

This form is ultimately meant to evoke emotions and strengthen beliefs within the represented group and construct a frame or view of the represented region or group by the representative (Lombardo & Meier, 2019).

Constructivist and discursive approach

Symbolic representation has an ambiguous character, and this has led to limited amounts of literature on symbolic representation, and in the classic work of Pitkin it is moreover being interpreted through the dimension of descriptive representation (Lombardo & Meier, 2017). But a more recent constructivist and discursive approach discusses symbolic symbolization as a dimension of political representation itself. Therefore, this theoretical framework will focus on this constructivist and discursive view of symbolic representation.

The classical work by Pitkin conceptualizes symbolic representation as the representation through symbols that evoke feelings and beliefs such as flags and national anthems (Pitkin, 1967). Pitkin herself discredited symbolic representation and she mainly related it to authoritarian regimes, because of its irrational mainly emotional components and its lack of activity (Lombardo & Meier, 2019). More recent literature that takes a constructivist and discursive turn claims the opposite. First, they claim that there is activity in symbolic representation, the activity of constructing a symbol and a discourse around a specific constituency (Saward, 2006). And second, they make the argument that irrational elements such as emotions and beliefs are an integral part of political representation (Lombardo & Meier, 2019).

The constructivist approach introduced by Saward in his "The Representative Claim" makes the argument that political representation is about making claims that construct or depict certain ideas about a constituency (Saward, 2006). The focus on this constructed component is essential to understand political representation and therefore symbolic representation. Because political symbols are in a sense a construct and their meaning is shaped, and associated to a particular group that is then presented in a particular manner by the representative (Saward, 2006). And because it clearly articulates the idea of a 'maker' of representation and the idea of a constituency (Saward, 2006). This could also be interpreted as a principal-agent relationship in which the principal is the group that is represented, and the representative is the agent. In representing the principal, the agent in the case of symbolic representation attaches meanings, norms, values, and beliefs to the principal to influence how other people and the represented group are perceived (Lombardo & Meier, 2017).

The identification of a 'maker' is important to further conceptualize symbolic representation because it always involves an actor often a political representative constructing a symbolization, simply because a symbol will not create itself. The meaning constructed and assigned to symbols can be different across makers from different political backgrounds (Lombardo & Meier, 2019). The distinction Saward makes between the constituency and the idea of a constituency is also relevant as it shows that what gets represented in a symbol is not the constituency as such but the representative's often politically aligned idea about the constituency (Saward, 2006). This construction of an idea of a constituency creates a particular presentation of the constituency through a specific selection of political symbols, which can then be targeted to a specific audience (Lombardo & Meier, 2019).

In the case of CoR, symbolic representation using the constructivist and discursive approach is the constructing of an idea of a specific region or set of regions like urban regions and the framing of those or policies affecting them in a specific light. In doing so a frame or symbolization of the region is constructed in which a specific set of ideas is then placed upon the constituency by the representative to evoke feelings, emotions, and specific beliefs about the region they claim to represent. In sum, they are standing for their constituency by framing or symbolizing a region in a specific light.

Political symbols

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According to Pitkin political symbols were flags and national anthems, these symbols were meant to evoke specific emotions and beliefs in for example the nation state. She only accredited symbolic representation with these classic political symbols and the meaning constructed around it. The constructivist and discursive turn in political and symbolic representation literature expanded on these symbols and laid the focus on the discursive elements of symbolic representation (Lombardo & Meier, 2017). Discursive elements of symbolic representation refer to the language, rhetoric, and communicative strategies employed by representatives to symbolize and convey the beliefs, identity, and values and evoke emotions within or in favor of the groups or constituents they claim to represent (Lombardo & Meier, 2017).

Discursive forms of symbolic representation and symbolic representation itself is inherently ambiguous (Lombardo & Meier, 2017) and have several forms of manifestation in political practice. Based upon the literature on symbolic representation some possible manifestations of symbolic representation can be the following:

- **Rhetorical choices**
  o Representatives may use specific words, phrases, and tones in their speeches to highlight certain values or ideas.
- **Narrative construction**
  o Constructing narratives that highlight the historical, cultural, or social aspects of the represented group, and paint them in a positive light.
- **Symbolic language**
  o Using symbolic language, like metaphors and analogies to convey deeper meanings.
- **Identity affirmation**
  o Affirming the identity of the represented group through public debate. This might involve highlighting shared values, cultural heritage, or historical experiences.
- **Emotional appeals**
  o Incorporating emotional appeals in public debate to connect with the sentiments of the represented group and display emotional struggles of the group towards other representatives.
- **Policy framing**
  o Presenting or criticizing policies in a way that aligns with the values and interests of the represented group. For instance, framing an environmental policy as a commitment to 'an attack on the sovereignty of the region'.

These discursive elements serve as crucial political symbolization in situations where political symbols like flags and national anthems are not as applicable, for example gender equality (Lombardo & Meier, 2019) or in the case of the CoR the representation of all EU regions and local and regional governments. The members of the CoR are actively advocating for regional policies, and the discursive elements of symbolic participation will most likely provide a platform for conveying the values and emotions attached to the different regions. Regions within the EU have distinct cultures. Discursive elements instead of static political symbols allow for communication that is culturally sensitive and useful in displaying diversity (Lombardo & Meier, 2017). Static political symbols like flags may not capture the evolving nature of regional concerns. And those static symbols can carry national connotations. In sum, the CoR's role and institutional set-up make discursive elements probably more applicable for effective symbolic representation compared to the limitations of static political symbols like flags.

3.2.2: Substantive representation

Pitkin relates 'acting for' to one specific form of representation: substantive representation. Substantive representation contrary to the psychological and communicative aspect of symbolic

representation is concerned with actively addressing and advancing the interests of the represented in decision-making and policymaking (Pitkin, 1967).

According to Hanna Pitkin the concept of substantive representation goes beyond the acts of 'standing for' the constituency through descriptive or symbolic representation. She emphasizes that through substantive representation representatives actively advocate for the interests, needs, and values of the group they represent (Pitkin, 1967). Substantive representation involves representatives playing an active role in influencing policies, so the needs and interests of their constituents remain protected. And engaging in meaningful dialogue and being accountable for addressing the diverse needs within their constituency (Pitkin, 1967). It requires an understanding of the social, economic, and political context of their constituents (Pitkin, 1967).

In the constructivist and discursive turn introduced by Saward and built upon by other literature the relationship between representative and represented in Pitkin's approach on substantive representation is criticized (Severs, 2012). Traditionally the relationship between representative and represented was perceived as 'a portrait and its model' (Severs, 2012). But since the constructivist and discursive turn in political representation literature has challenged the idea of a 'model' that is easily represented (Severs, 2012). The argument is made that political reality is "not first given to us and subsequently represented" (Severs, 2012, p. 171). Saward expands on these views and claims that "political representation is a world of claim-making rather than fact-abducing' (Saward, 2006, p. 302).

Using the constructivist and discursive approach to political representation, substantive representation can resemble an agent-principal relationship where the agent through direct acts represents what they claim are the needs and interests of the principal (Lombardo & Meier, 2017). A typical agent–principal relation in this case is between an elected representative and their constituency. The 'acting for' the principal mostly materializes in making claims on behalf of the principal, speaking in their name, and advocating for what the representative claims are their interests and needs (Lombardo & Meier, 2017). This can be achieved through discursive means such as speaking on behalf of the represented in public debates or in writing when proposing policy reform (Lombardo & Meier, 2017).

Detecting substantive representation

Substantive representation has received more attention than symbolic representation in political representation literature. And contrary to symbolic representation, frameworks haven been developed to recognize forms of substantive representation. The framework of Severs expands on the works of Saward and introduces the concept of substantive claims. She claims that Saward does not give enough depth to understand the 'acting for' or substantive part of political representation. And claims that only using Saward's theory could provide confusion between symbolic or descriptive claim making and substantive claim making (Severs, 2012).

To remedy this confusion, she introduces a formalistic definition of substantive representation through the concept of substantive claims. A claim can be defined as substantive or an instance of 'acting for' or 'speaking for' when: first the claim denounces a situation that is disadvantageous for the represented (Severs, 2012), and second the claim formulates a proposal to improve the situation of the represented or claim a right for the represented for the same reason (Severs, 2012).

Based on this definition Severs has created a framework to detect when a claim is of a substantive nature and when a researcher can speak of forms of substantive representation. The framework consists of three steps. The first step relates to her definition of substantive claims, public claim-making needs to be scrutinized to detect a substantive core. This needs to be an act of denouncing a disadvantageous situation, formulating a proposal to improve the situation, or claiming a right to improve the situation (Severs, 2012).

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1.  Detection of a Substantive Core

Instance of 'speaking for' and about:
(i)    Denouncing a situation that is disadvantageous for the represented
(ii)   Formulating a proposal to improve the situation of the represented
(iii)  Claiming a right to improve the situation of the represented

2.  Level of 'Substantiating'

Principal Dimension (proximate-remote context)
Problem holders: Whose problem is it seen to be? / Who is acted upon?

Interest Dimension (proximate context)
Problem diagnosis: What is presented as the problem? / Why is it seen as a problem?
Causality: What is seen as a cause of what? / Who or what is seen as causing the problem?
Problem prognosis: What to do? / Which action is deemed necessary and why? / Who is included in solving the problem?

3.  Abstraction and Comparison

Problem Frame
Issue: What is the issue raised? (asylum, political representation, prostitution, labour market, …)
Interest: What is at stake for the represented? (equality, equal rights, differential treatment, remediation of power relations, …)
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Figure 1: Severs' framework for substantive claims.

The second step is about determining the level of 'substantiating'. In the framework above the distinction is made between the remote context (cultural norms and past debates) and the proximate context (the specific situation in which a claim is made). In the framework these contexts are respectively called the principal dimension and the interest dimension. This distinction highlights that identifying the principal dimension of a claim can provide insights into the overall character of a debate, but identifying the interest dimension may not do the same (Severs, 2012). If the interest dimension is not properly considered in the principal dimension, the claim may not be seen as contributing to the overall debate. It could possibly shape norms or future debates, but it will not necessarily substantively represent a specific interest effectively (Severs, 2012). In sum, understanding the context in which a claim is made is crucial, and questions about both proximate and remote contexts help determine the meaning and the substantive impact of claims.

The third step of the framework is added for the comparison of different claims. This comparison does involve a high level of abstraction, where you need to move beyond the explicit words of representatives. But the previous stages of detecting and describing claims are expected to ensure the robustness of the claims made during the comparison stage (Severs, 2012). Two levels of comparison are introduced. The first level involves comparing general issues presented in claims (like women's emancipation, employment, education) (Severs, 2012), and the second level involves comparing the substantive interests of the represented within these issues (such as equal educational opportunities or positive discrimination) (Severs, 2012).

3.2.3: Relationship symbolic and substantive representation

According to Hanna Pitkin, symbolic representation and substantive representation are not opposing ideas. According to her they complement each other within the broader concept of political representation. Representatives often create or enforce symbols of the group they represent, while also actively advocating for the group's interests (Lombardo & Meier, 2019). The representative's symbolic role interacts with their substantive role of actively addressing the group's needs. Pitkin recognizes that challenges and tensions may arise between these dimensions, such as when a representative's symbolic actions do not align with the interests of the represented group (Pitkin, 1967). In sum, Pitkin says that effective political representation involves both symbolic embodiment and active advocacy for the substantive concerns of the represented group (Pitkin, 1967).

Pitkin has a one-sided view of symbolic representation when you compare it with the constructivist claim-making framework. This framework delves deeper into the relationship between symbolic and substantive representation, and claims that both forms can complement each other but can also constrain each other (Lombardo & Meier, 2019).

Symbolic representation in most cases sets the symbolic boundaries for some substantive claims, in return these are made more easily than others (Lombardo & Meier, 2019). Making a substantive claim within the symbolic boundaries set by a rivalling representative could create significant obstacles for the substantive claim and its maker. Because the substantive claim might be considered illegitimate within the symbolic boundaries set by other representatives (Lombardo & Meier, 2019). A claim is not simply about the substance of the claim made because it also highlights the symbolisms attached to it (Lombardo & Meier, 2019). The symbolism attached to the claim can be about for example a region, the nation, women, and ethnic minorities. Or it can be the framing of policies as attacks on their constituency. These symbolisms are not always explicitly included in the claim, but they shape in what context or timeframe the substantive claims that can be made (Lombardo & Meier, 2019).

3.3: Politicization and Representation

The relationship between politicization and political representation is not often discussed in literature. Some literature regarding democratic legitimacy and politicization gives insight but it does not go into detail. One claim is made that representational claim-making increases when a negotiation becomes more politicized (Kuyper, 2018). In this article it is said that politicized negotiations often occur through representational claim-making, and the more politicized a negotiation becomes the more claim-making would most probably take place (Kuyper, 2018). Following this logic, the argument can be made that politicization increases political representation, in which political representation using the constructivist view is seen as making claims on behalf of the constituency. But it is not clear how politicization affects representation. What is represented, how representation takes place and why it takes place in certain manner because of politicization is currently not a matter of academic discussion. And these questions are combined in the research question and expectations of this thesis.

Political representation is an ambiguous term, and this could be a reason for the small amount of literature on the relationship between politicization and political representation. To better recognize how politicization influences representation and what sort of claims are being made and why, this thesis has divided political representation in symbolic and substantive representation. Using this distinction, it is easier to recognize how interests are being represented and to what purpose. The division of political representation into symbolic and substantive representation allows for a comprehensive analysis that considers both the symbolic characteristics of claims made by representatives and the substantive policy outcomes these claims deliver.

This division enables a more nuanced understanding of how politicization may influence political representation within the CoR. This division also allows for a better connection to existing literature. In the case of substantive representation, no connection in literature was found, but for the case of

symbolic representation some connection can be found in literature. Because the act of political framing of groups or policies and constructing positive narratives is said to occur more often in politicized contexts (Gray, Purdy, & Ansari, 2015). A direct relationship is not made in literature between politicization and symbolic representation, but a connection is made between politicization and framing and constructing narratives, which are crucial aspects of symbolic representation (Lombardo & Meier, 2019). A reason for this could be the increased polarization of opinion due to politicization, in line with theories on meaning-making (Gray, Purdy, & Ansari, 2015). This polarization could give representatives an incentive to construct frames or symbolisms of a constituency or a specific set of regions, to give a conflictual alternative for the opposing side. Another reason for increased symbolic representation in a politicized CoR could be when representatives become more politically aligned, they may increasingly frame policies and construct narratives about regions in ways that align with the interests of their political party. As the CoR becomes more politicized internally, members may also strategically use symbolic gestures and rhetoric to emphasize regional identity in policy framing. This could align with political narratives and aims to appeal to regional sentiments, contributing to increased symbolic representation of local and regional governments. These arguments result in the following expectation:

Expectation 2: The internal politicization of the CoR increases the symbolic representation of local and regional governments.

This expectation aims to prove if the little amount of literature and the assumptions made on the relation between politicization and aspects of politicization are true. The expectation is made that because of the internal politicization of the CoR the symbolic representation has increased within the CoR. This expectation strives to explain the influence of internal politicization how interests are being represented in the CoR.

According to literature on both symbolic and substantive representation and their relationship symbolic and substantive representation can complement each other, but also constrain each other (Lombardo & Meier, 2019). Symbolic representation can set the symbolic boundaries for substantive representation or substantive claims (Lombardo & Meier, 2019). This is mainly a theoretical statement and has only been tested on political issues relating to gender, but never in an institutional setting like the CoR. This constraining could take place within the CoR if for example a representative constructs a positive frame or narrative about rural areas as proud and traditional regions that should be left alone in the context of environmental policy. This narrative or frame could constrain the substantive claims made by an opposing party and limit the overall substantive representation of this issue within the opposing symbolic boundaries. This constraining of substantive representation by symbolic representation has been discussed in literature but has never been put to the test in a context like the CoR. The internal politicization of CoR could lead representatives to increase their efforts of symbolic representation with the distinct goal of setting symbolic boundaries for the substantive representation of local and regional governments within CoR. Therefore, the following expectation has been formed:

Expectation 3: The increased symbolic representation of local and regional governments constrains the substantive representation of the interests of local and regional governments.

This expectation aims to elaborate on the effect of the possible increase of symbolic representation due to the internal politicization of CoR. Since politicization has no direct link to substantive representation in literature, a undirect link is sought with politicization through symbolic representation. This expectation strives to explain why political representation takes place in a certain manner in a politicized CoR.

Following the three expectations of this theoretical framework a claim can be made to answer the research question. First the internal politicization of the CoR could result in representatives putting a greater emphasis on the representation of the interests of the political parties and a less of an emphasis

on the representation of the interests of local and regional governments. Second the internal politicization of the CoR will increase the symbolic representation of the interests of local and regional governments by the representatives. And lastly, because of the increased symbolic representation, substantive representation of the interests of local and regional governments could be constrained by the symbolic boundaries set by representative due to their symbolic representation of the interests of local and regional governments. These expectations need to be empirically tested and the next chapter will explain the methods for these empirical tests.

Chapter 4: Methodology

This chapter explains how the research question: "*How does the internal politicization of the CoR influence its political representation of the interests of local and regional governments within the European Union?*" and the expectations are addressed through a qualitative mixed-methods design.

Expectation 1: The internal politicization of the CoR may lead to a greater emphasis on the representation of the interests of political parties, potentially deemphasizing the representation of the interests of local and regional governments.

Expectation 2: The internal politicization of the CoR increases the symbolic representation of local and regional governments.

Expectation 3: The increased symbolic representation of local and regional governments constrains the substantive representation of the interests of local and regional governments.

These three expectations are aimed to answer specific questions related to the influence of politicization on the political representation of the interests of local and regional governments. The first expectation aims to unravel ***what*** interests are represented more because of the internal politicization. Specifically, if politicization leads to a greater emphasis on the representation of political party interests. The second expectation aims to unravel ***how*** interests are being represented due to the internal politicization. Specifically, whether the amount of symbolic representation or substantive representation increases. The third expectation aims to unravel ***why*** interests are represented in a certain manner and how this relates to politicization. Following the logic of the literature and the second expectation this expectation aims to unravel if the expected increased symbolic representation has the aim to constrain substantive representation into a specific direction.

The research employs semi-structured interviews and a comparative case study to delve into these expectations. Semi-structured interviews aim to capture the perspectives of CoR members and obtain information about their experiences with internal politicization and its influence on political representation. The comparative case study delves into two distinct CoR opinions, strategically chosen based on the politicization variable, with its main purpose to validate and deepen insights from the interviews.

This chapter addresses a summary of the research design, operationalization of variables, the case selection, the methodology for data collection and analysis and lastly the validity, reliability, and limitations of this research design. By delving into how internal politicization influences the representation of local and regional interests within the CoR, this mixed-methods approach aims to offer possibly valuable perspectives for policymakers and regional stakeholders.

4.1: Research design

The design for this research consists of a two-step analysis aimed at researching the politicization within CoR and its influence on the CoR's political representation of the interests of local and regional governments. For this a qualitative mixed-methods approach was used. The first step consists of semi-structured interviews with CoR members from the Benelux region, including mayors, aldermen, provincial executives, and a member of a subnational parliament. The second step following from the insights of the interviews a comparative case study will take place. Specifically, a case comparison between the political process of two CoR opinions, one with a high level of politicization and one with a low level of politicization. The interviews are the main way of obtaining empirical findings, the main use of the comparative case study is to validate and deepen these findings.

Recognizing the complex nature of both politicization and political representation a qualitative method of gathering the experiences of CoR members has been chosen. By using qualitative methods

nuanced perspectives on the politicization within the CoR and its influence on its political representation of the interests of local and regional governments can be gathered.

In the first step, semi-structured interviews are conducted with the aim of gathering experiences of CoR members, specifically their experiences of politicization within CoR and its influence on their and others political representation of the interests of local and regional governments within CoR. The questions of these interviews are centered around the expectations formulated in the theoretical framework. The selection of CoR members within the Benelux area is strategic, because of time and scope constraints.

In the second step, a qualitative comparative case study will take place. Two distinct CoR opinions are chosen based on the independent variable of politicization. One opinion, based on the politicization index with a noticeable high level of politicization, and another opinion with a noticeable low level of politicization. This comparative case study serves as a means of validating and deepening the empirical findings from the interviews. By analyzing cases with differing levels of politicization, the study seeks an explanation of how politicization influences the political representation of the interests of local and regional governments within the CoR. The frameworks introduced in the theoretical framework will be used to determine when symbolic or substantive representation is taking place.

4.2: Operationalization

The variables will be further operationalized to test the different expectations and answer the research question. In the research question politicization is defined as the independent variable and political representation as the dependent variable. But for the expectations political representation is divided into symbolic and substantive representation, to better conceptualize and operationalize the concept. The following section will summarize the conceptualization of the variables and outline the operationalization and indicators associated with the variables. This is subsequently summarized in Table 1.

4.2.1: Politicization

First the independent variable politicization. Politicization was conceptualized using the frameworks of both De Wilde and Hutter & Grande and was further informed by other literature. Politicization is both defined as "an increase of opinions, interests and values and the extent to which they are publicly advanced towards the process of policy formulation within the EU" (De Wilde, 2011) and as "an expansion of the scope of conflict within the political system" (Hutter & Grande, 2014). Based on these frameworks an expanded index of politicization was introduced:

Politicization = salience X (actor expansion + (polarization + intensifying debate)).

From this index four main indicators of politicization can be recognized. First salience, according to Hutter & Grande salience is essential to speak of politicization, it is regarded as a necessary, although not sufficient condition for politicization (Hutter & Grande, 2014). Which can be measured by examining the frequency and depth of discussions, media coverage, and attention devoted to the issue during CoR meetings and other public debates, for example the European Parliament.

Second actor expansion, which mostly relates to the expansion of the scope of political or policy conflict. Which can be measured by identifying the inclusion of new actors, perspectives, or interest groups in CoR discussions and decisions.

Third polarization of opinion, because politicization is hard to speak of without two opposing sides (De Wilde, 2011). Which can be measured by examining the differentiation in opinions among CoR members, identifying clear and distinct positions on the topic, and noting instances where opinions are sharply divided.

And lastly intensifying debate, which is an addition to the politicization index of Hutter & Grande. This can be measured by examining the tone, duration, and frequency of debates during CoR meetings. Examining whether discussions become more heated, involve more participants, or extend over a more extended period. Polarization of opinion and intensifying debate are analytically independent but very much interrelated indicators (De Wilde, 2011). If there is no intensification of debate following a noticeable polarization of opinions or beliefs the total sum of politicization would be limited.

4.2.2: Political representation

To conceptualize and operationalize the dependent variable of political representation better it has been divided into symbolic representation and substantive representation. In the most general view and by using the framework of Pitkin political representation can be described as 'standing for' and 'acting for' a constituency (Pitkin, 1967). With 'standing for' relating to symbolic representation and 'acting for' relating to substantive representation. This research upholds the constructivist turn on political representation. In the constructivist view political representation is seen as an act of making claims on behalf of a constituency (Saward, 2006). Because representatives cannot fully and rationally purely stand for or act for their constituency. They can make claims on behalf of what the representative thinks are the interests of their constituency (Saward, 2006). These can be both symbolic and substantive claims.

Symbolic representation

Symbolic representation involves the symbolic aspect of representation, where the representative symbolizes the represented and their values and interests in a specific communicative manner, but no substantive realization of interests is taking place. This form is ultimately meant to evoke emotions and strengthen beliefs within the represented group and construct a frame or view of the represented region or group by the representative to possibly steer the debate (Lombardo & Meier, 2019).

Symbolic representation is an often-neglected subject of study within political representation literature, the most recent attention it has received is in studies related to the representation of women and minorities in politics. Possibly because of this there are no frameworks developed for symbolic representation. But using the literature on symbolic representation a list of materializations of symbolic representation has been made in the theoretical framework. These can also be used as indicators for recognizing when symbolic representation is taking place:

- **Rhetorical choices**
    - o Representatives may use specific words, phrases, and tones in their speeches to highlight certain values or ideas.
- **Narrative construction**
    - o Constructing narratives that highlight the historical, cultural, or social aspects of the represented group, and paint them in a positive light.
- **Symbolic language**
    - o Using symbolic language, like metaphors and analogies to convey deeper meanings.
- **Identity affirmation**
    - o Affirming the identity of the represented group through public debate. This might involve highlighting shared values, cultural heritage, or historical experiences.
- **Emotional appeals**
    - o Incorporating emotional appeals in public debate to connect with the sentiments of the represented group and display emotional struggles of the group towards other representatives.
- **Policy framing**

o   Presenting or criticizing policies in a way that aligns with the values and interests of the represented group. For instance, framing an environmental policy as a commitment to 'an attack on the sovereignty of the region'.

Substantive representation

Pitkin emphasizes that through substantive representation representatives actively advocate for the interests, needs, and values of the group they represent (Pitkin, 1967). Substantive representation involves representatives playing an active role in influencing policies, so the needs and interests of their constituents remain protected. And engaging in meaningful dialogue and being accountable for addressing the diverse needs within their constituency (Pitkin, 1967). This understanding can also be seen in the claim-making framework of Saward.

Contrary to symbolic representation, substantive representation has received ample attention in political representation literature. Because of this several frameworks have been developed to detect substantive representation, or to be more specific substantive claims. The framework of Severs will be used for this thesis, because it is based upon the representative claim-making framework of Saward. This framework is presented in Figure 1.

The steps presented in the model will be used in the comparative case study to recognize substantive claims made by representatives within CoR. Indicators derived from this framework are threefold. The denouncement of a disadvantageous situation, the formulation of a proposal for improvement and the claiming of a right to improve a situation.

Table 1 displays a summary of the independent and dependent variable and associated indicators. Attached are the theory they are derived from and their definition.

Variable	Definition	Subdimension	Indicators	Theory
Independent variable				
Politicization	An increase of opinions, interests and values and the extent to which they are publicly advanced towards the process of policy formulation within the EU (De Wilde, 2011).		Salience of the issue	(Hutter & Grande, 2014) (Hooghe & Marks, 2009)
			Expansion of actors	
			Polarization of opinion	(De Wilde, 2011) (Hutter & Grande, 2014)
			Intensifying debate	
Dependent variable				
Political representation	The act of making claims and engaging on behalf of a group in political processes where groups or individuals need to be seen, heard, and acknowledged (Saward, 2006).	**Symbolic representation**	Rhetorical choices	(Lombardo & Meier, 2019) (Saward, 2006)
			Narrative construction	
			Symbolic language	
			Identity affirmation	
			Emotional appeals	
			Policy framing	
		Substantive representation	The denouncement of a disadvantageous situation	(Severs, 2012) (Saward, 2006)

| | | | The formulation of a proposal for improvement | |
| | | | The claiming of a right to improve a situation | |

Table 1: Operationalization of concepts

4.3: Case selection

The participant and case selection for this research used specific criteria to get an inclusive view of the CoR. First for the interviews several criteria like experience, political affiliation, and diverse layers of local or regional government were used for the selection of CoR members to get an inclusive picture of the political reality and workings within the CoR. And second several control variables, like time-period, commission and opinion category were used for the comparative case study to control for other variables that could possibly influence the political representation within CoR.

The participants chosen for semi-structured interviews met specific criteria. Firstly, they needed to possess some degree of experience as CoR members of around a year to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the internal workings of the organization. Secondly, participant selection was aimed to speak to diverse layers of local and regional government, including mayors, aldermen, provincial executives, and a member of a subnational parliament, thereby providing a comprehensive and varied perspective. Third, the chosen participants represent different political groups within the CoR, ensuring a balanced and inclusive view across various political interests and affiliations. Apart from the ECR all political parties within the CoR were represented in the interviews. The aim was to gather perspectives from the entire Benelux area, but this did not fully succeed. Seven members in total participated, of which six were from the Netherlands, and one was from Belgium. Considering the possible political sensitivities, the interviews are analyzed and discussed anonymously. A list with information regarding the participants can be found in the appendixes.

For the comparative case study, the selection of two CoR opinions was based on deliberate variation in the independent variable of politicization. One opinion will be chosen for its noticeable high level of politicization, while the other will be selected for exhibiting a low level of politicization. This intentional variation allows for a thorough explanation of how different levels of politicization within the CoR influence the political representation of the interests of local and regional governments.

The two CoR opinions chosen for the qualitative analysis are the opinion on the Nature Restoration Law, characterized by a high level of observable politicization, and the opinion on the Revision of the EU Ambient Air Quality Legislation, selected for its lack of observable politicization. The selection of these cases was done using the politicization index introduced in the theoretical framework and further explained in the subchapter operationalization.

The Nature Restoration Law has a higher level of politicization. Firstly, based upon the higher degree of salience it had at the time of the formulation of the opinion. The opinion was formulated and adopted in the period between March 2022 and February 2023. With several NGOs like WWF hailing it as a massive opportunity to revitalize nature (WWF, 2022). And member states like Finland have addressed concerns because it could unfairly and negatively affect their economy (Helsinki Times, 2022). And the matter was being highly discussed in the European Parliament. This also entails a high number of actors getting involved, mainly interest groups both in favor and against the Nature Restoration Law. This polarization of opinion resonated both in member states and within different political parties, with more conservative parties not fully in favor of the law.

The opinion on the Revision of the EU Ambient Air Quality Legislation was formulated and adopted in the period between December 2022 and July 2023. This revision has received significantly less media coverage during the formulation and adoption time then the Nature Restoration Law which indicates a lower level of salience. And in contrast to the Nature Restoration Law less actors in the form of interest groups are involved. And it is regarded as a matter of health, of which there is less polarization of opinion. Which can be seen in the amendments, which mostly only refer to WHO regulations.

To control for other variables both opinions are from the same ENVE commission, ensuring a comparable context and handling by similar CoR members. Additionally, they are from around the same time period to maintain temporal consistency. And to retain the same status or formal procedures around the opinion, these opinions fall under the category of a rule 41a opinion, which in essence means that the opinions are mandatory consultations on European Commission proposals.

4.4: Data collection

Semi-structured interviews

The research employs semi-structured interviews. Where a predefined list of topics and questions centered around the expectations and informed by the theoretical framework, serve as a guide during the interviews. This approach ensures a systematic exploration of the concepts and processes under investigation. While the interview questions provide a structured framework, the semi-structured nature allows flexibility for follow-up questions and the exploration of unexpected insights, enhancing the depth of understanding. All these interviews are transcribed for further data analysis and coding. And the interview questions can be found in the appendixes.

The interviews delved into the indicators of symbolic representation by asking how they or others intentionally construct narratives or frames to symbolize values and invoke emotions related to regional and local interests. For example, frames about rural regions. For substantive representation participants were asked to recount instances where they or others actively denounced disadvantageous situations, formulated proposals for improvement, and claimed rights to address regional challenges. This line of questioning provided insights into how participants perceived and engaged in both symbolic and substantive representation. And which was more prevalent according to them.

One potential challenge in interviews is the reliability of outcomes, as interviewees may articulate concepts and processes differently than the theoretical frameworks suggest. Especially when discussing ambiguous concepts as politicization, symbolic representation, and substantive representation. During the interviews these concepts were explained using the theoretical framework. The semi-structured format gives room for this explanation of the concepts, if necessary, through follow-up questions and examples. This adaptability is important, especially when dealing with a limited number of participants from the CoR, as their perspectives may not fully represent the entire political and organizational reality of the CoR.

The selection of participants aimed to capture diverse perspectives within the chosen cases. As interviews progressed, it became evident that a point of saturation was reached relatively quickly. Participants consistently provided similar insights, and additional interviews ceased to yield new perspectives or information. This saturation point suggests that the data collected sufficiently covers the range of experiences and perspectives within the scope of the study.

Comparative case study

For the comparative case study two CoR opinions are analyzed, for which a multi-faceted data collection approach will be used to provide a comprehensive understanding of the internal politicization and its influence on the political representation of local and regional interests. The two primary data sources are publicly available documents related to ENVE commission meetings and

recorded footage of the ENVE commission meetings and plenary meetings themselves, both are made publicly available by the CoR.

Document analysis:

- **Minutes of meetings**
  - Thorough analysis of minutes capturing discussions, decisions, and key points during commission meetings where the Nature Restoration Law and Revision of the EU Ambient Air Quality Legislation opinions were discussed.
- **Draft opinions**
  - Analysis of draft opinions, focusing on the language, arguments, identified interests within each document, and how these changed over time after amendments.
- **List of amendments**
  - Reviewing lists of proposed amendments to understand the dynamics of opinion shaping and potential areas of contention.
- **Voting lists**
  - Examining records of voting outcomes to identify patterns of support or opposition and potential alliances among members.

Recorded commission meetings:

- **Recorded meetings**
  - Comprehensive viewing of recorded commission meetings where the two opinions were discussed. This includes observing the possible debates, discussions, and interactions among CoR members.
- **Statement analysis**
  - An analysis of statements made by CoR members during the meetings to identify the framing of issues, the representation of interests, and the possible rhetorical strategies employed.
- **Interest representation**
  - Examining how the interests of local and regional governments are articulated and advocated during the meetings.
- **Decision-making dynamics**
  - Analyzing the decision-making process, including areas of consensus or dissent, and the role of politicization in shaping opinions.

The combination of the document analysis and viewing commission meetings aims to triangulate findings, providing a strong foundation for the comparison of the two CoR opinions.

To detect certain forms of representation statements by representatives during commission and plenary meetings were noted down and analyzed using the indicators. For example, an Austrian member framed a policy as "an attack on the authority of local and regional governments on agriculture and forests.". Another example was the rapporteur stating, "We as humankind evolved from nature, developed from nature, now we need to protect nature.". The first example was recognized as symbolic representation because of the observable framing of a policy in a negative light, without further denouncing of a situation or the claiming of a right for their specific region. The second example was also recognized as symbolic representation because of the symbolic language used in the forms of metaphors to convey deeper meanings. These examples serve as an illustration of how symbolic representation was determined during the case comparison study.

A good example of the detection of substantive representation was when an Italian representative was claiming different rights then others for his region during commission meetings. In advocating for differentiated implementation, the representative highlighted a challenging scenario in his region, emphasizing the geographical characteristics that impede the dispersion of polluted air. Thereby

denouncing a specific disadvantageous situation for his region. In response to these challenges, the representative passionately argued for specific accommodations, including different timelines and reduced sanctions for the region. Thereby claiming a specific right for his region. This is an example of substantive representation and serves as an illustration how other forms of substantive representation were recognized in the case comparison study.

4.5: Data analysis

This research combines semi-structured interviews and a comparative case study to explain the influence of politicization within the CoR on its political representation of local and regional interests. The combination of these two components allows for a nuanced explanation in which findings are cross verified.

For the interviews, a detailed coding process was implemented. Transcriptions of the interviews are carefully coded, with the initial codes aligning with the expectations and related to the operationalization of politicization, symbolic representation, and substantive representation. The interviews were conducted in Dutch and transcribed in Dutch, direct quotes used will be translated. To delve deeper into the nuances, a second layer of codes were developed, focusing on the aspects of these key concepts. Codes were refined during the analysis to accommodate the patterns across different interviews. The process continued until data saturation was achieved, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of participant perspectives. The software program Atlas.TI was used for the coding process of the transcriptions. The coding scheme can be found in the appendixes.

In the comparative case study, the document analysis involves a detailed examination of minutes, draft opinions, amendments list, and voting records from commission meetings. This scrutiny aims to identify patterns and dynamics related to interest representation within the CoR. Simultaneously, recorded footage of these meetings is examined to capture the nuances of how interests are represented. What is represented by different members of the CoR is noted, specifically if they are representing their region's interests or their political party interests. How they are representing interests is noted, specifically to recognize if symbolic representation or substantive representation is more present. And lastly the reason behind certain forms of political representation was tried to comprehend. These were compared with each other's to recognize differences and find possible explanations for these differences. This examination seeks to recognize how politicization influences what interests are being represented, how these are represented and why they are represented in a certain manner. Findings from interviews are cross verified with the findings from the comparative case study. The comparative case study serves as a validation and deepening mechanism for interview findings, the interviews remain the main part of the empirical findings.

Integration with findings from semi-structured interviews is crucial for cross-verification, validation, and enrichment of the understanding of interest representation and politicization within the CoR. Triangulating data from various sources enhances the reliability and validity of the analysis, providing a more comprehensive perspective on how internal politicization influences the representation of local and regional interests within the CoR.

4.6: Validity and reliability

This subchapter will delve into the validity and reliability of the research. To discuss the extent in which the research accurately measures what it is intended to measure, whether the used measures were used consistently and the extent to which measures produce stable and consistent results over time. Lastly the limitations of the research and the research design will be discussed, and recommendations to improve on the research design will be given.

4.6.1: Validity
Content validity

To ensure content validity the structure of the interviews was designed to align with the expectations and the questions were centered around the conceptualization and operationalizations. Divided into distinct parts, the questions were crafted to explore indicators relevant to the three expectations derived from the theoretical framework. The introduction set the stage by explaining the concept of politicization and exploring possible conflicts between the interests of local and regional governments and political parties. Subsequent sections delved into the presence of politicization, the representation of interests, and the reasons behind specific representation strategies. The theoretical relationship between symbolic and substantive representation was explained to the participants. But the participants often arrived to differing views of symbolic participation, not fully in line with the theoretical framework. To accommodate for this, adaptations were made to accommodate varying participant perspectives. This was done during the interviews, by stressing the specific nature of symbolic representation and afterwards in the analysis by using the operationalization detecting instances of symbolic representation as described in the theoretical framework. This ensures that the content of the study directly addresses the intricacies of politicization and political representation within the CoR as conceptualized in the theoretical framework.

Internal validity

It is important to acknowledge that there is a bias in the interviews, particularly towards the Benelux region, with a specific emphasis on the Dutch context. Due to time and scope constraints. Acknowledging the bias toward the Benelux area, the findings from the interviews and analysis of the findings were written with transparency about the specific Dutch context, and the possible bias it introduces. The comparative case study was strategically employed to provide a broader perspective of differing nations and test the Dutch experiences to reality by including instances from other nations within the ENVE commission. This approach was introduced to balance the geographical bias inherent in the participant pool.

Data saturation within the interviews was taken into consideration in the research design. By acknowledging that saturation was reached within the scope of this thesis, the insights gathered can be seen as representative of the experiences and perspectives present in the chosen cases.

Efforts were made to control for confounding factors in the comparative case study. Cases within the same commission and timeline were selected to minimize confounders. Challenges associated with variables such as specific national interests were recognized and addressed with transparency in the analysis, enhancing the internal validity of the study.

External validity

Emphasis needs to be placed on the unique nature of the CoR as an advisory body with no decision-making power within the EU framework. The external validity of this research is constrained by the distinctive features of the CoR, and caution needs to be exercised in generalizing findings to other EU institutions. This is because the institutional setting of the CoR is an important part of the explanation of the relationship between internal politicization and political representation within the CoR. Insights on the relationship between internal politicization and political representation can offer valuable lessons for advisory bodies, but the specific institutional setting of the CoR always needs to be taken into account.

Acknowledging the challenges of applying findings to different EU institutions, the focus of the research remains on the CoR's specific institutional setting. The caution exercised in making broader generalizations underscores the need for future research to explore the nuances of politicization and representation in varied EU contexts.

4.6.2: Reliability

The semi-structured nature of the interviews aimed to strike a balance between flexibility and consistency. Predetermined questions provided a systematic approach, ensuring reliability across interviews. Conducted by a single researcher, the interviews maintained consistency in follow-up questions. This singular approach minimized variations, contributing to overall reliability.

The case comparison study focused on selecting cases with similarities to control variables and minimize confounding factors. Both cases were within the ENVE commission, during roughly the same timeline, ensuring comparability. The analysis of cases involved a comprehensive examination of statements and interactions. This process allowed for a nuanced understanding of how internal politicization influenced political representation, enhancing the reliability of the study.

The coding process underwent multiple stages, from pattern recognition to testing the first set of codes. The initial set of codes were refined through a trial run, ensuring the reliability and clarity of the final codes. Coding decisions were consistent across both interviews and the comparative case study. Similar themes and patterns were identified, contributing to the reliability of the qualitative data.

4.6.3: Limitations

This research encounters several limitations that should be acknowledged to provide a clear context for the findings. Time and scope constraints influenced the number of interviews and cases analyzed, with only 8 out of 25 CoR members that were contacted in late October and early November 2023 participating. Of which two due to time constraints opted for a thorough written reply, and one interview got cut off halfway. This limited sample size, and a primarily Dutch perspective may restrict the generalizability of findings to the entire CoR. The comparative case study aimed to diversify perspectives and improve on the generalizability aspect. This step has improved the generalizability, but the small number of cases restricted a greater amount of generalizability for the whole CoR context. A broader selection of cases across Europe could have provided a more complete understanding of the relationship between internal politicization and political representation.

The theoretical implications drawn from the study's findings are context-dependent, mainly applicable to the unique nature of the CoR. Generalizing these findings to other EU bodies may be challenging due to the specific institutional setting of the CoR, which played a large factor in the explanation of the relationship between internal politicization and political representation. Therefore, theoretical implications of this research are largely confined to the CoR context. The findings provide valuable insights into how internal politicization influences the CoR, but the transferability to other EU contexts is limited.

Future research could broaden the scope by including a more extensive number of CoR members from various countries. This would allow for a more nuanced understanding of how internal politicization influences political representation across diverse national perspectives. A larger comparative case study could provide a clearer and more nuanced picture of how internal politicization affects political representation within the CoR. This would require a more extensive sample size and interviews conducted across the EU. Researchers could explore the generalizability of findings to similar advisory bodies or political institutions in different EU or international contexts. This would contribute to a broader understanding of the impact of internal politicization on political representation within the CoR and possibly provide more generalizable theoretical implications.

Chapter 5: Results

This chapter aims to explain the influence of internal politicization on political representation within the CoR by presenting the results of the interviews and the comparative case study and the analysis of those. Through careful analysis of the empirical results this chapter aims to provide nuanced insights into the influence of internal politicization on political representation. The chapter is structured along the expectations, each section aims to prove or disprove the expectation.

The first section aims to shed light on what is primarily being represented due to the internal politicization of the CoR. This is done by drawing on the findings from the interviews and the comparative case study. The results reveal three notable phenomena: frequent discrepancy between political parties and local and regional governments' interests, members' autonomy to choose what interests to represent, and a prioritization of the representation of local and regional interests, especially among Dutch members.

The second section aims to shed light on how interests are being represented due to the internal politicization of the CoR. Contrary to the expectation, substantive forms of representation take precedence, which is revealed in both the interviews and the comparative case study. This section provides an explanation on the interplay between symbolic and substantive representation in the CoR's collaborative political landscape.

The third expectation scrutinizes the potential constraining effect of symbolic representation on substantive representation. And aims to shed light why interests are being represented in a certain manner. Contrary to the expectation, the scarcity of symbolic representation in the comparative case study suggests limited influence on substantive representation. Furthermore, the constraining of debates is not observed in the findings. Debates do get guided by good substantive representation. The interviews provide additional context, acknowledging symbolic representation and its effect on debates within the CoR but barely within public meetings, indicating that this has a more pronounced impact in faction meetings.

5.1: Effect of politicization on what interest is represented

This section aims to shed light on whether internal politicization leads to an emphasis on the representation of political party interests. Based on both the interviews and validated by the case comparison study there are three phenomena that are noteworthy. First there is a frequent discrepancy between the interests of CoR members 'political parties and the interests of their local and regional governments, and that these are more frequent with political parties farther away from the center. Second, members have the freedom to choose between the representation of the interests of the political parties and their local and regional governments. And lastly based on the interviews, Dutch members prioritize representing the interests of their local and regional governments, and these members say that this is also often the case with members from other countries.

5.1.1: Empirical results

All participants of the interviews recognized that the interests of their local and regional governments and the interests of their political party within CoR can often be different. All members receive voting advice both from their political party within CoR and their local and regional governments, which are in most cases represented by a centralized authority. For example, Dutch municipality officials get voting advice from both the Vereniging Nederlandse Gemeenten (VNG), which is the Dutch centralized authority for municipalities and their political party. This discrepancy is often more apparent with members from political parties that are more distant from the center of the political spectrum.

As one mayor mentions in his interview: "*For each vote we receive advice on how we could vote. .....*
There is sometimes some discrepancy. And of course, we also discuss all the essential topics that are

discussed within the commissions in the Dutch delegation. And then yes, then. Then sometimes we come to the situation. Here we give more importance to the Dutch situation than to the political situation." (Interview 1).

Members from political parties positioned more to the center of the political spectrum, for example the EPP, Renew Europe and in some cases the PES feel that there is often less discrepancy between the interests of their political party and the interests of their local and regional governments. They feel that the interests of their center-party often align more with the interests of for example the VNG. A Dutch alderman mentioned this very specifically in his interview: "*Well, look at the parties in the middle, I would almost say that you see deviations less often than with the Greens, especially when it comes to climate and the environment. They are then just a little tighter in the match. And of course that is also discussed. And then you see that the representative from the Greens says yes, you propose to vote for this amendment, but I am voting against it. And I think that's fine.*" (Interview 5).

As the alderman mentions members from political parties that are more distant from the center like the ECR, or the Greens see a more frequent discrepancy between their political party's interests and those of local and regional governments. This is echoed by both members from parties in the center and parties farther away from the center like this example from the Greens: "*I can give you an example: there is currently advice/opinion on soil quality, because new legislation is being introduced. But this is a very sensitive issue in the Netherlands. To put it bluntly ..... We emit a lot, so everything you do in terms of regulations feels like extra pressure, more rules, unnecessary pressure, etc. in the Netherlands, I'll exaggerate here to make it clear. While I think from my green point of view, it is becoming very harmful to health, not so much biodiversity, there is often a lot of navigating between interests involved in that.*" (Interview 3).

Almost all participants specifically mention that they feel that considerable agency or in other words freedom to choose is granted to CoR members in navigating between the interests of their local and regional governments and the interests of their respective political parties. A very important point that contributes to this freedom is the absence of any strict party discipline within political parties in the CoR. Participants from the interviews said that unlike some national political arenas, there is no explicit party disciplining or sanctions within political parties if a CoR member chooses to vote in favor of their local and regional governments' interests and against the interests of their respective political party. This is also felt within the national delegations. The absence of possible sanctions at both the national delegation and party levels creates an environment in which members feel they have agency and a certain degree of independence in aligning with either local and regional interests or political party interests. As highlighted by a member of a Belgian subnational parliament: "*There are of course points where we in the political group also have the freedom to vote differently. So there is no party discipline there that says you should vote like this, there are guiding lines. But it is not the case that you are sanctioned if someone votes differently or does not vote or something like that. That is absolutely not the case and I have the impression that this is also the case in the other factions.*" (Interview 2,).

Furthermore, the interviewed CoR members said that this freedom of choice is both facilitated by the cooperative atmosphere within CoR and an important element to maintain effective cooperation within the CoR. The ability for members to choose between political party interests and the interests of local and regional governments is seen as a positive feature of the CoR, because it helps to maintain and create a cooperative atmosphere. Participants mentioned the importance of open discussions within both national delegations and political parties about the possible difference in opinion members might have to ensure a transparent and informed decision-making process.

According to the interviews and observed in the case comparison study this can be seen in the consensus that is frequently achieved and the informal compromises made within the CoR. Consensus-building reflects the collaborative nature of decision-making, while informal compromises

show the commitment of the members to find common ground. The rapporteur's role in incorporating different views within the formulation of an opinion, as observed in the case comparison study, particularly stands out. This inclusion according to the interviews aims to foster consensus, demonstrating a proactive approach to harmonizing diverse perspectives within the CoR.

The interviews give ample evidence that there is indeed often a discrepancy between the interests of members 'political parties and the interests of their local and regional governments, but that they have the freedom to choose which interest they want to represent within CoR debates. In the Dutch context this choice mainly falls to the interests of the local and regional governments. For members that are part of for example the EPP fraction this is more often done then members that are part of for example the Greens. But still on each end of the political spectrum Dutch members of the CoR mainly choose to represent the interests of Dutch local and regional governments. A Dutch alderman had the following to say about this point: "*If you look at the Dutch Parliament you see that faction discipline, you rarely see that people vote differently there. In Europe this is different per definition, there the discipline is actually, well, it is not there. I have never been forced or asked to vote for this, of course advice is given from your group. But I also receive advice from the VNG, which often corresponds, but sometimes not. And then in principle I choose the VNG because I am there with a mandate from the VNG. And there is no mandate from the EPP faction. Then the VNG advice is given preference.*" (Interview 5).

In the case comparison study, these findings from the interviews are validated and deepened. For example, in the opinion on the Revision of Ambient Air Quality Italian members have banded together to voice their concerns over the implementation of the directives, mentioning the specific geographical qualities of some regions in Italy. This is done by Italian members from the conservative ECR, and Italian members from the socialist PES. By doing this they represent a different interest then most PES members, because Italian members are trying to limit ambitious timelines, while most of the PES was in favor of these ambitious timelines. Clearly showing that CoR members are free to choose their own national interests or the interest of their local and regional governments over the interests of a political party. Something similar can also be seen in the formulation of amendments for this opinion, where Dutch members, one from the EPP and one from the PES formulated amendments together. And in contrast to this in the debate on the Nature Restoration Law, we see large differences between the statement of a Dutch CoR member from the EPP and a Dutch CoR member from the Greens. Where the member from the Greens has chosen a standpoint that more closely represents the interests of the Greens then the more conservative interest of the Netherlands.

5.1.2: Analysis

The understanding of the dynamics of political representation within the CoR derived from the empirical results contradict the initial expectation that internal politicization may lead to a greater emphasis on party interests.

The interviews consistently highlight the existence of a significant discrepancy between the interests of CoR members' political parties and those of their local and regional governments. This discrepancy is particularly noticeable among members from political parties situated farther away from the center of the political spectrum, such as the Greens. A crucial aspect that emerges from the empirical results is the freedom granted to CoR members in choosing between the interests of their political parties and those of their local and regional governments. Unlike some national political arenas, there is a notable absence of strict party discipline within the CoR. Despite the freedom to choose, a consistent trend can be noticed. Specifically in the Dutch context CoR members consistently prioritize local and regional interests.

Looking at the empirical results it can be determined that the internal politicization of the CoR has not led to a deemphasis of the representation of the interests of local and regional governments. Because

firstly, in their freedom to choose between interests the choice is in most cases made for the local and regional governments. Because they feel that they have to act on their specific mandate, which in most cases is given by a local or regional authority and not by political appointments by their political party. And second members feel that the subject matter is not as political as some might think, because it is mostly related to implementation concerns. Therefore, the choice of what interests to represent more easily falls on the interests of local and regional governments, because it is often more specific. A Dutch alderman elaborated on this: "*And let me be honest, in the Committee you very often have to deal with local and regional matters that are much less political, which have much less to do with national politics or political parties. And of course that is the case with the European Parliament. And when it comes to, for example, the refugee crisis, we as municipalities naturally have to deal with it because the refugees come to us, but when it comes to the European borders and how we guard them, yes, that is not what we as a Committee are about.*" (Interview 5).

The internal politicization might not lead to a shift in what is being represented. But an interesting phenomenon is the possibility to choose which interest CoR members want to represent, this possibility of dual allegiances can be seen as unique in political arenas. The argument can be made that the internal politicization of the CoR in combination with its cooperative atmosphere has led to the freedom of choice for its members on what to represent. As discussed in the theoretical framework, the increased prominence of political parties within the CoR is the main factor of its internal politicization. This increased prominence has given members an increased opportunity of choosing what they represent, they can represent both their respective political party and their local and regional governments. Because both can in some instances provide equal amounts of support for members.

The cooperative atmosphere and the absence of party discipline within the CoR encourages open discussions, where members can freely express differing opinions without fear of sanctions from their political party or national delegation. This cooperative atmosphere reinforces the autonomy that members can make choices that best represent the interests they consider most important, whether aligned with their political parties or their local and regional governments.

In conclusion, the empirical results contradict the first expectation. Contrary to the expectation the internal pollicization has not led to a deemphasis of the interests of local and regional governments. Instead, the argument can be made that the internal politicization of the CoR combined with its cooperative atmosphere has resulted in the freedom for members to choose what interests they represent in the CoR. It has given them the opportunity of a dual allegiance. And based on the interviews the choice of what interest to represent mostly falls on the representation of the interests of their local and regional governments. Because they feel they have to honor their mandate, and because the subject matter is not as political and is mostly focused on implementation.

5.2: Effect of politicization on symbolic representation

This section aims to shed light on the influence of internal politicization on how members represent interests in the CoR and whether symbolic representation takes precedence due to the internal politicization. The interviews consistently indicate the dominance of substantive representation, with symbolic representation being a sporadic occurrence. Due to the focus on implementation concerns within the CoR. Symbolic representation is occasionally observed by Dutch members among members from other nations, away from public scrutiny, potentially carrying national political conflicts into the CoR. And the comparative case study indicates a very slight increase in symbolic representation when an issue is more politicized.

5.2.1: Empirical results

Interview participants consistently highlight the prevalence of substantive forms of representation over symbolic representation within the CoR. Symbolic representation as described in the theoretical

framework and the operationalization is only sporadically recognized in the public deliberation of the CoR. Participants, particularly from the Netherlands, suggest that when symbolic representation occurs, it is more noticeable among members from other nations and away from the public eye, potentially bringing national political conflicts into the CoR. On the specific question if CoR members create negative or positive symbolic frames around policies a Dutch mayor answered the following: "*Well, situations that scary I do not see in public discussions. What you sometimes see in the fraction meetings, and I also hear from other colleagues in the Dutch delegation that there is sometimes quite a heated debate in the various fractions between representatives of some countries that, well, have a regional interest as well and set priority. France, Germany, Spain. They are of course large countries, also in terms of surface area. And there it does make a difference whether you are in the south or in the north, so to speak. And in the Netherlands, of course, this is all a bit less strong, I notice.*" (Interview 1).

Participants of the interviews mention that the discussions and subjects discussed are inherently politically charged but are mostly about concerns related to the practical implementation of policies. The chair of the ENVE commission highlighted in both cases studied that one of the most important aspects of the CoR's role is striking a balance between ambition and feasibility. Therefore, mentioned by both the participants of the interviews and observable in the comparative case study, issues are approached with a focus on the interplay between political considerations or ambitions and the practicalities of implementation at the local and regional level. Because of this, specific substantive concerns, such as geographic differentiation and pragmatic feasibility considerations, take precedence over symbolic appeals or framing in these discussions. Like one Dutch alderman highlighted in his interview: "*Yes, really the implementation what you say. If you come to the committee with a proposal with a lot of red tape and we have to hire extra people to meet the costs. These are things that concern us. And normally we hope, the MEP who would read it, that does not always happen, the MEP would have to think about how do I better include the cities and regions in this.*" (Interview 5)

The case comparison study and sporadic mentions in interviews highlight a trend where symbolic representation tends to increase when an issue becomes more politicized. This can be observed in the comparison of the opinions on the Revision of Ambient Air Quality and the more politicized Nature Restoration Law. While an increase in symbolic representation is observable in the public statements made during the discussions on the Nature Restoration Law, it remains minimal, with substantive representation overwhelmingly dominating.

Within the Revision of Ambient Air Quality only one public statement among around thirty to forty public statements could be regarded as symbolic representation, with a CoR member making an emotional appeal about the death of a child because of air pollution. Apart from this most of the debate was centered around the balancing between the importance of ambitious timelines and the possibility of differentiated implementation and decreased sanctioning for regions with certain geographical conditions. But all members highlighted the importance of significantly reducing air pollution.

Within public deliberation about the opinion on the Nature Restoration Law four instances can be regarded as symbolic representation within the thirty to forty public statements. For example, the framing of an Austrian member as the law being an attack on the authority of local and regional governments in farming. And a Dutch member had a similar point framing the law in way that it would only bring uncertainty for farmers. Opposing symbolic representation to this was done on two occasions by the rapporteur, by making the rhetoric that humankind evolved from nature and has the duty to protect it. But most of the debate was centered around the uncertainty of the so-called urban green spaces, and how these would impact specific regions or local governments unfairly, but all members were stressing the importance of restoring nature.

Participants of the interviews expressed some difficulty in pinpointing instances of symbolic representation within the CoR. And when something qualifies as symbolic representation. And the case comparison study compared only two cases, so this slight increase in symbolic representation within a more politicized issue might not be the norm within the CoR.

5.2.2: Analysis

The empirical findings highlight the prevalence of substantive representation over symbolic representation. Symbolic representation, though acknowledged by both participants of the interviews and observed in the case comparison study, remains a sporadic phenomenon.

The nature of symbolic representation is nuanced. Even in issues characterized by high politicization, substantive representation overwhelmingly takes precedence. When symbolic representation takes place members often aim to introduce a symbolic layer to substantive discussions, by for example framing a policy as an attack on local and regional governments authority.

Two explanations for the prevalence of substantive representation can be derived from the empirical findings. First the expectation posits that the internal politicization influences what manner of representation takes place, but there is a stronger variable that influences the form of representation. A more significant variable that influences what manner of representation takes place is the institutional setting of the CoR. The cooperative atmosphere and the emphasis on practical policy implementation within the CoR contributes significantly to the prevalence of substantive representation. The cooperative atmosphere centers around building consensus, and symbolic gestures do not add substance to the building of consensus according to members. The CoR's commitment to practical policy implementation ensures that substantive representation takes precedence, as members navigate issues grounded in local and regional realities, emphasizing the pragmatic aspects of governance over symbolic gestures. This institutional context can be seen as a stronger explanatory variable for explaining what manner of political representation takes precedence within the CoR. Second the absence of the last factor of the politicization index: the intensifying of debates. The CoR's distinct lack of intense debates, in contrast to institutions like the European Parliament, may contribute to the limited occurrence of symbolic representation. This further underscores the importance of the institutional setting in shaping the dynamics of representation within the CoR.

In conclusion, the empirical results contradict the second expectation. While a very slight increase in symbolic representation is observable in the case comparison study, it remains a minor aspect within the CoR. And it remains important to note that this case comparison study contained a comparison between only two cases, which cannot be directly generalized to the entirety of the CoR. The main explanation for the prevalence of substantive representation is the cooperative institutional setting focused on implementation and practical concerns. This distinguishes the CoR in its political representation from more politically charged environments.

5.3: Constrainment of substantive representation

The final section examines whether increased symbolic representation constrains substantive representation. Empirical findings suggest that symbolic representation does not emerge as the dominant form within the CoR. While symbolic representation might subtly influence debates, it is not prominently observed in public deliberations.

5.3.1: Empirical results

As discussed in the previous subchapter symbolic representation does not emerge as the dominant form of political representation within the CoR. Interviews indicate that strong symbolic representation, while theoretically seen as a potential constraint, is not prominently observed as a constraint in public debates. This can also be seen in the plenary debate on the Nature Restoration Law, where the symbolic representation, in the form of framing the Nature Restoration Law as an

attack on the authority of local governments got drowned out by other members that were substantively representing their region with very specific concerns about a specific article from the law. Some members suggest symbolic representation might have a subtle influence on the debate. But they cannot really put a finger on it. If the sporadic form of symbolic representation guides or possibly constrains a debate, they mainly attribute it to meetings within political factions, but not really within public debates. And because of the desire to reach consensus the constraining of debates is not something that is recognized. As one alderman points out: "*I do think it has an influence. Let me say that carefully, but I have enormous doubts about how much. But it is certainly something that can have an influence. But if you were to read a number of opinions in a row, you wouldn't see it reflected in them. That's my assumption then. Because ultimately these are recommendations that must be supported by all regions*" (Interview 3).

Participants from the interviews did recognize that some members created positive frames of their regions to give their region or their own expertise a more prominent position in the debate. With the goal the guide the debate in favor of their region, using the strategies from their region or expertise they possess. These could be seen as symbolic representation, but they tend to be more substantive in nature. For instance, as the member interviewed from Noord-Brabant admitted he presented his region as a high-tech region, but this claim was grounded in the substantive strengths of the region, rather than a purely symbolic assertion. And partly because of this framing he could participate in the opinion on the Chips Act as a shadow rapporteur. Thereby, claiming a right for himself and his region. He said the following about this: "*I was shadow rapporteur on the Chips Act last year. Because we are of course known as the high-tech Brainport region. Yes, but I was also able to do a number of things in terms of content in the advice to do a good job for us as well. So that's why I worked hard to get that position and convince people about my region. And since then I have been seen as a representative of such a region again.*" (Interview 4).

By this framing they are claiming a right for their region, specifically aimed at being involved in the writing of the opinion on the Chips Act. This kind of framing can be seen as substantive. But framing a policy as an attack on the authority on agriculture and nature for local governments, without any mention of specifics on why this is the case can be qualified as symbolic representation. However, the policy framing depicting policies as attacks on the authority of local governments that can be seen as symbolic representation tend to get drowned out by the larger number of substantive claims and statements made by other members in public deliberation.

While symbolic representation may not constrain or consistently affect substantive representation within the CoR, there is an acknowledgment that debates can be guided or influenced. But this is done by strong or good substantive representation of a specific region, especially members from larger countries like Italy, France, and Spain can guide debates toward specific implementation concerns. According to participants from the interviews the persistent advocacy by certain regions, which is also observable in the case comparison study, suggests that strong substantive representation can guide the direction of discussions or debates. For example, on the opinion on the Revision of Ambient Air Quality, Italians across political parties, conservatives and socialists alike advocated for differentiated implementation. All based on the substantive representation of specific geographical conditions of Italian regions that retained polluted air. These Italian members guided the debate and the opinion to truly involve these concerns. But this does not constrain the debate to solely include statements surrounding this point, but building from the exchange of views to the discussion of adoption the subject reached more prominence. A Dutch mayor also recognized these occurrences within his own political party and warned against them: "*I recently had a situation with an Italian colleague in which the representatives from Lombardy had quite a situation there. Trying to set it as a standard. And yes, then you have to be careful not to let that happen completely, not even in your group.*" (Interview 1,).

5.3.2: Analysis

Symbolic representation appears to play a minor role within the CoR. Public debates, characterized more by individual statements than interactive discussions where members can express views without facing immediate challenges or constraints. Do not provide a good environment for symbolic representation to exert any constraints. Debates within the CoR are observed to be guided, not constrained, by substantive representation. Strong advocacy, as seen in the case comparison study in the coalitions formed by Italian members across party lines, showcases how substantive representation influences the directions of discussions. While debates are directed, there is no evident constraint on diverse perspectives. Symbolic representation faces challenges of being drowned out by the multitude of substantive concerns raised by different regions. The case comparison study supports this observation, with acts of symbolic representation receiving minimal reactions from rapporteurs and being overshadowed by the detailed substantive considerations of specific regions.

In conclusion, while symbolic representation is acknowledged, its impact is minimal within the CoR's unique setting. The absence of immediate feedback in the form of interactive debates, coupled with the CoR's perceived focus on implementation concerns, diminishes the potential constraining effect of symbolic representation. Instead, the emphasis shifts to the influential role played by substantive representation in guiding, rather than constraining, debates. Symbolic acts, when present, face the challenge of being overshadowed by the myriad of substantive concerns articulated by diverse regions.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and discussion

6.1: Conclusion

The CoR was designed as an advisory body within the EU decision-making framework. With its main purpose to be a voice for local and regional governments in EU decision-making. By initial design the CoR is not a political body, but gradually over time the CoR has designed itself to resemble one. Since its first meeting the prominence of political parties has risen and the CoR has been through a process of internal and external politicization. Prior research has delved into the external politicization or what others call 'institutional activism' of the CoR. However, there exists a notable gap in research regarding the influence of internal politicization on the core purpose of the CoR: its political representation of the interests of local and regional governments within the EU. This research has aimed to fill this gap and explain how the internal politicization of the CoR has influenced its political representation of the interest of local and regional governments. For this purpose, the following research question was created: *"How does the internal politicization of the CoR influence its political representation of the interests of local and regional governments within the European Union?"*.

To answer this research question, three expectations have been formulated. Which aimed to unravel the influence of the internal politicization of the CoR on its political representation in three ways. The first expectation aims to unravel what interests are predominantly being represented due to the internal politicization. The expectation was that the interests of political parties would be predominantly represented. The second expectation aims to unravel how interests are being represented due to the internal politicization of the CoR. The expectation was that due to the internal politicization symbolic representation would take prominence. And the third expectation aims to unravel why interests are being represented in a certain manner. The expectation was that the increased symbolic representation would constrain certain substantive representation attempts.

Contrary to the first expectation, internal politicization within the CoR does not lead to a de-emphasis of local and regional interests. Members stressed that the representation of the interests of local and regional governments remained their main purpose. Instead, the findings show that internal politicization provides members with the freedom to choose and represent both the interests of their respective local and regional governments and their political party. But the results have convincingly shown that members in this choice prioritize the concerns of their local and regional governments. But if the interest of their local and regional governments truly goes against what they believe in, members can make the choice to represent the interest of their respective political party. This refutes the notion of a noticeable shift towards emphasizing political party interests in the members' political representation. And shows that the internal politicization of the CoR has changed the institutional setting of the CoR and has granted the members the freedom to choose between what interest to represent. And not directly what interest members represent.

Contrary to the second expectation, which anticipated an increase of symbolic representation due to internal politicization, the results show a different picture. While a slight increase is observable in the case comparison study, substantive representation remains predominant. As highlighted by the members in the interviews the cooperative institutional setting, coupled with a focus on practical concerns and implementation sets the focus on substantive representation. This distinguishes the CoR's political representation from more politically charged environments, where symbolic representation is more present.

Regarding the third expectation, symbolic representation is observable and acknowledged by members, but it exerts minimal impact within the CoR's unique setting. The absence of immediate feedback and the perceived focus on implementation concerns mitigate the potential constraining effect of symbolic representation. Substantive representation plays a more influential role, guiding

debates without significant constraints. Symbolic representation if present often gets overshadowed by the myriad of substantive and practical concerns articulated by diverse regions.

As noted in the theoretical framework very little literature exists on the relationship between politicization and political representation. There was some literature that stated that political representation would increase in politicized environments (Kuyper, 2018). Based on this claim and other arguments the assumption was made that the political representation of political party interest would increase, but this claim was contradicted by the findings. Literature on framing and the construction of narratives claimed that the act of political framing of groups or policies and constructing narratives is said to occur more often in politicized contexts (Gray, Purdy, & Ansari, 2015). These acts were conceptualized and operationalized as symbolic representation, and the findings do confirm this claim in the context of the CoR within the comparison case study, although this increase of symbolic representation due to a higher level of politicization was very minimal.

In direct response to the research question: "*How does the internal politicization of the CoR influence its political representation of the interests of local and regional governments within the European Union?*" the findings indicate that internal politicization does not overshadow the political representation of the interests of local and regional governments or increase symbolic representation. Instead, it provides CoR members with the freedom to choose between the representation of the interests of their local and regional governments or their respective political party. The cooperative institutional setting serves as the main explanatory factor in how and why representation takes place within the CoR. The institutional setting fosters an emphasis on practical considerations that further contributes to the predominant substantive form of representation within the CoR.

In the EU decision-making framework the CoR stands out as a unique body. The opportunity for dual allegiances granted to CoR members in choosing the interests they advocate adds a layer of diversity to EU-decision-making. Were it not for the introduction of political parties and the process of politicization, the CoR might have purely reflected national sentiments. Only echoing the statements from centralized authorities for local and regional governments. However, the nuanced politicization within the CoR, combined with members' freedom to represent various causes without being bound by party discipline, prevents it from evolving into what some have feared in the early years of the CoR a 'European Parliament 2.0'.

The CoR, with its interplay between political affiliations and local and regional considerations, emerges as a unique and important element in the EU decision-making framework. By steering clear of a polarized political environment, the CoR delivers useful advice on implementation concerns that provides a useful balancing act between EU ambitions and feasibility.

6.2: Discussion

This research contributes insights into the relationship between internal politicization and political representation within the CoR. But it needs to be acknowledged that it has several limitations. The primary limitations revolve around time and scope, impacting both the number of interviews and cases analyzed. While the comparative case study aimed at diversifying perspectives, the small number of cases may limit the generalizability of findings to the entire CoR context, primarily reflecting a Dutch perspective.

Theoretical implications derived from the thesis findings are context-dependent, primarily applicable to the unique nature of the CoR. Attempting to generalize these findings to other EU bodies might be challenging due to the specific institutional setting of the CoR, which significantly shapes the relationship between internal politicization and political representation. Therefore, the theoretical implications drawn from this research are predominantly confined to the CoR context, offering limited transferability to other EU or international contexts.

Future studies could expand the scope by including a more extensive number of CoR members from diverse countries, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of how internal politicization influences political representation across varied national perspectives. A larger comparative case study could also provide a clearer and more nuanced picture of how internal politicization affects political representation within the CoR.

Researchers could also explore the generalizability of the findings to similar advisory bodies or political institutions in different EU or international contexts. By using the theoretical framework and expectations provided. This could contribute to a broader understanding of the impact of internal politicization on political representation on other advisory bodies within international organizations and potentially offer more generalizable theoretical implications.

In conclusion, while this research offers valuable insights into the internal politicization dynamics of the CoR, these limitations underscore the need for caution in generalizing the findings. Future research that expands the sample size and geographical diversity, hold promise for extending the understanding of how internal politicization influences the political representation of interests in the CoR.

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Appendixes

Appendix 1: Interview participants

Interview	Country	Function	Experience	Date Interview
Interview 1	Netherlands	Mayor	CoR member since 18-07-2016	14-12-2023
Interview 2	Belgium	Member of subnational parliament	CoR member since 26-01-2015	27-11-2023
Interview 3	Netherlands	Alderman	CoR member since 26-01-2020	10-11-2023
Interview 4	Netherlands	Provincial Executive	CoR member since 25-09-2020	23-11-2023
Interview 5	Netherlands	Alderman	CoR member since 13-07-2015	13-11-2023
Interview 6	Netherlands	Mayor	CoR member since 26-01-2020	21-11-2023
Interview 7	Netherlands	Alderman	CoR member since 19-12-2022	30-11-2023

Appendix 2: Interview questions
Introduction

Question 1: How did you become a member of the Committee, did you apply for the position?

Question 2: Do you think political affiliations are part of the designation process?

Question 3: What topics are you involved in within the Committee?

Politicization

Question 4: The Committee is officially an advisory body within the EU. But do you see the Committee as a political body within the EU?

Question 5: What do you think of the Committee's position in the EU? Do you think this should be strengthened, or do you think the current role of the Committee is sufficient to represent the interests of regional and local authorities?

Question 6: You are there on behalf of your region. But also on behalf of your political party, do you notice that this can cause conflict?

Question 7: Do you notice that (fierce) debates are taking place based on the political interests of the various parties?

- If so, are compromises made on the basis of those political interests?

Question 8: Do you think that these political interests, not necessarily yours, can stand in the way of strongly representing the interests of regional and local governments?

Forms of representation

Question 9: How do you represent the interests of your region?

Question 10: Have you noticed that symbolic frames are being created for certain regions. For example, rhetoric choices and making a play on emotions or on the identity of types of regions or a specific region to steer the debate in a certain direction?

Question 11: Do you think that the political nature of the Committee contributes to a stronger symbolic representation of the interests of local and regional authorities?

- If so, do you think that this symbolic representation limits the substantive representation?

Question 12: Or do you think that the political character of the Committee actually contributes to a stronger substantive representation of the interests of regional and local authorities?

Appendix 3: Coding scheme

Code	Grounded	Code Groups
Membership	14	Membership
○		
Membership: Application	8	Membership
○		
Membership: Commission	4	Membership
○		
Membership: Duties	6	Membership
○		
Membership: Experience	6	Membership
○		
Membership: Rapporteur	2	Membership
○		
Political Organization: Commission	1	Political Organization
○		
Political Organzation	23	Political Organization
○		
Political Organzation: Advisory or Political Body	2	Political Organization
○		
Political Organzation: Political Party	4	Political Organization
○		
Political Organzation: Position of Committee in EU	7	Political Organization
○		
Political Organzation: Purpose of Committee	5	Political Organization
○		
Political Organzation: Rapporteur	7	Political Organization
○		
Political Representation	44	Political Representation
○		
Political Representation: Discrepancy Political Parties	9	Political Representation
○		
Political Representation: Importance of Rapporteur	8	Political Representation
○		
Political Representation: Interconnection Symbolic and Substantive Representation	5	Political Representation
○		
Political Representation: National Interest	9	Political Representation
○		
Political Representation: Regional vs Political Interests	21	Political Representation
○		
Politicization	32	Politicization
○		
Politicization: Compromise and consensus	8	Politicization
○		
Politicization: Effect on Representation	2	Politicization
○		
Politicization: Examples	1	Politicization
○		
Politicization: Expansion of Actors	2	Politicization
○		
Politicization: Organization	9	Politicization
○		