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Article



Politicization Strategies in Domestic Trade Policy Making: Comparing Agriculture and Seafood Sectors in Norway

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ABSTRACT *This article analyses how domestic trade policies are adapted to new international framework conditions through strategies of politicization and depoliticization. Empirically, the focus is on how the interests of a globalized seafood industry are assessed in conjunction with the interests of agriculture – an industry traditionally treated as exceptional in policy making. The findings, which are based on a study of how trade policy issues have been handled in five white papers from Norway, show that different (de)politicization strategies can contribute to change in both policy goals and policy instruments.*

Keywords: politicization; historical institutionalism; trade; agriculture; seafood; Norway

Introduction

In the last decade, a series of developments have challenged the global trade framework. The collapse of the Doha Round of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2008 encouraged many countries to negotiate bilateral and regional trade agreements as a complement to the multilateral WTO agreement. For example, the EU has finalized trade agreements with Canada and Japan, while the USA has renewed the NAFTA agreement with Canada and Mexico based on President Trump's America First strategy. This new global order represents a challenge for small and medium-sized countries that depend on multilateral rules, since market size is the most important source of power in international trade negotiations (Young and Peterson 2014, p. 74).

This article analyses how trade policy positions in one country, Norway are adapted to these new, more uncertain framework conditions. Recent changes represent both threats and possibilities, and we ask if strategies of politicization and depoliticization can change the balance between the defensive interests of agricultural industries and the export-

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oriented interests of the seafood sector. Historically, in all international negotiations between 1947 and 1994, successive Norwegian governments allowed the interests of an agricultural industry that seeks to protect its domestic markets, dominated over the interests of a seafood sector seeking increased access to foreign markets (Frøland 2015, p. 130). The Norwegian experience is relevant for countries that regard agriculture as being a unique economic sector with special market and production conditions deserving special treatment in terms of government policy. The concept of agricultural exceptionalism has been used to describe this well-established idea (Grant 1995; Skogstad 1998; Daugbjerg and Swinbank 2009).

International trade negotiations are usually seen as negotiations between sovereign states pursuing national interests. Although the importance of domestic policies and politics is acknowledged – not least in Putnam’s (1988) iconic two-level game concept – there are fewer studies of how different domestic concerns are handled in the political systems of small states. This article seeks to make two contributions to the literature. Empirically, it offers knowledge about the formation of domestic trade policy positions through a comparative study of new policy initiatives from the agriculture and seafood sectors in Norway. The first was introduced in 2011 and the latest in 2017. Theoretically, the paper uses a historical-institutional perspective, and offers insights into how strategies of politicization and depoliticization influence the design of new policies. The study shows that different (de)politicization strategies can contribute to change in both policy goals and policy instruments.

The two industries studied in this article operate under different natural and political framework conditions. Norwegian agriculture faces challenging weather and topographical conditions. Although it is declining in relative economic importance, high levels of tariff protection and subsidies make it an important source of employment and settlement in many parts of the country (Farsund 2014, p. 150). The seafood sector, which is an amalgamation of traditional fisheries and a rapidly growing aquaculture industry, enjoys favourable natural conditions. Norway controls a large fisheries zone rich in resources, and its coastline is well-suited for fish farms. Currently, seafood is Norway’s third largest export product, but the industry is less important for employment than agriculture (Farsund 2014, p. 151). One reason is that processed seafood meets higher tariffs than other industrial goods in the WTO (Melchior 2006). Therefore, the seafood sector is primarily a supplier of commodities to processing industries in other countries.

Empirically, the article analyses five policy processes in the period from 2011 to 2017 – two within the area of responsibility of the Ministry of Agriculture and Food, two of the Ministry of Fisheries, and one of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. A potentially important change took place in 2013 when a new government established the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Fisheries. However, since the new ministry retained the position of the Minister of Fisheries as one of two equally ranked ministers and made no administrative adaptations (Farsund and Langhelle 2015, p. 111), we will regard it as a continuation of the old ministry in the period covered by this study.

The article proceeds in the following way. The next section presents the theoretical approach and expectations. This is followed by a presentation of the methodological

approach and the empirical evidence. Then there is a section for each of the five cases. Finally the article discusses the findings and their implications.

Theoretical Reflections and Expectations

Trade policy making in Norway is characterized by a high degree of institutionalization and compartmentalization (Farsund 2014; Melchior and Sverdrup 2015). Institutions are generally assumed to be difficult to change (Peters 2019, p. 23). However, they do change, and the three types of change identified by Peter Hall – change in policy instruments, policy goals, and policy paradigms – are relevant in this regard. The third type of change is less common than the first two (Hall 1993, pp. 278–279). In historical institutionalism, a *critical juncture* is the term for radical, paradigmatic change. This is “relatively short periods of time” when an institution arises or changes due to agents’ choices (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007, p. 348). Norway’s accession to the GATT (1947), EFTA (1960), WTO (1994) and EEA (1994) represent critical junctures in Norwegian trade policy positions. Although we cannot exclude the possibility that the new international framework conditions outlined in the introduction will result in a critical juncture, gradual change of policy instruments and policy goals is a realistic assumption for the 2011–2017 period.

Therefore, the article will utilize another relevant concept from historical institutionalism – path dependency – which refers to an “increasing return process” where “the relative benefits of the current activity compared with other possible options increases over time” (Pierson 2000, p. 252). This allows for slow and incremental change (Mahoney and Thelen 2010, p. 1). Mahoney and Thelen identify four modes of incremental change. The first is displacement, which refers to the removal of existing rules and the introduction of new ones. The second is layering, which refers to the introduction of new rules alongside existing ones. The third is drift, which refers to the changed impact of existing rules due to shifts in the environment. The fourth is conversion, which refers to the changed enactment of existing rules due to their strategic redeployment (Mahoney and Thelen 2010, pp. 15–16). The last two modes of change refer to the implementation phase, which will not be analysed in this article.

Historical institutionalism gives us insights into institutional dynamics, but we also need ideas about agency. Béland and Cox observe that change can be triggered by new ideas among core actors within a policy area, often as a response to some form of external shock. Ideas “shape how we understand political problems, give definition to our goals and strategies, and are the currency we use to communicate about politics” (Béland and Cox 2011, p. 3). Ideas are also an important basis for defining interest. As Blyth (2002, p. 32) argues: “Cognitive mechanisms, pace ideas, are important because, without having ideas as to how the world is put together, it would be cognitively impossible for agents to act in a world in any meaningful sense”. Therefore, since we want to examine whether changing international framework conditions affect institutionalized trade policy positions, we need to develop a connection between new ideas and changes in policy goals and instruments. It is in that regard we ask whether actors (here, ministries and political parties) use strategies of *politicization* or *depoliticization* in order to gain support for their new ideas and ultimately the interests they are

promoting, or whether actors use the same type of strategies to reject new ideas, which means that well-established solutions are continued.

Politicization implies that “an issue is ‘politicized’ when it has become subject to increased political conflict” (Broekema 2016, p. 384). Conflict can “pressure and motivate decision-makers into changing policies” (Broekema 2016, p. 385). In this article, the growing salience of a new idea (Zürn 2016) will be used as an indicator of successful politicization. However, an issue can also be depoliticized if it is moved from a political to a technocratic structure. Flinders and Buller suggest that

depoliticisation can be defined as the range of tools, mechanisms and institutions through which politicians can attempt to move to an indirect governing relationship and/or seek to persuade the demos that they can no longer be reasonably held responsible for a certain issue, policy field or specific decision. (Flinders and Buller 2006, pp. 295–296)

Politicization and depoliticization strategies may be implemented at several stages of the policy process, and, according to Feindt, Schwindenhammer and Tosun (2020), “by definition, depoliticization strategies will attempt to silence open controversy, while politicization strategies will seek to reinforce them”.

This article focuses on (de)politicization strategies in two phases of the political process. Firstly, a ministry can (de)politicize trade issues in white papers presented to parliament. The rationale for doing this is that it is in this phase that sectoral ministries can influence the trade agenda through policy proposals that present ideas and instruments that support the interests of their industries. Secondly, parliament can contest and either reject or support new policy proposals or depoliticize them by removing them from the political agenda. The rationale for this is that parliament can define the national interests by giving priority to and balancing different domestic interests, which “lies at the heart of what parliaments are supposed to do in democratic societies” (Langhelle and Rommetvedt 2004, p. 192). As a result of a committee reform in 1993, the Standing Committee on Business and Industry is responsible for handling the white papers from both the Ministry of Agriculture and Food and the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Fisheries (Rommetvedt 2017, pp. 121–122). Furthermore, the Standing Committee of Foreign Affairs and Defence handles white papers from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The theoretical framework reviewed in the previous paragraphs will constitute the basis for three expectations of what effects strategies of politicization and depoliticization have on Norwegian trade policy positions. The first and second expectations are based on the fact that the formulation of trade policy positions needs to account for domestic concerns. Since agriculture and fisheries were historically treated as exceptional industries, the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Fisheries have considerable influence on trade policies in their areas of responsibility (Farsund and Langhelle 2015). Nevertheless, they represent different institutional and political logics.

The corporatist system, where the Ministry of Agriculture and Food negotiates an annual Basic Agricultural Agreement with the Norwegian Farmers’ Union and the Norwegian Farmers’ and Smallholders’ Union, is the most important characteristic of agricultural policy making in Norway. The negotiations cover regulations, income, subsidies and domestic food prices. The ministry submits the agreement as a proposition to parliament,

which discusses and subsequently accepts it (Farsund 2014, p. 154). However, a high level of conflict in the agricultural negotiation can motivate parliament to intervene, especially in the event of a minority government (Rommetvedt and Veggeland 2017, p. 16). The annual negotiations make agricultural policy making path-dependent. However, new international framework conditions may challenge the scope of domestic policy making. The first expectation, therefore, is that the Ministry of Agriculture will, in its white papers, use a politicizing strategy to secure agricultural interests. This line of reasoning builds on a well-known observation in the literature that protectionist interests have a strong influence on domestic policy, since their losses are more concentrated than the potential benefits for exporters (Schattschneider 1935).

Policy making in the seafood sector is different from in agriculture, not least because the Basic Agreement for fisheries was phased out in the 1990s (Finstad 2014, p. 228). Nevertheless, there are still strong elements of corporatism in the seafood sector. The Ministry of Fisheries interacts with representatives from interest groups through several boards and committees (Mikalsen and Jentoft 2003, p. 400). This is basically “a public–private partnership where policy is the outcome of consultations and negotiations” (Jentoft and Mikalsen 2014, p. 1). Quotas and regulatory issues are the most important topics, but trade and market access can also become issues in consultations. However, parliament “is conspicuously absent from the policy-making process” (Mikalsen and Jentoft 2003, p. 400). This means that there is a lack of contestation of this policy area in parliament, and this may be one reason why the agricultural industry “has carried more political clout than fisheries representatives” (Mikalsen and Jentoft 2008, p. 174). However, changes in international framework conditions may represent new opportunities for this industry, or the prospect of loss of market access in existing markets. Therefore, the second expectation is that the Ministry of Fisheries will use a politicizing strategy in order to highlight the possibilities and threats facing the seafood industry. This line of reasoning builds on the “protection-for-exporters argument”, which is perceived “to have explanatory power for the new preferential trade agreements negotiated in the twenty-first century” (Dür 2010, p. 217).

The third expectation is based on the fact that Norway is a small country with an open economy, where the primary interest is described as “upholding the multilateral trade regime and multilateral trade rules” (Langhelle 2014, p. 191). According to Langhelle and Rommetvedt, the main cleavage in Norwegian trade policy making runs between the Progress Party, the Conservative Party and the Labour Party, which are positively oriented towards the WTO and trade liberalization, and the Socialist Left Party and Centre Party, which are generally sceptical towards trade liberalization. The Christian People’s Party and the Liberal Party are in the middle, mainly positive towards free trade but strong supporters of rural and agricultural interests (Langhelle and Rommetvedt 2004, p. 208). However, the trade policy that existed before the recent turmoil in international trade relations, as expressed in the position Norway notified for the Doha Round negotiations in 2002, contains a commitment to the multilateral trade system, and it presents inputs to an agreement that can safeguard Norway’s defensive and export-oriented interests (Farsund 2014, p. 159). Since there was a large degree of cross-party agreement behind this position, the third expectation is that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will use a depoliticizing strategy in order to balance the competing interests of agriculture and seafood in one national interest.

Methodology and Data

This study is designed as a comparative case study (George and Bennet 2005, p. 18), focusing attention on five policy processes in one country – Norway. Each policy process starts with preparatory work inside the responsible ministry and government, but, since it is difficult to access information on (de)politicization strategies in this phase, this study starts with the policy proposal presented as a white paper to the Norwegian parliament, the Storting. The Storting handles the white paper in two stages. Firstly, the responsible committee makes a recommendation to the Storting, and this is the point of departure for a plenary debate. The study includes all white papers that cover the relationship between the defensive interests of agriculture and the export-oriented interests of seafood in the period from 2011 to 2017. Two of these are from a majority government consisting of the Labour Party, the Centre Party and the Socialist Left Party (2005–2013), and three are from a minority government consisting of the Conservative Party and the Progress Party supported by the Liberal Party and the Christian People’s Party in parliament (2013–2017).

The selection of five cases in one country makes it possible to conduct an in-depth study of how (de)politicization strategies influence domestic trade policy positions. Therefore, the study is designed “to explain policy outcomes, to identify potential patterns of policy and to understand the dynamics within a particular area of activity” (Peters, Fontaine, and Mendes 2018, p. 37). However, the analyses will provide insights into Norwegian experiences that are relevant for other countries that seek to balance defensive agricultural interests against export-oriented interests in an increasingly changing landscape of trade agreements.

Data is derived from written sources, and a manual content analysis has been conducted in the following way. Firstly, the content of each white paper has been analysed with the aim of identifying if the document recommends a continuation of existing policies or if it proposes new trade-related goals and policy instruments for agriculture and seafood. This data makes it possible to identify (de)politicizing strategies in the white papers. Secondly, the corresponding committee report for each white paper has been analysed similarly. In both instances, changes that can be classified according to the categories of Mahoney and Thelen (2010) – i.e. displacement and layering – have been of particular interest. Thirdly, the debates in parliament have been analysed in order to identify whether the participants seek to politicize or depoliticize the relationship between the defensive agricultural interest and the export-oriented interest of the seafood sector. The debates contain far more topics than trade, and the following categories have been used: import protection, export, trade, food security, seafood, agriculture, protectionism, and free trade. The numbers of participants talking about these subjects are summarized in Appendix I.

The White Paper on Agriculture from the Centre-Left Government

The white paper *Agriculture and Food* (Meld. St. 9 2011–2012), which was presented in December 2011, proposed four goals that aimed to strengthen the basis for agricultural production in Norway (Meld. St. 9 2011–2012, p. 14). The principal ambition was to enhance national and global food security through increased domestic food production. This was the first time the ministry introduced this idea as the main argument for

supporting and protecting agricultural industries in Norway. As such, it represents an example of what Mahoney and Thelen define as layering in agricultural policy making. However, the white paper also described the large production of seafood in Norway as being a crucial element for food security. In doing so, it did not challenge the seafood industry's role in providing food security. Thus, the strategy seems to be to depoliticize a potential conflict with the seafood industry.

The white paper discussed several trade-policy challenges. It framed the (then) ongoing Doha Round in the WTO as a major challenge. The stated ambition was to secure Norway's exemption from some of the liberalization efforts agreed in the draft modality text from December 2008. Furthermore, the ministry promised to compensate all loss of income that may follow from an agreement (Meld. St. 9 2011–2012, p. 75). The political ambition was clear: "The government will use all policy instruments allowed to secure Norwegian food production" (Meld. St. 9 2011–2012, p. 77). The policy ideas were vague, but high tariffs for sensitive products and green box support were mentioned as possible tools in case of an agreement (Meld. St. 9 2011–2012, pp. 78–81). The ministry also stressed defensive positions in the discussion of agricultural issues in the EEA agreement with the EU and other trade agreements negotiated through EFTA. To sum up: the white paper did not try to challenge existing trade policies, but instead it proposed several new goals and policy instruments to safeguard agricultural interests in potential new trade agreements. The proximity to existing policy is palpable, and layering is the best description of this depoliticized strategy.

The Standing Committee on Business and Industry presented its recommendation to the Storting in March 2012 (Innst. 234 S 2011–2012). The committee was divided in its responses to the white paper. The three governing parties, and the Christian People's Party and the Liberal Party, supported – and, in crucial issues, strengthened – the recommendations of the Ministry of Agriculture. This was firstly reflected in the majority supporting a concrete goal that stated that domestic food production was to be increased in line with an expected population growth (Innst. 234 S 2011–2012, p. 28). High tariffs that could protect domestic production from international competition were the crucial policy instrument in this regard. The Conservative Party and the Progress Party politicized the debate by criticizing the government's policy proposals. Firstly, the Conservative Party wanted to change, and the Progress Party wanted to eliminate, the system of annual Basic Agricultural Agreements (Innst. 234 S 2011–2012, pp. 40–41). Such an institutional change would have undermined the influence of agricultural interests in future policy making. Secondly, these two parties recommended the deregulation of domestic food production, and suggested changes in the Norwegian trade policy position. They argued for lower tariffs on imports, since this would benefit Norwegian consumers and producers in Third World countries (Innst. 234 S 2011–2012, p. 32). However, since they were a minority, their politicization strategy failed.

Parliament debated the white paper in April 2012 (Stortingstidende 2012). The debate included 119 speeches and replies. The discussion reflected the divisions between the Centre-Left majority and the rightist minority in the standing committee. Representatives from the first group argued for increased domestic production in order to obtain food security in Norway. Furthermore, the spokesman for the government, Hagen, argued for the use of "all legal tools within the WTO agreement in order to achieve this national goal" (Stortingstidende 2012, p. 2912). The second group argued for reforms and

changes in policy, and several representatives from the Progress Party emphasized seafood as being an important element in Norwegian food security. However, the two parties did not contest that Norwegian agriculture needed high tariffs to survive. In the end, parliament approved the agricultural policy proposed in the white paper, which supported the traditional interest of agricultural industries in Norway. The attempts by the rightist parties to politicize the debate failed. Instead, the new food security idea became an argument for the continued protection of Norwegian agriculture. This led a satisfied Minister of Agriculture to conclude that “there exists all-party support for this policy” (Stortingstidende 2012, p. 2927).

The White Paper on Seafood from the Centre-Left Government

The white paper (Meld. St. 22 2012-2013) presented in March 2013 had an ambitious title: *The Leading Seafood Industry in the World*. The general idea was to facilitate the growth and profitability of this industry to the benefit of the Norwegian society. The main objectives were: the seafood industry is to be sustainable; added value is to be increased for the benefit of domestic consumers and the economy at large; policies would support employment and settlement along the coast; and increased production and export of knowledge and seafood from Norway could contribute to global food security (Meld. St. 22 2012–2013, p. 10). The white paper introduced several trade challenges. Increased market access in the EU was the most crucial issue, followed by an agreement in the Doha Round, and more FTAs with countries where the seafood sector sees potential for growth in exports (Meld. St. 22 2012–2013, pp. 63–68). However, the policy proposals did not promote any new trade policy instruments, and neither did it propose any trade-offs between seafood and agricultural products in the negotiations with the EU, in the WTO or the FTAs (Meld. St. 22 2012–2013, p. 69). Therefore, the ministry did not politicize the relationship between the interests of the seafood industry and the agricultural sector, but instead argued for protection for exporters in the EU market.

The Standing Committee on Business and Industry presented its recommendation to the Storting in June 2013 (Innst. 418 S 2012–2013). The viewpoints of the committee were, to a large degree, in accordance with the recommendations of the white paper, and the whole committee supported the government’s vision of becoming the leading seafood industry in the world (Innst. 418 S 2012–2013, p. 17). Surprisingly, there were no references to trade issues or problems with market access for seafood. However, the committee supported the idea that a sustainable seafood industry in Norway could help to mitigate global food security challenges, directly through the export of seafood and indirectly by the export of knowledge related to fish stock management and other types of sustainable technology (Innst. 418 S 2012–2013, p. 18).

Parliament debated the white paper in June 2013 (Stortingstidende 2013). There were 68 speeches and replies in the debate. Again, the discussion was not characterized by concrete political conflicts between the parties in government and the opposition. Instead, the representatives from the first group of parties emphasized consensus and the potential of the seafood industry, whilst the latter parties emphasized ambitions for more structural reforms than the government had proposed. Only one representative from the Labour Party, Hansen, raised the question of market access when stressing the importance of “an

active policy for securing Norwegian seafood access to international markets” (Stortingstidende 2013, p. 4023). The rest of the committee remained silent on this issue. It is therefore reasonable to argue that neither the governing parties nor the opposition wanted to politicize the conflicting interests of seafood and agriculture in trade policy positions.

The White Paper on Trade from the Conservative/Progress Party Government

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs presented an ambitious trade policy agenda in its white paper, *Globalisation and Trade* (Meld. St. 29 2014–2015) in May 2015. The white paper discussed national and international trade issues, including the multilateral trade system, Norway’s bilateral trade agreements and the relationship with the EU, as well as policy options for Norwegian trade policy-makers. Seafood was described as an export-oriented interest in international trade negotiations (Meld. St. 29 2014–2015, p. 93). Tariffs on the export of seafood to the EU were listed as one of the most important challenges in Norwegian trade relations. The government’s ambition was to eliminate tariffs and to reduce technical barriers in order to increase market access. However, it was not “natural for the government” to exchange market access for Norwegian seafood with market access for EU agricultural products (Meld. St. 29 2014–2015, p. 94). Therefore, the government did not try to challenge the majority in parliament and avoided a politicization of the market access issue.

However, the consensus was challenged when the white paper notified that Norway would offer to eliminate all export subsidies for agriculture at the forthcoming WTO Ministerial Conference in Nairobi (2015). This is what Mahoney and Thelen define as a displacement of existing rules, and it was the most comprehensive policy change proposed in the white paper. This would have had real consequences for the industry, since estimates had shown that 8–9 per cent of milk production was exported as subsidized cheese. The offer was directly linked to the ongoing negotiations in the Doha Round, and the white paper referred to the Ministerial Declaration from Hong Kong (2005) when the previous government had supported this reform. More importantly, the white paper claimed that: “It will strengthen Norway’s credibility and profile in the WTO by showing willingness to comply with the decision from the Bali Ministerial Conference (2013) by implementing additional reforms” (Meld. St. 29 2014–2015, p. 105). Furthermore, the ministry also challenged the majority in parliament when it observed that domestic support was close to the maximum support level in the existing WTO agreement, and recommended “some domestic reforms” to meet challenges in future agricultural negotiations in the WTO (Meld. St. 29 2014–2015, p. 105).

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs also criticized the claim that increased domestic agricultural production would enhance Norwegian food security. Indeed, it warned against using food security as the main argument for Norwegian positions in trade negotiations: “An agricultural policy that actively seeks to restrict trade in order to promote national food production will therefore contribute to reduced food security globally” (Meld. St. 29 2014–2015, p. 106). The contestation of central elements in Norway’s agricultural policies can be interpreted as part of a politicization strategy by the government. However, the most important policy elements are retained. Firstly, the ambition was to shield important parts of domestic food production from increased

import competition. Secondly, as mentioned above, the government stated that it would not offer issue linkages between agriculture and seafood in ongoing trade negotiations.

The Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence presented its recommendation to the Storting in December 2015 (Innst. 101 S 2015–2016). The committee communicated a high degree of consensus regarding Norwegian trade policy strategies. The Conservative Party, the Progress Party, the Liberal Party and the Labour Party supported the recommendations from the government – most crucially, the proposed elimination of export subsidies. However, the committee’s majority depoliticized the issue by delegating the implementation to the Ministry of Agriculture, thus making it a budgetary issue (Innst. 101 S 2015–2016, p. 13). The main opposition was from the Centre Party and, to a lesser degree, the Socialist Left Party, and occasionally the Christian People’s Party. In one comment, they politicized the viewpoint of the majority by arguing that a high level of food security and increased domestic food production was not an agricultural interest, but “a national interest adopted by the parliament” (Innst. 101 S 2015–2016, p. 11).

Parliament debated the white paper in January 2016 (Stortingstidende 2016a). There were only 38 speeches and replies in the debate. Several members emphasized that Norway had defensive interests in agricultural trade and export-oriented interests in trade in seafood. One member, Agdestein, from the Conservative Party aimed to depoliticize potential conflicts around agricultural issues when she stated, “the government emphasises that the protection of agriculture will continue to be an important concern in future negotiations” (Stortingstidende 2016a, p. 1715). Several members expressed strong support for increased market access for Norwegian seafood in the EU. However, they acknowledged the dilemma facing Norwegian authorities when they tried to increase market access for seafood abroad while at the same time rejecting lower tariffs for agricultural imports. Nevertheless, none of them suggested changing the priority from agriculture to seafood. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs had challenged the consensus on agriculture in parliament, but the Standing Committee mostly depoliticized conflicts between agriculture and seafood by not recommending any changes in priorities between the two industries.

The White Paper on Seafood from the Conservative/Progress Party Government

The government presented its white paper on seafood policy in November 2015 (Meld. St. 10 2015–2016). The title was less ambitious than the previous white paper: *A Competitive Seafood Industry*, but many of its policy proposals regarding domestic deregulation were more radical. The ambition was to increase productivity and added value in different parts of the seafood industry, and trade was crucial in that regard. The ministry emphasized that Norwegian seafood has market access in the EU through a complicated system of sector agreements, with tariffs and other regulations hampering exports. The white paper stressed that the ambition was to achieve free trade, but it did not politicize a potential conflict of interest between seafood and agriculture in that regard (Meld. St. 10 2015–2016, p. 96). However, another potential conflict between seafood and agriculture was highlighted in the case of a free trade agreement between the EU and the USA in the so-called Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) negotiations. The government anticipated a negative impact on Norwegian seafood

exports and stated that Norway would seek to achieve some sort of linkage to the TTIP even though it could have a negative impact on agriculture in the future (Meld. St. 10 2015–2016, p. 91). Thus, we can observe the “protection-for-exporters” argument in the problem definition, but the white paper proposed no concrete policy changes that would have challenged the agricultural industry.

The Standing Committee on Business and Industry presented its recommendation to the Storting in March 2016 (Innst. 215 S 2015–2016). There were only minor disagreements in the committee regarding the policy proposals in the white paper, but the Labour Party, the Socialist Left Party and the Centre Party, and occasionally the Liberal Party and the Christian People’s Party, criticized some of the deregulation efforts proposed by the government. Trade issues did not get much attention, but the committee supported the government’s efforts regarding more market access, especially in the EU. However, the committee stressed that “Norway needs to take defensive trade interests into consideration during market access negotiations” (Innst. 215 S 2015–2016, p. 25). Therefore, the committee depoliticizes this issue by assuring that agriculture is not “going to pay” for the benefits the seafood sector can achieve.

Parliament debated the white paper in April 2016 (Stortingstidende 2016b). There were 76 speeches and replies in the debate. Most of the participants addressed issues linked to fisheries, and especially the rules for the handling of quotas and catches, where the centre-left parties opposed the government’s liberalization agenda. Two representatives raised trade and market access issues. One member from the Centre Party, Pollestad, dismissed the need for linking export-oriented and defensive interests in trade negotiations. He argued that Norway could continue to promote market access for seafood without surrendering the defensive interests (Stortingstidende 2016b, p. 2476). One member from the Conservative Party, Trellevik, claimed that the experience with the EU was that if Norway wanted more market access for seafood, then the EU demanded more market access for agricultural products. According to this representative, “we need to reconsider this principle” in order to achieve better market access for seafood in the EU and in potential new free trade agreements with major exporters of agricultural products (Stortingstidende 2016b, p. 2884). By this, he repeated the “protection-for-exporters” argument raised by the government. However, the silence with which the proposal was met from other members of parliament may be seen as part of a depoliticization strategy identifying challenges without proposing any new policies.

The White Paper on Agriculture from the Conservative/Progress Party Government

The white paper presented in December 2016 (Meld. St. 11 2016–2017) had a title that signalled political ambitions: *Change and Development. A Future-Oriented Agricultural Production*. The very first paragraph stressed the need for “competitiveness, efficiency, and more market solutions and less political involvement in the whole industry” (Meld. St. 11 2016–2017, p. 7). However, several of the primary policy goals, such as the emphasis on food security and the maintenance of agriculture in the whole country, represent a continuation of the main objectives in the previous white paper. Therefore, despite being critical of the existing agricultural policies, the government’s strategy appeared to depoliticize a potential conflict with the majority in parliament by not proposing changes they knew would be resisted.

The white paper discussed global issues, including food security and recent changes in international trade negotiations. Three issues were emphasized. Firstly, the government stated that it would continue to use tariffs to protect the domestic production of food, but they would not be raised since some increases in imports improved consumer choice (Meld. St. 11 2016–2017, p. 60). Secondly, the white paper warned about future limitations on domestic support if there is an agreement in the WTO Doha Round. Norway had already used most of the latitude in the Uruguay Round Agreement and, according to the government, policies needed to be adjusted (Meld. St. 11 2016–2017, p. 63). This statement challenged the majority in parliament, but since there were no specific amendments in policy, it does not appear to be a politicization strategy. Thirdly, the government stated that it would eliminate all export subsidies before the end of 2020, which was in line with Norwegian commitments from the WTO Ministerial Conference in Nairobi 2015 (Meld. St. 11 2016–2017, pp. 63–64). On the last point, the government followed the consensus that was created when the parliament debated the white paper on trade, but the practical solutions were still to be decided in the implementation phase.

The Standing Committee on Business and Industry presented its recommendations to the Storting in April 2017 (Innst. 251 S 2016–2017). All opposition parties, including the Christian People’s Party and the Liberal Party, challenged the government’s proposal. They argued that the white paper “represents new goals and policy instruments that break with previous white papers” (Innst. 251 S 2016–2017, p. 19). However, this attempt to politicize the handling of the white paper was moderated later in the statement when the government received support for the main objectives (Innst. 251 S 2016–2017, p. 26). Trade issues were also contested, and the governing parties were again in the minority because the other parties recommended the increased protection of domestic production rather than more consumer choice through imports. However, the most comprehensive change – the elimination of export subsidies – was not contested by the opposition (Innst. 251 S 2016–2017, pp. 28–29).

Parliament debated the white paper in April 2017 (Stortingstidende 2017). There were 93 speeches and replies in the debate. The committee spokesperson, Pollestad, started by declaring that the majority did not support the government’s ambition for making cost-efficient food production the main policy goal. Instead, the majority wanted to have “increased domestic food production as the main goal” (Stortingstidende 2017, p. 2998). Speakers from both the opposition and the governing parties articulated support for traditional agricultural policies in Norway, not least because these provide national food security. Trade was not an important issue in the debate, but several participants mentioned that the continued protection of the domestic market was crucial for the viability of the agricultural industry. The government had therefore proposed modest changes in agricultural policies in the white paper, but resistance from the opposition politicized the debate. Since the government did not have a majority, this politicization strategy led to a continuation of traditional agricultural policy.

Discussion

The analysis shows that actors – in government and parliament – have used (de) politicization strategies in order to influence domestic trade policy-making in Norway.

In this section, we will return to the theoretical framework and discuss the observations from the Norwegian cases in more general terms.

The first expectation is that ministries representing defensive trade interests (here, the Ministry of Agriculture and Food) would use a politicization strategy in order to gain approval for policies that would protect the industry from increased import competition. The empirical material gives limited support for this expectation. The main reason is that the ministry used a depoliticization strategy when it presented increased domestic food production as part of its new principal goal of national and global food security. It is by incorporating seafood in its definition that the ministry reduced the potential for conflict with actors supporting the interests of the seafood industry. Thus, this new policy goal, which represents an example of layering in the terminology of Mahoney and Thelen, justified a continued protection of national agricultural production. The success of this strategy is illustrated by the salience that food security has in the white paper from the government dominated by pro-liberalization parties, i.e. the Conservative/Progress Party government.

The second expectation is that ministries representing export-oriented interests (here, the Ministry of Fisheries) would use a politicization strategy, since the new international trade framework represents both possibilities and threats for the seafood industry. The empirical material gives only partial support for this expectation. Both white papers promoted the interests of the industry by emphasizing its export potential and describe the need for lowering trade restrictions in important markets, especially in the dominant EU market. However, the ministry did not try to politicize the “protection-for-exporters” argument by directly challenging agricultural interest by proposing concrete changes in policy goals and instruments. The absence of politicization is even more tangible in the parliamentary committee, where the Standing Committee on Business and Industry is responsible for handling this issue. Although all parties back the visions for the further development of the seafood industry, there are no concrete policy proposals that would change the prioritization between the two industries.

The third expectation was that ministries representing the national interest (here, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) would try to use a depoliticization strategy in order to build on the consensus existing in Norway before recent turbulence in global trade affairs. This was not the case, especially regarding agriculture. In its white paper, the ministry notifies that Norway, as part of ongoing negotiations in the WTO, will offer to eliminate export subsidies for agricultural products. This represents an important displacement of existing rules in the terminology of Mahoney and Thelen, and it will have real consequences for agricultural production. Furthermore, the ministry also contested the idea that domestic food production would strengthen national and international food security, and it argued for domestic reforms that could make agriculture more competitive. The politicization of these issues is directly connected to the primary interest of upholding the multilateral trade system. One could, therefore, argue that, with a new policy actor entering the process, the policy issue receives a new framing. However, the all-party support for the elimination of export subsidies in the committee contributed to a depoliticization of this issue, since its implementation was made into a budget issue. Furthermore, the committee acknowledged that agriculture is an exceptional industry that needs favouritism in Norwegian trade policies. The findings are summarized in [Table 1](#).

Table 1. Summary of findings

Expectations	Findings	Type of change
Ministry of Agriculture would use a politicization strategy	The ministry implemented a depoliticization strategy. Remained depoliticized in parliament	Layering
Ministry of Fisheries would use a politicization strategy	The ministry implemented a depoliticization strategy. Remained depoliticized in parliament	No change
Ministry of Foreign Affairs would use a depoliticization strategy	The ministry implemented a politicization strategy. Depoliticized in parliament	Displacement

Conclusion

The point of departure of this article is the assumption that the Norwegian experience is relevant for small and medium-sized countries incorporating agricultural exceptionalism in trade policy positions. We will highlight two observations in this regard. First, small and medium-sized countries need to change their policies when larger countries approve new provisions in international agreements. For Norway, this was the case in 2015 when WTO member states agreed to eliminate export subsidies for agricultural products. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs implemented a politicization strategy but won almost bipartisan support for the displacement of existing rules by pointing at the fact that Norway could not be the only country using export subsidies. This proposal was approved, although all parties knew that this would have negative long-term effects for domestic agricultural production.

Second, it is possible to add new rules to existing policies if the international framework has not been decided. Food security is an issue where there is no consensus in the WTO regarding new rules (Daugbjerg et al. 2017). Thus, there was room for Norway to make food security a more salient issue in its trade policy positions. The Ministry of Agriculture implemented a depoliticization strategy by incorporating seafood in its definition of food security and won bipartisan support for this idea in parliament. Thus, food security is now a requirement that must be included in all new trade agreements.

This article illustrates that the ideas associated with agricultural exceptionalism still enjoy remarkable support in Norway. However, the eliminations of export subsidies may indicate a transition to a more post-exceptional trade policy (Daugbjerg and Feindt 2017). A further weakening of the multilateral trade system may force Norway and other small and medium-sized countries to again rebalance defensive and export-oriented interests.

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Appendix 1. Overview of participants and trade topics in the debates in parliament

White paper from:	Number of speeches	Import protection	Trade	Food security	Seafood
Ministry of Agriculture (I)	119	25	10	9	7
Ministry of Agriculture (II)	93	16	6	5	0
White paper from:	Number of speeches	Export	Trade	Food security	Agriculture
Ministry of Fisheries (I)	68	5	3	0	5
Ministry of Fisheries (II)	76	7	3	0	4
White paper from:	Number of speeches	Protectionist	Free trade	Agriculture	Seafood
Ministry of Foreign Affairs	38	4	22	16	15