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**THE DEBT CLOCK IS TICKING:**  
A qualitative content analysis of  
depoliticization in Finnish politics

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# ABSTRACT

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This study examines how depoliticization practices are produced in the context of Finnish parliamentary elections. Depoliticization refers to governmental, societal and discursive practices that attempt to restrain the agency of democratically elected politicians and transfer political power to other actors in society. Depoliticization can be understood either as a strategy for state governance or as an ongoing process that includes various social and power relations such as gender, race, and age.

The theoretical framework of this study includes a conceptual definition of depoliticization, and it examines the phenomenon from the perspective of ideologies and hegemonies. The research consists of a qualitative content analysis on an electoral debate that was organized by a Finnish broadcasting company MTV in May 2015. The analysis is supplemented with elements from discourse theory to provide a more comprehensive picture of discursive depoliticization practices.

According to the analysis, depoliticization is mainly produced in Finland by the European Union fiscal policy regulations and the neoliberal ideology that encourages governments to advance fiscal austerity measures in balancing the public economy. Furthermore, Finnish mainstream media tends to reproduce depoliticization discourse in their presentations because it has widely adopted the capitalist economic system.

It has been suggested that depoliticization could be one reason for the current political disengagement in modern liberal democracies because it decreases the political power of democratically elected governments by limiting the scope of available policy actions. Consequently, formal politics is no longer the main arena for political antagonism and ideological disputes that are an intrinsic part of social life.

This research aims to provide new information about the phenomenon by revealing how depoliticization practices are used in everyday politics. In addition, it suggests that liberal democracies should avoid having too much depoliticization in their political systems because otherwise political antagonism could eventually take radical forms that might not be democratic or liberal.

**Keywords:** depoliticization, post-politics, post-democracy, ideology, economization, democracy, social science, politics, content analysis, elections, political science, neoliberalism, discourse theory

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. The crisis of liberal democracy and the return of politics

It has been said that liberal democracy is in a crisis (e.g. Ronkainen & Mykkänen, 2019). The political participation has decreased in Europe and the United States: fewer people vote in the elections or belong to political parties than before. In Finland, only 70 percent of the electorate voted in the parliamentary elections in 2015 whereas, for example, in 1983 the figure was over 80 percent (Statistics Finland, 2015). Besides, many people are more displeased with their political leaders, parties and institutions than before (European Social Survey, 2014).

In recent elections, candidates who have proclaimed to be anti-political and anti-establishment have succeeded and the support for radical right- and left-wing populist parties has grown both in Europe and in the United States. For example, the current Republican president of the United States, Donald Trump, has promised to “drain the swamp” in Washington (Smith, 2018). By this Trump means that he will constrain the power of the federal politicians and other members of the liberal elite who work in the capital. Trump has promised to make America great again by giving more power to the people and putting America first. In Great Britain, people voted for leaving the European Union in the referendum in 2016. One reason for the result was that the British wanted to “take back control” from Brussels and EU bureaucrats.

Many scholars in political science have studied the reasons for political disenchantment in modern liberal democracies. They have tried to find out why we have such a negative image on politics and politicians who are supposed to be our representatives and serve our interests in the parliament. One group of scholars claim that the problem is on the demand side of political engagement. They argue that we are disengaged from politics because social and political trust has decreased in our societies (Putnam, 2000) or because we have become more educated and therefore more critical towards the traditional political authorities, institutions, and decision-makers (Norris, 2011).

Another group of scholars accepts that demand-side factors can increase political disenchantment, but they also want to pay attention to the supply side of political engagement. In other words, the actions of political institutions, politicians and political parties matter. For instance, Mouffe (2005) believes that political disenchantment is originally caused by neoliberalism and globalization that have changed our perceptions of politics and political. At the heart of neoliberalist ideology is the so-called *laissez-faire* principle (French 'let do') which means that the state and politicians should not interfere in the economy but only provide the right circumstances for markets by decreasing regulation and securing the right for private property.

Many pro-market politicians and political parties in modern liberal democracies have accepted this principle. Therefore, they have voluntarily advanced such policies that aim to reduce the power of political institutions and transfer the power to other actors in society. In addition, many politicians believe that the state government should adopt more management strategies from private companies to make the public sector to be more efficient.

Gamble (2000), Mouffe (2005) and Hay (2007) argue that we are dissatisfied with the current form of representative democracy because polity is no longer the main arena for political antagonism or ideological struggles that are integral parts of democracy. The role of politicians is reactive or even passive in a system where their main duty is to increase economic growth and keep up with the global competition. Therefore, politics has turned out to be trivial in the eyes of the public which is why many people refuse to participate in traditional political institutions of representative democracy.

In the literature, this process has been called post-democracy (Mouffe, 2005; Rancière, 1999), post-politics (Žižek, 1999) and depoliticization (Hay, 2007). They all refer more or less to the situation where the sphere of polity is narrowed, ideological struggles are replaced by management and political conflicts are reduced to technocratic policy problems. The issues are left to be managed by independent experts and the decisions are legitimated through processes in which "the scope of possible outcomes is defined in advance" (Swyngedouw & Wilson, 2014). In liberal democracies, "the dispute of the people is eliminated and reduced to an interplay of state mechanisms and social interests" (Rancière, 1999, 102). It means that people will eventually lose their touch with the representative democracy because they feel that they are not represented.

However, there have been some startling signs that may foreshadow the return of politics. We were used to believe that after the collapse of the communist Soviet Union political liberalism, free trade and globalization had triumphed and become universal values (Gamble, 2000). Fukuyama (1992) even declared that the history of ideological struggles had ended. The Brexit referendum and the election of President Trump have reminded that the struggle did not end. People who voted for Brexit and Trump wanted to make a fundamental change in their political establishments and change the direction of their countries. These results have been a shocking lesson for liberal politicians who have witnessed that if the current political system cannot provide enough alternatives, people will find other ways to advance their interests.

Eventually, the new ways of political agency can be more radical and take place outside political institutions. Radical democracy movements, such as Occupy movement in New York and Gezi Park protests in Istanbul, have practiced and endorsed plural leadership where there are no individual leaders, but the leadership is distributed between all the members (Swyngedouw & Wilson, 2014). These groups use modern information technology in communication and organizing the public events. The attempts to socialize previously privatized functions, such as water delivery, power grids and railroads, can also be considered as an implication of a larger political movement where people are willing to *repoliticize* certain issues that they hold dear (Beveridge & Naumann, 2014).

## 1.2. Finnish parliamentary elections 2015

In this master's thesis, I will study how depoliticization is practiced in Finland. I use the concept of depoliticization because, in my opinion, it catches the phenomenon better than post-democracy or post-politics. From my perspective, depoliticization is an ongoing process that can advance in two opposite directions: issues can be (re)politicized and depoliticized. Therefore, depoliticization does not take place before or after anything. It takes place all the time. Besides, post-democracy and post-politics include a presumption that we have had a golden era of politics and democracy, but it is now replaced by something else. However, I refuse to believe that there was no depoliticization during the Cold War or the 1930s although the ideological struggles were more evident. I will go through the depoliticization literature in chapter two, where I conduct the literature review.

My purpose in this study is to analyze how depoliticization discourse is produced and legitimized in Finnish electoral debate. I selected Finland as my case country because I already know Finnish

politics relatively well. Finland is an interesting case country also due to its multiparty system that encourages political parties to cooperate. In Finland, we are used to having strong governments who enjoy large support in the parliament (Raunio & Wiberg, 2008). It means that there are often several parties in the government to advance policy initiatives. Having more than one party in the government forces the parties to compromise about the policy outcomes.

I decided to analyze the 2015 elections because back then the electoral campaign focused mainly on economic policy and fiscal austerity. The Finnish economy had not recovered from the financial crisis of 2008 and politicians were worried by the rise of the national debt. In Spring 2015, the political atmosphere in Finland was tense and the last year of the term had been very chaotic for the government. Former prime minister Jyrki Katainen (NCP) had resigned to join the European Commission. He was replaced by Alexander Stubb (NCP) who did not get along with his minister of finance Antti Rinne (SDP). Additionally, two smaller parties the Left and the Greens had resigned from the government because they disagreed about the environment and social security. In January, the prime minister Stubb declared that the whole political decision-making process is broken, and politicians have failed to implement structural reforms. (Rahkola, 2015)

Therefore, the environment was favorable for anti-political candidates who placed themselves above political conflicts and disagreement. There was a consensus that the previous government had been too ideologically fragmented and plural. The opposition leader Juha Sipilä (Center) seized the opportunity and highlighted his earlier career as an engineer and CEO to distinguish himself from other party leaders. Sipilä started building an image of a determined leader who could set aside political ideologies and find practical solutions to stabilize the Finnish economy.

At the beginning of the year, Finnish Ministry of Finance had published a document that demanded austerity measures and encouraged politicians to decrease public spending in effort to control the amount of national debt (Valtiovarainministeriö, 2015). Almost every party accepted the content of the document and supported its message. Left Alliance was the only party that opposed austerity policy and supported fiscal stimulus. The document was actively discussed in the media before the elections and in the electoral debates.

In March 2015, Finnish broadcasting company MTV3 arranged the first television debate in which all the major party leaders participated. The debate took over two hours. The discussion was led by professional journalists and it was divided into four sections. Economic policy was the main theme

of the debate and the discussion focused on the Finnish national debt. During the second section, there was a big screen behind the discussants that showed the national debt in real-time. The idea of the debt clock was originally presented by the Finnish Chamber of Commerce who had adopted it from the United States. In early Spring 2015, the leader of the Chamber of Commerce Risto Penttilä hung the clock in Aleksanterinkatu, Helsinki. Newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* published an article about this event where Penttilä said that the chamber encourages people and media to demand answers on how to stop and turn off the debt clock (Lassila, 2015).

MTV copied the idea of the debt clock and used it to frame the electoral debate. Politicians and journalists referred to the debt clock several times which created a sense of urgency for austerity actions. It narrowed down the potential topics for discussion and limited the possibility to present alternative solutions for economic policy. In reality, the national debt was relatively moderate compared to other members of the European Union, but this was not explained in the debate.



*Picture 1: Screenshot from the MTV3 electoral debate on 18.3.2015. The debt clock is set behind the party leaders Alexander Stubb (NCP), Antti Rinne (SDP) and Paavo Arhinmäki (Left). In the right low corner of the picture, there is also a tweet that urges politicians to be rational and make more savings. The tweet was sent by Kirsi Sharma who supported Alexander Stubb in his campaign.*

The purpose of this study is to provide new insights on depoliticization discourse: how it is produced and how it is linked to the existing literature. I hope that my research will provide new tools for future studies and help the audience in recognizing depoliticization strategies that are widely used in politics. My main research questions are the following:

1. How discursive depoliticization is produced in the context of Finnish politics?
2. What depoliticization tactics, tools and strategies are used?
3. What issues are depoliticized and what issues are politicized?

The study will consist of a qualitative content analysis of MTV electoral debate. I have chosen this particular debate because, in my opinion, it shows how media representation is an important tool in producing depoliticization discourse. Media is one of the ideological state apparatuses that are used to legitimize the ruling hegemony (Rehmann, 2013). I hope that my analysis will reveal some mechanisms and rhetorical tools that are used in the production of depoliticization discourse.

### 1.3. The limitations and content of the study

As with all scientific research, this study has some limitations that are worth keeping in mind. The aim of my qualitative content analysis is not to offer a comprehensive picture of depoliticization in Finnish politics. One electoral debate offers a very limited perspective on the issue and therefore the results and outcomes cannot be generalized reliably. We would need more research material to create a more holistic understanding of how depoliticization is produced in Finnish politics. That would, perhaps, also require a broader time frame and more comparative research where the current political environment would be compared to previous ones. However, I believe that one electoral debate is enough to show how depoliticization discourse is produced and what strategies and discursive tools are used in that purpose.

Another important factor in qualitative scientific research is the position of the scholar that often impacts on the presumptions and premises of the study. My profession as a journalist might have increased my interest in the way media creates and reproduces depoliticization discourse during the elections. Additionally, it has helped me to recognize the representative power that media has in framing and setting the agenda of public discussion. Therefore, I might be eager to criticize the journalistic choices that were made before and during the electoral debate. However, it is good to keep in mind that my intention is not to judge the work of journalists but to reveal and discuss those ideological premises that are used in the debate.

Finally, I want to pay attention to translation and how it possibly impacts on the interpretations that can be made from the text. The electoral debate that I have analyzed was in Finnish which means

that after transcription I had to translate the whole debate into English. Although I have translated many texts before, I am not a professional translator which means that in the analysis there can be some translations that are not idiomatic or do not capture the entire meaning of the source.

With these limitations in mind I will continue with my research. I begin my work with a literature review that is divided into three sections. First, I go through the current academic discussion concerning politicization and depoliticization. I will present my key concepts and give them the context. Second, I will continue with the Gramscian theory of ideology and hegemony to explain the mechanisms through which neoliberal ideology has spread and reached the hegemonic position in modern societies. Third, I will discuss how liberal democracies have tried to restrain politicization before and why depoliticization has become a characteristic part of the neoliberal hegemony.

After providing the theoretical framework for my thesis, I will explain more about my research method and argument why I have conducted a qualitative content analysis and supplemented the analysis with discourse theory. In the fourth chapter, I present the results of my content analysis. I go through my research material and present direct quotations from the debate to support my argumentation. In addition, I present the three categories that I have induced from the research material and compare those to the existing depoliticization theories.

I will conclude my thesis with a discussion chapter where I present my key findings and outline the possible directions for future research about depoliticization in Finland and abroad. At the end of the paper, there is a complete list of references that I have used in this work. I want to present my thanks to my supervisor, University Lecturer Mikko Lahtinen and to the Academic Director of the Leadership for Change master's degree program, University Lecturer Anni Kangas for guiding my work and offering academic guidance. I would also like to thank my family members and my girlfriend for their support during the writing process.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of my thesis consists of two separate elements. First, I give a thorough introduction to the concept of depoliticization by presenting the two generations of literature on the topic. In addition, I give context to the conceptualization by explaining how depoliticization impacts on society and democracy. Second, I change the perspective and combine the existing depoliticization literature with theories about ideology and hegemony. My aim is to explain that depoliticization strategies are not free of ideological struggles or societal power relations although those people who use these strategies often present themselves as nonpolitical agents. Especially in the context of Finnish politics, depoliticization strategies seem to support the hegemonic position of neoliberal economic policy.

### 2.1. Two generations of depoliticization literature

There are different conceptual ways to understand depoliticization. Wood (2016) recognizes two generations of depoliticization literature. The first-generation literature was in its prime between 2000–2010. It was later supplemented by the second generation after the financial crisis in 2008 when it was clear that the earlier conceptions of depoliticization were not enough to capture the whole essence of the phenomenon.

The main difference between the two generations is that the first generation understands depoliticization as a technical strategy for state management whereas the second generation emphasizes the social aspects of power that relate to the depoliticization process. I will first explain how depoliticization is understood in the first generation and then I will introduce how the concept has been challenged and reformed by the second generation.

Wood (2016) argues that the concept of depoliticization became popular in political science in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. It appeared that “following the collapse of communism, neoliberal policies of privatization, deregulation and discipline of the labor market became triumphant across the globe, leading to arguments about an alleged end of politics and the rise of post-democracy” (Wood, 2016, 522). For the first generation of authors, depoliticization is a mode of statecraft and a governing strategy where politicians attempt to deflect blame away from the government for policy failures.

According to Wood (idem, 523), this strategy can include the delegation of decisions to technocratic and quasi-democratic institutions, such as central banks, that create strict rules limiting the government on spending public money but whose members are not democratically elected.

In this sense, depoliticization has been often used to describe the liberation of the British financial markets in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Especially, during the terms of prime minister Margaret Thatcher the United Kingdom went through significant reforms in legislation affecting labor markets and the financial sector. The labor unions lost most of their traditional power to negotiate collective labor agreements whereas banks and other financial actors demanded the free movement of capital and investments. (Pattie et al, 2004)

Authors who belong to the first generation include for example Burnham, Buller and Flinders. Buller and Flinders have defined depoliticization 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 reasonably be held responsible for a certain issue, policy field or specific decision.” (Buller & Flinders, 2006, 296)*

They have recognized three main tactics for depoliticization: institutional, rule-based and preference-shaping depoliticization. In an institutional depoliticization tactic, politicians transfer the responsibility and government of a certain policy issue to an additional institution that consists of experts and administrative staff who enjoy managerial freedom within the framework set by politicians (idem, 298). For example, in many countries, monetary policy is managed by national central banks who attempt to control inflation by raising or lowering the interest of the loans they grant to other banks. In the European Monetary Union (EMU), the monetary policy is managed by the European Central Bank (ECB), which can guide the interest rates in the entire euro-zone.

In a rule-based depoliticization tactic, there are explicit rules that are included in the decision-making process that constrain the need and demand for political discretion. (idem, 303) These rules can be set in national legislation, in international trade treaties or through other arrangements. For example, all the member states of the EMU have committed to the fiscal discipline through the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) that restrains how much loan states can have and take. According to the SGP, a state's annual government deficit should not be more than three percent of Gross

Domestic Product (GDP), and total debt should not be more than 60 percent of GDP. However, most member states, including France and Spain, have failed to follow the discipline meaning that SGP has become more like a guideline than a compulsive rule.

The third depoliticization tactic, preference-shaping, involves “the invocation of preference shaping through recourse to ideological, discursive or rhetorical claims to justify a political position that a certain issue or function does, or should, lie beyond the scope of politics or the capacity for state control” (idem, 307). In other words, the preference-shaping tactic tries to change public opinion and expectations both about the capacity of the state and the responsibilities of politicians (idem, 308). Eventually, issues are transferred from the realm of human agency to the realm of faith and necessity (Gamble, 2000; Hay, 2007).

Buller and Flinders (2006, 309) name globalization rhetoric as an example of a discourse where “the potentially negative political consequences of policy choices are neutralized through the creation of an ideological context in which issues are depicted as being beyond the political control framework of national politics”. Within this discourse, globalization is often described as an irresistible natural force that cannot be halted. We just have to cope with it and adapt to it. However, this kind of rhetoric obscures the political decisions and ideologies that make the globalization process possible.

Additionally, Buller and Flinders (2006, 312–313) introduce alternative depoliticization tactics such as constitutional, judicial, conventional and scientific depoliticization. However, as these tactics are not the topic of this study, they will not be discussed here. In conclusion, Buller and Flinders remind that different depoliticization tactics and tools can be and often are used simultaneously and therefore one example can cover more than just one tactic.

<b>Depoliticization tactics</b>	<b>Examples</b>
institutional depoliticization	IMF, WTO, WHO, IAEA
rule-based depoliticization	SGP, NAFTA, ETA, EMU
preference-shaping depoliticization	globalization, urbanization, economization

*Table 1: First generation: depoliticization as tactics for state management (Buller & Flinders, 2006).*

For the second generation of authors, depoliticization is defined not in terms of strategies of governance, but as “rhetorical strategies employed by various social actors” (Wood, 2016, 524). The new line of thought has been brought into the discussion after the financial crisis of 2008, which

challenged neoliberalism and led to a growing interest in re-politicization (idem, 524). Authors, such as Jenkins, Beveridge and Naumann claim that politicization and depoliticization are dynamic processes that include various social and power relations such as gender, race, and age. They criticize the first generation for being too simplistic and technical as it focuses too much on state governance. For example, Jenkins (2011, 158) argues that first-generation literature appears too state-centric and instrumental and does not open the relation or dynamic between politicization and depoliticization. She claims that depoliticization should not be defined only as a strategy for governance but also as a struggle of power and influence.

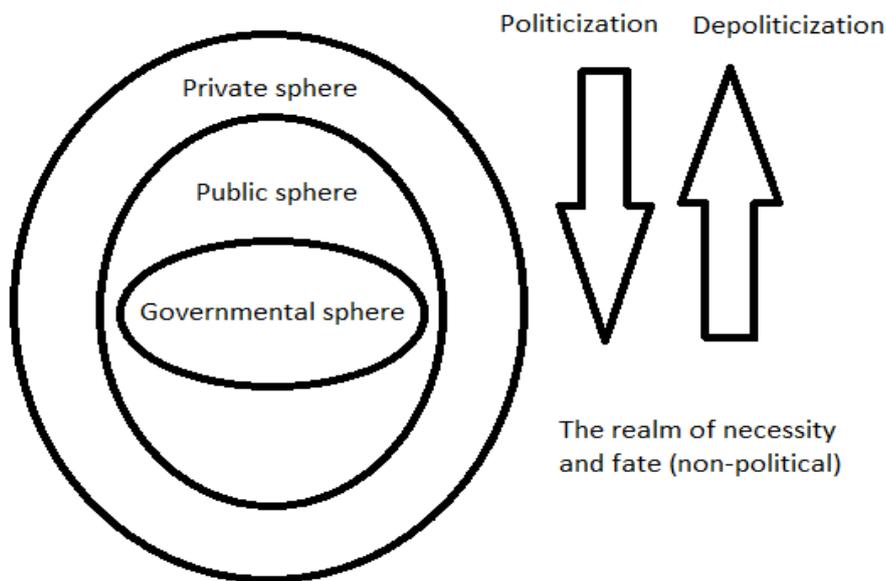
Generations	Authors	Content	Examples
First generation 2000 – 2008	Buller & Flinders 2006; Flinders 2008; Swanson 2008	Depoliticization is a tactic and tool for state management	International agreements and central banks
Second generation 2008 – 2014	Jenkins 2011; Beveridge & Naumann 2014; Foster et al. 2014	Depoliticization process includes various power relations	Transferring political issues outside human agency

*Table 2: Two generations of depoliticization literature.*

Hay is an interesting author because he is located in between the two generations. He can combine the two generations and offer a holistic picture of depoliticization process. Hay (2007) believes that globalization and depoliticization have reduced the power of national political institutions to make decisions which results in people being less interested in their actions. People feel that parliamentary politics has no more influence on the policies that are implemented, and thus it does not matter who is elected because the political decisions will remain the same.

According to Hay, issues are politicized when they “become the subject of political decision-making where previously they were not” (Hay, 81, 2007). In contrast, issues are depoliticized when they become the subject of the private sphere and are displaced from formal political deliberation. The ultimate form of this process is when issues are placed in the realm of necessity and fate. It means that there is no more space for human agency, but the issue is (re)presented as a natural law that cannot be challenged or altered.

The three spheres of political agency and their dynamics are represented in the following figure that is borrowed from Hay:



*Figure 1: Dynamics of politicization and depoliticization by Colin Hay (Hay, 2007, 80).*

Hay introduces three types of depoliticization. The first type includes the effective reduction of issues that were previously subject to formal political accountability. These issues are displaced from the governmental sphere to less political arenas, such as the markets, or arenas that are international, and where the political accountability no longer belong to the national parliaments.

In other words, Hay's first type of depoliticization often transfers the political accountability of certain issues from formal political institutions to less political actors. This means that citizens are regarded more as consumers rather than voters and political power is transferred to global actors and organizations. A good example of this type of development is climate policy where national governments have been reluctant to find political solutions to restraining the climate change and global warming. Instead of political legislation and regulation, the responsibility is often given to individual citizens who should change their consumption patterns or private companies, which should invest in innovations and technologies that are more sustainable. All this should be done voluntarily without enforcement by political decision-makers. Furthermore, climate change is often seen as a global problem that is so wicked it cannot be solved by any individual state. Therefore, political responsibility is also transferred to global actors, such as the United Nations, which has even less power to provide binding regulation.

In Hay's second type of depoliticization, issues that were previously politicized within the public sphere are displaced to the private realm (Hay, 2007). For example, in the Finnish social and healthcare reform, the National Coalition Party wants to increase the number of private companies as producers of healthcare services. The NCP insists that private companies are more efficient than public healthcare centers and therefore more responsibility should be transferred to the private sector. They believe that it would increase competition, save public money and improve the quality of healthcare if the public sector were only the buyer of these services. However, this decision also increases the power of private companies to decide about issues that have traditionally belonged to the public authorities. Therefore, this reform would mean the partial depoliticization of Finnish healthcare.

Hay's third and final type of depoliticization occurs when responsibility is completely transferred from "the realm of deliberation and politics to the realm of necessity and fate" (Hay, 2007). This means that these issues are no longer in our control but, in a way, they follow a divine natural law that cannot be altered or replaced. This is what has already happened to the political economy in most Western societies. We have collectively accepted that capitalism, the market economy and free trade are the best and the only possible model of arranging our production and consumption of goods and services. The invisible hand is like a divine force that controls the demand and supply and humans should not interact in the mechanism.

## 2.2. Governmental, societal and discursive depoliticization

By using Hay's fragmentation as a framework, Wood and Flinders (2014) have recognized three faces of depoliticization. These faces are governmental, societal and discursive. In governmental depoliticization, issues are transferred from the governmental sphere to the public sphere through judicial structures and rule-based systems that delegate political power from democratically elected politicians to quasi-democratic organs that consist of experts and specialists. A good example of this face is the delegation of monetary policy in the hands of central banks (FED in the United States or ECB in the EU) who control the interest rates without having any direct political accountability.

Societal depoliticization involves the transition of issues from the public sphere to the private sphere by offering individualized responses to collective challenges. It means that such issues that used to

be common and open for public discussion become personal choices that should not be intervened by political actors. For example, although climate change mitigation requires immediate and large social and economic reforms, many politicians believe that instead of regulation and taxation we should encourage people to make personal choices that are both sustainable and fair. Therefore, the responsibility for these decisions is transferred from society to individuals who often lack the information, capabilities and incentives to make sustainable choices.

Discursive depoliticization focuses on the role of language and ideas in the transition of issues from the private realm to the realm of necessity. In the realm of necessity, issues follow certain determined rules that cannot be altered or modified. These rules are very much like the laws of nature and the principles of physics. Things just happen or do not happen without any contingency or alternatives. There is no space for human action, let alone public discussion.

Face	Hay-link	Conception of the political	Act	Example	Key texts
Governmental	type 1	the state	delegation	the hiving of functions to arm's-length agencies, boards and commissions	Burnham 2001; Flinders and Buller, 2006
Societal	type 2	public deliberation	privatization	an important political issue is displaced from the media news-cycle	Brändström and Kuipers, 2003; Blühdorn, 2007
Discursive	type 3	political agency	denial of the capacity	need to cut fiscal deficit presented as 'common sense'	Gamble, 2000; Jenkins, 2011

*Table 3: A summary presentation of the three faces of depoliticization and their characteristics by Wood & Flinders (2014, 157).*

Wood and Flinders (2014, 161) write that discursive depoliticization occurs when “the debate surrounding an issue becomes technocratic, managerial, or disciplined towards a single goal”. Only one interpretation is allowed at a time, and other interpretations are denied. The use of “scientific

discourse” (idem. 163) in the debate increases the credibility of the discussants but alienates those people who do not speak the same language but who otherwise might have had something to say.

However, if someone attempts to challenge the dominant discourse by offering alternative interpretations, he or she is easily denounced as radical or irresponsible. However, we must keep in mind that depoliticization and politicization are not separate nor linear processes that happen in a vacuum. Instead, they are strongly interconnected and the one cannot exist without the other.

### 2.3. Depoliticization, economization and democracy

The economization of society and politics is at the heart of the depoliticization discourse. This process has many qualities that potentially accelerate depoliticization (Madra & Adaman, 2014). In brief, the concept of economization refers to certain developments where traditional institutions in the society accept and adopt neoliberal practices of government and organization. According to Madra and Adaman (2014, 700), “the neoliberal governmental model posits competition as its code of conduct and aims to govern the social in a decentralized manner by manipulating structures and institutions that encourage people and companies to compete.”

These *New Public Management* ideas are carried out at all levels of government, which means that officials give up their traditional authority and respect the economic authorities. It also means that economists are considered as experts of every field in the society which is why their message is taken as neutral, objective and unquestionable. Those who refuse to adopt neoliberal ideology are often considered as irresponsible and ideological actors who are incapable of understanding the rational common interest.

Burnham (2014, 195) argues that depoliticization is a strategy that politicians use in avoiding economic crises. It helps politicians in office to create distance between them and the decisions they have made when they can transfer the responsibility to a higher (economic) authority. According to Flinders (2008, 195–196), depoliticization refers to processes that decrease the political character of governing and partly remove the responsibility that state officials usually have for certain policy issues. Flinders et al. (2014) write that the economy is constantly under a crisis and, therefore, the government has no choice but to follow the rules of budget discipline and austerity. Otherwise, the economy will fall, production will suffer, and people will lose their jobs.

The demanding pressure for transparency in decision-making enforces politicians to build mechanisms to avoid responsibility (Flinders & Wood, 2015). Therefore, the politicians transfer power to economic authorities such as central banks, economists or government officials. It gives a lot of power to such quasi-state actors such as Central Banks and the IMF to dictate the direction of economic policy. The officials in these institutions are not elected democratically and have no direct accountability to the people that are affected by their decisions. Furthermore, the officials usually follow the neoliberal ideology that they have adapted from school and media.

Swanson (2008, 57) argues that in the United States economic practices are often depoliticized in two different ways. First, these practices are naturalized or conceptually essentialized, in other words, the political control over them is limited. Second, the existing economic practices are depoliticized, naturalized and treated as common sense. Once issues are portrayed as economic, political control or regulation is deemed more or less inappropriate. Swanson (2008, 58) believes that such arguments, common sense and conceptualizations, depoliticize economic practices also in practice. Thus, the neoliberal common sense clears ideology from economic practices and plays a particularly important role in depoliticizing the existing practices.

Similar notions have been presented by Foster et al. (2014) who divide depoliticization definitions into two main categories: narrow and expansive. In the narrow definition, depoliticization is understood as a simple form of statecraft, whereas the expansive definition refers to the widespread foreclosure of political debate and the disengagement of the citizens from formal political arenas (Foster et al 2014, 226). Depoliticization is a technique of governing that is used to legitimize neo-liberalism as the dominant political ideology.

Besides, the depoliticization in one sector of society can cause politicization in another. Or as Flinders writes: "neutral domains became the focus of (political) antagonisms that lead them to be politicized" (Flinders 2014, 142). For example, migration policy has been deeply politicized recently and it has been given more space than its actual impacts are on the society. The depoliticization of the economy may have increased the pressure to politicize the immigration policy because in democratic societies people seek arenas for debate, conflict, and antagonism. The sense that political parties have no more interest or possibility to change the direction of economic policy may cause dissatisfaction and disengagement. (Ford & Goodwin, 2014, 188)

When new radical parties and politicians come up in the conversation blaming refugees and migrants for being behind every social and economic problem, they seem to have fresh ideas and thoughts how to make society a better place. Focusing on a new area of politics, immigration has brought back political antagonism, debate and struggle into the discourse. This confrontation has also been beneficial for those liberal parties who try to defend human rights and freedom of movement because they have been given a platform and space to bring up their ideas.

In the following section of my literature review, I am going to focus on neoliberalism and how it has become the dominant political ideology in contemporary western societies during the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. I will use the concepts of ideology and hegemony that are produced and discussed mostly in the Marxist cultural theory. I believe that these concepts will provide a clear historical framework for my study and a perspective towards the further discussion of depoliticization. The section supports the works of Raymond Williams (1977) and Jan Rehmann (2013) who have tried to clarify and update the Marxist and Gramscian theories of ideology and the work of Cornel Ban (2016) who has explained the mechanisms of global neoliberal ideology.

## 2.4. The struggle for power, ideologies and hegemony

The concept of ideology was first introduced by a philosopher Destutt de Tracy as a term for the science of ideas (Williams, 1977,56). However, there are three different definitions of the concept which are all common in Marxist theories. First, ideology can be seen as a system of beliefs that is characteristic of a particular class or group. Marx believed that society consists of socio-economic classes and each class has its system of beliefs that could not be combined with other systems. For example, according to Marxist thinking the ideologies of the working-class and capitalist class are in such a deep contradiction that there is no chance for compromise. Therefore, there exists a never-ending struggle for power and influence between the classes and ideologies. (Williams, 1977)

Second, Marx believed that ideology is a system of illusory beliefs and false ideas that can be contrasted with scientific knowledge. Throughout history, humankind has believed in gods and nation-states that exist only in our collective imagination. Harari (2015) even claims that our ability to believe in imagined communities has made it possible to organize and manage large-scale human societies which have given us the dominion over the whole planet. Williams (1977,55) points out that because in a class society all beliefs are founded on class position, they are then in part or wholly

false from the perspective of another class. Therefore, the ability to make one's ideology and beliefs sound like a scientific truth is the best way to guarantee one's hegemonic position.

Third, ideology can be understood as the general but complicated process of the production of meanings and ideas within which we become conscious of our interests and conflicts (Williams, 1977, 68). According to this definition, ideology is understood as a neutral and universal concept that describes how beliefs are produced but it does not help us to understand what these beliefs are or what consequences they might have. In other words, every thought and idea are formulated by some ideology which is why there cannot be ideologically neutral ideas or systems of belief.

However, although ideologies are an integral part of social life and democracy, in the modern political debate they are often described as imaginary, unrealistic and false ideas that are in contrast with our practical experience and practical politics (Williams, 1977, 70). The decisions that are based on some ideology are considered to be less attractive than those decisions that are based on rational thinking and empirical, practical knowledge. Therefore, many political parties and other organized interest groups are compelled to represent their ideas as 'the common sense' that serves all the members of the society (idem, 66).

For example, nowadays it's completely normal that companies call for tax cuts by arguing that it will create prosperity for everyone. Cutting taxes, they say, will create more economic activity, people will have more jobs, the economy will grow and eventually the government can collect more taxes because there are more taxpayers. For obvious reasons, the companies avoid admitting that they are the first who benefit from the cuts and it's up to them if they want to invest the extra money in production or the profits that they pay for the shareholders.

Another example is the labor union who wants to secure the interests of its members. Binding overall labor agreement ensures that employees can have a minimum salary and that a company has to take into account the quality and safety of their working conditions. The union believes that this arrangement would be beneficial for the whole society because it will guarantee peace in the labor market and ensure that those people who are currently unemployed can enjoy the same advantages than their colleagues have when they get the contract. However, the union does not consider that inflexible labor markets create structural unemployment when the companies are not able to pay the salary that is promised in the overall labor agreements. This means that people remain

unemployed, companies cannot grow their production and the state will lose money because there are fewer tax-payers.

The concept of hegemony has been connected to Antonio Gramsci who spent almost 10 years in prison because of his radical ideas about democracy and state. Williams (1977, 108) argues that the traditional definition of hegemony is political rule or dominion in relations between the states. However, Gramsci made a distinction between the rule and the hegemony. During his years in captivity between 1928 and 1937, Gramsci continued his work and further developed his ideas which were eventually published after world war two in the series called *Prison Notebooks*.

According to Gramsci, rule refers to direct policies and commands that are taken and given during crises whereas hegemony is the unconscious form of governing that takes place in normal life through culture and social interaction. Hegemony differs from ideology because it is not only the conscious system of ideas and beliefs but “the whole lived social process as practically organized by specific and dominant meanings and values” (Williams, 1977, 109). Thus, the Gramscian hegemony is a lived system of meanings and values which are experienced as practices, and which appear as rational ideas that follow the common sense. Ideology has achieved a hegemonic position when the subjects unconsciously execute and reproduce its beliefs and ideas because it is considered to be normal and desirable.

Gramsci understood ideological as a “material ensemble of hegemonic apparatuses in civil society” (Rehmann, 2013, 117) that actively produce and spread ideas that are hegemonic and follow the common sense. Together with social agents, these apparatuses form a historical bloc that secures the hegemonic position of the ruling class also in such times when the ideology has lost its political support in the eyes of the public. By following the Gramscian theory, Althusser introduces several ideological state apparatuses (ISA) that work to legitimize the hegemonic ideology. These apparatuses can be religious (church), familial, juridical (entire legal system), political (all the registered parties who follow the system), syndicalist (trade unions and other associations) communications (television, radio, press) and cultural (idem, 150).

The most important ISA, however, is the educational apparatus (public and private schools) that, according to Althusser, “can draw upon an obligatory attendance of the totality of the children in the capitalist social formation, eight hours a day for five or six days out of seven” (Rehmann, 2013,

150). Therefore, the one who can decide about the content of the national education curriculum has the power to determine what ideologies could achieve the hegemonic status in the future.

Furthermore, Althusser claims that ideology can be used to change our behavior unconsciously because it has "interpellated individuals as subjects" (Rehmann, 2013, 158) with "ideological rituals" that take place already in our childhood. We are often baptized in some religion and our gender is determined through the name that our parents choose to give us. It is important to note here that the English word subject has two distinctive aspects: a subject can be an actor who makes decisions independently, but it can also be a subordinate who follows the orders that are given by a higher authority, such as king or pope. Gramsci and Althusser believe that a subject cannot be independent from ideological interpellations and therefore we are constantly bound to some systems of beliefs.

If we now think about the neoliberal ideology, we can recognize at least two interpellations that make us subjects in a way that includes both definitions. First, we are interpellated to be citizens of a state who have political rights and responsibilities. In modern liberal democracies, we can vote regularly in elections, arrange demonstrations and criticize our decision-makers publicly without any legal consequences. However, we are also obligated to pay taxes, obey the law and serve our country in case of war or another national crisis. Second, we are interpellated to be consumers and producers that buy and sell products to the markets. We have a right to have a property and the freedom to use our money to buy goods that we want to possess.

These above-mentioned interpellations form the backbones of modern liberal democracies and therefore they are hardly ever questioned or criticized. However, it's important to note that a lived hegemony is a process that creates counter-hegemonies and alternative hegemonies that try to challenge and replace the existing hegemony (Williams, 1977, 112–113). Hegemonies are produced, maintained and revised through traditions, institutions, and formations. From the Marxist perspective, the ruling class can dictate which traditions are followed because it possesses capital and the most important societal institutions and authorities such as schools, churches, and media that are the main sources of information and education. Consequently, the ruling class has always an upper hand in the struggle between alternative hegemonies and ideologies.

However, Williams (idem, 118) points out that the true condition and power of hegemony is in "the effective self-identification with the hegemonic forms." If we as citizens and consumers voluntarily choose to support the liberal economy because we believe that it best serves our common interests,

then what could be wrong with that? The neoliberal economy has probably been the most efficient system of beliefs in the history because it has pierced through all the layers of society and spread around the world. There are only a few countries left in the globe where the economy is not based on the idea of free trade and the principle of the invisible hand. Additionally, the neoliberal economy has changed the way we think about society, politics and democracy making the markets to be the greatest authority of all.

According to Ban (2016), the appeal of neoliberal ideology is based on its practical adaptability and international financial institutions (IFIs) that are designed to advance neoliberalism. Most of these institutions were built at the same time when the fall of communism, the ideological counterpart of modern capitalism, proved that the practical adaptations of socialism had failed to increase the welfare for people and ended up in violent totalitarian governments. Ban defines neoliberalism as:

*“a set of historically contingent and intellectually hybrid economic ideas and policy regimes derived from specific economic theories whose distinctive and shared goals are the following: make economic policies have credibility with financial markets, ensure trade and financial openness, and safeguard internal and external competitiveness.”*  
(Ban, 2016, 10)

Ban writes that the most important international finance institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) advance neoliberal economic policy by rewarding governments for neoliberal actions and punishing governments who fail to follow the rules. One rule is, for example, that a government can use fiscal stimulation in times of recession only if it has fiscal leeway. If, however, the government does not have that leeway because the national debt is already high and the annual budget deficit is too big, the only acceptable policy action, in the eyes of the IFIs, is austerity and structural reforms that save money.

Additionally, Ban (2016, 23) argues that since the spread of neoliberal institutions and networks coincided with the fall of communism, it ensured that there were no plausible alternatives for the neoliberal ideology. Conversely, the collapse of the Soviet Union worked as a warning example of socialism and supported the argument that neoliberalism was the best model to organize modern societies and democracies. According to Pietilä, the political economics developed in a period when the economic activity was (discursively) diverged from other parts of the society and it became an ideologically independent sector (Koivisto & Mehtonen, 1991, 81). From this societal position, the

economists were able to present their neoliberal ideas as neutral and scientific facts that transferred economic policy from the public sphere to the realm of necessity and fate.

However, ruling hegemonies have always created counter hegemonies that produce alternative ideologies that try to challenge the existing ideology. The financial crisis of 2008 challenged the hegemonic position of the neoliberal hegemony because it revealed the failures inside the financial and political system that was constructed by following the neoliberal ideas. The crisis that had started from the United States' real estate markets soon became a global crisis that threatened the financial markets and institutions all over the world. Governments in the United States and Europe build vast stimulation packages to save banks and other financial institutions to prevent the collapse of the global financial system. Mario Draghi, the president of the European Central Bank, even promised to do "whatever it takes" to solve the financial crisis.

The financial crisis increased the national debts in many EU countries when they used public money to support the global financial markets. Many people felt betrayed because neoliberal ideology had insisted that governments should not interfere in the markets but now the politicians were ready to save those bankers and investors who had involved in creating the crisis. However, the austerity policy was continued to balance the budgets which meant more savings and cuts in social security. People started to lose their faith in the system that had promised eternal economic growth and social welfare but had led them down. (Ronkainen & Mykkänen, 2019) In the next chapter, I will explain why neoliberal politicians and institutions have used depoliticization strategies to mitigate political antagonism and to secure their hegemonic position in the society.

## 2.5. The radical challenge for liberal democracy

There are some insuperable internal intentions that are characteristic to liberal democracies that are related to the fundamental logics of the markets and democracy. For example, Mouffe (1999, 43–44) argues that democracy always entails relations of inclusion and exclusion and that there cannot be a rational consensus without exclusion. In ancient Athens, only free men were accepted in *demos* and had the right to vote in the *ecclesia* (principal assembly of the *polis*). Women, children, *metics* (foreign residents) and slaves had no political rights in the society. In modern societies, exclusion is primarily done through citizenship (Mouffe, 1999, 41). If you have a passport and social security number, you also have political rights in the state. If you have arrived in a country without any

documents, you are called an illegal immigrant and you are excluded from the social security services and from the political sphere.

Consequently, we can argue that representative democracy and its institutions are by themselves an aspect of depoliticization because through their mechanisms political debate and process get predetermined forms that are accepted as normal and legitimate. However, multiple alternative political discourses and ideas are excluded from the official political agenda. Some of these discourses, such as economic degrowth and solidarity economy, are often considered irrational and irresponsible. In other words, representative democracy is a way of protecting the state from antagonist forces that would otherwise be too plural to control. It helps politicians to negotiate and compromise by restraining the alternatives that would challenge the status quo and the neoliberal common interest.

Political philosopher Žižek (2008, 28) argues that “the entire history of political thought is ultimately nothing but a series of disavowals of political antagonism”. He introduces four ways of how antagonism has been reduced in history:

- *Arche-politics* is the communitarian attempt to define a traditional and organically structured homogenous social space, such as tribes and small villages, in which the political can peacefully emerge because people are similar enough so that they can have mutual interests.
- *Ultra-politics* is the attempt to depoliticize the conflict by bringing it to its extreme. Politics is militarized into friend-enemy relations and the primacy is given to external politics over internal politics.
- *Meta-politics* is the attempt to transform the political conflict into a shadow theatre where events whose proper place is on another scene are foreclosed. The goal of meta-politics is the self-cancellation of politics and the transformation of administration of people into the administration of things.
- *Para-politics* is the attempt to depoliticize politics by reformulating it into a competition within the representational space between acknowledged parties who follow rules that limit the antagonistic nature of politics. Para-politics is what we today call representative democracy.

Žižek (2008, 30) argues that we are now moving from *para-politics* towards a period of *post-politics* where “the conflict of global ideological visions and different parties who compete for power is replaced by the collaboration of enlightened technocrats” (economists, public opinion specialists). However, Mouffe (1999, 42) believes that “when political inequality and antagonism are diminished through depoliticization, substantive inequalities would shift into another sphere that is separated from the political and concentrated in the economic.” Under these conditions, there might be a superficial equality in politics, but the true power lies in another sphere (in this case in the economy) where social inequalities still exist.

When the political decision-making process is first institutionalized and then transferred into the hands of a few economic experts, people are understandably disengaged in contemporary politics. Voting has become the only accepted form of participating, but it has little influence on the political decisions because all elected leaders must follow certain rules and frames that are defined by the neoliberal economic system. Economic growth and increasing employment rates have become the most important target for economic policy which means that other policy areas, such as social security and healthcare, are subordinate to these targets. In the macro-economic discourse, human agency is obscured, and we are moving from the public sphere to the realm of necessity and fate where the neoliberal invisible hand controls all our hopes and needs.

In the following section, I will introduce my research layout and method. The section is divided into three chapters. First, I discuss shortly about media and its role in producing and spreading the depoliticization discourse. Second, I focus on my research method and explain how to conduct a qualitative content analysis. Third, I will introduce the frameworks that I am going to use in my analysis. I have created the categories with the help of existing literature by combining elements from the two generations of depoliticization authors who in this study are represented by Bullers, Flinders and Hay. However, it is good to keep in mind that there could have been plenty of alternative ways to conduct the study, but I try to provide you arguments that support my choices and legitimize my research findings.

# 3. RESEARCH LAYOUT AND METHOD

In my study, I conduct a qualitative content analysis of Finnish electoral debate. I supplement the analysis with a discourse theory approach to help recognize discursive depoliticization elements of the debate. When I started conducting my research, I noticed that content analysis alone did not offer me enough tools to combine the existing depoliticization literature with my primary research material. Therefore, I have added elements from discourse theory to make my analysis more comprehensive and coherent. In this section, I first introduce the qualitative content analysis method and then explain how discourse theory supplements my analysis.

## 3.1. Qualitative content analysis as a research method

Content analysis is a method that can be used in analyzing written, verbal or visual communication messages (Cole, 1988). According to Elo et al (2008), content analysis is a systematic method that can be used to describe and quantify phenomena. The aim is to create a broad description of the phenomenon and to provide knowledge, new insights and representation of facts (Krippendorff, 2013). I have chosen content analysis as my main method because I want to provide new insights into depoliticization practices that are used in the context of parliamentary elections. It can work as an example of how depoliticization can be recognized, examined and studied in political campaigns and media representations.

Content analysis is a method that may be used with either qualitative or quantitative data and it can be done in an inductive or in a deductive way (Elo et al, 2008). In qualitative research, the hypotheses are typically formulated during the study. The hypotheses are not pre-determined ideas, but they are developed and tested in interaction with the data (Maxwell, 2005). Sampling mechanisms are also different in qualitative research than in quantitative research. Maxwell (2005, 88) argues that the typical way of selecting settings and individuals in qualitative research falls into a category he calls purposeful selection. In this strategy, “settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately to provide information that cannot be gotten as well from other choices” (idem). Using purposeful selection gives more power and responsibility to the researcher who, naturally, must keep in mind the good academic practice while conducting the study.

The purpose of qualitative content analysis is to provide a means of describing the phenomenon, increase understanding and generate knowledge (Elo et al, 2008). The organizing process includes open coding, creating categories and abstraction (idem). Open coding means that notes and headings are written in the text while reading it. The research material must be read through many times so that all the relevant headings are found. Therefore, qualitative research design is an ongoing process where “the researcher must go back and forth with the different components of the design” (Maxwell, 2005, 3).

My purpose is to conduct a qualitative content analysis with an inductive approach. In the inductive content analysis, the categories are derived from the research data. In the deductive content analysis, the categories are based on an earlier theory or model. Therefore, it is often used to test already existing theories and hypotheses. My first intention was to follow the deductive approach and build categories that combine the two generations of depoliticization literature. However, I soon noticed that my research material does not fit easily into predestined categories that are deduced from the previous theories. I would have had to compromise too much with my analysis to make it compatible with the categories. Therefore, I decided to change the approach of the study from deductive to inductive.

The inductive approach gave me more freedom to select such parts from the material that would enrich the analysis with elements from discourse theory. Additionally, it meant that I did not have to present or test any predetermined hypothesis or theories, but I could observe the research material without such limitations. One reason for this decision was also my research material that is a relatively short glimpse for Finnish political discussion. One cannot build a comprehensive model based on a single electoral debate. However, I hope that my study will provide new models and tools for future research on depoliticization practices. Focusing on a limited number of research material, I have made it possible to examine the phenomenon from multiple perspectives which might open up new paths and directions for future research.

### 3.2. Using discourse theory in political analysis

As mentioned above, I use elements from discourse theory to support and supplement my content analysis to create a more comprehensive picture of how depoliticization strategies and practices are used in Finland in the context of an electoral debate. In my analysis, I follow the discourse theory of

the Essex school which assumes that all objects and actions are meaningful and that meanings are conferred by historically specific systems of rules. (Howarth et al, 2000)

Discourse theory investigates for example how different discourses produce identities, ideologies and social imaginaries. Discourse is defined as “a social and political construction that establishes a system of relations between different objects and practices, while providing positions for social agents to identify” (Howarth et al, 2000, 3). Therefore, all texts can be analyzed with discourse analysis because their meaning depends upon “a socially constructed system of rules and significant differences” (Howarth et al, 2000, 3).

I find discourse theory a very useful implement for my content analysis because it recognizes the power of discourses in creating the socially constructed reality. According to discourse theory, “discourses are intrinsically political because they always involve the exercise of power as their constitution involves the exclusion of certain possibilities and a consequent structuring of the relation between social agents” (Howarth et al, 2000, 4). An electoral debate is supposed to include various competing discourses when politicians from different parties try to gain support for their ideologies. However, discursive depoliticization practices undermine the variety of discourses that can be used in the discussion by appraising one discourse over another.

Furthermore, the Essex School’s discourse theory recognizes hegemonic practices as a form of political activity that involves the articulation of different identities and subjects into a common project that supports the Gramscian historical bloc (Howarth et al, 2000, 14–15). The discourse theory also understands the role of political antagonism in society and, therefore, it helps us to look beyond the hegemonic practices and reveal that eventually, the neoliberal common-sense policy is nothing but free of political interests, societal structures and power relations.

Discourse analysis refers to “the practice of analyzing empirical research material and information as discursive forms” (Howarth et al, 2000, 4). Empirical data is examined as sets of signifying practices that constitute discourse and its reality. According to Howarth et al, (2000, 9), “the articulation of political discourse can only take place around an empty signifier that functions as a nodal point.” In political science, an empty signifier usually refers to such concepts and ideas that are repeatedly presented by politicians but vaguely defined in the discourse. Thus, they can be used to advance multiple policy goals. In the context of Finnish politics, welfare society can be regarded as an example of an empty signifier. Most people agree that the Finnish welfare society is a positive

system and that it should be conserved which is why politicians used it as an argument to support their policies that might actually weaken or at least remarkably alter the current welfare society. From the global perspective, democracy and freedom are empty signifiers that are used to advance a large amount of controversial policies and governments.

### 3.3. Building the categories for the content analysis

In creating theoretical categories for the qualitative content analysis, I have combined the two generations of depoliticization. I have used the list of depoliticization tactics and tools (Buller & Flinders, 2006) and depoliticization types (Hay, 2007) to create a framework that would help me to analyze how depoliticization is produced in Finnish electoral debate. The categories are created in accordance with the material and I have selected such topics from the discussion that fit into these categories. In the analysis, I will provide some extractions from the debate to emphasize my points.

The categories are listed below:

- governmental depoliticization and the public sphere
- societal depoliticization and the private sphere
- discursive depoliticization and the realm of fate

The first category includes such discourses that transfer the political responsibility from politicians to institutions whose members are not democratically elected nor politically accountable. Political issues remain in the public sphere, but they are no longer under direct control of governments. Decisions are made by authorities and experts who are supposed to represent the common interest and rationality. Issues that fall into this category are discussed publicly by officials who are not subject to formal political scrutiny and whose authority is rarely questioned. In the electoral debate, candidates referred to a report that was published by economists Anders Borg and Juhana Vartiainen who suggested that Finland should cut expenses and make labor market reforms to balance the economy (Borg & Vartiainen, 2015). The ideas and policy recommendations of the report were widely accepted by the candidates.

The second category includes such discourses that transfer political agency from the public sphere to private with the help of rules and legislation. Social issues and functions that used to be public

become privatized and they are framed as individual choices. The social and healthcare reform has been on the political agenda for many years in Finland. When the population is aging and the costs for healthcare are increasing, there is a great urge to find extra funding for these services. NCP believes that the costs could be reduced if the healthcare sector was privatized and people could have more freedom to choose where they want to buy the service. The party claims that private companies are more efficient in producing the services than the public sector. At the same time, healthcare services would move away from the public sphere and become more private matter of individuals who would need to take more responsibility for their decisions. The privatization would be done with the help of such laws and regulation that would help private companies to get better access to healthcare markets and expose public services to increasing competition.

The third category includes such discourses that transfer political agency from the private sphere to the realm of necessity and fate by shaping people's preferences. When we accept certain behavior and practices as natural and keep on saying that it is the only way, we voluntarily give away our political agency and yield to be controlled by some divine and unnatural forces. This is the ultimate form of depoliticization because it removes human agency completely from issues that used to be public. However, the economy is a system created by humans and therefore humans do have the capacity to change it if they want to do so. The ticking debt clock does not tell the whole truth and economic growth (measured by GDP) might not be as fruitful as we are taught to believe. Presenting alternative solutions that challenge the existing hegemony is a fundamental part of democracy and politics. If we remove that aspect from formal politics, new ideas and thoughts will eventually emerge in other areas where they might get more radical forms.

## 4. QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

In this chapter, I conduct a qualitative content analysis of the electoral debate. I supplement the analysis with discourse theory. The analysis is divided into two parts: first I analyze the debate in thematical order and then I present categories that are induced from the data. I will conclude the analysis by presenting the results and answering the main research questions that were presented in the introduction chapter.

### 4.3. Introduction to the analysis

Electoral debates are arenas for politicking which refers to the performative operations that take place inside the polity (Palonen, 2003). The debaters aim to convince the audience that their policy ideas and initiatives are worth supporting for. Thus, the aim of the electoral debate is not to find a compromise but to challenge the other debaters. Debates are usually arranged before the elections when political parties and candidates run their campaigns. Therefore, participants are generally well prepared for the event and they often have slogans and other key messages ready that they can use in the discussion. Parties and politicians can also make promises to attract the potential electorate.

The electoral debate that is discussed in this study took place on March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2015, about a month before the parliamentary elections. Eight party leaders participated in the debate and represented all the parties that had places in the parliament. Prime minister Alexander Stubb (National Coalition Party), minister of finance Antti Rinne (Social Democratic Party), minister of defense Carl Haglund (Swedish People's Party) and minister of homeland security Päivi Räsänen (Christian Democrats) represented the government and Juha Sipilä (Centre), Timo Soini (Finns), Paavo Arhinmäki (Left Alliance) and Ville Niinistö (Greens) belonged to the opposition at that time.

The debate took about two hours and it was divided into four sections. The first section included current affairs such as education policy. The government had voted down its proposal to limit the amount of student allowance periods. The last nine months of the government had been full of controversy and disagreement after Antti Rinne had replaced Jutta Urpilainen as the chair of Social Democrats and Alexander Stubb had replaced Jyrki Katainen as a prime minister and chair of

National Coalition Party. According to Stubb, the prime minister and minister of finance lacked a shared understanding of the Finnish economy.

The second and third section focused on the economic policy. Both sections began with an introduction where one of the two hosts presented a framework for the discussion. Before the second section, the same host presented the debt clock and before the third section, he presented a graph that showed how Finland's incomes and expenses had developed during the 21<sup>st</sup> century. After the financial crisis in 2008, Finland's incomes had collapsed whereas expenses kept on rising. When Paavo Arhinmäki, chair of the Left party, pointed out that we should also have a clock that measures Finland's dues, the other host, snapped at him: "Now we discuss about the debt!". In my analysis, I present critical notions about the work of the two journalists and how they lead the conversation. However, their actions must be considered against the rules of journalistic profession and the practices produced by the broadcasting company MTV.

The fourth section of the debate consisted of foreign policy. I will leave that out from my analysis since my intention is to focus on the economic policy. However, it is worth mentioning that party leaders avoided questioning the Finnish foreign policy doctrine or President Sauli Niinistö's policy. Finland has a long tradition of having a common foreign policy. In a way, we can claim that foreign policy has been the most depoliticized part of Finnish politics. Few people disagreed with the current doctrine. The only topic that raised a proper discussion was the question about Finland's membership in the military union NATO.

The audience could participate in the debate by sending tweets that were presented on the screen. There was also a small competition between the party leaders who could get most Twitter notifications during the debate. However, the tweets were merely just commenting on the events, but since they did not have much impact on the discussion, I decided not to include them in the content analysis. At the end of the debate, the hosts pleaded for the audience that now was the crucial time to act to save the Finnish economy. This can be interpreted as a strong ideological interpellation such as Louis Althusser have described.

In my analysis, I will focus especially on the second and third sections that covered the discussion about the economic policy. These sections also included the representational tools that were used to frame the discussion. Since I am conducting an inductive qualitative content analysis, I have built categories that are induced from the research material. I have transcribed the whole debate in

Finnish but translated only those parts that I found relevant for my study. All indented quotations that are used in this chapter are derived from the research material.

I have divided my analysis into three sections: first I will go the debate through in thematical order and then I will divide it into categories. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, I decided to change the approach of my analysis during the process. My first intention was to conduct a deductive content analysis where the categories are derived from the existing theory but soon, I realized that the debate did not have enough elements to fill those categories that I had planned. Therefore, I decided to go with an inductive content analysis instead and add some elements from the discourse theory to supplement my analysis. In the inductive content analysis, the categories are derived from the data and then compared with the theories. It was difficult to combine the depoliticization literature with Finnish politics because the context is very different. Most of the scholars come from countries that have two-party systems, such as the United States and Great Britain, where the political culture is completely different.

In the discussion section, I will provide some conclusions and possible research gaps that exist in the Finnish depoliticization. Furthermore, I will discuss more about the limits and weaknesses of this analysis. It is not possible to make broad generalizations from this qualitative research, but it would be interesting to reflect alternative ways of studying how depoliticization acts in practice.

## 4.4. First part of the analysis: Purposeful selection of topics

In this first part of the analysis, I present and analyze the relevant parts of the electoral debate that have been purposefully selected to support my analysis. The sub-chapters are not in chronological order, but they are arranged by the topic. All the direct quotations are derived from the debate and translated from Finnish to English. The names of the hosts are not mentioned because that is not relevant information for the study.

### 4.1.1. The ticking debt clock sets the agenda for discussion

Agenda setting is a powerful tool for media to guide the discussion in the right direction. When the host presents the debt clock for the first time, he explains that the situation is urgent.

*Host: "The clock tells severely how swiftly the national debt runs. The sum is already 96 billion euros and the current phase is alarming: 9 000 euros per minute."*

A ticking clock triggers the audience to demand imminent actions that would help to stop the clock. At the same time, the debt clock frames the discussion by limiting the number of alternative policy actions. Getting more debt for fiscal stimulus or investing in public infrastructure projects is not an option because that would increase the speed of the clock.

When one of the debaters, Paavo Arhinmäki (Left Alliance), proposes that they should also have a clock that shows how much money Finland receives as interests from other countries, the host snaps at him that now we discuss the debt. When Ville Niinistö (Greens) proposes that we should increase both the supply and demand of work, the host interrupts again and demands more discussion about the national debt.

*Host: Does your armpit sweat already when you hear that clock ticking?*

*Rinne: It is a very bad situation that our debt grows at that pace.*

*Stubb: I can honestly say that it frightens me to watch that clock. (--) I think that it is irresponsible. During the last six years Finland has doubled its debt from 50 billion euros to 100 billion and it is more than 60 percent of our GDP.*

*Sipilä: That 96 billion euros is frightening. (--) We have much work to do.*

*Räsänen: The amount of the public sector debt and Finnish national debt is reaching the limit. It is around 60 percent of our GDP which is the limit.*

*Soini: Of course, this is alarming in many ways. Economic growth is the only way to impact efficiently. (--) But we also need budget cuts.*

*Haglund: We only get more jobs if entrepreneurs and other employers believe that tomorrow is better. To succeed, we need reasonable taxation and employment policy. (--) We have to remove welfare traps and support entrepreneurs. We have to be honest with the people. We also need to adjust public spending.*

With the help of the ticking debt clock and bypassing the disagreeing voices, the discussion has concluded that cutting public spending and decreasing social security is the *reasonable* action to do to stop the state getting into more debt. It is a good example of discursive depoliticization where “the debate surrounding an issue becomes technocratic, managerial, or disciplined towards a single goal” (Flinders & Wood, 2014, 161).

Alternative policy actions, such as increasing public expenditure, welfare payments or raising taxes are considered *irresponsible*. Or as Carl Haglund (Swedish People’s Party) puts it:

*“Purchasing power has diminished too much and therefore taxation should be looked from the perspective where we can find more work. If we cannot put off these ideological lenses and think about how to create more jobs, this country will not rise.”*

In other words, challenging the neoliberal economic policy means that you wear *ideological lenses* that prevent you to see clearly what is going on. In that sense, Haglund reproduces the Marxist conception of ideology as false consciousness. For Marx, (capitalist) ideology is unable to orientate towards new circumstances and therefore it remains in old ways of thinking and obscures the reality (Koivisto & Mehtonen, 1991, 42). Haglund’s policy actions are, in his opinion, free of such ideological constraints because they are based on mainstream theories of economics. However, denying the ideological and political nature of economics (Koivisto & Mehtonen, 1991,81) is precisely what Hay calls the third type of depoliticization: accountability is transferred from the realm of deliberation and politics to the realm of necessity (Hay. 2007).

Furthermore, it is interesting to see how the debt clock generates emotional responses from some politicians. Alexander Stubb and Juha Sipilä are *frightened* by the debt clock and Soini says that the situation is *alarming*. Appealing to people’s emotions is a common rhetorical tool for politicians to support their arguments (site). If I was doing a rhetorical analysis of this debate, I would pay more attention to these responses but now I only point out that using emotional rhetoric is in contrast with the demand for rational policy actions. Frightened people seldom make rational decisions.

When the discussion has concluded that budget cuts are the only reasonable policy action to do, the hosts urge politicians to present lists of possible cuts.

*Host: Rinne. Let's take another question. What is your list of cuts?*

*Rinne: Budget cuts mean that we must weaken the public services. It will increase inequality. Instead, we need economic growth, structural reforms, and adjustment actions. We need to build a reasonable combination that helps us to increase growth and stop us from falling into more debt. You cannot just throw several budget cuts because it means bad things in everyday life or ordinary people.*

*Host: Are you going to the elections with lights turned out?*

*Rinne: No, we won't. We'll tell our targets one of these days and public ICT purchases are going to be one of these things.*

Once again, the host has turned down any attempt to question the presumption that making budget cuts is the best way to balance the economy. Other politicians continue the discussion and present their cut lists.

*Sipilä: We present that we cover the deficit half with savings and half with growth so that the balance is reached in six or seven years. I believe that this is a realistic, gritty program with savings.*

*Host: Do Christian Democrats have a gritty program?*

*Räsänen: I believe that we need to adjust at least two billion euros - - and I know that it is extremely difficult unless you go into the structures and social security benefits. I don't believe that we can survive by doing small cuts with a cheese slicer. Instead, we should go into the benefits. The most equal solution is to stop raising the index-related allowances.*

*Arhinmäki: This is absurd that we want to cut from pensioners, students and unemployed people. At the same time, we don't want to stop money flowing to tax havens. That would be a remarkable way to balance the public sector economy.*

*Host: Armpits are sweating here too because the discussion has been so vivid but now it is time to take a short break and move on.*

Instead of asking more about how to prevent tax evasion or fight against the black-market economy, the host decides to take a break. Of course, the time of the show is only limited, and the broadcasting company needs to have commercial breaks every now and then, but it still looks a bit peculiar to cut the discussion every time someone proposes alternative policy solutions to budget cuts and austerity.

#### 4.1.2. Structural reforms and the EU Stability and Growth Pact

After the first commercial break, the debt clock has stopped ticking but now they have projected a graph to the wall that shows the public incomes and expenditures. The message remains alarming.

*Host: Let's look at this picture. It tells what the economic situation of state and municipalities is. In the financial crisis of 2008, the incomes decreased dramatically but the expenses have stayed up there steadily. It has stuck there permanently, which means that Finland spends more than earns. Last year the budget deficit was about 10 billion euros.*

*Host: That number means that the annual budget deficit transcends the EU limits. Has the government built repeatedly the budget on too optimistic predictions?*

The EU limits refer to the European Stability and Growth Pact where the members of the European Union have agreed to maintain the stability of the European Monetary Union via fiscal monitoring. Basically, this means that member states have committed to limit their annual government deficits to three percent and the total national debts to 60 percent of their GDPs. In 2015, Finland is about to transcend both these limits which concerns the hosts. However, they do not mention that many countries have already broken the pact by transcending the limits.

Transferring fiscal power to quasi-democratic actors such as European Central Bank is a good example of governmental depoliticization where issues are transferred from the governmental sphere to the public sphere through judicial structures and rule-based systems (Wood & Flinders. 2014). It also means that they are transferred from the governmental sphere to the public sphere where there is less political accountability and scrutiny. When Finland joined the European Monetary Union and started using Euro as a currency in 2002, it gave away its independent monetary policy. Since then the interest rates are managed by the ECB who is responsible for the whole Eurozone. It

means that Finland can no longer use monetary policy to revitalize its economy. Instead, the interest rate is defined by ECB economists who lack direct political accountability.

During the euro crisis, ECB took an active role to save the monetary union (Ronkainen & Mykkänen, 2019). ECB helped to create vast stimulus packages to Greece. In return, Greece had to accept hard austerity programs that included cutting pensions and other social security allowances. According to Ronkainen (2019, 155), this active role contested the assumption of ECB as an independent actor.

The former prime minister Alexander Stubb admits that Finland has overspent money during the whole 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to Stubb, Finland has based its economic policy on too optimistic scenarios, especially after the financial crisis in 2008. “The fact is that we cannot continue this way which means that we must first adjust our economy and then start to work”, Stubb says. Carl Haglund agrees with Stubb and claims that Finland should do public sector reforms.

Structural reform is a phrase that many politicians repeat in the debate. It is used by Sipilä, Haglund, Rinne, Stubb and Räsänen. Structural reforms are needed at least in education, labor market policy and in public sector governance. It is hard to know exactly what it means because politicians use the phrase as a magic word that would solve all the problems. According to Räsänen, structural reforms are hard to get through, but they need to be done in the next term. Timo Soini offers a concrete example from municipalities. He demands that civil servants should not have long protection periods against dismissal because it means that municipalities cannot denounce people directly after mergers. Former minister of defense Carl Haglund praises the reform he has recently done in Finnish Defense Forces as an example of a successful reform. The reform meant, for example, closing several units and selling real estates to balance the budget. In that sense, it is hard to make a difference between budget cuts and structural reforms.

One of the biggest structural reforms in Finnish contemporary politics is the social and healthcare reform that was started already in 2006 with the Paras Hanke. The reform aims to reduce the regional inequalities in health and wellbeing, improve the quality of services and curb costs. (Finnish Government, 2019, 161–164) This is supposed to be done by establishing regional provinces that would take responsibility of organizing healthcare and social welfare services. Especially NCP would also want to improve the position of private health care services in the system. The reform has gone through many failures and the legislation was again stopped in 2019 because it was against the constitution. I will not go deeper into details because social and healthcare reform was not the topic

of the debate that I am analyzing in this study. However, it is a good example of how difficult it is to do large societal reforms even though all the parties agree that it must be done.

Therefore, discussing about structural reforms without giving any concrete examples is another example of discursive depoliticization where politicians use technocratic and abstract language to obscure what they mean. Consequently, structural reforms work as an empty signifier that can be used to advance multiple purposes. It sounds better to say that education must be reformed than to admit that we need to cut from the education budget. On the other hand, structural reforms in public administration often mean that procedures and operations are rationalized and optimized to cut the public costs. Especially, new public management doctrines emphasize that public administration should learn from private sector actors how to increase productivity and efficiency in the decision-making process. Therefore, structural reforms often refer to neoliberal reforms that aim to diminish the role of the government and increase the role of the markets.

#### 4.1.3. Government's role in creating the economic growth

In addition to budget cuts, the politicians also discussed how they can create economic growth in a situation where the growth of Finnish GDP had been almost nonexistent after the financial crisis in 2008. Many politicians emphasized that it is the private sector companies that create growth and new jobs. The government should only provide favorable environment for business.

*Soini: We need new tools. The problem here is that we don't lack workforce, but we lack the employers. We need entrepreneurs who are brave enough to take risks.*

*Räsänen: If we talk about economic growth, it is the entrepreneurs who create the growth and the state can only create the conditions. We need tax policy, labor market reforms and less regulation for entrepreneurs.*

*Stubb: Work creates more work. It means that we need to get young women into work and occupational migration and longer careers. - - We need to make those structural reforms so that we can save the Finnish welfare society.*

*Rinne: I believe that the role of state changes in time. At some point, it is more active and entrepreneurial. Now we need that. We lack the demand and the companies can afford to make investments. Now we should increase the demand with an active policy.*

Apart from Antti Rinne, the chair of the Social Democratic Party (SDP), the debaters agree that the state government should not interfere in the economy more than is necessary. Apparently, the only acceptable way of doing this is either deregulation or tax cuts. In 2014, the Finnish government decided to lower the corporate tax from 24,5 to 20 percent. The idea was to attract companies to make investments in Finland. The argument was that the dynamic impacts would eventually cover the tax revenues, but Left Alliance criticized the decision.

*Arhinmäki: We strongly suspected these dynamic impacts although we hoped them. What has happened then? 80 percent of the cut has gone into dividends and only 20 percent to investments. We made a gap of 800 million euros into our tax system.*

*Rinne: I think that it has not brought those impacts that we hoped for, but we must be predictable in our corporate tax policy and build a future where companies can believe in stability and predictability which is very important.*

*Sipilä: From the opposition I defend that we need predictable tax solutions. We cannot put that back where it was. Besides, one year is too short a period to analyze the results. It is important that we give a signal, message and promise that the tax rate will not rise, and we make such changes that encourage people to work and take risks.*

*Haglund: It is precisely like Juha just said. Now it is impossible to raise this tax anymore. Within a few years, we can see if it was a good decision. The fact is that if we look at these other taxes that have been raised, for example the income tax, it has turned out that people have less money to use because we have raised the taxes too much which has decreased the demand especially in the service sector.*

The neoliberal laissez-faire ideology is visible in some of these statements. The idea that free markets should work without any political inference is at the heart of neoliberal economic policy. It claims that the government should advance private entrepreneurship with tax cuts and deregulation but

otherwise remain passive. Social security allowances and minimum wages are heavily criticized for creating welfare traps that discourage economic activity.

Miettinen writes that the European economic constitution is built on German ordoliberalism which means that it emphasizes strong competition legislation, rule-based regulation for public economies and central bank independence (Miettinen, 2019, 128). The idea is to highlight the role of the self-guided markets. The state's role is only to guarantee the predictability and stability of the business. Ordoliberals believe that liberalism is a doctrine that is based on scientific facts and that it is free of ideologies. They believe in the power of experts, such as economists, who they see as unpolitical. According to Miettinen (2019, 142), European ordoliberal economic constitution has protected the institutions against undemocratic movements but it has simultaneously limited remarkably the sphere for democratic politics.

Transferring the political power and accountability from the public sphere to the private sphere belongs to the second type of depoliticization (Hay, 2007). It also relates to the societal depoliticization (Wood & Flinders, 2014) where politicians offer individualized responses to collective challenges. It is the private companies that create jobs and therefore politicians cannot be held accountable for labor market policy. The only acceptable thing to do is to lower the taxes and hope that it will eventually have some positive dynamic impacts.

The demand for austerity actions increased when the ministry of finance published their report of Finland's economy. In the report, the officials demanded structural reforms and budget cuts that together would cover six billion euros by 2019 and they estimate that the total deficit is about 10 billion euros (Ministry of Finance, 2015). The report received a lot of attention in the media and commentators used it to support the argument that austerity is the only reasonable solution to balance the economy.

The political nature of the report was neglected although it included quite detailed policy recommendations. For example, it says that Finland should have higher targets for its fiscal policy discipline than what the European Union agreements demand, and that adjustment should focus on cutting the costs instead of increasing the revenues because Finland's tax rate is high enough already and cannot be raised (Ministry of Finance, 2015).

#### 4.1.4. Final call to action as an ideological interpellation

At the end of the electoral debate, the hosts ask what prerequisite questions parties have for the upcoming elections. In Finland, parties have to negotiate before forming the governance because usually none of the parties get the majority in the parliament. Three party leaders, Juha Sipilä (Center), Carl Haglund (SFP) and Alexander Stubb (NCP), tell that reasonable economic policy is the most important prerequisite for their government cooperation.

*Stubb: We have two prerequisites that I can tell you here. First, we need to have a common picture of the economic situation so that we understand where we are going. Second, we all must work for our homeland without political scheming or playing. These are the prerequisites.*

The common picture of the economic situation refers to a shared understanding that austerity and other neo-liberal economic policy actions are accepted as the foundation for the next government. The common picture is used here as a scientific fact that should not be criticized or questioned by political interests. Instead, politicians should give up political scheming and work for their country. Therefore, questioning the common picture of the Finnish economic situation is framed as an unpatriotic and selfish play that serves only one's selfish political interests.

However, Stubb does not admit or recognize that his picture of the economic situation is affected by neoliberal ideology and nothing but unpolitical or free of interests and political play. There is no such picture of economic that can be separated from political antagonism because ideological and political struggles are at the heart of social life (Mouffe, 2005).

The final words from the hosts are include a powerful call to action for the audience:

*Host: This was the first electoral debate with the party leaders. During this debate, Finland got more into debt. How much exactly?*

*Host: Wait a minute. The accurate number is around 1 050 228 euros.*

*Host: It is time for decisions.*

*Host: Have a nice evening.*

Once again, the hosts highlight that national debt is the most important topic of the upcoming elections. Announcing a big number without offering the context is a powerful rhetorical tool to create a sense of urgency in the audience. One million euros sounds like a big sum but actually if you compare it to Finland's budget, which is around 55 billion euros a year, that does not sound as alarming. Besides, with this final message the hosts strongly imply that Finland should not take more debt and therefore it is time to vote for politicians who act responsibly.

#### 4.5. Second part of the analysis: Building the categories

Now that I have gone through those parts of the debate that are included in the analysis, it is time to present the categories. Based on this electoral debate, I have recognized all three faces, tactics and tools of depoliticization that were presented in the literature review. According to my observation, Finnish politicians follow first-generation's definition of depoliticization. Especially right-wing parties NCP, SFP, and Center use discursive depoliticization in reasoning their economic policy initiatives. Besides, these parties often refer to European Union institutions and their rules to legitimize austerity policies and budget cuts. The Finnish Ministry of Finance and the European SGP are important authorities for these parties when it comes to economic policy. The hosts participated in creating discursive depoliticization by framing the discussion and limiting the possible policy options although MTV is supposed to be an objective broadcasting media.

The second generation of depoliticization was harder to recognize from a single electoral debate because often the power structures are not visible. However, it is worth mentioning that most of the politicians were middle-aged white men who represented the Finnish demographic majority. Päivi Räsänen, chair of Christian Democrats, was the only woman in the debate and Carl Haglund, chair of the Swedish Party, was the only politician who represented a linguistic minority. Instead, there was no representation for ethnic or cultural minorities in the debate. The inequality of political activity among different groups of Finnish society is an important topic and it has an impact on political disengagement among these groups. However, the political participation and activity of minorities is not the topic of this particular study.

Based on these questions and existing theories about depoliticization and ideologies I induced three categories from the research material. The first category of analysis includes governmental depoliticization that transfers issues from the governmental sphere to the public sphere and transfers the responsibility from democratically elected politicians to quasi-democratic institutions. The second category of analysis consists of societal depoliticization that transfers issues from the public sphere to the private sphere and transfers responsibility from political institutions to private sector actors. The third category of analysis discusses the discursive depoliticization that transfers issues from the public sphere to the private sphere or the realm of fate and necessities. The responsibility from political actions is obscured and the political agency is vague and hard to recognize. The following table clarifies the selection of categories and their position in the depoliticization discussion. Each category has its number and the arrow in the left shows the direction of the depoliticization process.

<b>Spheres of political agency by Hay (2007)</b>	<b>Tactics and tools by Buller and Flinders (2006)</b>	<b>Three faces by Wood and Flinders (2014)</b>
governmental (1)	institutional (1)	governmental (1)
public sphere (2)	rule-based (1)	societal (2)
private sphere (2)	preference-shaping (3)	discursive (3)
The realm of fate and necessities (3)		



*Table 4: The position of categories in the depoliticization discussion. Combination from Hay (2007), Buller & Flinders (2006) and Wood & Flinders (2014).*

#### 4.1.5. First category: Governmental depoliticization and SGP

Based on my inductive content analysis, the data indicates that in the context of Finnish politics the governmental depoliticization is produced mainly by the European Union and its regulations for financial policies. The European Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) constrains politicians because it sets limits for budget deficits and national debt. Based on the electoral debate that I analyzed, Finnish politicians and journalists are very concerned about following these financial rules even though they

limit the available policy actions. Some politicians are *frightened* by the amount of national debt and most believe that budget cuts are inevitable for responsible economic policy.

However, nobody contests the rules of the SGP although other European countries have already violated these rules by having bigger budget deficits and by getting into more debt than the rules allow. SGP is a combination of rule-based and institutional depoliticization because it determines certain financial rules for politicians to follow and these rules are controlled and supervised by a separate institution, the European Commission, who has the power to order sanctions for those member states who fail to follow the rules. However, when Spain and Portugal violated the rules in 2016 and the Commission had to begin the sanction mechanism the sum of the fine was zero euros (Ronkainen & Mykkänen, 2019, 137).

Another source of governmental depoliticization in the Finnish economic politics is the Ministry of Finance whose reports produce the financial frame in which politicians can make decisions about budget allocations and redistributions of income. The Ministry preferably presents itself as a non-political institution whose calculations and figures are based on the economics. However, giving detailed policy recommendations makes the Ministry a political agent whether it wants it or not. The Ministry has also adapted such traditions of economics that follow the neo-liberal ideology which means that the recommendations are not ideologically neutral. Transferring political power to quasi-democratic institutions such as ministries is one example of institutional depoliticization. However, I am not suggesting that we should not listen to what the economists and other experts have to say but I argue that we should pay more attention to their ideological positions and keep in mind that there is no economic theory that is free from politics and ideologies.

#### 4.1.6. Second category: Societal depoliticization and the economic growth

According to my analysis, societal depoliticization becomes visible in the discussion about the role of the government in creating jobs and economic growth. Many politicians argue that growth is primarily created in private sector companies and that the government should only provide a suitable environment for business by cutting the taxes and reducing the regulation. This follows the German ordoliberal model where the government has a limited role in economic policy and where policy recommendations are given as scientific facts that should not be disagreed. This is the model

which Carl Haglund refers to when he says that we should put off ideological lenses when discussing how to create new jobs. What he means, though, is that we should wear the same ideological lenses that he does and accept that the ordoliberal model is the best in creating economic growth.

In the discussion, the chair of Social Democratic Party Antti Rinne disagrees with Haglund and suggests that the government should take a more active role in fiscal policy and stimulate economic growth by creating demand with the help of public infrastructure projects. However, Rinne does not deny the importance of private sector companies in creating the growth or the assumption that the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) measured economic growth is a desirable target for economic policy. Instead, Rinne argues that economic growth is the best way to avoid austerity and budget cuts that would otherwise be necessary for balancing the budget. No leader questions the idea of continuous growth although we live on a planet that has limited resources.

The responsibility of creating economic growth is given to entrepreneurs who would need tax cuts and less regulation to survive in the global competition. Some politicians even suggest that there should not be salary raises in the Autumn because that would harm the competitiveness of Finnish companies. Although politicians admit that the previous cut in corporate taxation has not provided the desired dynamic impacts, they argue that now it is impossible to return the tax to the same level because that would cause unpredictability in the markets. Consequently, austerity and budget cuts are the only *reasonable* and *responsible* policy actions that the government can follow in balancing the budget and stopping the state from getting into more debt.

#### 4.1.7. Third category: Discursive depoliticization and media presentation

The third category includes discursive depoliticization and here I would like to pay attention to the agenda-setting power that media, in this case, MTV, uses in the electoral debate. Having a ticking debt clock and a figure that presents budget deficit as the starting point for discussion is a strong representational tool to state that this is the most important topic in Finnish politics. A ticking time bomb is a strong cultural symbol that is apt to creating a sense of urgency among the politicians and the audience. The debt clock, of course, runs into a different direction than a time bomb but the message is still the same: we need to stop that clock immediately. This message is repeated in the final words of the hosts when they close down the debate: it is time for decisions.

As mentioned previously, discursive depoliticization focuses on the role of language and discourse in transferring issues from the public realm to the realm of necessities and fate (Wood & Flinders, 2014). Usually, this means that the discussion is framed in a way that allows one interpretation at a time and excludes other interpretations. The debate enforced the idea that national debt and the budget deficit were the most important topics in the elections. Instead, there could have been a picture of a senior citizen who cannot afford to pay for his medical bills or a table that presents how many species are endangered because of global warming and deforestation or an ecological debt clock that shows how much we need to reduce the carbon dioxide emissions if we want to mitigate climate change below the critical two degrees of Celsius.

Therefore, having a ticking debt clock on the wall and showing the figures of budget deficits were actions of discursive depoliticization and it helped to shape the preference of the politicians and the audience. However, we need to keep in mind that the two journalists who hosted the electoral debate are not to be blamed alone by the representational choices that were made before and during the show. In discourse theory, social agents (in this case the journalists) are social constructs that undergo constant historical and social change as a result of political practices. According to Louis Althusser and other discourse theorists:

*“subjects are constructed by ideological practices and that is why individuals acquire an identity of who they are and their role in society by being positioned in certain ways by a whole series of unconscious practices, rituals, customs and beliefs with which they come to identify.” (Howarth et al, 2000, 12–13)*

This means that the journalists who lead the electoral debate have to follow certain practices and rituals that are characteristic of the identity and profession of journalism. Otherwise, they would not be considered professionals and perhaps someone else would take their place in the debate. Objectivity is one of the main requirements for professional journalism. In this particular debate, the journalists managed to create an illusion of objectivity by being objective within the selected discourse. However, the hosts failed to be critical towards their discourse and interrupted those politicians who did not accept the discourse. Of course, this can also be a conscious choice that has been made by the production team to increase the discussion about the national debt. However, that interpretation would question the ideological neutrality of the broadcasting company and reveal the possible political interests of its owners.

Harjuniemi and Ampuja have studied the Finnish economic policy debate in the media after the financial crisis of 2008. They claim that mainstream media broadly adopted austerity policies as a solution to the crisis and marginalized those critical voices who demanded more public spending and stimulation of the economy (Harjuniemi & Ampuja. 2018). Articles that were published in the newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* between 2009 and 2014 framed the financial crisis as a technical issue and gave voice to political, administrative and economic elites such as ministers, government officials and economists who were often presented as unquestioned authorities in the articles.

My content analysis supports the argument that Finnish mainstream media has actively supported financial austerity as the only reasonable policy in solving the euro crisis. On the contrary, public financial stimulus or increases in taxation are condemned as irresponsible actions that would only worsen the economic situation. Therefore, Finnish media has participated in producing discursive depoliticization in financial policy by limiting the possible policy actions and by transferring issues from the realm of the public discussion to the realm of necessity and faith.

## 4.6. Conclusions from the content analysis

In this chapter, I draw some conclusions from the qualitative content analysis that I have conducted in the previous chapters. My research aimed to examine the depoliticization tactics, tools, strategies and discourses that were used in the Finnish electoral debate in March 2015. My main research questions were the following:

1. How discursive depoliticization is produced in the context of Finnish politics?
2. What depoliticization tactics, tools, and strategies are used?
3. What issues are depoliticized and what issues are politicized?

The third category of my analysis answers the first question. The depoliticization discourse, or in other words, discursive depoliticization is produced with the help of representative tools such as the ticking debt clock and the alarming figure of budget deficits that frame the discussion. These symbols are confirmed by rhetorical devices that some politicians use when they refer to symbols. Additionally, the hosts who lead the debate make sure that alternative discourses are not allowed

in the discussion. Whenever a politician tries to change the discourse, the hosts interrupt in the conversation and return it to the original discourse. However, we must keep in mind that the two hosts are not sovereign social actors who can make independent decisions. They are guided by the many professional and institutional practices of capitalist journalism. Therefore, they might not be able to recognize the ideological presumptions that form the base of the chosen discourse.

The answer to the second question is a combination of all the three categories of my analysis. The governmental depoliticization is mainly produced by the European Monetary Union and its fiscal policy regulations. The Stability and Growth Pact sets the limits for national governments and the European Central Bank controls the monetary policy. In times of recession or moderate economic growth, national central banks are not allowed to devalue their currencies to increase the export of domestic products and national governments are not allowed to take more debt to increase the demand by public infrastructure projects. Therefore, it seems that austerity and cuts are the only way to balance the public economy and the only way to stimulate the new economic growth is to lower the wages and corporate taxes. This development is the main source of societal depoliticization where the responsibility of creating economic growth is transferred from the politicians to companies, entrepreneurs and other private sector actors.

The final question is perhaps the most difficult one. During this research process, I have focused on finding the depoliticization discourses, tactics and strategies but I have not paid much attention to politicization although these two opposite processes can emerge at the same time: when one societal issue is depoliticized, another is politicized. According to Swyngedouw and Wilson (2014, 2), issues become politicized when they are “discussed, dissected, evaluated, raised as issues of public concern and debated at length in a variety of public and political arenas.”

When I formulated my research questions, I had a hypothesis that the depoliticization of the economic policy could politicize new issues such as immigration policy or climate policy. However, I soon realized that the debate I had chosen to analyze included hardly any discussion about immigration policy. The only time the issue was mentioned was when Timo Soini, the chair of Finns, urged the former government to tell how much immigration costs to Finland. The other debaters responded to Soini that Finland profits from migration. The immigration policy came up to the political agenda in the summer 2015 when the European refugee crisis began and thousands of people from the Middle East seek refuge from Finland. Consequently, immigration policy was not an

urgent political issue before the parliamentary elections that were held in April and therefore the analyzed material does not support the hypothesis that the depoliticization of the economic policy would have caused the politicization of the immigration policy.

Similarly, climate policy was not discussed in the analyzed electoral debate. The issue became politicized in Finland only after the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published its alarming report in October 2018. The following parliamentary elections in 2019 were called “climate elections” and the topic was discussed in many content specific debates. However, this transformation occurred too late for my research and therefore I am not able to use climate policy as an example of a politicized issue in the context of the 2015 elections.

Fortunately, there was one element in the analyzed electoral debate that was heavily politicized: the national debt of Finland. Following the above-mentioned conceptualization by Swyngedouw and Wilson, the national debt was inevitably discussed and raised as an issue of public concern. In the debate, it formed the single most important topic of the elections and an issue that demanded immediate actions from the politicians. Therefore, my conclusion is that in this particular electoral debate the politicization of the national debt increased the depoliticization of the economic policy.

The national debt works as an empty signifier that is repeatedly discussed in the debate without giving a proper explanation or definition of what it means and why it is so relevant for the elections that it needs to be politicized in such magnitude. The politicians and the journalists who host the electoral debate fail to make a difference between household debt and a national debt that are, obviously, very different concepts. The national debt is presented as a common challenge for all the parties who should put aside their political disagreements and instead focus on solving this one problem. Furthermore, the politicization of the Finnish national debt depoliticizes the discussion about the economic policy because, in the debate, there seems to be only one acceptable procedure to solve the problem: austerity. This limitation results from other faces and strategies of depoliticization. The rules of the European Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) prevent the government for stimulating the economy (example of governmental and institutional depoliticization) and the neoliberal (ordoliberal) ideology prevents the government for collecting more taxes to increase the government’s revenues.

Governmental depoliticization	Societal depoliticization	Discursive depoliticization
European Union fiscal policy regulations limit the possible policy actions for national governments.	Neoliberal ideology encourages politicians to transfer political power to the private sector.	Mainstream media tends to reproduce the neoliberal depoliticization discourse in their presentations.

*Table 5: Key findings of depoliticization in Finnish politics.*

To conclude my qualitative content analysis, I want to remind that these results and findings are based on a limited amount of research material. Therefore, it is not possible to generalize these results or argue that the analysis provides a comprehensive picture of depoliticization in Finnish politics. For that purpose, we would need more research material and perhaps add quantitative elements to supplement the analysis. However, in my opinion the analysis serves my original research aims because it shows what depoliticization strategies are used and how depoliticization discourse is produced in the Finnish context. Furthermore, the analysis provides tools for audience to recognize depoliticization discourse, increases the general understanding of the topic and provides new insights for the future depoliticization research.

In the following chapter, I will discuss more the relation between depoliticization and liberal democracy. Using depoliticization as a strategy for state management might be a convenient tool to reduce political antagonism and obscure ideological confrontations in the short term, but in the long term, however, it might provoke political disenchantment among those people who disagree with the outcomes of depoliticized politics. That disenchantment, if it cannot find representation inside the formal political institutions, can open space for new radical social movements who do not respect democracy or human rights. Therefore, liberal democracies should reconsider their relationship with politics and accept that political antagonism and ideological struggles cannot be obscured without consequences.

# 5. DISCUSSION

## 5.1. Depoliticization and the political disengagement

Many scholars (i.e. Mouffe, 2005 Hay 2007 and Jenkins 2011) claim that depoliticization might result in political apathy and disengagement in Western liberal democracies. When politicians voluntarily deny their agency and transfer political power and accountability to quasi-democratic actors, such as markets and central banks, they make politics irrelevant in the eyes of the public. Recent accusations for corruption and political scandals in Europe and the United States have further undermined the people's trust in their political institutions. The growing frustration and disenchantment towards current political leaders and institutions have opened space for radical social movements. In many European countries, far-right nationalism has regained its support.

Jokisalo has studied the right-wing populists in Europe. He argues that currently the right-wing populists are the only true alternative for neoliberal politics because the Left parties have failed to present compelling visions for liberal democracies (Jokisalo, 2019). Jokisalo argues that right-wing populist parties have gained support in Austria, France, Poland and Italy because they have managed to *repoliticize* certain issues, especially migration and climate change mitigation, that used to be less political before. Therefore, depoliticization of economic policy is a negative process for liberal democracy because it may provoke new radical social movements who can benefit from the political antagonism that depoliticization attempts to restrain.

On the other hand, depoliticization has turned out to be a useful strategy for state governance in times of crisis because it helps politicians to outsource the responsibility for the unpleasant policy actions (Burnham, 2014). Sometimes wicked problems, such as financial crisis or climate change, might be easier to solve when they are first depoliticized. Avoiding ideological confrontations undoubtedly makes the decision-making process more efficient and straightforward whereas the democratic process often requires time and compromises. Additionally, depoliticization can help politicians and institutions to get over the tensions that are an intrinsic part of the union between market economy and democracy. Depoliticized institutions are built to restrict democracy because they provide a better environment, such as less regulation and taxes, for market actors.

However, using depoliticization as a strategy for state government does not remove ideological confrontations from the society because political antagonism is an intrinsic part of social life (Mouffe, 2005). And if this antagonism has no place in the formal institutions of representative democracy, it will eventually find another way to challenge the existing hegemony. According to this line of thought, Brexit referendum, Trump's presidency and the rise of the European populist parties can be interpreted as an attempt to *repoliticize* politics and to take back control from these international financial institutions. When traditional parties cannot provide plausible alternatives for the current system, people are ready to vote anyone who can promise change.

## 5.2. Media's role in producing depoliticization discourse

Mainstream media has a lot of power in public political discussion, especially before elections, when they arrange debates and introduce candidates. Media can guide the public discussion by setting the agenda and framing the issues (Herkman, 2011). Agenda setting means that in everyday news work journalists choose to pick some issues on the daily political agenda and leave others out of it. This selection of topics limits the number of policy issues that are publicly discussed, and people have an opinion about. Framing refers to the set of routinized practices that help journalists to build context to the news story (Seppänen & Väliverronen, 2013, 97). The practices include the selection of interviewees and the way how they are represented in the story, and the selection of other source material and the way it is used in the story.

Harjuniemi (2018) claims that the liberal mainstream media has adopted the capitalist economic system as a ruling hegemony. Media tends to support the status quo and seek rational solutions through consensus because it is good for their business. Media appreciates economic reason over politics and therefore political conflicts are often framed as a selfish game for power and influence (Harjuniemi, 2018). This framing often produces a negative image on politicians and politics who are only seeking their profit to the detriment of the people. Therefore, it favors those politicians who have gained experience in other fields of society and who are eager to represent themselves as unpolitical and unideological candidates although they might have a very strong neoliberal ideology behind their policy ideas.

Therefore, we should learn how to recognize depoliticization strategies that are used in the public discussion and whose interests those might advance. Current political institutions are not free of ideological struggles. When a ministry publishes a report that includes policy recommendations it is a political action no matter how much the ministry wants to highlight its unpolitical nature. And if media chooses to frame electoral debates with a ticking debt clock it should understand that it is a strong political statement for austerity policies.

The Finnish mainstream media actively produces and represents depoliticization discourse in economic policy because media prefers using professional economists and ministries' officials as neutral authorities in their news stories without questioning their ideological premises. On the other hand, media encourages political disenchantment by presenting politics merely as a competition of power and politicians as selfish players who only want to advance their interests. Therefore, politics is often presented in the media as an ineffective way to advance those rational economic reforms that neoliberal ideology and economic policy demands. From the discourse theory perspective, media is not just passively expressing or reflecting social phenomena, but it produces, reproduces and transforms them (Dahlberg & Phelan, 2011). It has the power to set the agenda and frame the public discussion and it should use this power wisely.

In recent years, social media has changed how the political agenda is set and framed. More and more people follow the news through social media services and politicians run their campaigns on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. In these channels, people can freely engage in political debates and there are no professional journalists in between the politicians and the people. The business logic is different in social media where radical and critical voices gain more visibility through likes, shares and comments.

New radical social movements have used social media channels in organizing demonstrations and other public events. Through these channels, these groups can spread their message without interference from the law enforcement. These movements often practice and advance different forms of political leadership such as plural, pooled and shared forms of leadership. In a way, social media has brought political disagreement back to the public discussion, but it has also encouraged people to spread disinformation and hate speech and to join in radical movements that do not respect democratic values. This development has also increased the fragmentation of media because people want to follow the news that support their picture of the world.

### 5.3. Roadmap for future research on depoliticization

My aim in this study has been to show how the depoliticization strategies and tactics are used in mundane politics to legitimize unpopular policy actions such as budget cuts and to support the hegemonic position of the neoliberal ideology. I hope that this study has provided new information about how depoliticization is produced and practiced in Finnish politics. The European Union institutions and neoliberal economic policy are used to limit the available policy options and to transfer political power from politicians to quasi-democratic institutions and private sector actors.

However, more research is needed on the topic if we want to create a comprehensive picture of depoliticization. One electoral debate is not enough to catch all the aspects of the phenomenon that pierces all the layers of society. Especially, the second generation of depoliticization literature is worth analyzing because it might help to explain the political inactivity of some social groups. If almost all the party leaders are white middle-aged men, there is a huge group of people who are not demographically or culturally represented in our current political system.

Furthermore, more comparative research and quantitative research are needed to explain the historical and topical frequency of depoliticization: When depoliticization has been used most and what issues are depoliticized? It would be interesting to study the differences of depoliticization discourse between different countries and cultures: Is depoliticization more characteristic to such countries that have a multi-party system, or does it take place also in two-party systems.

Further research is also needed to confirm the hypothesis that depoliticization has caused political disengagement and opened more space for right-wing populists. The theoretical framework of this study suggests that depoliticization constantly provokes politicization and hegemonies produce counter hegemonies, but these theoretical suggestions have not yet been empirically tested. Therefore, we cannot argue that having less depoliticization would directly increase political engagement and enchantment in liberal democracies and decrease the support for populist parties. But we can argue, however, that it would make liberal democracies more democratic if political antagonism and ideological confrontations were recognized and accepted as an intrinsic part of politics and if political power and accountability were retransferred from the realm of fate and necessity to the realm of political agency.

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