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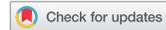
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# Introduction: the European Union beyond the polycrisis? Integration and politicization in an age of shifting cleavages

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## ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, the EU has faced multiple crises. In the introduction to this collection, we argue that this 'polycrisis' is fracturing the European political system across multiple, simultaneous rifts, thereby creating a 'polycleavage'. As a consequence, the EU is caught in a 'politics trap'. Similar to other decision traps, this multi-level politics trap is dysfunctional, but difficult to escape altogether. The contributions to this collection analyze the mechanisms of the politics trap, its relationship to the European polycrisis, and the strategies pursued by a plurality of actors (the Commission, the European Parliament, national governments) to cope with its constraints. In light of this analysis, we argue that comprehensive, 'grand' bargains are for the moment out of reach, but national and supranational actors can find ways of 'relaxing' the politics trap and in so doing perhaps lay the foundations for more ambitious future solutions.

**KEYWORDS** Crisis; politicization; cleavages; decision trap; integration

## Introduction

For more than 10 years, from the launch of the euro to the global financial crisis, the process of deepening European integration advanced incrementally, while the EU widened its membership and extended its borders. The Eurocrisis, however, signaled the beginning of a prolonged period of distress for the EU: several simultaneous crises are now affecting multiple policy domains and fracturing the cohesion of the Union's member states across new and changing cleavages. The still incompletely resolved Eurocrisis continues to affect southern member states disproportionately, widening the center-periphery gap. Similarly, the refugee and migration crisis has opened a rift between the front-line countries on the South-Eastern borders and the core countries of the North-West on the one hand, and Central and Eastern European member states, unwilling to share the burden of the crisis on the

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other. The EU likewise faces a host of other challenges, from Brexit and democratic backsliding to geopolitical and security threats, which have not yet blown up into full-scale crises, but may do so at any time, threatening to create new cross-cutting faultlines among member states.

In the face of this 'polycrisis',<sup>1</sup> the Union's institutions and governance have evolved significantly. Yet despite the remarkable array of new institutions, governance processes, and policies introduced to counter these inter-connected challenges, a patchwork approach has prevailed and no comprehensive solution is in sight. The old functionalist adage that 'integration advances through crises' appears to be simultaneously confirmed and rejected: while institutional integration points in the direction predicted by neofunctionalists, the dynamics of political fragmentation have accelerated, as postfunctionalists would expect.

### ***Two views of politicization***

The EU's polycrisis in turn has had a major impact on the ongoing politicization of European integration. We use here the standard definition of politicization advanced by de Wilde et al. (2016). Politicization occurs when issues become salient, when actors polarize in their views of these issues, and when they are able to mobilize public opinion accordingly. Politicization defined in this way has no single implication for European integration. Rather, two competing views on its effects coexist. Some analysts see politicization as an unavoidable stage in the integration process, leading to the transformation of domestic and European political systems. Others, by contrast, see politicization as a fundamental constraint on the capacity of EU institutions to deliver effective solutions to urgent problems, undermining the output-driven legitimacy of the integration project.

Scholars in the first group tend to see politicization as a manifestation of a deeper transformation of the EU. As integration moves beyond pure regulatory policies and touches core state powers (such as currency, taxation, defence and border controls), decisions made by the EU institutions increasingly become objects of political conflict, both domestically and at the European level (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2018). This in turn creates a new fundamental cleavage in democratic political systems, leading to the restructuring of domestic and supranational party competition around the national/supranational cleavage. For instance, Zürn and de Wilde (2016) interpret such growing politicization in terms of the emergence of a new 'cosmopolitan/communitarian' cleavage that tends to replace (Hooghe and Marks 2018) or cut across (Kriesi 2016) the traditional left/right divide. This line of analysis is directly inspired by Lipset and Rokkan's (1967) conceptualization of the interactions between societal cleavages and political representation. Indirectly, it also borrows from late neofunctionalists (like Schmitter 1970)

the intuition that as integration moves forward into key functions of sovereignty, a transformation of both domestic political systems and supranational institutions is to be expected.

A second group of scholars sees politicization as neither inevitable nor necessarily positive. For some authors, such as Majone (2014) or Moravcsik (2018), politicization represents the failure of a system whose aim was precisely to de-politicize certain issues so to achieve better policy outcomes. Others, such as Brigid Laffan (2019) argue that European integration has always been political, in the sense defined by Michael Zürn (2019) of involving collectively binding choices ‘based on a prior process of putting the issue on the agenda, some deliberation about the right decision, and the interaction of different positions regarding the choice’. But the politicization of European integration over the past two decades in terms of increasing salience, polarization, and mobilization of domestic electorates has created what Laffan has called a multi-level ‘politics trap’ (by analogy with Scharpf’s well-known joint-decision trap), which inhibits national leaders at the EU level from reaching the compromises needed to resolve urgent policy problems (Falkner 2011; Scharpf 2006). Furthermore, politicization of European policy issues opens up space for political entrepreneurs to mobilize national publics against EU institutions and their elites. Such a ‘constraining dissensus’ (Hooghe and Marks 2009) could fuel the growth of Euroskeptical forces within the EU institutions, leading to paralysis of the European decision-making process, and eventually to disintegration of the Union itself.

### ***From polycrisis to polycleavage***

This theoretical debate confronts the new dynamics of the European polycrisis. The Euro crisis, the refugee/migration crisis, and the other simmering sub-crisis challenges facing the EU have created multiple spaces for politicization, at both domestic and European level, which have been occupied by different parties and movements in different countries and regions. Each of the crises experienced by the Union has increased dramatically the salience of the issues at stake, polarized political actors, and increased political mobilization. Thus a rift between debtor and creditor countries has emerged with regard to the management of the Eurozone and its domestic economies following the Euro crisis (Hernandez and Kriesi 2016; Matthijs and Blyth 2015). While the Euro crisis stimulated preferences for further integration, the type of integration preferred differed substantially between countries depending on their economic performance (Nicoli 2018). A divide between countries of arrival and core countries has similarly emerged as a consequence of the refugee/migration crisis (Niemann and Zaun 2018). These rifts have opened up not only between member states, but also within domestic political systems. The same structural divisions that pit creditors and debtors or

front-line and more distant migration countries against one another also polarize domestic debates within each EU member state (albeit to varying degrees in different countries).

In other words, the EU faces what we call a 'polycleavage',<sup>2</sup> whereby multiple issues are simultaneously salient, polarize actors in different ways, and mobilize public opinion on each of the issues at stake. Furthermore, this type of politicization is inherently multi-level, occurring within as much as between member states. As a result, the European political system, rather than moving towards a normalization of left-right dynamics at EU level, as some had hoped (e.g., Hix 2008), is becoming increasingly characterized by temporary alliances of 'strange bedfellows' who may side with one another on certain issues (for instance, the German AfD and the Italian 5-Star Movement on border control) but will never be able to forge a compromise on others (for instance, the same two parties on bailouts and fiscal policy). Furthermore, the multi-level nature of the polycleavage implies that even when a solution is reached (often after strenuous negotiations) at European level, the compromise (by its very nature) paves the way for vigorous domestic contestation in each member state, since domestic oppositions have an intrinsic interest in mobilizing the public against their own governments.

Paradoxically, scholars in the past had seen such cross-cutting cleavages as a source of social stability, since they distribute political divisions and grievances over a larger number of actors and policies, hence preventing the formation of extremely polarized systems where the middle ground disappears under the pressure of both poles, which in turn cannot agree on anything (Goodin 1975). This latter line of argument has been used, for instance, to explain the inherent instability of the Weimar Republic or the Austrian First Republic.

In the specific rule set and consensus-based political system of the EU, however, this polycleavage may become a source of deadlock, since a blocking minority or a veto by a single member state may be sufficient to hamper common progress on a salient contested issue, even in the midst of a crisis, especially where questions of Union competence are at stake. Such a deadlock, in turn, may quickly develop into instability, since the lack of policy action in the face of a crisis may undercut the Union's output-based legitimacy. Hence the EU is particularly vulnerable to politicization. The specific politics trap that the Union faces today is multi-level in nature, and is characterized by multiple, simultaneous cleavages, each of which finds its roots in a specific crisis. This collection explores the processes that link crises and politicization, as well as possible exits from the politics trap (by analogy to Fallick's [2011] analysis of exits from the joint-decision trap). Section 2 of this introduction walks the reader through the individual contributions to the collection, highlighting their analysis both of the sources of the problem and potential solutions. Section 3, finally, explores the prospects for relaxing, if not escaping, the EU's politics trap.

## Polycrisis, polycleavage and the politics trap

### *The mechanisms of the politics trap*

In the first part of this collection, we explore the emergence of an EU politics trap. The opening contribution by Michael Zürn (2019) discusses how politicization, while affecting multiple levels of governance (at international, European and domestic levels), is discussed in literatures that often remain separate, failing to provide a comprehensive view of the phenomenon. Scholars tend to see politicization in a rather positive light when discussing it at the global and domestic levels. However, politicization is typically viewed, Zürn argues, less positively when looking at EU-level dynamics. But these politicization dynamics should not be studied in isolation, since they are interdependent across levels: authority transfers from national to European and international institutions lead to (re)politicization at national level, creating spaces for opposition and mobilization, and potentially create similar spaces for politicization at higher tiers of governance, even within non-majoritarian institutions such as international organizations or the European Commission. In this light, the European polycrisis – and associated transfers of authority to supranational, non-majoritarian institutions – can have multiple consequences. Following Zürn's reasoning, these authority transfers can, on the one hand, lead to political realignments at national level, which typically take the form of negative politicization and contestation of supranational authority, as suggested by Hooghe and Marks (2009). On the other hand, non-majoritarian institutions may adopt a more flexible stance, becoming a 'responsive technocracy' that draws on political inputs from civil society campaigns to reach outcomes more congruent with citizens' preferences (following the mechanisms analyzed by Rauh 2016). Furthermore, these dynamics have long-lasting, second-order effects insofar they feed a growing cleavage between cosmopolitans and communitarians at both national and European levels, which cuts across the established left-right class-based cleavage.

While Zürn does not enter into the details on how different crises affect different cleavages differently, the second contribution deals with precisely this topic. Swen Hutter and Hanspeter Kriesi (2019) investigate the composite nature of Europe's polycrisis and its association with changes in politicization. Their empirical model provides new evidence regarding step changes in politicization of European integration (in terms of salience and polarization) as a result of the polycrisis across a set of European countries. As expected by Zürn, and in line with the framework put forward in this introduction, Hutter and Kriesi identify a relationship between the growing politicization of European issues and the intensification of the emerging integration/demarcation cleavage cutting across the classic left-right socio-economic cleavage. Even more interestingly, this effect varies across the three macro-regions of

North-Western, South-Eastern and Central-Eastern Europe, which in turn were affected very differently by different components of the polycrisis. This regionally differentiated polycleavage makes it more difficult to find comprehensive solutions to the polycrisis through EU-level grand bargains, since the scope of the bargain is increased by the number of issues on the table, while on each of these issues politicized oppositions with very different outlooks are active in each member state.

The impact of this process of politicization, however, differs domestically and at the supranational level. In her contribution, Vivien Schmidt (2019) argues that the EU has experienced two distinct but linked processes over the past decade. Before the polycrisis, member states found themselves engaged in what she calls 'politics without policy' at national level, while the EU institutions conversely produced 'policy without politics'. National electorates experienced, but did not yet react to a perceived democratic deficit. Dissatisfaction was expressed as a passive opposition, as a potential but not yet exploited politicization. First the Euro crisis, and then the migration crisis, triggered this potential into action. This awakening has led in some cases to the emergence of 'politics against policy', where national politicians target specific EU policies and use them to mobilize their audiences, and in others to 'politics against polity', whereby the very existence of the EU becomes the focus of popular dissatisfaction. Once again, the specific institutional set-up of the EU comes into play: since national leaders are vested with a double role, domestically and at European level, the shift towards 'politics against policy' threatens to produce deadlocks in the decision-making process, all the more so insofar as the policies preferred or opposed by national publics are at odds with one another or respond to different positioning across multiple cleavages.

### ***Exiting the politics trap***

A number of contributions to this collection tackle the question of how the EU and its constituent institutions may be able to free themselves from this politics trap. Schmidt's paper offers a first pathway out of the quagmire. By engaging supranational institutions in the political arena, the EU might re-establish the natural congruence of 'policy with politics' without deconstructing the Union itself. In fact, certain European actors – especially the Commission and the Parliament, but also some national leaders in the Council – have sought to anchor their legitimacy in the broader political process, and have explicitly attempted to justify their positions (to one another, and towards the citizenry at large) in political terms. Such explicit politicization and discursive justification of EU policy-making, she suggests, can raise the Union's salience and legitimacy, even where it involves mutual criticism and contestation. Nonetheless, mutual accusations (negative discourses) among

EU actors may also reinforce Eurosceptical attitudes, fueling ‘politics against polity’ at the national level, especially ‘if the EU’s multiple crises continue without resolution’. Implicit in this argument is the view that since the principal source of legitimacy for the EU for national publics remains output rather than input-based, EU-level politicization can only strengthen the Union’s legitimacy insofar as it produces successful solutions to the polycrisis.

At the same time, however, as Zürn among others appears to suggest, opening spaces for contestation at EU level might have a positive effect on legitimacy even if does not necessarily produce better solutions to outstanding problems (cf. van Middelaar 2019: ch. 7). For as Mair (2007) observed, the lack of space for opposition *in* the system necessarily generates opposition to the system. Lipset and Rokkan (1967: 4) had earlier likewise argued that political competition and spaces for contestation ensure that ‘grievances and attacks are deflected from the system and directed towards the current power-holders’. Politicization could thus strengthen the resilience of the European political system regardless of whether outcomes are congruent with citizens’ desires, insofar as they ensure that the leadership (and policy direction) are contestable. While European-level politicization may therefore fail to address a situation of ‘politics against policies’, it might at least prevent the drift towards ‘politics against polity’.

In the fourth contribution in the collection, Nicolas Jabko and Meghan Luhman (2019) analyze how national and EU leaders engage in politicized debates so as to reconfigure practices of sovereignty in a way that is consistent with the strengthening of European integration. Political leaders, faced with populist discourses, pragmatically reinterpret the concept of sovereignty, reconfiguring its practice across governance layers. In doing so, they devise institutional solutions that attempt to address the functional interdependencies exposed by the polycrisis (such as the creation of the European Stability Mechanism, Banking Union, and the transformation of Frontex into a European Border and Coast Guard) in ways that respond to enduring and politically flammable concerns over national sovereignty. In this sense, such a reinterpretation of sovereignty (and the ensuing construction of institutions which are consistent with an expanded understanding of it) may provide a partial exit from the politics trap. Naturally, these institutional solutions often remain incomplete, because they need to be achieved with minimal treaty reforms (which leaders tend to avoid, as discussed in the next contribution). Nonetheless, these partial reforms may (as expected by both historical institutionalists and neofunctionalists alike) lead to further pragmatic reconfigurations in the future, should the need for them arise – especially in the face of new or renewed crises, as suggested by Jones et al. (2016) ‘failing forward’ model, which is itself a hybrid of neofunctionalist and intergovernmental approaches.

In the fifth contribution, Frank Schimmelfenning (2019) elaborates on a key point left open by Jabko and Luhman. Treaty reform is a major challenge for many European governments, which are afraid of facing contested referendums. Referendums, as Hutter et al. (2016) have shown, represent the most intense form of politicization. In his contribution, Schimmelfenning explores how governments have learned to deal with constraining EU referendums when those yield negative results, in particular by finding multiple avenues to 'get around no'. In so doing, national governments have cultivated the art of escaping from the politics trap, at least domestically, and have thereby ensured that the EU avoids becoming paralyzed by extreme forms of national-level politicization. At the same time, however, they have become wary of referendums themselves, seeking to avoid them at all costs. In turn, this means avoiding treaty reform, which also constrains the policy space available to implement far-reaching solutions to the polycrisis.

While Schmidt is concerned with the adaptation to politicization within the European institutions, and Jabko and Luhman and Schimmelfenning explore the responses of national leaders, Katharina Meissner and Magnus Schoeller (2019) discuss how the European Parliament reacted to the polycrisis. They show that – as in previous critical junctures – the EP sought to extend its powers, using the same institutional strategies that it has effectively deployed since the 1970s, even though no major treaty change was in sight. In both the fields of economic governance and trade agreements, these strategies of 'integration by stealth' have proved only partially successful, since the Parliament did not fully achieve one of its prized objectives – an extension of its involvement in decisions over fiscal and economic governance. Meissner and Schoeller show that the Parliament obtained a voice in the negotiations over the Six-Pack and Two-Pack legislation and even the Fiscal Compact beyond their formal co-decision rights under the Lisbon Treaty, but this involvement did not lead to a substantial further extension of its powers in these procedures and institutions, nor in the intergovernmental European Stability Mechanism.

The EP arguably proved more effective in enhancing the transparency and accountability of the Commission and the Council than in extending its own decision-making powers. In our view, while the Parliament enjoyed only limited success in extending what Luuk van Middelaar (2019: 244–9) calls its 'federal' role as a proponent of 'more Europe', it achieved more significant gains in extending its 'civic' role in facilitating public debate and contestation on controversial policy positions taken by the other EU institutions. This civic role of the Parliament, as Dür et al. (2019) have shown, has helped to push not only the Commission but also the Council to become more politically responsive to pressures from public advocacy campaigns and social movements on a wide range of policy issues, from environmental and consumer protection to privacy, financial regulation, and trade agreements (cf. Rauh 2016). While

increased transparency and policy responsiveness do not necessarily translate into increased alignment between mobilized publics and supranational institutions, the European Parliament – by becoming the lockpick that releases information fueling public debate – may position itself as the natural arena for a European form of issue-specific ‘binding dissensus’ van Middelaar (2019: 238–9), a role which national parliaments (the natural locus of Euroskeptical oppositions) may be less equipped to play.

Since the European Parliament has been able to make use of the polycrisis to enhance its importance in the EU political system, notably – as shown by Meissner and Schoeller – by ensuring accountability and enhancing contestability through increasing public access to information, it is reasonable to expect that European elections could become progressively more salient. The concluding contribution by Julia Schulte-Cloos (2019) explores the political implications of these EU-wide electoral contests. By using a quasi-experimental method on electoral data from the mid-2000s, Schulte-Cloos demonstrates that engagement with EP campaigns brings about higher engagement with politics by young voters, who become (both in the short and the longer term) comparatively more engaged than their peers who could not vote in these elections. Furthermore, despite their status as ‘second-order’ elections, the European elections do not imply that first-time voters are more likely to support Euroskeptical challenger parties. The paper’s findings are specific to a certain moment in time – the mid-2000s – and it is unclear how far they could be generalized to the current period (when Euroskeptical parties are much more strongly present in EP and national elections). But they suggest nonetheless that to the extent the European Parliament is able to enhance its own role in the EU political system, and thereby increase the salience of European elections, the electoral process may contribute to ‘positive’ forms of politicization that could fuel the development of a European public sphere.

## Conclusions

The contributions in this collection provide an overview of the EU’s ‘politics trap’ and some possible exits from it. Other scholars have advanced more comprehensive and ambitious solutions to this trap. For instance, Börzel and Risse (2018) urge the EU to seize politicization as an opportunity to comprehensively reform its own institutions, and to intensify the process by mobilizing European citizens on the basis of a genuine cosmopolitan platform. In this scenario, those European citizens with non-exclusive national identities would challenge the minority of Eurosceptic voters and exclusive nationalists, eventually leading to the transformation of the European Union along pathways not dissimilar from those envisaged by Schmitter (1970) or Hooghe and Marks (2019). In this scenario, the build-up of a European ‘political’

sphere would support, and be accompanied by, the extension of EU competences to address the contradictions between layers of policy-making exposed by the polycrisis.

Others, like de Vries (2018), have instead suggested differentiated integration as a way forward. To accommodate diverse preferences with respect to the possible solutions to each of the components of the polycrisis, member states should be allowed to cluster around differentiated policy responses. If necessary, some member states could even withdraw from integration in certain fields to accommodate the demands of domestic Eurosceptical forces, without risking the collapse of the Union through further, full-fledged 'exits'. Such differentiated retrenchment in certain countries may be met by a scaling-up of integration in others, potentially creating a multi-tier Europe even within the Eurozone. Finally, Zielonka (2014) suggests a wholesale scaling-back of integration, turning the EU into a sort of voluntary 'club of clubs' (cf. Majone 2014), while others such as Krastev (2017) raise the specter of a complete disintegration of the Union itself. Initial backward steps in integration could conceivably set off a reverse-functionalist 'spillback' dynamic, eventually leading to more and more competences repatriated to the national level, reducing interdependence between countries, and ultimately leading to the dissolution of the integration project altogether (Jones 2018).

None of these solutions seem within reach in a reasonable timeframe, since one key element of the politics trap is self-reinforcing in nature. As aptly noted by Schimmelfennig, national leaders currently seek to avoid major EU reforms, above all ones that would require treaty change, since these could become the focal point for opposing forces, exacerbating the negative politicization dynamics. Addressing the polycrisis-induced politicization by a comprehensive reconfiguration of European political space – whether by moving politics upwards to the EU level, by scaling policies downwards to the national level, or by structural differentiation among member states – would require a fundamental constitutional 'showdown' that national and European leaders are not ready to face, not least because substantial disagreements about the way forward remain between countries, and the necessary compromises involved in any such agreement would be open for contestation by domestic oppositions. In turn, the lack of comprehensive solutions to the problems exposed by the polycrisis may fuel further discontent, which is would then be translated by active minorities into political dissensus, very much in line with a postfunctionalist reading of integration.

While the constitutional engine of EU reform is caught in a self-reinforcing politics trap, which puts comprehensive solutions out of reach – at least for the immediate future – the contributions to this collection also highlight a number of pathways to relaxing this trap if not escaping from it altogether. Both Zürn and Schmidt advocate a better matching between politics and

policies, albeit in different (but non-exclusive) ways. Schmidt suggests that altering the rationale upon which the political bodies of the EU work – that is, responding to political inputs and taking responsibility for political decisions, rather than justifying their decisions in predominately technocratic terms – would help to foster the EU's legitimacy, and perhaps also to restructure the terms of political conflict away from the populist/technocratic clash. Similarly, Zürn proposes that by evolving towards a 'responsive technocracy' that explicitly seeks to address broad civil society concerns, the EU would be able to strike a better balance between political contestation and effective policy-making. Such responsiveness could take various forms, including allowing wider margins of manoeuvre for member states in adapting common European goals and rules to diverse national and local contexts, as suggested by experimentalist governance (Zeitlin 2016). The European Parliament, Meissner and Schoeller show, could contribute to fostering such responsiveness by ensuring wider public access to information in advance of decision-making, thus enabling civil society to exert greater policy-specific pressure on the Commission and the Council. In doing so, the Parliament might even regain some of the appeal it has lost in the European imaginary over the last decade, which was characterized by a pronounced fall in turnout. In time, this could even lead to more benign forms of politicization through electoral socialization, as suggested by Schulte-Cloos. Conversely, national governments could seek to address the polycrisis-induced challenges facing the Union by reconfiguring sovereignty through the creation of new problem-solving institutions and procedures, such as the Single Supervisory Mechanism for Eurozone banks or the European Border and Coast Guard. This reconfiguration could go hand in hand with politicization, insofar as political leaders succeed in selling to their domestic publics the idea that EU multi-level governance can be a way to reinvigorate sovereignty.

None of the solutions discussed in this collection represent a silver bullet for European integration. Instead, they suggest that the EU can still find ways to tackle its polycrisis in an era of shifting cleavages – even under the constraint of little or no treaty reform – by advancing incremental solutions aimed at addressing the fundamental policy problems at stake, while promoting subtle but constructive shifts in the dynamics of ongoing irreversible politicization.

## Notes

1. This term was coined by European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker (2016) to refer to the confluence of multiple, mutually reinforcing challenges facing the EU, from 'the worst economic, financial and social crisis since World War II' through 'the security threats in our neighborhood and at home, to the refugee crisis, and to the UK referendum', that 'feed each other, creating a sense of doubt and uncertainty in the minds of our people.'

2. We term these issue-specific divisions created by the EU's polycrisis 'cleavages', by analogy to the broader socio-political cleavages analyzed by Lipset, Rokkan and their successors, though it remains to be seen whether these will be equally deep and enduring.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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