frontiers | Frontiers in Political Science

TYPE Original Research
PUBLISHED 05 November 2024
DOI 10.3389/fpos.2024.1409630

OPEN ACCESS

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RECEIVED 30 March 2024
ACCEPTED 30 September 2024
PUBLISHED 05 November 2024

CITATION
Schubert-Zunker HJM and Knappe H (2024) (De)politicizing water: justice in times of water crisis.
Front. Polit. Sci. 6:1409630.
doi: 10.3389/fpos.2024.1409630

(De)politicizing water: justice in times of water crisis

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In times of climate change, water resources are shrinking at an alarming speed worldwide, making water a focal point of social and political contestation. Essential for environmental and human wellbeing, and economic prosperity, competing demands on water's finite resources amidst the global water crisis raise critical justice questions regarding allocation, accessibility, legitimate recipients, or prioritized uses. Access to water is deeply intertwined with political decisions, as it heavily depends on infrastructure and governance. Depoliticization, however, renders water issues to technical or economic terms, aligning with neoliberal practices that commodify and privatize water resources. This approach often neglects the inherent political and social dimensions of water, privileging corporate interests while restricting access for the poor and powerless. This article examines how (de)politicization shapes such water realities by applying theoretical perspectives on (de)politicization and environmental justice. Through a systematic literature review and interpretative content analysis, we explore how (de)politicization is conceptualized in scholarly discussions, identifying common themes in the water context, the scales and regions addressed, and the roles of various actors and actions involved. Our research reveals a persistent tension between depoliticization and repoliticization. While depoliticization, though conceptually rather imprecise, obscures accountability and perpetuates neoliberal practices leading to exclusion, repoliticization, driven by activism, addresses policy deficiencies and amplifies marginalized voices. By illuminating these dynamics, this study enhances the understanding of (de)politicization in the water realm and its implications for justice.

KEYWORDS

politicization, depoliticization, water, justice, neoliberalism, climate change, crisis

1 Introduction

Water is a "total social fact" (Mauss, 1950). At the heart of Earth's vitality lies the essence of water, a universal life-sustaining force that weaves through societal, environmental, and political dynamics, serving as a linchpin for human wellbeing, economic prosperity, and environmental equilibrium while influencing geopolitical realities-water ubiquity underscores its pivotal role in shaping the interconnected web of life on our "blue planet." Earth's surface is covered by 71 percent of water. However, only about 2.5 percent of the world's water resources are freshwater, with most trapped in glaciers and ice caps while the remainder is unevenly distributed. The fluid and cyclical nature of water further complicates its capture, storage, and movement, making it both difficult and costly to govern (Conca and Weinthal, 2018; Valavanidis, 2019). Given the governance challenges and the limited availability, coupled with competing demands, freshwater becomes a fiercely contested resource (Sultana, 2018, p. 483).

Described as the bloodstream of the biosphere due to its pivotal role, water is currently undergoing profound human-made changes in the water cycle, impacting the overall health of the planet (Wang-Endersson, cited by Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, 2023). The convergence of global changes, including population growth, rising living

standards, increased consumption, pollution, land-use change, and climate change, places immense pressure on the world's freshwater resources. The alarming speed at which water resources are shrinking is a global concern (UN-Water, 2023). Growing evidence furthermore suggests that climate change will exacerbate existing water issues, impacting not only supply and demand but also the quality of water resources (Conca and Weinthal, 2018; Gleick, 2018; Kang, 2022).

The social conflicts arising from diverse worldviews, interests, and competing demands for water are intensified by these changes and require political consideration and action. The distribution of benefits and burdens, access to fresh water, or flood protection are governed by different institutional arrangements between science, the state, and the market. Access to fresh water, a fundamental human right (UN, 2010), depends on costly, well-organized, and maintained infrastructure (Conca and Weinthal, 2018; Kang, 2022). Despite this, water, such as other environmental issues, has long been governed in a more managerial and depoliticized manner (Swyngedouw, 2011), heavily influenced by neoliberal ideas.

However, with the growing global water crisis—marked by scarcity, unequal access, and contamination—issues of justice are coming to the forefront. "Water has emerged as a critical twenty-first century challenge, forcing policymakers to adjudicate between different uses (…) to manage water both domestically and globally in ways that are equitable, fair, and just. Inevitably, how these decisions are made tends to be highly contested and political" (Conca and Weinthal, 2018, p. xi). This increasing focus on justice has led to the politicization of water governance, where decisions on access and distribution are no longer seen as purely technical, but deeply political. Politicization is usually defined as "the demand for, or the act of, transporting an issue or an institution into the sphere of politics—making previously unpolitical matters political" (Zürn, 2019, p. 977–978).

In this paper, we delve deeper into the (de)politicization of water in times of current water crises and recurring injustices. In this regard, this paper aims to address the following questions: What are the dynamics behind the (de)politicization of water? How do notions of justice manifest within the context of water crises? The paper will present findings derived from a systematic literature analysis. We examine how the (de)politicization of water is framed and debated in scholarly discussions by investigating which water resources and uses, which scales and regions are addressed, and which actors, actions, and dynamics of (de)politicization are identified. This inquiry will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the scholarly debate on (de)politicization dynamics in the realm of water and its implications for water-related challenges.

In the first part of the paper, we will delve deeper into the concepts of (de)politicization and justice in the context of environmental and water governance. We will establish a deeper understanding of the different conceptual notions in order to then turn to the systematic review of empirical studies on the politicization of water. After introducing our research methodology, we will present findings from the qualitative text analysis of our sample of research literature. Followed by a discussion of these findings in light of our theoretical perspective and a final conclusion, with an outlook of most pressing research issues in the field of water justice and (de)politicization.

2 Theoretical perspectives

We will start by defining what we mean by politicization and (environmental) justice in the context of water policy in more general terms, and then examine the different ideas associated with both concepts, in particular the dynamics of neoliberal agendas and questions of justice in times of water crisis.

2.1 Politicization and depoliticization

Politicization, in broad terms, refers to the act of bringing an issue or institution into the political realm, transforming previously non-political matters into political ones. This concept involves moving something into the realm of public choice and enabling collectively binding decisions (Zürn, 2019, pp. 977–978). Re-politicization means reinterpreting an issue politically, discarding the neutralizing effects of neoliberal or technocratic views (Flinders and Wood, 2014, p. 143). This process can make previously non-political topics (e.g., education, gender relations, science) contentious again, reallocating political responsibilities or shifting their scale (Jessop, 2014, p. 214). Politicization can lead to policy change if enough public debate disrupts routine policy-making (Feindt et al., 2021, p. 516). However, Bang and Marsh (2018) warn that excessive politicization, or hyper-politicization, can polarize public opinion, hindering consensus-building and constructive problem-solving (Feindt et al., 2021, p. 516).

Depoliticization in turn, defines the act of removing the political character from decision-making (Burnham, 2001, p. 128). On the one hand, it is argued that depoliticization arises from the necessity to establish norms and routines for delivering public policy, services, and goods in a complex society, which implies a need to professionalize politics (Feindt et al., 2021, p. 513). Therefore, depoliticization can also be viewed as a mode of general governance rather than an active effort to make something apolitical (Anshelm et al., 2018, p. 207). However, other scholars argue that depoliticization does not necessarily mean less politics but rather politics occurring elsewhere, often beyond public and democratic scrutiny. Depoliticization can be a strategy used by political elites to avoid critique (Hay, 2014, pp. 303–304) and promote consensus at the expense of democratic disagreement. In so far, depoliticization can be a barrier to effective climate and environmental politics, as a democratic pluralistic discourse is seen as necessary to tackle the complex problems of climate change and sustainability (Eckersley, 2004; Smith, 2021; Bornemann et al., 2022a). Democratic theorists, following Mouffe (2006), argue that instead of avoiding political controversy and politicization, it is crucial for a functioning democracy to "acknowledg[e] the *political* disagreement" (Machin, 2020, p. 159) against the backdrop of the rise of right-wing populists skeptical of both, anthropogenic climate change and science more generally. In this vein, a depoliticization of environmental problems and climate change rather serves those right-wing populists and other sceptics to act against effective environmental and climate politics (Bornemann et al., 2022b, p. 4). This can be observed internationally (Marquardt et al., 2022) and is interestingly translated by right-wing populists for example in Germany to establish notions of "alternative expertise" to make a seemingly legitimate expert impression in democratic institutions (Boecher et al., 2022). Depoliticization often leads to a lack of accountability, but at the local level, concerned citizens

frequently demand accountability for decisions impacting their environment (Hay, 2007; Jessop, 2014; Anshelm and Haikola, 2018, p. 585).

2.2 Repoliticization and environmental justice

Beyond the local level, actors have emerged that pursue the goal of re-politicizing the climate change discourse. They attempt "to create a space in which political plurality, power differentials, conflicts, and oppositions would become visible, and it considered this condition to be essential for tackling climate change in an effective, democratic and socially just way" (Kenis and Mathijs, 2014, p. 149). In this regard, initiatives and movements for democracy and justice in environmental politics often address issues of depoliticization and acts of making environmental problems and their impacts invisible (Agyeman et al., 2003; Nixon, 2013). The origins of environmental and climate justice claims can be traced back to U.S. social movements in the 1980s. During this period, activists from the civil rights movement and environmentalists formed alliances against toxic waste disposals and other polluting entities disproportionately located in marginalized communities (Bullard, 1993). While early environmental justice concerns were primarily local, a pivotal moment occurred with Hurricane Katrina in the U.S. in 2005. Although the term "climate justice" had already been coined in the Bali Principles in 2002, Hurricane Katrina starkly illustrated the interconnectedness of global climate dynamics and politics with the devastating and unequal impacts on predominantly Black communities in New Orleans (Schlosberg and Collins, 2014).

Distributive justice emerged as the dominant dimension of justice, alongside procedural and recognitional, as key normative reference points in environmental, climate, and water politics (Schlosberg and Collins, 2014; Klinsky and Brankovic, 2018). Distributive justice revolves around the fair allocation of environmental benefits and burdens, equitable access to clean water and sanitation for all communities. In the context of water justice, this means ensuring equitable access to water resources for all communities, particularly those that are marginalized or disadvantaged. The importance of procedural justice, which ensures fair and inclusive decision-making processes regarding environmental issues, has grown as the connection between marginalized groups and the unequal distribution of environmental hazards has become more evident in environmental and water governance (Sultana, 2018; Knappe, 2023). Recognitional justice (*Anerkennungsgerechtigkeit*) in environmental and water politics pertains to acknowledging and validating the diverse knowledge systems, values, and cultural perspectives of different communities when addressing environmental and water issues. In the realm of water justice, this involves recognizing the traditional and indigenous practices of water management, as well as respecting the cultural significance of water to various communities (Boelens et al., 2018). Overall, these dimensions of justice are integral to advancing water justice, ensuring that all people have fair access to water, that decision-making processes are inclusive, that diverse cultural and knowledge systems are respected, and that historical harms are addressed through active community involvement and restoration efforts. These principles collectively highlight the need for a comprehensive and equitable approach to water governance, recognizing water as a fundamental human right and a critical component of environmental justice.

The debate on politicization and depoliticization thus sees often a quite dominant depoliticized discourse on the environment and climate change that focuses on technological solutions instead of political or social change (Swyngedouw, 2011) vis-à-vis a rather marginalized discourse of politicizing actors, such as the climate justice movement (Marquardt and Lederer, 2022, pp. 739–740). However, the times of a completely depoliticized and expert-driven discourse on the environment and climate change seem to be over: "Climate change is thus moving to the heart of the political sphere and it becomes a battleground for the promotion of and resistance to broader political reforms and societal change" (Marquardt and Lederer, 2022). If the politicization of environmental problems indeed serves a more effective environmental politics is still an open question. Next to politicizing agents such as climate justice movements, we can also observe politicization in the form of resistance against, e.g., energy transition projects such as wind parks or mobility transition goals such as a reduction of individual car usage. Politicization can also lead to lock-in situations as well as difficult and highly emotional political conflicts.

2.3 Depoliticization and neoliberal water governance

Neoliberal agendas that began in the 1970s and intensified through the 1990s, framed as responses to "state failure" (Furlong, 2010), promoted privatization, liberalization, deregulation, and decentralization, resulting in a largely depoliticized approach to governance (Burnham, 2001, 2014, 2017; Madra and Adaman, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2015). In response to fiscal crises, governments in the Global North adopted market-based regulatory mechanisms, liberalized trade, and implemented cuts to social spending, public sector bureaucracy, and labor power (Harvey, 2007). Meanwhile, in the Global South, international lenders such as the World Bank and IMF imposed neoliberal reforms as conditions for funding, initially through structural adjustment programs and later through "good governance" initiatives (Furlong, 2010).

Neoliberal ideas, which advocated seemingly straightforward solutions to complex and persistent problems, were widely adopted across government sectors and promised environmental protection through "market environmentalism" or "ecological modernization" (Furlong, 2010; Dryzek, 2021). As Harvey (2007, p. 2) notes, "if markets do not exist in areas like land, water, education, health care, or environmental pollution, they must be created (…)."

In the water sector, neoliberal reforms aimed to address issues such as underinvestment in water infrastructure, pollution, and rising demand (Bakker, 2003). The neoliberal water agenda was prominently marked by the Global Dublin Principles (1992), which emphasized treating water as an economic good (Furlong, 2010; Gleick, 2018; Vos and Boelens, 2018). Proponents criticized traditional water governance for diffuse property rights, inefficient allocation, regulatory capture, and politicization, arguing that market mechanisms and private sector involvement are essential for improving efficiency and management. The subsequent neoliberal reforms included a range of institutional and organizational processes (Bakker, 2007), such as the extension of exclusive water

rights, the adoption of private sector principles in public management, the introduction of new governance actors, the establishment of water markets and private sector partnerships (Furlong, 2010). These changes expanded opportunities for capital accumulation, a phenomenon Harvey (2017) terms "accumulation by dispossession."

Privatization transfers public goods, such as water services, into private hands through exclusive water rights, long-term management contracts, or public-private partnerships, and commodifies resources like freshwater, turning it into bottled water (Bakker, 2007). Thus, privatization enhances the role of the private sector, shifts power to non-elected entities, and reduces government spending (Foster et al., 2015; Wood, 2016). While privatization may reduce costs and elevate efficiency and innovation in water management, it also creates disparities in water allocation and pricing. Research shows that neoliberal reforms often lead to increased prices and investments that prioritize profitability over necessity (Prasad, 2006; Jimenez and Perez-Foguet, 2009; Furlong, 2010), resulting in unaffordable prices, lower-quality water, and services that fail to reach the poor and powerless, disproportionately impacting women (Shiva, 2002; O'Reilly et al., 2009; Bakker, 2010; Furlong, 2010; Boelens et al., 2018). Financialization converts water into financial assets through mechanisms such as water rights trading, polluter pays schemes, or payment for ecosystem services. Liberalization policies expose water resources to global financial markets, while deregulation concentrates resources and power among elites. In addition, market-driven allocation often shifts water to more powerful actors and profitable uses, such as private companies, industry, tourism, and export agriculture, thereby marginalizing small producers and non-commercial water users, and exacerbating inequities in both water quantity and quality (Swyngedouw, 2005; Molle et al., 2009; Zwarteveen and Boelens, 2014; McDonald, 2016; Vos and Boelens, 2018). Hence, without strong regulation, water becomes over-exploited and polluted as conservation largely remains managed by the public sector. Finally, decentralization has expanded governance participation, bringing in diverse actors like private corporations, NGOs, and lobby groups (Furlong, 2010). While it can enhance transparency and local engagement, smaller actors face limitations due to financial capacity, and their effective participation in water governance is undermined by powerful private interests (Page and Bakker, 2005; Furlong, 2010), leading to a reduction in public oversight and accountability deficits (Buller et al., 2019).

The neoliberal reforms in the water sector, as outlined above, concentrate water resources in the hands of a few, and create markets for what were recently conceived as public goods, often leading to reduced public access and equity (Harvey, 2007). A notable example is Cochabamba's "Water War" which illustrates how neoliberal policies can exacerbate exclusion and undermine the human right to water (Bakker, 2007; Zwarteveen and Boelens, 2014; Sultana, 2018). Neoliberalism reduces "civil society (…) to a marketplace of individualized and depoliticized market citizens (producers-consumers), weakening the connection between society and the political sphere of the state and other governing institutions" (Laruffa, 2023, p. 24). As a result, neoliberal water governance increasingly relies on market mechanisms, narrowing public space and involvement (Burnham, 2017), while framing social and environmental issues predominantly in economic terms. This approach potentially silences attempts to rethink water governance outside of market logic (Madra and Adaman, 2014; Burnham, 2017). Such economic framing treats water merely as a resource to be managed efficiently, with technological solutions proposed for water issues without addressing underlying value conflicts (Goeminne, 2010, 2012; Swyngedouw, 2011; Kenis and Mathijs, 2014; Methmann and Rothe, 2012). The focus on individual responsibility and private, technocratic management limits collective goals such as water justice (McCarthy and Prudham, 2004; Wilson, 2007; Jessop, 2014; Anshelm et al., 2018) and constrains democratic governments' ability to provide public goods or implement redistributive policies (Brown, 2015; Bartels, 2016; Whyte, 2019). Overall, neoliberal water governance seems to prioritize "accumulation" over equity, favoring private capital over public goods (Roberts, 2008).

Consequently, the neoliberal water agenda leads to everyday injustices (Cleaver, 2018) within a largely depoliticized governance framework. This approach reflects the outlined tendencies of privatization, liberalization, deregulation, and decentralization that began in the 1970s and are prevalent in water governance at all scales.

3 Research framework and methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach, combining a systematic literature review with an interpretative content analysis. Our primary objective is to uncover how the (de)politicization of water is conceptualized in scholarly debates. The systematic review provides a comprehensive overview of the various water issues, scales and regions addressed, and the actors covered in the literature. Using interpretive content analysis, we delve deeper into how (de)politicization is conceptualized in specific water contexts. We examine the dynamics of politicizing and depoliticizing water, identifying recurring themes, actors, and actions involved in these dynamics. This approach enhances our understanding and advances the scholarly debate on (de)politicization within the context of water, with a particular focus on its justice implications.

In this chapter, we first delineate the systematic approach for identifying and selecting relevant literature. We then outline the qualitative approach for describing and analyzing (de)politicization of water discussed in the literature.

3.1 Systematic literature review

The literature review, defined as "a library desk method involving the secondary analysis of explicit knowledge, so abstract concepts of explicit, tacit knowledge are explored" (Jesson et al., 2011, p. 9), allows for a cohesive picture of the scholarly debate on (de)politicization of water (Petticrew and Roberts, 2006). This method ensures a comprehensive overview by systematically mapping, collecting, and synthesizing existing research on the topic (Booth et al., 2016; Page et al., 2021), revealing key conceptual and empirical insights, themes, and gaps (Hart, 2018).

Our systematic review followed a standardized step-by-step procedure involving several key steps: search, appraisal, synthesis, and analysis (Page et al., 2021). First, we established specific search terms aligned with our research question and selected a relevant database, followed by a systematic and iterative process to identify literature.

Second, we appraised the identified literature by thoroughly examining the titles and abstracts, applying inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure the quality and relevance of the selected articles. Third, we synthesized a comprehensive, narrative yet systematic, overview of the scholarly debate, describing key aspects of water (de)politicization, including regions, scales, actors, and water issues (see Chapter 4.1). Finally, we enriched the literature review by conducting an interpretative content analysis on a subset of articles to explore the conceptualization of (de)politicization, contextualize the findings within the water context, extract deep meaning, and reflect on the implications of (de)politicization for water governance and justice (Petticrew and Roberts, 2006; Booth et al., 2016; Berg and Lune, 2017) (see Chapter 4.2).

For systematically identifying relevant literature addressing the (de)politicization of water (step 1), we initiated a keyword search within the SCOPUS database focusing on the key terms "(de) politicization" and "water." The two keywords, "politici*" and "water," were selected together to ensure a comprehensive search. The term "politici*" was chosen for its inclusivity, covering various expressions related to the term (de)politicization.[1] Our keyword search presented a refined iterative process comprising four steps (see Supplementary Annex 1). This approach aimed to enhance the precision of the search, systematically identifying relevant literature that contributes to our understanding of (de)politicization within the realm of water governance. The first phase involved employing the keywords "politici*" and "water": first, for all accessible years (1927–2024); second, for the last decade (2013–2023); third, for a more specific search in "article title, abstract, or keywords"; and forth, exclusively in the "article title" (Supplementary Annex 1—Table 1). To specifically focus on the social sciences field, we limited the search to journals in social sciences as defined by SCOPUS. In the first step, we generated an initial set of 11,264 articles; in the second step, we still identified a total of 8,465 articles, underscoring the increasing relevance of the topic in recent years. In the third step, we retrieved 371 articles, and in the fourth step, 15 articles (see Supplementary Annex 1—Table 2).

For systematically selecting literature (step 2), we conducted a thorough examination of all titles and abstracts from the 371 articles identified in the third step of the keyword search to ensure their relevance to the research question. Articles not related to water or lacking a focus on justice-related water issues, as well as those that did not mention (de)politicization, were excluded. A large portion of exclusions resulted from our discovery that many articles solely included the term "politician(s)" without referring to (de) politicization. This issue stemmed from the use of the keyword "politici*" and was an unforeseen aspect in our initial keyword search.[2] Moreover, to maintain a narrow focus in the review, we excluded full books and articles that did not fall strictly within the social sciences, as the SCOPUS definition allowed a broad search. We also excluded publications in languages other than English or German. Ultimately, this selection process resulted in a refined sample size of 79 articles (see Supplementary Annex 1 - Table 3). We repeated this selection process for the 15 articles identified in our most specific search step four. Surprisingly, two articles were unrelated to water despite meeting the initial search criteria, two articles only mentioned "politicians" without addressing (de)politicization, and another three articles faced language barriers. This left us with a refined subset of eight articles for our in-depth interpretative content analysis (see Supplementary Annex 1 - Table 3).

Although the selected literature is a rather comprehensive than a representative selection, focusing specifically on social science, it serves as a valuable starting point for us to understand how academic literature conceptualizes the (de)politicization of water issues. As our qualitative approach aims at advancing a conceptual understanding of the focal concept, namely "(de)politicization of water," it diverges from an exhaustive author-centered or article-centered review, relying only on quantitative methods for theory construction or testing (Rowe, 2014).

3.2 Qualitative literature analysis

After the systematic literature search and appraisal, we delved into our qualitative literature analysis, beginning with a comprehensive overview of the scholarly debate (step 3). This narrative yet systematic overview synthesized and described key aspects of water (de) politicization based on the remaining 79 articles (see Supplementary Annex 2). To gain an initial understanding of the (de) politicization context, we examined the manifest content of the abstracts, exploring the geographical coverage, research scales, actors involved, and the water issues addressed.

To gain a deep understanding of (de)politicization, a qualitative content analysis was conducted in the final research step (4). Despite the constrained sample size, the central focus of our analysis is on the eight articles of the subset, as they establish a discernible and direct connection to (de)politicization within the water context. With eight articles comprising more than 10 percent of the sample, this subset is considered sufficiently representative for an in-depth analysis, thereby adding a qualitative layer to the literature review.

"Thematic analysis, often called Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) in Europe, is one of the most commonly used methods for analyzing qualitative data" (Kuckartz, 2019, p. 181). QCA is chiefly a coding and data interpretation process that involves a careful, detailed, and systematic examination of both the manifest and latent content of a particular body of material. This approach facilitates the identification and synthesis of patterns, themes, concepts, and deep meanings in the data. By "coding" the material and iteratively developing categories, the process aims to establish a transparent, objective, and reliable method for addressing the research question (Mayring, 2014; Kuckartz, 2016; Berg and Lune, 2017; Kuckartz and Rädiker, 2023).

Addressing the articles' research question, our qualitative analysis sought to understand the conceptualization, dynamics, and implications of (de)politicization in the water context. Using MaxQDA, the eight articles were read and analyzed intensively. Through an iterative process, the literature was thematically

1 Such as *depoliticization, politicization, depoliticisation, politicisation, depoliticize, politicize, depoliticise, politicise, depoliticizing, politicizing, depoliticising, politicising, depoliticization, depoliticisation, repoliticization, repoliticisation*, and so forth.

2 This issue might have been avoided by using the Boolean operate "NOT" to exclude the term politician. However, since politicians play a crucial role in (de)politicization dynamics, such an exclusion would not be appropriate.

categorized both deductively and inductively, covering everything from short phrases to entire passages (Saldana, 2015; Kuckartz, 2016; Kuckartz and Rädiker, 2023). This process addressed our key analysis questions: *How is (de)politicization conceptualized? What are the dynamics of (de)politicization? Who are the involved actors, and what actions do they take? What are the recurring themes (*e.g., *neoliberalism)? What connections exist between (de)politicization and justice?*

Categories were initially coded based on these questions and are informed by our theoretical perspectives, such as (de)politicization, environmental justice, and neoliberal water governance (see Chapter 2). Thus, key terms included "(de)politicization," with subcategories like "definition/concept" for definitions and conceptual elements. "Dynamics of (de)politicization" were coded, including aspects such as "repoliticization," "actors," "potentials/effects" and "limits." The "water context," along with segments related to "neoliberalism" and "justice," were also coded. Additional categories were developed from the data to capture recurring themes and discussions.[3] Reliability was ensured through data triangulation (Saldana, 2015). This rigorous and transparent process facilitated a comprehensive understanding of (de) politicization—essential for conceptual clarity in social science, as Sartori (1970) emphasized. The subsequent sections will present the results of this qualitative analysis.

4 Results: (de)politicization in the water context

In this chapter, we will present the results of our extensive qualitative analysis. The presentation of the findings is structured as follows: First, we present the findings from our comprehensive overview, covering geographical coverage, scales of research, water issues, and key actors in all 79 articles. Second, we delve into the interpretative content analysis of the subset of the eight specific articles. This analysis illuminates the conceptualization of (de) politicization, including its dynamics, actors and actions, and recurring themes in water governance, while ultimately examining its implications for water justice.

4.1 Comprehensive overview: geographic coverage, sacles, water issues, and actors

As we embark on the rather descriptive yet comprehensive overview of the 79 articles identified in our systematic literature review, the publication trend from 2013 to 2023 reveals a steady yet modest volume of publications exploring themes of (de)politicization within the water realm. However, notable fluctuations are observed, with annual publication numbers ranging from five to ten. A peak of 10 publications is recorded in 2017, followed by nine publications in 2018 and eight in 2019. Post-2017, there is a discernible trend toward slightly higher publication numbers compared to preceding years, a pattern also reflected in the subset of the eight specific texts under examination. This implies a sustained, and perhaps growing, scholarly interest in the subject (see Supplementary Annex 1—Table 4).

4.1.1 Geographical coverage

The literature review encompasses a diverse array of regions and countries, featuring extensive studies on Asia (32 articles), comprehensive research on the Americas (14 articles), Africa (12 articles), and Europe (9 articles), as well as five articles on Australia and New Zealand. Additionally, two articles have a broader focus on the Global South and North, while five remain theoretical.

Zooming into the map of scholarly attention, it becomes evident that certain regions receive significant coverage, while others remain comparatively underexplored. Asia stands out as a focal point, with extensive studies on India's water issues. Middle Eastern countries are examined, as well as China's transboundary river basins. Additionally, urban water issues in Southeastern Asia are explored. In the Americas, half of the articles focus on US water issues, while Central America is represented by one single article on Guatemala, and the rest focus on South American countries. In Africa, research focuses on North African countries, but also includes studies on Eastern Africa. European research is concentrated on Western Europe, particularly on cities like Berlin, Barcelona, Amsterdam, Paris, and Naples. Australian research focuses on cities like Brisbane and, while New Zealand examines rural areas.

The literature review reveals that certain geographical areas receive more coverage than others, with a notable emphasis on Asia, particularly India. There seems to be a lot of research on urban water issues too, which we want to examine in the next chapter on scales of research.

4.1.2 Scale of research

Upon closer examination of the scale of research[4] across the articles in our literature review, a predominant theme emerges: The majority, comprising 29 articles, delve into local-level dynamics, with 21 articles focusing specifically on urban water governance, highlighting challenges within metropolitan settings. Additionally, transboundary water issues are extensively addressed in 15 articles, emphasizing collaborative efforts and complexities across borders. Notably, five papers adopt a "multiscalar" perspective, navigating interdependencies across scales, while only four articles discuss national-scale water questions, indicating a lesser focus on country-level dynamics. Finally, five purely theoretical papers remain outside these categories.

Geographical patterns indicate varying research focuses across regions: North Africa-focused articles primarily address transboundary issues, a trend also mirrored in articles focusing on

3 The segments were often assigned to several categories, as the statements referred to different aspects of (de)politicization, such as the actors, their motivations and actions, which often included water and justice issues.

4 The scales of research are categorized as follows: *local level* (water issue at local or regional level; f.e. village, community, specific region) or local actors (f.e. major, local politicians, community, activists); *urban level* (water issue is mentioned specifically in an urban context; f.e. word "urban" or a specific city is mentioned); *national level* (water issue is may occur at local or regional level but is considered from a national point of view; f.e. state authorities, national policies); *transboundary level* (water issue can be local, regional or national, but has to affect at least two sovereign/riparian countries; f.e. sharing water basin); *multiscalar* (more than one level is considered in the paper).

China. Conversely, South America-focused articles concentrate solely on local-level matters. Similarly, research on the United States, Europe, Southern Asia (particularly India), and Southeastern Asia leans toward local and urban focuses.

These trends underscore the focal points in water-related research, emphasizing pressing issues in transboundary contexts and signaling a notable shift toward local and urban concerns. Further examination in the subsequent chapter will delve deeper into the specific water issues at hand.

4.1.3 Water issues

First, it is essential to recognize the profound diversity of water issues, entwined with their local contexts and shaped by various actors, historical trajectories, social practices, cultures, values, and identities. Yet, amid this diversity, the preliminary review of the literature reveals some common trends and recurring themes.

Urbanization leads to a discernible rise in urban water challenges, fueled by increasing demands for water infrastructure to accommodate growing populations, ensure access to clean water, and manage risks such as rising sea levels. This trend involves contemporary explorations of solutions, including large infrastructure projects and the remunicipalization of urban water supplies, making a departure from the privatization wave in the 1980s and 1990s. Amid population growth in many parts of the world, climate change exacerbates water risks, including food and electricity shortages, thereby bringing questions of the Water-Energy-Food-Nexus, the management of climate-induced water changes such as increased droughts and floods, as well as the need for sustainable water management to the forefront. Moreover, the securitization of water poses significant challenges for cooperation, particularly in transboundary water contexts, often prompting consideration of large-scale hydraulic projects like dams and desalination plants as potential solutions. This trend suggests a shift toward seeking "depoliticized" solutions based on scientific and technocratic approaches, aiming to bypass contentious debates over disputed water resources.

Pressure on water resources, coupled with inadequate availability, and tensions with economic development, frequently lead to conflicts among stakeholders, especially in developing countries. Extensive agricultural practice and irrigation needs further contribute to changing water demands, necessitating policy responses. However, the absence of a one-size-fits-all approach is evident, as (funded) projects may not align with local contexts or needs. One insight is the multifaceted nature of water disputes, stemming from varying problem definitions, water values, cultural and social practices, and ontologies. While activism among social groups challenges mega projects, inadequate water access, extractivist development, and polluted water by strategically politicizing water to claim their rights. Power dynamics strongly underlie water issues, with inadequate access persisting for the already marginalized groups in urban areas, informal settlements, rural, and cross-border settings. The discrepancy underscores the importance of recognizing and addressing these varying needs and contexts within water resource management.

The compounded challenges of climate change, population growth, and economic development intensify pressure on water resources, resulting in human-made scarcity and contamination concerns. This raises attention to efficient water use, wastewater treatment, and, crucially, fair water allocation and the pursuit of water justice. Realizing the human right to water becomes imperative in becomes imperative in addressing these mulitfaceted issues, as the literature shows as the coverage of water issues in the literature demonstrates.

4.1.4 Actors

In this final overview section, the actors within the (de) politicization dynamics of water are explored. However, it is crucial to recognize the complexity and evolving nature of these dynamics, including the involvement of diverse stakeholders, shifts in power and discourse.

In transboundary water scenarios, riparian states and local communities are pivotal players disputing water access. Infrastructure projects, such as dams, raise questions about water security, rights, and equitable access, often sparking activism, involving local communities, environmentalists, and NGOs. Marginalized groups, including the poor, low-income, rural, and indigenous communities, frequently face water access challenges and discrimination in various water-related contexts. Some engage in activism to politicize water issues and assert their rights, whereas companies also seek to voice their claims. Water-related changes like droughts or floods significantly influence agricultural practices. In addressing resulting irrigation needs, farmers play a significant role in (de)politicization to assert their rights. In urban and local water governance, both public and private water suppliers are engaged in privatization and remunicipalization. Other actors, such as local politicians, experts, engineers, private corporations, and funding organizations or countries, who play crucial roles in these projects, tend to depoliticize infrastructure projects and other water-related issues. They often frame water issues in a depoliticized manner, offering seemingly straightforward solutions intertwined with technical, managerial, or water security discourses. Lastly, courts can contribute to (de)politicization, while juridification and bureaucratization tend to have depoliticizing effects.

In summary, the exploration reveals diverse actor constellations engaged in the dynamic interplay of depoliticization and politicization, shaping the complex landscape of water governance. While social groups often take center stage in politicization processes, the roles of other actors remain less clear. Politicization mainly aims to assert rights, defend access, and address power imbalances and injustices, whereas actors involved in depoliticization appear motivated by self-interests such as securing water access, economic gains, or obscuring accountability. This is reflected in the involvement of politicians, private entities, or riparian countries in such efforts, while experts and engineers contribute to depoliticization through their scientific or technical knowledge.

The first rather descriptive literature overview aimed to unveil publication trends in the scholarship on (de)politicization of water, shedding light on the array of geographical areas addressed, scales of examination, water issues explored, and key actors involved. This sets the stage for the subsequent qualitative in-depth analysis of the small sample size.

4.2 Qualitative unveiling: (de)politicization in selected articles

For our in-depth qualitative analysis, we focused on the subset of the eight specific articles, covering various regions with a concentration on Asia, reflecting the regional distribution observed in our literature overview (see Chapter 4.2). Referring to the results of our interpretative

content analysis, we first examine how (de)politicization is conceptualized within specific water contexts. Next, we explore the actors and actions involved in (de)politicization dynamics and analyze the connections between (de)politicization and (water) justice. Throughout these sections, recurring themes of (de)politicization, including motives, actions, potentials, effects, and limits, are implicitly addressed. The section begins with a brief overview of the selected articles, presented in chronological order.

Joy et al. (2014) advocate for repoliticizing water governance to focus on justice. Using India as an example, they identify mechanisms of depoliticization such as technification, naturalization, and universalization, which abstract water issues from specific socio-political contexts. Williams (2018) examines desalination as a solution to water challenges and riparian disputes, in the Colorado River basin. This "technical fix" (p. 36) promises to increase water supply, without questioning governance structures tied to water-intensive economic development. Octavianti and Charles (2019) adopt the lens of hydrosociality to examine water security through a sea wall megaproject in Jakarta, Indonesia, highlighting depoliticization mechanisms inherent in large-scale infrastructure projects. Specifically, they delineate three dimensions of depoliticization: framing water insecurity as a technical problem, abstracting the social element from water security, and discounting long-term consequences. Aijaz and Akhter (2020) provide an examination of the ongoing depoliticization and (re)politicization dynamics in the Indus Basin in Pakistan, which remains relatively stable across political regimes. They discuss how depoliticization involves technical and managerial discourses and a shift of "politics of water to the domain of politics of knowledge" (Aijaz and Akhter, 2020, p. 1) and propose a scale-sensitive understanding of depoliticization. Popartan et al. (2020) delve into the complex interplay of populist and anti-populist dynamics surrounding Barcelona's water remunicipalization. They also shed light on tensions among politicization forms and highlight economic agents' counter-politicization efforts in the ensuing power and legitimacy struggle. Shah et al. (2021) analyze a water conservation program in drought-prone villages in Maharashtra, India. Their examination centers on its practical implementation and its effects on capture, equity, and sustainability. Hanna and McDonald (2021) examine the changing landscape of water remunicipalization in over 70 cases in the United States, noting a surge in politicized demands for public control over water resources, fueled by frustration over disparities in water quality due to discrimination and racism. However, decisions on remunicipalization seem to be rather based on pragmatism. Lastly, Copeland (2023) study focuses on the strategic politicization of water by post-extractivist movements, particularly in Guatemala. The study queries how this politicization transforms the movements' scalar potential to interrupt extractive practices.

4.2.1 (De)politicization in review: conceptual issues

In this section, we explore the conceptualization of (de) politicization, focusing on essential components such as defining characteristics, key elements, and empirical applications as discussed in the articles.

In Joy et al. (2014), a comprehensive conceptualization of three depoliticization mechanisms is presented. Firstly, technification, renders water issues technical and solvable through expertise, often resulting in supply-side approaches that commodify water and overlook allocation complexities. Secondly, naturalization frames water scarcity as a natural problem, ignoring distribution challenges and power dynamics. Lastly, universalization, abstracts water from specific contexts by rendering it global or universal, leading to the idea that all are equally affected and equating all water uses while neglecting differences in authority, identity, or culture. Repoliticization, conversely, necessitates an understanding of the complex socio-environmental and socio-political dynamics surrounding water, recognizing scarcity as rooted in historical and management contexts of exploitation and development. Crucially, water issues must be recognized as fundamental problems of allocation. They contend, "the need to 'repoliticise' water debates as a necessary first step toward a more explicit discussion of water in terms of justice" (p. 956). This implies recognizing and examining the multiple ways in which water rights are "claimed, negotiated, defined, and contested" (Joy et al., 2014, p. 962).

Also, Octavianti and Charles (2019) provide a nuanced exploration of depoliticization mechanisms inherent in large-scale infrastructure projects. They identify three key elements: firstly, depoliticization manifests through framing water insecurity as a technical issue solvable by expertise. Such infrastructure projects are portrayed as simple solutions that promise enhanced safety and development, masking their social and environmental impacts. Secondly, they highlight how large infrastructure can dehumanize "the anthropocentric nature of water security by abstracting its social elements" (Octavianti and Charles, 2019, p. 1024). Lastly, depoliticization occurs by discounting the long-term consequences of such projects to future generations. Infrastructure-focused solutions divert attention from addressing root governance problems such as groundwater over-extraction in Jakarta. Consequently, the authors advocate for repoliticization, aiming to make the "social construction and production of water" visible, as articulated in the "hydrosocial cycle" (Linton and Budds, 2014, p. 171).

Williams (2018) underscores the prevalence of "technical fixes" (Li, 2016) in addressing water issues and disputes. These solutions often overlook the entrenched "hierarchical water rights" that favor upper basin states and water-intensive economic development in the Colorado River Basin. Consequently, political questions regarding water allocation are obscured by the technological optimism associated with large infrastructure projects like desalination, which offer promises of increased water supply without addressing essential changes in water governance practices.

Aijaz and Akhter (2020) assert that depoliticization and repoliticization are inherently interconnected parts of political dynamics. They illustrate how this process persists across diverse political regimes, notably in the Indus Basin, Pakistan, where entrenched knowledge and value systems shape water development strategies. These state-driven initiatives typically employ managerial rhetoric and techno-scientific authority, shifting the locus of water governance from political arenas to realms of knowledge. The authors also highlight the enduring influence of colonial hydrology and capitalist reforms on water management practices, which promote a binary view of nature, prioritizing efficient and productive water use at the expense of traditional water knowledge and practices. Consequently, repoliticization, which they understand as an ongoing cultural process, primarily occurs at discrete scales, such as the everyday level, where the lack of access and water scarcity, being problems of distribution and governance rather than water availability in Pakistan, are felt most acutely. Therefore, the authors emphasize the importance of adopting a scale-sensitive understanding of politicization.

Similarly, Copeland (2023) highlights the "scalar potential" of politicization. The author underscores the strategic significance of politicization in the "defense of territory" (DT) discourse in Guatemala, where water emerges as a unifying theme, fostering solidarity and empowering movements to challenge extractive practices. The author characterizes market-oriented and technocratic framings of the human right to water, along with government narratives on water governance favoring "(green) development" and "redistribution" (Copeland, 2023, p. 6), as instances of depoliticization.

Popartan et al. (2020) illustrate a persistent tension between various forms of politicization, particularly examining populist and anti-populist. They elucidate politicization "as a disruption of the established order of things which can render visible issues that had been relegated to techno-managerial governance" (Popartan et al., 2020, p. 1413). Their analysis highlights populist elements like the dichotomy between "those from below" and "those from above" (Rodriguez, 2016, p. 60), as well as the framing of "public and democratic water." The authors emphasize the potential transformative effect of reintroducing political discourse into the city and illuminate economic agents' efforts to counter-politicization amidst ongoing legitimation and power struggles.

Hanna and McDonald (2021) observe that remunicipalization dynamics are predominantly driven by pragmatic motives (Grant, 2015) such as efficiency and cost-saving measures, which are typically devoid of political implications. They acknowledge the bureaucratic nature of remunicipalization processes, which involve legal negotiations and technical experts, potentially hindering active community engagement. Nevertheless, they assert, "the potential for greater politicization […] in the growing number of pro-public water organizations and an increase in demands for better social and economic justice in water services" (Hanna and McDonald, 2021, p. 1).

Finally, Shah et al. (2021) scrutinize a water conservation initiative, denouncing it as a depoliticized, short-term, supply-focused solution lacking adequate groundwater conservation and management. They argue that it was crafted by government interests to render water "'visible" and "available," denouncing it as a hurried response to mitigate public resentment stemming from a corruption scandal. Ultimately, the initiative failed to meet village water needs and improve equitable water access.

4.2.2 Actors and actions of (de)politicization

In this section, we will present the actors and actions that are repeatedly mentioned in connection with (de)politicization as conceptualized in the previous chapter.

Social movements and grassroots organizations, comprised of local, indigenous, and peasant communities, spearhead resistance against unjust water governance. Through community resistance, mass mobilization, and protests, these marginalized groups seek to politicize issues like inadequate water governance, unequal access, and contamination, violating their traditional knowledge, culture, and identities. In Guatemala, communities strategically unified around water vehemently protest against extractivism and commodification. They reached "Water Dialogues" and a new legislation (Copeland, 2023). Similarly, in India, civil society actions emphasize the human right to water, challenging the state's responsibility to provide equitable access to water as a public good (Joy et al., 2014). Aijaz and Akhter (2020) highlight collaborative efforts across different scales, exemplified by the anti-dam building movement in Pakistan, which compelled the government to reevaluate its environmental costs and compelled the government to set up a commission to examine dam construction.

These movements' ability to politicize is enhanced by their "scalar capability" (Copeland, 2023), enabling them to build horizontal and vertical alliances and engage in politics at multiple levels, from local to international. Whereas a significant challenge lies in the fragmentation of movements, making organization across different scales and among diverse actors difficult (Copeland, 2023). This is also demonstrated by Hanna and McDonald (2021) with the formation of "anti-privatization coalitions" in the US, where the lack of cohesion results in inconsistent messaging, organizing difficulties, and varying opinions, such as the definition of "good" public water in the fragmented pro-public movement.

In addition to grassroots activism, movements employ juridical approaches and policy advocacy to advance their agendas. Public interest litigation has been a powerful tool in challenging government narratives and campaigns. For instance, legal challenges were mounted against Maharashtra's "drought-free" initiative, exposing the inadequacies of the government's water management strategies (Shah et al., 2021). These movements also engage in policy advocacy, proposing laws and organizing referenda to push for more equitable water governance. Such efforts demonstrate the multifaceted nature of resistance and the importance of legal frameworks in holding governments accountable. Furthermore, the media plays a crucial role in raising public awareness and mobilizing social groups by spotlighting water governance issues (Hanna and McDonald, 2021).

Politicization efforts also emanate from within the state apparatus, driven by power struggles as political elites seek to assert control over federal governance (Aijaz and Akhter, 2020) or in the context of remunicipalization processes, although fiscal pressures lead back to pragmatic motives (Hanna and McDonald, 2021). Popartan et al. (2020) demonstrate how "anti-privatization coalitions" emerging around populist movements or parties politicize remunicipalization, influencing populist narratives concerning water. Additionally, economic agents, such as private water companies, engage in "counter-politicization" to defend their legitimacy and power by asserting expertise in water management (Popartan et al., 2020). Farmer protests against the diversion of water rights for irrigation to industrial and urban uses may also contribute to the politicization of water allocation but often not contribute to a more even distribution (Joy et al., 2014).

Depoliticization in water governance involves a diverse array of actors, each motivated by self-interest and seeking to obscure deeper issues to avoid change and accountability. State actors, including government officials and policymakers, play a central role in depoliticization. They frequently employ development or security narratives, as well as technocratic, scientific, and managerial language, or expert knowledge, to objectify issues and justify their actions. These actions support capitalist accumulation and dispossession, prioritizing industrial and urban interests at the expense of farmers and local communities (Aijaz and Akhter, 2020), and are promoted by international organizations such as the World Bank (Joy et al., 2014). Alongside government entities, corporate and industrial actors seek to maintain their privilege to privatize water (Shah et al., 2021; Copeland, 2023). The American Water Works Association (AWWA) exemplifies such a depoliticizing effort by framing itself as the "best" water operator due to its adherence to sound accounting, engineering,

financial, and economic principles (Hanna and McDonald, 2021). Octavianti and Charles (2019) state that depoliticization is a "powerful strategy when stakeholders' interests strongly diverge from more powerfully political actors" (p. 1022). When employed by private actors, depoliticization may aim to eliminate political involvement from certain projects or issues.

Finally, other actors sometimes involved in depoliticization dynamics include the media, judicial bodies, and civil bureaucracy. Media can also play a significant role in depoliticization efforts, defending government actions and adopting their narratives, particularly in contexts with corruption and democratic flaws (Joy et al., 2014; Octavianti and Charles, 2019). Additionally, judicial and civil bureaucracy may influence depoliticization efforts, as legal frameworks and institutions that favor, privilege, or even promote forms of capital accumulation Harvey (2017) and economic growth may further manifest depoliticized water practices (Harvey, 2007; Joy et al., 2014; Aijaz and Akhter, 2020).

4.2.3 Water (de)politicization and the pursuit of water justice

After investigating the conceptualization of (de)politicization, involving actors and actions in the previous sections, our qualitative exploration ends with an outline of the connection of water (de) politicization and water justice.

The core concern of justice in (de)politicization dynamics mainly stems from actors' experiences of exclusion and marginalization faced by various communities. This is often due to "depoliticizing at the expense of a more socially and historically informed understanding of material and affective struggles around water" (Aijaz and Akhter, 2020, p. 2). For instance, Copeland (2023) highlights how rural communities in Guatemala suffer from violations of their water rights due to extractivist practices that marginalize Indigenous values and epistemologies. In Maharashtra, India, where a state-led water conversation program was initiated, gendered and exclusionary participation, neglecting community needs and perpetuating inequities, disproportionately benefitting extractive uses and privileged groups, while historically disadvantaged communities lacking key endowments or entitlements remain marginalized (Joy et al., 2014; Shah et al., 2021). Large-scale infrastructure projects, justified by narratives of inevitability, development, and security, exclude local communities from decision-making processes and silence their claims for water rights, reinforcing power imbalances and worsening social inequalities (Aijaz and Akhter, 2020). These projects often violate principles of sustainability, shifting consequences to future generations and resulting in displacement (Octavianti and Charles, 2019). Overall, these processes of exclusion and marginalization contribute to a broader landscape of water injustice.

A depoliticized water governance obscures the political questions of how water is allocated, distributed, stored, managed, and prioritized, while these actions imply urgent justice consequences. Thus, another concern of justice lies in the prioritization of specific water uses and users, and the privatization of water that exlcudes or disadvantages certain other users and users. This injustice is evident in the allocation of water for luxury purposes, such as golf courses and sugarcane fields, while neglecting the domestic needs of poor people or women farmers in Pakistan (Aijaz and Akhter, 2020). Additionally, the water transfers such as of water to industry and cities marginalize local communities and favor productive and efficient uses as well as powerful interests. Power imbalances are also evident within urban areas, water disparities particularly affect socio-political, historical, and spatially marginalized groups, impacting their health, income, and housing affordability (Octavianti and Charles, 2019). Additionally, the privatization of water (supply) affects water disparities in cities, where service disconnections due to inability to pay have become a significant issue, with water bills potentially becoming unaffordable for over one-third of Americans. Hanna and McDonald (2021) highlight that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated inequities in basic services like safe water supply, mostly affecting the poor and racially discriminated communities, leading to intensified calls for politicized changes such as remunicipalization processes. This aligns with discussions around remunicipalization, as seen in Barcelona, where water cut-offs for people unable to afford service have raised broader concerns about access and affordability (Popartan et al., 2020). Overall, the way water is governed and managed, often leads to exclusion and marginalization, leaving the poor and powerless without (safe) water. Even though the specific contexts differ, the ongoing water crisis reveals uneven distribution across different sections of society, emphasizing critical questions of water allocation.

Depoliticization processes "(…) all work to obscure the political nature of analyses of, and solutions to, water problems. Underlying valuations of water resources and priorities for allocation become implicit, while the processes of water appropriation and allocation appear as inevitable. Often the question how these processes influence patterns of access and exclusion along axes of power difference and social differentiation is not asked" (Joy et al., 2014, p. 968). To shed light on the justice dimension of water issues, Joy et al. (2014) advocate for a re-politicization. The authors emphasize that (re-)allocations cannot be neutral and are differently justified by different actors at different scales, with significant consequences for "rights, access, equity, and legitimacy" (Joy et al., 2014, p. 963).

In such re-politicization efforts, the disadvantaged, often represented by social movements and grassroots organizations that include local and Indigenous communities, challenge exclusionary practices and technocratic narratives that perpetuate inequities. They advocate for democratic governance structures that promote inclusivity and transparency, aiming for procedural justice and recognition. These groups seek the recognition and integration of diverse epistemologies, like the Indigenous values of buen vivir (Copeland, 2023), and an understanding of water as a human right and public good (Joy et al., 2014). They aim for restorative justice, seeking to repair the harm caused by historical and ongoing injustices. Their demands include a reprioritization of water uses and users and equitable water allocation. This pursuit involves challenging depoliticized perspectives that ignore the material and affective struggles around water, emphasizing the need for a socially and historically informed understanding (Aijaz and Akhter, 2020).

5 Discussion

Against the backdrop of our theoretical perspectives, namely (de) politicization, environmental justice, (de)politicization and neoliberal

water governance, we discuss the findings from our literature analysis. Our review reveals that while the concept of politicization is frequently used, it is often not very clearly conceptualized. Furthermore, the scales of politicization are of great importance in many papers, since scalar capacities are crucial for regaining a political voice and achieving a sufficient level of public debate to disrupt routine policymaking that perpetuates unjust water practices. Furthermore, we observed a strong reference to justice issues in (de)politicization studies. Depoliticization often obscures and justifies unfair water practices, while re-politicization emerges as a response to deficiencies in water policy performance, unintended consequences, and the amplification of marginalized voices and identities. Lastly, a central theme in (de)politicization is neoliberal practices such as extractivism and privatization, while other recurring themes include securitization and remunicipalization.

The concept of politicization is often used as a descriptive term, sometimes as a buzzword suggesting a declining importance of political issues among the public (Wood and Flinders, 2014, p. 159). Despite the frequent usage, there is a notable lack of concrete conceptualization or definition in the literature (Williams, 2018; Aijaz and Akhter, 2020; Hanna and McDonald, 2021; Shah et al., 2021; Copeland, 2023). This suggests a need for clearer definitions and more nuanced understandings within the existing scholarship. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify some commonality in how politicization is understood and discussed (Wood and Flinders, 2014, p. 159). Li (2007, p. 8) observes that "questions that are rendered technical are simultaneously rendered non-political," a theme clearly visible and common across many papers. This technical framing is often associated with the depoliticization of water governance issues, obscuring underlying political and justice-related concerns (Joy et al., 2014; Williams, 2018; Octavianti and Charles, 2019; Copeland, 2023). Depoliticization, while not inherently negative as noted by Palonen et al. (2019), can be part of a normal political dynamic (Ranciere, 1995; Flinders and Buller, 2006; Jessop, 2014; Aijaz and Akhter, 2020). However, according to some authors, when actively promoted, it tends to serve specific actor interests (Shah et al., 2021), aiming to obscure accountability and injustices (Joy et al., 2014; Hanna and McDonald, 2021) while maintaining the status quo (Williams, 2018). Such challenges related to accountability are also discussed within the broader literature on depoliticization (Hay, 2007; Jessop, 2014; Anshelm and Haikola, 2018; Buller et al., 2019).

While politicization typically occurs in "localized settings" (Feindt et al., 2021, p. 513), scaling up the issue or building multiscalar alliances is essential for actors to regain political voice (Jessop, 2014; Anshelm et al., 2018; Buller et al., 2019) as demonstrated by Copeland (2023). The privatization of basic services, including water, is described as a hallmark of the neoliberal model and is often regarded as the inevitable approach to water governance globally (Bakker, 2010; Beveridge, 2012), complicating "who to address, who is responsible" (Buller et al., 2019, pp. 27–28). However, while privatization efforts are primarily discussed in the context of water services and are mostly contested at the local level (Popartan et al., 2020; Hanna and McDonald, 2021), the influence of national and global anti-privatization movements suggests that these broader efforts can be more impactful (Hanna and McDonald, 2021). These social movements argue that privatization reduces water governance to a depoliticized management issue (Flinders and Buller, 2006). The broader reach of these movements seems to increase the chances of engaging in higher-level debates, identifying responsible parties, and advocating for the protection of public goods and services (Buller et al., 2019; Feindt et al., 2021). Therefore, understanding the role of different scales seems to be crucial in understanding (de)politicization processes, especially in the context of water governance.

A central concern in the (de)politicization literature is water justice (Joy et al., 2014; Aijaz and Akhter, 2020; Shah et al., 2021; Copeland, 2023). While some scholars focus on politicization (Copeland, 2023), others emphasize depoliticization (Joy et al., 2014; Octavianti and Charles, 2019; Shah et al., 2021) or the dynamic interplay between the two (Aijaz and Akhter, 2020). There is a tendency that politicization arises due to perceived injustices, leading to demands for justice (Joy et al., 2014; Copeland, 2023). However, politicization does not necessarily result in improvements in water justice, as it can be driven by stakeholder interests (Popartan et al., 2020). Nonetheless, politicization can highlight unjust practices and refocus attention on fundamental issues in water governance, such as changes in water allocation, which often underlie problems of water scarcity, contamination, or lack of access (Joy et al., 2014; Copeland, 2023). Depoliticizing water issues through technical rendering obscures their socio-political dimensions and systemic injustices. Achieving water justice requires re-politicizing governance to address historical and ongoing grievances (Joy et al., 2014; Aijaz and Akhter, 2020; Copeland, 2023) as well as unsustainable practices (Octavianti and Charles, 2019), and re-emphasizing the human right to water (Bakker, 2007; Zwarteveen and Boelens, 2014; Sultana, 2018). This involves not only distributional equity but also recognition, participation, and respect for local Indigenous rights and knowledge, challenging hegemonic discourses. Enhancing transparency and accountability in decision-making processes is essential for water justice (Joy et al., 2014).

Recurring themes in the literature are extractivism (Octavianti and Charles, 2019; Copeland, 2023), privatization (Copeland, 2023; Shah et al., 2021), remunicipalization (Popartan et al., 2020; Hanna and McDonald, 2021), and securitization (Octavianti and Charles, 2019), all are accused to align with neoliberal and neocolonial practices (Joy et al., 2014; Aijaz and Akhter, 2020; Copeland, 2023). Here, the focus is on how neoliberal logic and positivist discourse abstract water problems from their socio-political context, prioritizing the allocation of water where its marginal returns are highest. This tendency is documented by various authors who critique depoliticized or neoliberal water governance (Swyngedouw, 2005; Molle et al., 2009; Zwarteveen and Boelens, 2014; McDonald, 2016; Vos and Boelens, 2018). This leads to water being seen increasingly as an economic good, leading to its uniformization and privatization (Joy et al., 2014).

Studies find, that extractivism, linked to neocolonial and neoliberal practices, emphasizes the commodification and privatization of water (Copeland, 2023), and the implementation of technical solutions such as desalination, dams, or seawalls (Williams, 2018; Octavianti and Charles, 2019; Aijaz and Akhter, 2020). These practices, as highlighted by Copeland (2023), frame water within a development and growth narrative, leading to significant environmental and social impacts, especially on Indigenous territories. Extractive industries, by redirecting water flows toward private industrial needs, tend to exclude other users and exacerbate dispossession (Copeland, 2023). This aligns with the concept of "accumulation by dispossession" as described by Harvey (2017).

Research indicated that privatization, a core aspect of neoliberal water practices (Bakker, 2007), often leads to debates about remunicipalization (Popartan et al., 2020; Hanna and McDonald, 2021). Supporters of remunicipalization argue that it can lead to lower prices, improved quality, enhanced local control, and democratic public ownership (Hanna and McDonald, 2021). They also emphasize the importance of transparency, equity, and inclusive decision-making in water governance, advocating for the protection of public interests over private ones (Popartan et al., 2020). However, Popartan et al. (2020) highlight challenges related to populism and legal hurdles. Interestingly, they also note that the literature on remunicipalization appears to overlook the counter-politicization efforts by economic agents in the struggles for power and legitimation.

In the literature, water security is increasingly discussed as the emerging prevailing paradigm in water management (Octavianti and Charles, 2019). This shift is accompanied by discussions on securitization within the context of politicization research (Kuzemko, 2015): "the move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue either as a special kind of politics or as above politics. Securitization can thus be seen as a more extreme version of politicization" (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 23). Joy et al. (2014) highlight that the lack of attention to rights and justice in water governance stems from the engineering and natural science traditions, which are institutionally reproduced through education, policies, and engineering practices. This critique extends to the research itself, pointing out the need for a broader, more interdisciplinary approach.

Our literature analysis highlights that (de)politicization is frequently mentioned but remains conceptually imprecise. It sheds light on depoliticization by identifying recurring themes, with the most pressing and common being neoliberal and neocolonial practices that lead to exclusion and dispossession, while technical framing tends to obscure accountability and justice in water practices. A crucial takeaway is that (de)politicization dynamics should be conceptually and analytically distinguished into the evaluation of their outcomes and the normative judgments about their effects, as they are neither binary nor inherently "good" or "bad." However, we can draw a link between the depoliticization of water and unjust water practices. According to the literature, achieving water justice requires re-politicizing governance and scalar capacity to address historical and ongoing grievances, emphasizing equity, recognition, and participation. Our analysis reveals that water governance, despite being largely depoliticized, is shaped by a fundamental tension between depoliticizing and increasingly repoliticizing forces. This reflects ongoing struggles over the allocation, management, and regulation of water resources and potential transformation in (neoliberal) water governance, especially in the face of water crisis.

6 Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored the intertwined dynamics of politicization, justice, and neoliberal agendas within the realm of water politics and environmental governance. Through examining the evolution of politicization discourse from EU integration studies to environmental and climate scholarship, we have observed contrasting perspectives on the role of politicization in addressing environmental challenges. The discourse surrounding (de) politicization in environmental issues, particularly in the context of water governance, highlights the complex interplay between science, policy-making, and democracy. Depoliticization efforts are often framed as technocratic solutions, risk marginalizing political controversy, and hindering democratic participation. Conversely, repoliticization endeavors aim to foster inclusive dialogue and confront diverging perspectives to address climate change democratically and justly. Furthermore, the commodification, marketization, and privatization of water, propelled by neoliberal economic agendas, have reshaped water governance landscapes globally. The interconnectedness of water scarcity, climate change, and social inequality marks a highly relevant field of research, in particular for social sciences.

The extensive qualitative analysis of the literature underscores this crisis-ridden relationship between water dynamics and politics across diverse global contexts. From transboundary disputes to urban water challenges, the literature analysis illuminates the multifaceted nature of water issues. Although there are different (and interesting) foci with respect to the geographic regions that were investigated in the literature, it is striking how depoliticization of water is often tightly linked to different dimensions of injustice. Importantly, the qualitative analysis delves deeper into the conceptualization of (de)politicization and its connection to water justice, highlighting the transformative potential of repoliticization efforts in centering discussions on equity and fairness.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

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Funding

The author(s) declare that financial support was received for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. This work was supported by the Open Access Publication Fund of TU Berlin.

Acknowledgments

The authors acknowledge the use of assistance with language refinement, grammar correction, and style improvement provided by OpenAI's ChatGPT (GPT-4).

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2024.1409630/full#supplementary-material

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